"You Must Remember This": Traumatic Postmemory and the "Cold War" Construction of Canon in Joyce Carol Oates's Recent Fiction

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The "event" of narcissism [i.e., the true structure of trauma] ... is really a question of something that never occurs, and at the same time never passes away, something that is impossible, a self-apprehension of the ego that is not a self-apprehension, a "splitting" that brings death at the very moment it brings the subject into being.

-Charles Shepherdson, "Telling Tales of Love: Philosophy, Literature, and Psychoanalysis"

It is the fluidity of experience and not its Platonic essence that is significant, for truth is relative, ever changing, indeterminate.... [Accordingly,] identity is not permanent; it is a philosophy of the individual, stubborn, self-reliant, and ultimately mysterious.

-Joyce Carol Oates, (Woman) Writer

Is there any mystery like who you finally turn out to *be*, Felix wondered.

—*Joyce Carol Oates*, You Must Remember This

In his most recent novel, *The Coming Storm* (1999), Lambda Literary Award finalist Paul Russell draws the reader sympathetically into the lives of Claire Tremper and Libby Fallone, two unhappily married women who had at one time "been roommates together at Barnard College during a time when the world was settling in for the long haul of a cold war" (31). At that time, "The Bomb loomed over everything," Russell writes. "Spies and traitors lurked—in friends, family, perhaps even in oneself. So

the official story ran" (31). "To compensate," we're told further, Claire and Libby "had invented other lives, a private world meant to augment the stifling, suspicious America that hemmed them in on all sides" (31). Such an America would perhaps have been more suited to the happily married Douglas Brill and his "energetic wife Mary Ann"—"a couple straight out of the fifties," Russell's narrator observes, a minor characterization "so uncomplicated, so dreary, in many ways perfect for the [prep-]school" world (190) in which all of the major characters in *The Coming Storm* are situated later in the 1990s.

For these major characters in the present day, the novel's prepschool—the very tony Forge School located in New York state's Hudson Valley—thus becomes the site of some extraordinary machinations in Russell's compelling narrative that the apparent simplicity and naiveté of the Cold War 1950s can only serve to contrast. Headmaster Louis Tremper (Claire's husband), for instance, is clearly motivated by something more than a simple desire to fill an unexpectedly vacated English teaching position on his faculty when he hires the extraordinarily handsome and charismatic twenty-something Tracy Parker, a former Forge School alumnus. Tremper's conflicted marriage to Claire, and his continuing to work on the novels of the sexually embattled German novelist Thomas Mann, present the troubling case of a closeted homosexuality that can only be the match of the even more troubled Tracy Parker himself, whose same-sex attraction to the underage Noah Lathrop III excites and repulses Parker by turns given his longstanding friendship with the HIV-positive Arthur, another Forge alumnus.

Moreover, the fact that Claire Tremper now finds herself attracted to Parker like her older severely repressed husband adds a further storm of emotional complication (to go with Russell's title) that intensifies even further when it is gradually revealed that the apparently innocent Noah Lathrop may be consenting to an illicit sexual relationship with his new Engish teacher merely as a means of striking out at the callous indifference of his usually coked-up and not easily scandalized father. Would that those apparently uncomplicated and perhaps now welcomingly dreary fifties might return in the face of such present day sexual and emotional turmoil. For Russell, therefore, one important aspect of his project in a novel dealing with traumatic subjects like paedophilia, intergenerational sex, queer sexuality and AIDS would appear to be the development of an arguably more current perception "that life might be rich, complicated, ambiguous ... especially as seen from the perspective of two decades" whose "specifics," DAVID R. JARRAWAY is currently Professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Ottawa, and is most recently the author of Going the Distance: Dissident Subjectivity in Modernist American Literature published in the "Horizons in Theory and American Culture" Series by Louisiana State University Press (2003). Other essays on American novels have also recently appeared or are forthcoming in College English (on Wallace Thurman), Modern Fiction Studies (on Tim O'Brien), and FDU Press (on Countée Cullen), among others. His last appearance in ESC (on American novelist Michael Cunningham) was in 1996.

