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The Complexity of White Female Identity in Selected Works by Joyce Carol Oates

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Abbreviations

E: *Expensive People*.

BB: *Because It Is Bitter, And Because It Is My Heart*.

H: *Heat and Other Stories*.

B: *Blonde*.

ITYT: *I'll Take You There*.

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

The Problematic of Race and Identity

> If we stop pretending that whiteness studies will lead us to the promised land of a new racial justice, we can pay attention to more prosaic claims, to more realistic payoffs. We can say, at the very least, that the study of whiteness adds to our knowledge about race and ethnicity in American culture. We can say that it gives us a new and richer way of thinking about class, gender, and sexuality. […] And so we go forward, poking and prodding whiteness until it ends up where it never meant to go – until it divulges secrets it didn't even know it was keeping. (Stokes 2001, 192)

A study of the representation of whiteness evokes contradictory thoughts and affects. I find this inevitable and necessary, because the problematic of race, and especially of whiteness, is complex and intractable. I agree with Mason Stokes, who suggests in the above citation that although whiteness studies do not offer decisive solutions to racial injustice we should continue the examination of whiteness. In my view, we need more persistent and diverse approaches to the problematic. That is, the questions of how whiteness is produced, maintained, experienced, and resisted have to be mapped from various positions and with various theoretical and epistemological perspectives in order to reveal and examine the volatilities and yet unknown qualities of whiteness.

One of Joyce Carol Oates's short stories titled "Naked" in *Heat and Other Stories* (1991) prompted my curiosity of the problematic of race and its relation to white female identity in the American context. The story begins as the central character, an unnamed white middle-class woman, is hiking alone in a suburban wildlife preserve. She comes upon a group of young black children, who unexpectedly attack her and strip her clothes. The incident generates an intense self-analysis, and she starts

contemplating who she really is. As Greg Johnson interprets, the woman's nakedness forces her to consider questions of identity.[1] Her contemplation relates to issues of gender, class, age, profession, and race. On the subject of race, she articulates contradictory thoughts and beliefs. For example, she claims that race, to which she refers as skin color, does not define her: "My skin doesn't define me. My color, my skin" (H 134). Yet, she admits that her white skin provides her with some privileges, such as a responsibility to be "good and decent and charitable" (H 127). Throughout the story, she maintains that she does not define others because of race, and repeats that she is not a racist.

In my view, the story draws attention to the ways of thinking about race in the contemporary U.S. context. One of the basic observations by scholars, who first started theorizing whiteness as racial identity in the beginning of the 1990s, was that whiteness is implicitly seen as a non-racial norm.[2] That is, white people see themselves as being racially neutral and beyond racial categories. Oates's story "Naked" reflects the very same phenomenon. The unnamed white woman sees the black children as representatives of their race, but insists that she herself is not defined by her skin color. Even though she categorizes black people according to their skin color, she denies that race affects her thinking. Moreover, her denial reflects the contemporary era of color-blind thinking, also referred to as post-racial liberalism. Liberals advocated color-blind thinking as an optimistic idea for equality in the 1960s.[3] In the post-civil-rights era, especially since the 1980s, color-blind thinking has become an ideology that endorses racial inequality, because it denies the significance of race as a fundamental dividing category in society, and the existence of racial discrimination. The idea of a color-blind society serves to promote the privileges of whites and people with a good education and incomes. The post-racial liberalism, promoted especially by the right-wing

[1] Johnson 1994, 79.

[2] See, for example, Dyer 1988; hooks 1993; Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1989; Erickson 1995, 166.

[3] Wise 2010, 16. David Roediger traces the roots of modern liberalism and its color-blind stance back to the age of Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s. Roediger 2008, 173–84.

conservatives as a backlash against affirmative action, has produced altered forms of racism. The colorblind standpoints escalated especially during the 1990s.[4] The woman's viewpoint in Oates's story represents a typical color-blind attitude. Moreover, she is not able to see the significance of other differences in the social stratification such as those imposed by social class or status.