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until this "Coming Storm" of "rich and complex ambiguities," would largely remain "unknowable" (177) if they even existed at all.¹

With this paper and its focus on traumatic postmemory, I would like briefly to explore an alternative version of 1950s America—"so uncomplicated, so dreary"—and an alternative project for the novel emanating from the 1990s. Repeatedly, one might almost say obsessively, returning to painful depictions of inner urban culture at mid-century, the recent work streaming from contemporary American fiction writer Joyce Carol Oates in the last dozen years or so-Marya: A Life, You Must Remember This, Because It Is Bitter and Because It Is My Heart, Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang, What I Lived For, and (most recently) Blonde—such novelistic prodigality provides readers, as in Russell, with an almost text-book case of historiographic literature informed by trauma. But in so relentlessly returning to the "Cold War" 1950s in fiction—the very formative years constituting indisputably the birth of one of America's most prominent writers in fact—Oates's "Cold War" canon as I shall designate it would appear to speak to the very rich and complex ambiguities that Russell ostensibly would make "known" solely from his novel's purchase on the 1990s. What is more, Oates's "Cold War" project is richly complex and ambiguous in precisely the opposite way, I would contend, opening as it does a kind of historical "space of trauma" that Cathy Caruth, for one, descries in the writing of Freud: writing that "preserves history ... [in] words that do not simply refer, but through their repetition ... convey the impact of history precisely as what can not be grasped" (21, emphases retained). As Hannah Stevick "in a sudden rage" remarks one day (ca. 1953) in You Must Remember This (1987, 1998, YMRT hereafter): "What do you know?'—turning upon her astonished husband [Lyle], her hands clenched into fists raised awkwardly at shoulder level, trembling—'What have you ever known about anything, you!" (YMRT 66).

Oates's You Must Remember This, as we shall see, revolves upon a rather complex act of incestuous sexual congress (and possibly abuse) that takes place over a two-year period in the mid-fifties. Hence, it hardly seems surprising that the "Cold War" narrative constructed in this case (like the one built upon an act of miscegenation compounded of murder in the pre-Civil Rights era depicted in Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart [1990])—would revolve about an experience of trauma that Greg Johnson, Oates's biographer, invites readers to comprehend

¹ Russell's specific allusions to the psychopathology of trauma in the novel are given on pages 24 and 33.

as not unrelated to an act of "semi-molestation" (Oates's word) that the author herself underwent from roughly the same 1950s time-period (30). Returning to that real-life experience much later in her journal, Oates reflects upon it as "one of my 'crystallization-around-a-theme' essays: The Secrets of Childhood"—a factual text purportedly about the "activities of children of which parents know nothing" (27). Yet in historiographic fictional terms, the traumatic event about which the narrative in both cases "crystallizes" establishes fairly much the same point noted previously by Caruth. As Persia Courtney observes in *Because It Is Better*, for instance, in words that could very well apply to her very own white daughter Iris, and Iris's scandalous sexual union with the black man Merlyn (Jinx) Fairchild: "there are things you don't talk about [because] ... nobody seems to know the words" (66).²

However, in pursuing the more general argument for a "Cold War" construction of canon in Oates's later fiction through the lens of traumatic postmemory, I want to make clear that it is not at all my intention to explore the theoretical linkages between the characters of a contemporary novelist encountered in fiction and the personages from her formative years encountered in fact. In the discursive space of trauma, as Caruth quite rightly further observes, the words "do not simply refer." Accordingly, in endeavouring to (re)construct the "Cold War" contours of Oates's most recent writing, I shall argue that the genuine cultural work this contemporary author of historiographic literature performs will be to *exceed* all referential or correspondent notions of truth in precisely the manner of "traumatism' in psychoanalysis" as Slavoj Žižek renders it: as

2 "[T]he victim must be helped to speak the horrifying truth of her past—to 'speak the unspeakable," writes Ruth Leys (following Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* [1992]), because telling the truth has not merely a personal therapeutic but a public collective value as well" (109). Thus, the editors of a recent collection of essays dealing with memory in the context of trauma speak of it as "a locus of struggle over epistemological issues." Clarifying the issue further, they observe that "It may be seen as a problematic and perhaps exemplary site for dealing with the complex interlinkage of reality and fantasy in representation and interpretation; the balance between reproduction and representation, or fact and interpretation, or recollection and understanding. Seen in this light, therapy that is supposed to discover the truth of what 'really' happened is a kind of parody of the Enlightenment will to truth" (Antze and Lambek xxvii). Oates's handling of traumatic postmemory in the context of "Cold War" American culture appears to be especially insistent on this last point, as I endeavour to reveal in some detail in what follows in my argument.

"an 'unheard-of-occurrence' which, when fully assumed, undercuts the 'objective certainty' that pertains to our 'life-form[s]" (154).³

Trauma's undercutting all "objective certainty" in life noted by Žižek has at back of it, of course, Lacan's own earlier remarking upon a similar undercutting of sameness in words when things rightly become the focus of the "subject in [its] repetition." In his famous lecture at the landmark "Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" Symposium at Johns Hopkins University in 1970, Lacan sums up much of his own seminar work through the "Cold War" fifties and sixties when he scruples to observe how in the human discourse of signs, "The mark has the effect of rubbing out difference" (192). Hence, if there were to be any reclamation for a differentiated subject in the myriad of its "life-forms," it could only proceed by means of one's very uncertainty about things, the most signal of which Lacan reckoned to be "this obscure thing that we call in some cases trauma"—a psychic state linked inextricably to "the unconscious subject in the repetition" (192). The utterly crucial notion to the psychoanalyst here and to the novelist previously of "things" neither known nor said ("What have you ever known about anything, you!") that is introduced into consciousness, but that has no discernible relation to consciousness itself—such a notion, then, perhaps becomes the best place to begin teasing out some of the rhetorical alignments between the theorist of traumatic postmemory and its "Cold War" novelistic proponent.