In general, in the post-civil-rights era, the discussion concerning race has largely focused on the recognition of people of color, who have suffered from racial discrimination in American society during its history that includes periods of slavery and legal racial segregation. Although there are significant signs of progress, such as the state-based racial reform after the civil rights movement or the election of the first African American President, Barack H. Obama in 2008, racism has not been eliminated from present-day discourses and practices. As Tim Wise notes, Obama was a suitable political figure at the time, because he was a man of color, who was unthreatening to whites.[5] The prevailing race-neutral policies make the efforts to challenge the racial injustices and racism more difficult.

In the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, whiteness as an idea and racialized identity was undergoing profound shifts owing to the political and social situation.[6] It was a time fraught with increased racial tensions. Americans witnessed, for example, the beating of Rodney King by LAPD police officers, the L.A. Riots following the trial and the O.J. Simpson murder trial.[7] Moreover, organized hate groups and movements

[4] On color-blindness in the contemporary US context see, for example, Gallagher 2003; Brown et al. 2003; Olson 2004, 95–105; Bonilla-Silva 2006 (2004); Ansell 2006; Roediger 2008, 207–11; Williams 2009, 45–81; Wise 2010.

[5] Wise 2010, 12–3. Obama's success suggests, however, that his image was unthreatening to various individuals and groups, not only to whites. Moreover, as David Roediger points out, as a man with a mixed-raced origin, transnational background, and an elite education, he appealed to a prevalent logic that race is not any more about status, but, more than ever before, about choice. Roediger 2008, 217–8.

[6] Kincheloe & Steinberg 2000, 9; Gallagher 1997, 6; Winant 1997, 41.

[7] On the Rodney King incident and uprising in L.A., see Gooding-Williams (ed.) 1993; Fiske 1996, 125–90; Jacobs 2000, 81–139. On O.J. Simpson trial see, for example, Russell 1998, 47–68; Lipsitz 1998, 99–117.

reinvigorated their activities and strategies.[8] Racial tensions in the 1990s were intensified subsequent to the color-blind and neoliberal politics in the Reagan and Bush administrations, political order dominated by white and neoconservative officials, as well as changing racial demographics, which reproduced racial divisions.[9] The so-called "white backlash" and the political attitudes and development regarding multiculturalism during the 1980s and 1990s, was a continuation of the same dilemma about racial, cultural and national diversity that has been present in the U.S. since its early history. American society is, indeed, in Howard Winant's words "a complex combination of the old and new racial systems."[10]

As whiteness gradually became the object of analysis, it was displaced from its status as unnamed and non-racial. Both conservative politicians and critical scholars appropriated the concept in various discourses and for different purposes.[11] Toni Morrison's essays, *Playing in The Dark: Whiteness and the American Literary Imagination* (1992) about the "literary whiteness" and its consequences in American literature, are among the launching texts of the whiteness studies and literary analyses on the construction of whiteness. Scholars in the field of whiteness studies often express their debt to the black intellectual tradition in the Unites States even before Toni Morrison.[12] The list of the most often mentioned black intellectuals include W.E.B. du Bois, Ida B. Wells, Fredrick Douglas, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. According to Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Morrison's essays "offered a set of questions and an agenda for research that resonated with a number of projects

[8] Ross 1997, 555.

[9] Omi & Winant 1994, 128–36, 140–1; Lipsitz 1998, 15; Giroux 1998, 44. The conservative politics and new patriotism of the Reagan-Bush-era was a consequence of manifold economic and political causes: tensions created by the Cold War and the Vietnam War, a backlash against the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and global economic downswing in the 1970s.

[10] Winant 2004, 5. See also Omi & Winant 1994, 157.

[11] Giroux 1988, 44.

[12] See, for example, Roediger 1999 (1991), 11–3; Ignatiev 1995, 179; Stokes 2001, 180–1. The articulation of this debt signals not only the awareness of the work done in the racial scholarship by the black intellectuals, but also the awareness of the long and unjust history of racial relations and institutional racism.

already under way[.]"[13] Nevertheless, it was only after Morrison's essays that the question about literary whiteness received more attention.