For Lacan in his Johns Hopkins lecture, for instance, that something is taken up by his almost total preoccupation with the "unconscious," imagistically foregrounded in relation to Baltimore's early morning half-light—a state of mind that "has nothing to do with instinct or primitive knowledge or preparation of thought in some underground," he observes, but is rather "a thinking with words, with thoughts that escape your vigilance, your state of watchfulness" (189). ⁴ As Lacan further labours to remark, "Freud told us that the unconscious is above all thoughts, and that which thinks

- 3 Dominick LaCapra makes a similar claim for the effects of trauma in the "Conclusion: Writing (about) Trauma" to his most recent Writing History, Writing Trauma (2001): "For the excess of trauma which overwhelms the self and disorients society also poses a challenge to modes of understanding and may become the occasion for critiques of disciplinarity which shade into freely associative 'enactments' of confused or undisciplined thought" (205)—a point to which I shall return in relation to Oates's own most recent counter-disciplinary novel writing a bit later.
- 4 Hence, Lacan's famous pronouncement elsewhere that "the material of the unconscious is a linguistic material, or as we say in French *langagier*, that the unconscious is structured as a language" (188).

is barred from consciousness. This bar has many applications, many possibilities with regard to meaning" (189). The several references in Oates's You Must Remember This to which I now turn to frame the remainder of this discussion—the "meanest houses and slum tenements" which represent "places of exquisite mystery" to Lyle Stevick (YMRT 77), for instance, or "the mysterious sounds" of place-names in the Adirondacks that "had the power at times to fill [Lyle's teenage daughter Enid Maria] with vague cravings" (YMRT 88), or (as in my concluding epigraph) the "mystery like who you turn out to *be*" with reference to Lyle's half-brother, Felix (*YMRT* 401), etc.—these references would also appear to affirm the same idea. Thus, in fiction focussed even upon as apparently an uncomplicated and dreary a subject as 1950s America, a significant element of experience may conceivably be barred from perceptual cerebration, and against which, as with the imposition of conscious thought in Lacan, the "door opened onto some kind of possibility" may nonetheless remain shut, as Paul Russell seems also to corroborate (339), but solely from the vantage of the 1990s: "We want there to be that mystery. Where there's mystery, there's hope" (*The Coming Storm* 354).

If for Lacan, then, intelligence essentially becomes the structured relationship between consciousness and some Real that is entirely forbidden to consciousness—that "space," as Lyotard puts it, "on the far side of the intelligible that is diametrically opposed to the rule of opposition and completely under the control of difference" (qtd. in Brammer 34 n. 6)⁵—then three implications would appear to follow. First, the comprehension of the phenomenal world truly becomes a sometime prospect. "Life goes down the river," as Lacan wistfully ruminates, "from time to time touching a bank, staying for a while here and there, without understanding anything—and it is the principle of analysis that nobody understands anything of what happens" (190, emphases added).6 Second, and following from this primal

- 5 "In contradistinction to the propositions of a system," as Lyotard further explains, "the impulsions occupy an identical position in [unconscious] space simultaneously [rather than a series of fixed oppositions].... By a series of displacements that are highly irregular, the singular becomes the plural, the feminine the masculine, the subject becomes the object, the determinate the indeterminate, and here becomes elsewhere" (qtd. in Brammer 34 n. 6).
- 6 Oates would perhaps concur that such a frank lack of understanding was a first principle of art as well. In her "Preface to them" written in 1979, for instance, she remarks: "Though we all share emotions ... very few of these are allowed above the threshold of consciousness; we do not know, we do not understand, unless we experience. And it is only through art, an art seriously committed to the portrayal of a dense complex stubborn irreducible reality, that we can hope to approximate the experience of another's life" ((Woman) Writer 367, emphasis

lack of knowledge, human subjectivity becomes what de Certeau says about mysticism in a related psychoanalytic context: "the rendezvous of an enigma" (24). "The idea of the unifying unity of the human condition" now something on the order of "a scandalous lie," according to Lacan, subjectivity is perhaps more accurately viewed as "the introduction of a loss in reality," and thus like the universe of discourse itself, a "nothing contain[ing] everything" if "you find again the gap that constitutes the subject" (190, 193).

From this lack and from this gap, thirdly and finally, we are offered that state of desire in which the subject is perpetually cast in its unceasing but impossible efforts to undo the loss "introduced in the word" when a loss for words becomes, so Lacan contends, the very "definition of the subject" itself. In sum:

The question of desire is that the fading subject yearns to find itself again by means of some sort of encounter with this miraculous thing defined by the phantasm. In its endeavour, it is sustained by that which I call the lost object ... which is such a terrible thing for the imagination ... the object, lower-case, a ... as all psychoanalysis is founded on the existence of this peculiar object. (194)⁸

In the end, therefore, desire issues into the traumatic state of *jouissance*, the principle of pleasure and displeasure at once, whose "curious organiza-

added). Finessing the point in a somewhat Lacanian fashion more recently, in a comment on her story "American, Abroad" from 1991, Oates further remarks that "[t]he external world is a forest of signs and symbols, inviting, but always *eluding* interpretation," so that "[i]n 'American, Abroad,' even fellow Americans become mysterious, elusive" (*Where I've Been* 371, emphasis added).

⁷ Thus, at a later point in *You Must Remember This*, about Lyle Stevick's son Warren, the narrator observes that "[he] dozed off, woke to tepid water and a sense of inexplicable loss, *not knowing* the year, the time, his own age" (*YMRT* 298, emphasis added).

⁸ As Tim Dean notes, the "real" in Lacan becomes indissociable with his notorious postulation elsewhere of the *objet petit* "a", defining this Real as "that which disrupts meaning and, as a by-product of that disruption, leaves objects a in its wake" (205; further on 50, 77, 189, 195–96, 232, and passim). *Cf.* the notion of *hors-text* in Michel de Certeau's *Heterologies*, which Richard Terdiman defines as "the over-the-horizon reality of alterity. In the present state of our understanding what is text is somehow definably *not* other; what is other is still not text. This inability to accept into our own paradigms the reality of what is 'out there' over against us seems, in this last bit of [the twentieth-century], a fundamental and potentially momentous limitation," according to de Certeau (9).

tion" allows the subject only "to approach [or] test" out "the full spectrum of desire" without ever, alas, fully achieving or exhausting it (195).9

In such terms, then, trauma lines up with Lacan's notion of the Real: the lost object, lower-case a. And by giving the edge to the "exquisite pleasure" of trauma rather than its opposite (192), Lacan signals the great store he places in that otherwise "terrible thing" within the fading subject—that Real thing which "like trauma," as Tim Dean recently observes, "resists assimilation to any imaginary or symbolic universe" (232). For this reason, I tend to be somewhat resistant to the false dichotomy that Dominick LaCapra sets up between a melancholy "acting out" phase of trauma (usually in the past, in some primal encounter), and the later mourning-like "working through" phase of trauma (usually in the present, through conclusive grieving) that, according to LaCapra, solely provides the "openings to the future" for the traumatized subject (21-22). To the contrary, as Charles Shepherdson explains, "given ... the fact that the true

Trauma lines up with Lacan's notion of the Real: the lost object, lower-case a.

- 9 Thus, that previously cited passage revealing Enid Stevick's attraction to "mysterious names" imbued with "vague cravings," concludes: "were they halfsubmerged dreams impossible to define[?] She wanted—so much! She wanted so much she would never have" (YMRT 88).
- 10 The dichotomous separation between these considerably Freudian divisions of experience are further drawn upon in LaCapra's two previous books related to trauma, Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma (1994) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998), as he later notes (65). In "tak[ing] [his] distance from the rapeutic conceptions of psychoanalysis," LaCapra does admit later that the "working through" phase of trauma need not necessarily be "something leading to a cure" (143). Nonetheless, achieving a state of mourning where finally "one acquires the possibility of being an ethical and political agent," does in some sense require one to transcend one's melancholic attachment to the past by ultimately "coming to terms with trauma" (144). However, the innumerable references to the state of melancholy in *You Must Remember* This—"the melancholy truth" of Russians pushing Americans "into the sea" (YMRT 215), the "excitement and melancholy" that can be stirred up by watching Jo-Jo Pearl box (YMRT 232), "the melancholy prospect" of imagining the H-Bomb having been dropped (YMRT 324), "how melancholy Christmas" can tend to make one feel (YMRT 354), or Hannah Stevick's "feeling melancholy about Enid's [leaving home]" (YMRT 426), among others—these references would appear to indicate that, from Oates's purview, one perhaps never fully does come to terms with trauma. No mention of "mourning," interestingly, is made during the course of a novel well over 400 pages in length. Ruth Leys's extensive work on the writings of Pierre Janet in the context of post-traumatic stress disorder inclines her similarly to resist dichotomous forms of thinking on the matter, recognizing instead "the impossibility of sustaining theoretically or practically the opposition between forgetting and remembering upon which so much of the edifice of modern psychotherapeutic thought has been made to depend" (116).

structure of trauma would not consist in a localized chronological 'event' that one might (secondarily) remember or forget, one can only conclude that the trauma itself is *in* the memory, in the structure of remembering and repeating, and nowhere else" (98). With this coincident structure of remembering and repeating in mind, we are perhaps more induced to think that working through trauma is very much a part of the very acting out of trauma itself (and vice versa). Thus, the co-implication of past with present (and future) is perhaps that aspect of Lacan's theory to which the postraumatic memory speaks most in Oates's *You Must Remember This* as foregrounded in her title. And it is within this general theoretical frame of reference that I now take up the novel more specifically.