In his introduction to *Whiteness: A Critical Reader* (1997), Mike Hill speaks of first and second waves of whiteness studies.[14] Hill's delineation serves its purpose in outlining the development of whiteness studies, which is not a monolithic field, but comprised of various branches and theoretical approaches. The first wave of the whiteness studies focused, as Hill observes, on making whiteness visible as "a distinct and relatively recent historical fiction."[15] One of the often-quoted scholars of the first wave is British scholar Richard Dyer, whose insights on whiteness are pioneering especially in the field of cinema studies. The first wave emphasized that whiteness should be understood as a social construction, which followed the re-conceptualization of race already made in the race and ethnic studies in the 1980s.[16] Historian David Roediger, whose books deal with labor history, is a pioneering scholar of the first wave within the U.S. context. Roediger illuminates in his work, as several other historians after him, such as Theodore Allen, Karen Brodkin, Matthew Frye Jacobson, Grace Elisabeth Hale, Neil Foley, and Nell Irvin Painter the historically changing character of whiteness in the United States. Their work also focuses on the influence of dominant racial ideology on attitudes, behavior, and the construction of racial identities in the United States.

As whiteness studies quickly became a popular academic field, it stirred up a lot of criticism. In the early stages, the new attention to whiteness was considered as "provocative behavior," especially in the fields of literature and cultural studies.[17] Because almost all the scholars

[13] Fiskin 1995, 430–1.
[14] Hill 1997a, 2–3.
[15] Hill 1997a, 2.
[16] Among the most influential academic studies of race and ethnicity in the 1980s are the racial formation theory advanced by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (*Racial Formation in the United States*, 1986), the collection on the study of race in literary studies edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. (*"Race," Writing, and Difference*, 1986), Cornel West's analysis of race (*Race Matters*, 1993), and the intersectionalist approach developed by black feminist thought and critical race theory. These studies share an attempt to recognize diverse aspects related to difference, otherness, and oppression.
[17] Fisher 1995, 429.

focusing on whiteness were white, the growing interest on whiteness was also considered as a narcissistic move.[18] In general, whiteness studies were criticized for the risk of reifying the privileged status of whiteness.[19] A great deal of the critique was targeted towards the so-called "Race Traitor School," identified with Harvard professor Noel Ignatiev, the founder of a journal called *Race Traitor: Journal of the New Abolitionism*. The journal proclaimed to work towards the abolition of whiteness and undoing the power of whiteness. I agree with Linda Alcoff, who perceives their project as problematic, because it proposes that whites can simply renounce the privilege that goes hand in hand with one's appearance of being white.[20] The aim of the critique was to call more attention both to the motives and consequences of the desire to talk about whiteness.

After the first wave, the scholars focusing on the construction of whiteness often refer to themselves as representing critical whiteness studies in order to emphasize the awareness of the problems raised by the desire to examine whiteness. Nevertheless, as Hill points out, any work on whiteness will always be surrounded by contradictions.[21] The second wave stressed that whiteness is no longer considered invisible. Ruth Frankenberg, one of the early contributors to gendered analysis of whiteness in the U.S., introduced *Displacing Whiteness* (1999) as a collection of essays that aims to displace whiteness from its unspoken status by demonstrating how whiteness works in particular contexts, as internally differentiated, and fractured by multiple dynamics of alterity.[22]

The discussion about women and whiteness began in the early 1990s. The origins of the discussion can be traced to the late 1970s and early 1980s, when African American feminists, "radical women of color," criticized white feminists' failure to take responsibility for racism and white privilege.[23] They stated that white women did not understand the