As a novel emanating from the American social milieu situated primarily between 1953 and 1956, *You Must Remember This* arguably has more than its share of traumatic events, as Oates's narrator emphatically enumerates: the abortion described as "so extreme a physical trauma, as the medical book said" (*YMRT* 386) that Enid Stevick submits herself to in order to terminate a pregnancy resulting from her love affair with her half-uncle Felix; or, the surgery given as "an extraordinary physical trauma, a protracted physical trauma" that Enid's brother Warren must undergo in order to repair finally "the trauma of his wounding" experienced during his stint in the Korean War (*YMRT* 109, 144); or, the spousal and child abuse that Warren's sometime fiancée Miriam Brancher experiences at the hands of a previous husband: "Bob traumatized [her son]—hitting him the way he did. Him and me both" (*YMRT* 340). And if all of this grievous personal affliction is not enough,

Then there was the news these days worsening all the time: Secretary of State Dulles issuing his warnings about U.S. military preparation vis-à-vis the Soviets and Defense Secretary Wilson demanding \$35.5 billion for the Pentagon for 1957, the big project being the production of guided missiles, what they were calling the "ultimate weapon," an intercontinental ballistic missile with a nuclear bomb as a warhead!—diabolical. (*YMRT* 322–23)

To speak of trauma, however, as reducible to any of these particular historical occurrences both great and small in this one later novel of Oates is entirely to miss the point of her requiring to rework similar chains of painful circumstance and event in any of the other novels in her "Cold War" canon. Her compulsive need to repeat such materials would suggest, therefore, that an engagement with trauma in her work might be part of a much larger effort to stage an encounter with that which *exceeds* any and

all of its specific historical occurrences. "The flashback, the nightmare, the return of traumatic memory are distinct from historical memory," Shepherdson observes, "insofar as they concern an event that has not been integrated into historical time, ordered by a relation to the past and the future." As Shepherdson further explains,

What repeats is therefore something that somehow never "took place," a past that was never "present" which does not mean that it is merely nothing, a figment of the imagination or a purely mythical event, but rather that it happens without happening ... an event which occurred, as Freud tells us, before history as such, before the beginning of historical time, in a mythical time that explains how time in fact began. (95)

In *You Must Remember This*, therefore, where the traumatic postmemory would appear to be leading us reveals mind turning back on that which must resist all masterful attempts to become *like* mind—a terrible thing for the imagination, as Lacan has us remember—and so confront that very dense and opaque and obscure thing (Baltimore in dawn's early light, say) where consciousness, like time, might itself have begun.

Such psychic opacity that the traumatic memory sets us before—"the specific point at which," as Caruth characterizes it, "knowing and not knowing intersect [and] the language of literature and psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet" (3)—such opacity greets us repeatedly throughout Oates's novel. Lyle Stevick may be sympathetically romanticizing the innocence of children by remarking that "they don't know, do they?"; but he speaks very much to the presentiment of a traumatic memory when he further adds that "as long as [children] don't know[,] there's a part of Daddy that doesn't know too isn't there?" (YMRT 81). His daughter Enid raises a similar issue whilst interrogating her brother Warren about his traumatic experiences in Korea, "want[ing] to know precisely how it felt, how he'd known what was happening, why he was so certain it had happened at all... 'Everything that happened might have been a hallucination, Enid said[;] ... how do you know?' [she] persisted" (YMRT 110). As the novel proceeds, such exchanges become gradually more pointed: Lyle's wife Hannah, for instance, commiserating with her husband about her daughter Enid, and the "something so closed off and secretive about her" that provokes her despairing "what can you know about other people?" (YMRT 284). Or, from Enid herself, once again: "What did she care really for Nelia, Rose Ann, [or] her own sister Lizzie: they knew nothing of her" (YMRT 379). Or, Al Sansom's rounding on his sometime business partner, Felix: "I'm tired. I have an early day tomorrow.