[18] Hill 1998, 236.
[19] Wiegmann 1999; Zack 1999; Davis 2000, 176–7; Knadler 2002, xxi–xxii.
[20] Alcoff 1998, 17.
[21] Hill 1997b, 156; Hill 2004, 7.
[22] Frankenberg 1999 (1997), 3–4.
[23] See Smith 2000 (1983); Davis 1983 (1981); Hull, Bell-Scott & Smith 1982; Moraga & Anzaldúa 1983; hooks 1981; hooks 1984; White 1984. In particular the Combahee

complex differences of power caused by gender, race, and class. They also maintained that it is important to recognize that white and black women have distinct race and class histories and disparate experiences. Accordingly, radical black feminists insisted that feminist theory must be attentive to different varieties of oppression, and involve an examination of the intrinsically linked relations of race, gender, class, and sexuality. The question about the interaction between two or more differences has been reformulated during the so-called third wave of feminism.[24] In tandem with the third-wave feminist theorizing, issues concerning gender have also become de-politized. Since the early 1980s, there has been a set of so-called postfeminist discourses, which emphasize women as autonomous agents, who can make freely individual choices, and who are not constrained by an unequal distribution of power.[25] Similar to the post-racial liberalism, postfeminist rhetoric, which emphasizes "individual choices," tends to mask basic structural inequalities.[26]

River Collective was an important political organization that launched the critical charge against white feminism and articulated the goals of black feminism. "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1977) is one of the most often-cited documents of the radical black feminism. On the Combahee River Collective, see Breines 2002, 1110–17. The debate concerning the conflicts between gender and race harks even further back to North American antislavery and women's suffrage campaigns in the 19th century, in particular to Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I a Woman." For more on this see Brah & Phoenix 2004, 76–8.

[24] The third wave of feminism, which began in the beginning of the 1990s, is a discourse or paradigm of feminism for understanding gender relations that grew out of a critique of the failures of the second wave. According to Susan Archer Mann and Douglas Huffman, it is often understood as a generational paradigm created by younger feminists, who are reforming and finding new ways of thinking. The third wave feminism, especially approaches imbued by poststructuralist theories, may also be characterized as seeking to challenge and problematize notions of gender and sexuality. Mann & Huffman 2005.

[25] The term 'postfeminism' has been used to indicate a number of different things both in popular and academic discourses. The term first appeared in the early 1980s, when it was understood as a "chick" anti-feminist backlash. As Rosalind Gill suggests, the so-called postfeminism should be seen as a new sensibility, which has an intimate relation to feminism and to neoliberalism. Rather than seeing postfeminism simply as a backlash to feminism, she emphasizes it as a *response* to feminism. It is a sensibility that is constituted as an effect of neoliberal ideas, as well as both feminist and anti-feminist discourses. Gill 2007, 163–4. In the academic discussion, the term is utilized especially in media studies. For discussions on postfeminism, see Faludi (1991) 2006; Brookes 1997; Jones 2003c; Tasker & Negra 2005; Holmlund 2005; Gill 2007.

[26] Cf. Tasker & Negra 2005, 108.

The third wave theorization emphasizes that gender as a single category fails to describe various experiences and identities. Frankenberg as well as the majority of feminist theorists studying whiteness draw on third-wave theorization, and use as their starting point the idea that it is through differences within whiteness that whiteness and its complicated relation to power becomes visible.[27] Although there are white feminists, who recognize that issues concerning race include whiteness, more theorizing is needed, because it is a far more complex challenge than commonly recognized.[28]

Following the path laid down by Toni Morrison and feminist and literary studies of whiteness, I will examine the literary construction of white female identity in a selection of Joyce Carol Oates's fiction. So far, studies of Oates's works have not focused on the meanings of race. In the field of literary studies, the significance of race has more often been studied in fiction by non-white authors. The growing field of whiteness studies has inspired a number of literary studies that consider racial issues also in works by American white authors.[29] These studies focus mostly on Southern writers such as William Faulkner or Carson McCullers.[30] Despite the recent interest in the subject of whiteness, there are only a few studies on white American writers, who stem from the Northeast of America and whose fiction does not deal explicitly with issues of race as often as works by Southern authors in general.[31] These kinds of studies demand, perhaps, a more attentive and profound analysis that plunges

[27] See also Cuomo & Hall 1999, 2–3; Lewis & Ramanzanoglu 1999; Najmi & Srikanth 2002, 5–6.