I don't even know who you are" (*YMRT* 368). Until finally, we are given this important rumination from Felix himself near the end of the novel:

Felix wondered. There were large burnt-out patches in his brain he never entered. Why? To what purpose? ... Or the space in the brain you go to when you're knocked out like nothing else on earth and the secret is, it's sweet. But he never entered, he didn't know and didn't want to know. (*YMRT* 409)

"[T]he space in the brain you go to when you're knocked out like nothing else on earth": knocked into unconsciousness enough times perhaps to know, Felix, in a more Lacanian frame of mind, could very well have been describing our theoretical encounter, once again, with that impossible "something" alluded to in my opening epigraph—"a self-apprehension of the ego that is not a self-apprehension, a 'splitting' that brings death at the very moment it brings the subject into being" (Shepherdson 98). And if all the previous allusions to the unknown "secret" part of consciousness converge in that splitting of selfhood, surely one very important aspect of Oates's traumatic postmemory is to strike out at any kind of objective certainty with respect to that very selfhood.

On this point, it seems to me, we enter the very heart of Oates's "Cold War" canon, and through an understanding of her deft handling of trauma, fully appreciate the cultural work she perhaps proposes that some of her most recent writing focussed on the 1950s might do. For one of the most clamant certainties undercut in Oates's "Cold War" fiction pertains to the essentializing of subjectivity in what Elaine Tyler May tags the culture of "containment" and "cold war consensus" (xxiv, xxv). As Tyler May further remarks, "There can be no doubt that the gender roles associated with domestic consumerism—homemaker, breadwinner—were central to the identity of many women and men at the time" to the degree that "conformity to strict gender assumptions were fraught with potential tensions and frustrations" (162, emphasis added). Thus, taking at its word what the narrator of Oates's later *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang* (1993), for instance, observes in connection with the long-suffering dissidence of "Legs" Sadovsky, we perhaps might be invited to view Oates's traumatic postmemory in novels like You Must Remember This painfully motivated by the fact that "Truth is not always available, not always recalled accurately, or even known ... [so that 'Legs'] might live independently of all adult intervention which had been her dream for years" (Foxfire 196).11

11 Citing a crucial passage from Oates's "Myth of the Isolated Artist" (1973) to

Let me round out this discussion of the construction of Oates's "Cold War" canon, therefore, by elaborating just a bit further upon the vision of independent life underwritten by traumatic postmemory that Oates attempts to revive in American life with respect to the central triangulation of character in You Must Remember This. In the case of Lyle Stevick, first of all, the traumatic experience of being rudely abandoned, along with his mother and brother, when his father deserts the family to take up with a "cheap" and "common" paramour (YMRT 30) and thereby sire Lyle's rival half-brother Felix—this painful experience while it might leave Lyle with searching doubts about the ideals of fatherhood, parental authority, monogamous marriage or the nuclear family structure reveals perhaps even more how fearful he becomes by the alternatives. Falling back on the ultra-conventional rôles of dutiful husband and father and family provider—"Lyle Stevick had his pride, after all he was a breadwinner too," the narrator remarks (YMRT 329)—he doggedly accepts his position in society as a secondhand furniture salesman, goes on indifferently to raise four children whom "he didn't take much notice of" (YMRT 37), and for the remainder of his life, is content to make patriarchal control his constant and abiding watchword:

Mr. Stevick made a toast to the memory of his nephew Joe Pauley who had died in the service of country defending the American flag along with countless thousands of other American boys.... Mr. Stevick's eyes shone with tears but he was smiling his broad white salesman's smile so Enid knew its was all right: he was in control. (*YMRT* 47)

But a "dangling rope—its shadow resting lightly on the wall" (*YMRT* 80) that Lyle contemplates longingly at an early point in the novel reveals quite clearly that not all was ever completely right with him.

And when his daughter Enid beats him to the act of suicide a little later, and once again the trauma of "grief, guilt, rage" threatens to overwhelm him—"suddenly he lost control and said, 'Oh, Enid—why?" (YMRT 145)—we're given to understand that it's the need to contain the vagaries of

the effect that "belief in a unified and autonomous self is 'totally erroneous," Brenda Daly masterfully undertakes to argue, therefore, that Oates's redefinition throughout much of her work of the narrative voice "as multivocal rather than individual" points clearly to Oates's "resistance to the notion of a unified (essentialist) self" (137, xi, 228 n. 4). As Daly elsewhere frames her argument, "If one assumes a unitary subject ... a writer will have only one voice, but Oates persistently challenges this unitary conception of the self" (239 n. 17).

subjectivity inspired by trauma that most often provokes Lyle's most willful acts of repetition. Hence, in response to the ghastly news that his oldest daughter Geraldine has become pregnant outside of wedlock, "Mr Stevick had come close to slapping his own daughter, and calling her a whore a slut.... Daddy almost lost control: but Daddy hadn't lost control, had he" (*YMRT* 206). Incited to dismantle an overly facile symbolic processing of experience as all such traumatic experiences warrant, Lyle prefers instead to play to the very strategies of containment embedded as previously noted in the "Cold War" culture in which he finds himself. Hence, Lyle's fixation, spawned at this very point and through to the end of the novel, upon the building of a bomb shelter:

Ah yes: underground bomb shelters: something eerily snug, attractive about them, wasn't there. He saw the appeal suddenly. It was all quite insane and terrifying but ... a man showed his love for his family, perhaps even for the greatness of America, by building a cozy place of refuge by lining the walls with concrete and storing up provisions.... (YMRT 215)

Now the fact the bomb shelter eventually will leak—"after a rainstorm he'd found six inches of dirty water in it" (*YMRT* 425)—and the further realization (as Enid points out) that once deployed, "there'd be nothing to live for afterward" anyway (*YMRT* 327) contribute little in curtailing Lyle's obsession. And his forcing upon his wife an act of sexual intercourse within the odiferous confines of its claustrophobic concrete walls in the final pages of the novel reveals just how blocked Lyle truly is with respect to renewing a vital purchase on life through the challenges afforded by his various traumatic encounters.

In the case of Lyle's step-brother Felix Stevick, the second character in Oates's central triangulation of protagonists, we appear to be offered something a little more fortunate as suggested perhaps by his first name. For in pursuing a cross-generational and admittedly incestuous relationship with his half-niece Enid, Felix's repeatedly traumatic encounters with the fifteen-year old would appear to suggest that he was endeavouring to move beyond the institutional ideologies everywhere interpellating fixed identities within the "Cold War's" claustrophobic consensus culture. The previous references to the mystery of his character—"It was said of Felix Stevick that you never got to know him," the narrator remarks at an early point (*YMRT* 53)—and to the secrecy of his inner mind—"The man you saw wasn't there and the man who was there you couldn't see," the narrator remarks at a later time (*YMRT* 95)—these might combine to suggest that

traumatic experience was truly offering the reader that self-apprehension of the ego that is not a self-apprehension but instead a "splitting" that might promise to bring a brand new subject into being:

As a boy Felix Stevick thrived on opposition, resistance. When he was alone ... he fantasized, [in] those years, a twin self with whom he chattered and conspired, but when another consciousness intruded upon his[,] he came awake, alert, alive. (YMRT 165)

But as the passage goes on to relate, the traumatisation of subjectivity for Felix promises not so much an accession to new life-forms as a recycling of old and hackneyed and all-too-familiar patriarchal ones modelled mainly after "heroes directly from the boxing world." Tellingly, the narrator reveals, "[Felix] measured all men, all male behavior, against that world—which was a twin or mirror world of the 'real' world, and far more significant" (YMRT 165, emphasis added).

Not surprisingly, then, Felix's relationship is not about the traumatic occultation of subjectivity at all, but rather its "Cold War" consolidation—a consolidating conformism whose "symbolic consistency" and "fantasy of oneness" purposes to hide the self's originary self-division, and instead, offer to it "the illusion of identity, as well as reassurance that the traumatic real of sex can be rehabilitated to a sexual relation—a fantasy image of sexual completion, the copulatory couple" (Dean 109). It is hardly accidental, therefore, that when Enid stares across a table part way through their stormy relationship she sees "that impassive hooded look of [Felix]" that tells her that like her father, "he was supremely in control" (YMRT 193). And as in the case of Enid's father obsessing about his bomb shelter, it's a type of control that has some kind of death inevitably attached to it. Hence, Felix's taking ultimate control of Enid's life by finally impregnating her can nearly cost her her life through the bloody abortion she resorts to, exactly in the way that Felix's commandeering the boxing career of Jo-Jo Pearl does in fact issue in death when Jo-Jo dies needlessly, thanks to Felix, from boxing injuries incurred from a final, hopelessly mismatched fight. The culminating death in this containment scenario could very well have been Felix's own when Jo-Jo's avenging father, Leroy Pearl, finally comes after him and beats him within an inch of his life near the end of the novel. "This time Pearl was in control," so the narrator wryly renders the scene, "leaning on his left crutch, gesturing with his right, and you could see the ropey arm muscles inside the slacker flesh, his eyes rolling wild and wet, mouth curling like a scar into a smile and Felix was too weak to defend

As in the case of Enid's father obsessing about his bomb shelter, it's a type of control that has some kind of death inevitably attached to it.

himself, his guts still sick and knees like water" (*YMRT* 410). Precisely how far Felix is, in this final pathetic scene, from the pleasurable displeasure of traumatic individuation is ultimately left for Leroy Pearl to decide: "I know you! I know you! Stevick! Fucker! Bastard!" (*YMRT* 410).