[28] On the need to interrogate white feminist discourse, see Moreton-Robinson 2000; Haggis & Schech 2000; Radford Curry 2004; Gillman 2007; Berg 2008, 214; Valovirta 2010, 25–6.

[29] For analyses on the literary construction of whiteness in American literature see, for example, DuPlessis 1995; Sandell 1997; Babb 1998; Aenerud 1997; Curry 2000; Stokes 2001; Jurca 2001; Prosser 2001; Xiaojing 2002; Abbott 2002; Entzminger 2003; Goldsmith 2003; Belluscia 2006; Ahokas 2007.

[30] See, for example, McKee 1999; Jenkins 1999; Parker 2000; Davis 2000; Wu 2001; Abernathy 2003, 54–106; Duvall 2010; Watson (ed.) 2011.

[31] Most of the studies focusing on Northern writers are scholarly articles or chapters in books, and only a few book-length studies have been published. See, for example, Engles 1999, 2006; Robinson 2000; Wesley 2003, 140–64.

deeper into both the obvious and more implicit meanings and implications of race.

Overall, white authors are not likely to consider the impact of race on the representations of white characters. According to Renée Curry, who explores works by American white women poets written between the 1920s and 1970s, white women write as white women, from within various frameworks of whiteness, "yet simultaneously they reveal limited, if any, conceptual relationship to the conditions of whiteness[.]"[32] Recent fiction by white American writers, however, deals with the racial problematic more openly, and even shows signs of a critical attitude towards whiteness.[33] This is partly explainable, because white people are more conscious of their whiteness due to intricate racial tensions in the post-civil-rights era.[34] In the same vein, I argue that Oates's fictional works, especially her recent fiction published from the 1990s onwards, reveal an amplified awareness about the conditions of whiteness in U.S. society. My aim is to demonstrate how her fiction renders white female characters in ways that compel the reader to acknowledge the effects of whiteness on identity.

Throughout my readings of Oates's works, I will emphasize the focus on white women, because they occupy, in general, a noteworthy position in relation to the crossing of gender and race. As Ann McClintock maintains, women are generally required to carry a "burden of representation," as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity, both personally and collectively.[35] In addition, white women have a special significance in the constitutive myth of American citizenship and of the American family. The gendered signification system of the American nation building consigns white women to a specific position, where they symbolize a racial ideal that must be maintained and protected. It is also a position conditioned by certain requisites and rules. Samina Najmi and Rajini Srikanth see the position of white women in the

[32] Curry 2000, 1.
[33] Aenerud 1997, 38; Engles 1999, 781.
[34] Giroux 1998, 44–5; Winant 1997, 41; Aenerud 1997, 57.
[35] McClintock 1993, 45.

U.S. and European nations as an in-between status, because it is at once privileged and marginalized.[36] Thus, a focus on white women requires an approach that takes into consideration the convoluted nexus between whiteness and supremacy, that is, practices that sustain and generate white privilege.

Although the issue of race is highlighted in the title of my study, the object of my investigation is the *complexity* of white female identity. That is, I will examine how the intersections of race with other categories of difference work in the pathways of identity constitution. Like in the Oates's story "Naked," where the woman's encounter with the idea of race works as a moving spirit that forces her to reflect on different aspects that constitute her identity, in this study, race functions as a stimulus for the question about the intersections of different aspects that play a part in the constitution of white female identity. The focus on the intersecting relations and boundaries between the denominators of identities, including their ramifications on individuals that form a certain recognizable group as white people, works as a tool to understand and challenge current understandings of identity.

Oatesian Oeuvre

Joyce Carol Oates was born in 1938 in Lockport, New York. Her family was poor and lived in rural surroundings in the state of New York. Oates started telling stories even before she could write.[37] Some of her short stories where first published during her college years at Syracuse University in the 1950s. In 1959, she won a *Mademoiselle* College fiction award. Her first story collection *By the North Gate* was published in 1963 and her first novel *With Shuddering Fall* in 1964. Subsequently she has produced dozens of novels and short story collections, stories for children

[36] Najmi & Srikanth 2002, 14.
[37] Johnson 1999, 31; Schumacher 2006, 131; Björkmann 2003, 36.

and young adults, plays and poetry.[38] She has also published novels under two pseudonyms (Rosamund Smith and Lauren Kelly), written essays and reviews, and compiled literature anthologies. Since 1978, she has taught creative writing at Princeton University, where she is the Roger S. Berlind Distinguished Professor of Humanities.

A frequent observation about Oates is that she is a remarkably prolific writer. Scholars doing research on Oates are recurrently asked how they manage to keep up with her work. The answer to the question is that it is not possible. As Joanne V. Creighton puts it: "[S]he [Oates] sprints buoyantly ahead of any attempt to assess her achievement."[39] Studies of her works have offered various perspectives to her fiction. I find the monographs by Joanne Creighton (1979, 1992), Ellen G. Friedman (1980), Marilyn C. Wesley (1993), Brenda Daly (1996), and Gavin Cologne-Brookes (2005) the most valuable sources for my own study, because the authors of these studies have a wide-ranging knowledge of Oates's body of work and offer versatile and perceptive readings of her fiction.

Because of Oates's extreme productivity and versatility as a writer, it is not very easy to place her in American literature. Indeed, the array of styles can be seen as one of the central characteristics of Oatesian oeuvre, as Asta Balšiūnaitė suggests.[40] Oates has been categorized as a realist, neo-naturalist, social novelist, proletarian novelist and so forth. In particular, her earlier fiction is often seen as representing a more traditional phase from which she moves towards postmodernist and gothic fiction in the 1980s.[41] She has made excursions into the genres of detective novel, romance, and thriller. Her employment of different literary conventions and genres suggests an ongoing experiment, as several critics have pointed out.[42] Moreover, her use of pseudonyms implies a persistent need to

[38] By the end of 2011 Oates had published 56 novels, 35 short story collections, eight poetry collections, nine drama collections, and eight books for children and young adults.
[39] Creighton 1992, x.
[40] Balšiūnaitė 2009, 2.
[41] Manske 1992, 137; Edemariam 2006, 223; Balšiūnaitė 2009, 3.
[42] Barth 1980, 66; Bender 1987, 6; Johnson 1987, 13; Creighton 1992, ix; Showalter 1994, 4; Daly 1996, xii-xiii; Loeb 2002, 11; Cologne-Brooks 2005, 6.

experiment and to renew her authorial self. As Oates ponders in an essay, to write under a pseudonym embraces a possibility to redefine oneself.[43]

One of Oates's fundamental aspirations is to criticize American society, its values, and social injustices. She approaches her objective from different angles, and the central themes in her fiction are connected to the critical examination of social conditions of American life. According to Brenda Daly, Oates investigates particularly the distribution of power in various institutions and discourses within American society, and her aim to challenge the social hierarchies becomes evident especially in the transgressions of generic conventions. [44] Gavin Cologne-Brooks characterizes Oates as a "national novelist," since her work reflects the various sides of American culture and society as well as the various traditions, tendencies, and concerns of American fiction.[45] I agree with both Daly and Cologne-Brooks, and emphasize that Oates's critical examination of American society reveals a receptive gaze to its social stratification and injustices, and that she impugns the social hierarchies through skilled narrative strategies and twists of genre.

Critics have praised Oates's short stories, and some even claim that the genre of short story is most suitable to her.[46] In the beginning of her career she was, perhaps, a more skillful short story writer than novelist. I agree on this with Cologne-Brooks, who argues that Oates matured earlier as a storywriter than as a novelist.[47] According to Joanna Creighton, short stories provided Oates with an experimental ground, which offered a greater flexibility than the novel.[48] Oates herself finds short story as an art that "lends itself to experimentation."[49] Her two story collections, *The Wheel of Love* (1970) and *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972), published in the beginning of the 1970s, are composed of multilayered stories that induce a variety of interpretations. *The Wheel of Love* (1970) is a