With Enid Stevick, the third and final character of Oates's traumatic triangulation, we are thus given a character quite beyond control and quite beyond containment. In her love-making with Felix, for example, the narrator scruples to press home the point that Enid "controlled nothing," not even "the tiny panicked muscles in spasms encircling [Felix], her hands wild clutching at his back, his shoulders, his hair" (*YMRT* 224). Nor does she even for a second entertain the notion that her relationship with Felix in any sense confines her:

Hadn't Felix given her the ring? Held close to her eye, the glassy jewel trapped a tiny rectangle of the world, reversed, over her shoulder, emptied of her presence. That was its extraordinary significance—[that] it did not contain her, [that] it knew nothing of her. (*YMRT* 192)

By emptying Enid of any determinate "presence" in this way, she becomes a character "contrary to philosophical common sense," as Žižek might say, one whose "I' is nothing but a vanishing point of the 'subject of enunciation," and thus "becomes 'somebody" only to the extent "that we can answer the question, 'Who is in pain?" (155). And it is Oates's narrator who frames Enid with that very question immediately following the first attempt on her life made by her own hand—her initial vanishing as it were: "you might argue that there was a trauma, there to be dealt with, exorcised as after combat in war, a physical memory lodged in the flesh as well as the spirit" (*YMRT* 148).

In the final analysis, we come to understand that the traumatization of subjectivity that de-presences Enid but at the same time imbues her very much with a flesh and spirit reality—that such an experience has *not* left her with a memory merely of nothing, a prospect that perhaps only a monological culture of containment might otherwise conduce her (and us) to believe. Contrary to such "Cold War" consensus, as her brother Warren is given to remark, "we are one, we are many" (*YMRT* 111). The dispersion of Enid's identity into a number of variations of some "Angel-face" that is by turns sinister, curious, empathetic and at times downright cryptic would persuade us to believe that any self-consistency in the memorial encounter with trauma would make indeed of Enid, as Angel-face herself

regrets, "[one] poor sad cunt" (YMRT 54).12 In conclusion, therefore, I thus return in such an encounter to the notion of "the splitting off of a 'traumatic memory" as a function of "the dissociation of the psyche around the event" (Caruth 141), and the excess of signifying representations such dissociation portends for the construction of subjectivity underwritten by the "pure void" or "non-symbolized object (a) rehearsed previously" (see Žižek 155). For Oates, the pure void of subjectivity, as her biographer never tires of remarking, would be the state of "invisibility" itself where "no notion or sense of the body as an integrated aspect of self" exists because, as the novelist herself remarks, "there's this empty blur that must be where I exist ... [as a] mere vapor of consciousness" (175). That "mysterious and elusive concept we call personality" is a presentiment that Oates had occasion to remark significantly upon as far back as 1974 (New Heaven 207). 13 If the (re)construction of Oates's "Cold War" canon serves one overriding purpose, therefore, it will be to reveal how the trauma of postmemory can allow us to gain a more recent purchase in Oates's work on that mysterious elusive concept, and never more so than at the end of her painful narrative when Enid Maria Stevick—"drunk, giddy, forgiving"—is "about to cross

- 12 That Enid is that, and so much more is movingly suggested by her brother Warren, once again, in the letter he writes to her from Colorado in the opening of the novel's "Epilogue": "Strange isn't it," Warren writes, "how 'love' seems to carry with it no knowledge. The people I have loved most in my lifetime (including you) I haven't known at all. Nor have they known me.... Something terrifying there ... —so strange, helpless, paralyzing and exciting both. It's only away where people don't know me or haven't known me for very long that I am myself" (YMRT 416). Enid's recent move from Port Oriskany to Rochester to study piano at the Wescott School of Music by the end of the novel would appear to corroborate brother Warren's insightful and reassuring sense of epistemological self-displacement.
- 13 Oates is on record for not thinking very highly of Freudian psychoanalysis (see Conversations 74, 115, and Where I've Been 229). But the mystery of the human personality is one tenet of Freud's writings that she can apparently praise without reservation, for instance: "Freud remarked, 'Anyone who writes a biography is committed to lies, concealments, hypocrisy, flattery and even to hiding his own lack of understanding, for biographical truth does not exist, and if it did we could not use it" (qtd. in Where I've Been 231). Hence, three years later after the appearance of You Must Remember This, in her Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart (1990), Oates's narrator can therefore allude to "That I-I-I we can't imagine ceasing to exist," and hence query "how provisional, even nominal [are] the terms of its [that I–I–I's] existence" (184). Not unexpectedly, then, in a review of Saul Bellow's *Theft* (1989), Oates approvingly remarks on "the phenomena [Bellow] loves best: the haunting contours and textures of the physical world, and the mystery of human personality in its extraordinary variety" (Where I've Been 158).

over into another self" all over again (*YMRT* 393), no doubt in pursuit of "a child she'd never been" (*YMRT* 419).

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