[43] Oates 1987a.
[44] Daly 1996, x.
[45] Cologne-Brooks 2005, 232–4. Cf. also Friedman 1980, 3–4, passim.
[46] See Loeb 2002, 11; Waller 1979, 3.
[47] Cologne-Brooks 2005, 55.
[48] Creighton 1979, 113.
[49] Oates 1992, 7.

good representative of Oates's work and themes in general. The stories in this collection are all thematically related unlike in her earlier collections, *By the North Gate* (1963) and *Upon the Sweeping Flood* (1966), which consisted of diverse material.[50] The Southern storywriters, such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Carson McCullers, and Eudora Welty, inspire the early stories.[51] *The Wheel of Love* represents in many ways a turning point in Oates' fiction when she starts to concentrate more on women characters and gender issues. Its stories depict adolescent girls, the sexual victimization of women, and the American obsession with violence. Many of the stories of this collection are placed in the suburban surroundings, while in the earlier stories the setting is almost invariably rural. The collection includes one of her most famous and frequently anthologized short story "Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?" which focuses on an adolescent girl and her search for independence.

Oates's fourth volume of short stories, *Marriages and Infidelities* (1972), has received a good deal of critical attention, most likely because of its intertextuality.[52] The story collection epitomizes the importance of intertextuality in Oates's fiction. It is composed of re-imaginings of well-known short stories by writers of the western literary tradition.[53] The collection has been interpreted from a feminist point of view as Oates's dialogue with the male literary tradition, as a fulfillment of a need to understand and overcome the complex relationship to male predecessors, and as a negotiation about the self and the purpose of writing.[54] In addition, the collection explores the themes concerning the limiting

[50] Oates 1999, 359.

[51] The most frequently mentioned influences are Faulkner and O'Connor, and Oates often mentions in interviews Faulkner, O'Connor and Porter. See, for example, Bender 1987, 2; Johnson 1994, 16; Loeb 2002, 26, 51; Phillips 2006, 77; Sjoberg 2006, 119; Schumacher 2006, 137; Balšiūnaitė 2009, 8. I add to the list also McCullers and Welty.

[52] For closer analyses on the collection, see Creighton 1979, 131–6; Bastian 1983; Johnson 1994, 70–81; Loeb 2002; Araújo 2004.

[53] Her stories re-imagine stories by James Joyce, Anton Chekhov, Franz Kafka, Henry David Thoreau, Gustave Flaubert and Henry James, all writers, who have been important literary influences on Oates at some point of her career.

[54] See, in particular, Showalter 1987, 140; Daly 1996, 70–6; Loeb 2002; Araújo 2004.

feminine roles and social position of women. Oates explains in an interview that she needed to find ways to show in her fiction "possible ways of transcending" nightmarish problems instead of just dramatizing them.[55] Indeed, as Monica Loeb argues, the story collection that focuses on transformation is a revisionary moment in Oates's career, which helped her to create her own voice.[56]

Ventures to the experimentation of the novel genre emerged later. Her novel trilogy of the 1980s, which consists of the novels *Bellefleur* (1980), *Bloodsmore Romance* (1982), and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984), represents the experimental phase. All three novels explore and criticize popular genres of the nineteenth century: Victorian gothic family saga (*Bellefleur*), romance (*Bloodsmore Romance*), and detective-mystery novel (*Mysteries of Winterhurn*). Oates is often mentioned as a writer, who writes in a mode of American gothic.[57] Some of her fiction clearly represents gothic fiction. More often, however, she employs in her narratives the tropes of gothic fiction. The literary influences come as much from the European gothic tradition as from American and Southern gothic, but she is especially inspired by American gothic writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James, William Faulkner, and Flannery O'Connor. Oates's story collections *The Night Side* (1977), *Demon and Other Tales* (1996), *Haunting: Tales of Grotesque* (1997), and *The Collector of Hearts: New Tales of the Grotesque* (1998) concentrate on the unconscious and uncanny sides of the human psyche. The stories are haunted by the past, or rather, by the return of the past, which is one of the main characteristics of American gothic genre. As Allan Lloyd-Smith delineates, American gothic is about "the repressed and denied [...] whatever the culture does not want to know or admit[.]"[58] The most evidently gothic among Oates's novels are the above-mentioned *The Bloodsmoor Romance* and *First Love: A Gothic Tale* (1996). The claustrophobic gothic atmosphere, feelings of displacement and isolation,

[55] Clemons 2006, 33.
[56] Loeb 2002, 177–80.
[57] See, for example, Johnson 1987, 16–20; Waller 1987, 37; Gardner 1987, 99; Showalter 1987, 140; Manske 1992, 137, passim; Araújo 2007, 91–2; Rodriguez 2008.
[58] Lloyd-Smith 2004, 1.

and a playful relationship to gothic conventions are present in her novels *Expensive People* (1968), *Wonderland* (1971), *Bellefleur*, and *My Heart Laid Bare* (1998). The influence of the gothic genre, or the use of certain gothic patterns or tone referring to it, comes to the surface repeatedly also in other novels and stories.

One of the central themes in Oates's fiction is identity and the nature of self.[59] The writer describes her curiosity on the riddle of the self in the following way: "All my life I've been fascinated with the mystery of human personality. Who are we? – so diverse, yet perhaps, beneath diversity, so much akin?"[60] For example, her novels *Solstice* (1985), *Marya: A Life* (1986), *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* (1990), and *I'll Take You There* (2002) focus on the female protagonist's search for self-understanding. The struggle with identity is frequently connected to another central theme, to the portrayal of the American family. The characters of Oates's fiction often have a problematic relationship to their family that has a strong influence on their perceptions of themselves. A citation from her novel *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006) discloses a typically Oatesian view of family: "Something monstrous about the family. The family is a many-headed creature like the Hydra. The family is the locus of obsession. The family is about possessing and being possessed."[61] As Marilyn Wesley neatly recapitulates, Oates's portrayals of troubled and dysfunctional family relationships address intricate issues of personal, familial, and public power in contemporary society.[62] Her fiction looks at the problematic of an individual and family in different eras, giving a retrospective of the American family since the Depression era. Some of her fiction reaches even further back, but most of her oeuvre covers the period from the 1930s onwards.

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[59] Although critics have also disagreed about Oates's thematic intentions, most of them agree that identity is one of the central themes in her fiction. See, for example, Waller 1979, 70; Cunningham 1989; Creighton 1992, 19; Cologne-Brooks 2005, 235; Balšiūnaitė 2009, 5.

[60] Oates 2003, 37.

[61] Oates 2006, 33.

[62] Wesley 1993, 1–2.

Harold Bloom defines Oates's ambition as belonging "to the domain of what Freud called the drives, love and death, so that her sense of facticity, of our being imprisoned in over-determination, takes on the aura of a powerful mythology, as much her own as Freud's."[63] Oates's attempt to understand the riddle of the self deliberately reaches out to domains beyond comprehension. In doing so, she utilizes notions and views that are familiar from psychoanalytic discourse, but at the same time, as Bloom attentively perceives, her move toward the whims of the human psyche is creative. Oates's interest in the human psyche and models offered by psychoanalytical theorizing is detectible in her fiction, for example, in patterns that reflect the oedipal scenario. They appear especially in her narratives that focus on the development of young characters. Yet, her affiliation to a psychoanalytic viewpoint is critical, and she frequently examines, rewrites and moves beyond psychoanalytic models and notions that have become an integral part of Western thought and its cultural mythologies concerning the questions of identity. Most importantly, however, she is not concerned with the human psyche on an individual level, but rather with how an individual's experiences mirror larger social and political problems. As Oates phrases in her correspondence with Dale Boesky, her characters "represent, in their various struggles, fantasies, unusual experiences, hopes etc., our society in miniature."[64] In my view, her stance offers an insightful view into the constitution of identity in a specific time and place, that is, the postwar era in the American sociocultural context.

Although Oates's early works touch on issues of race, the theme of racial problematic becomes salient especially in the beginning of the 1990s, first in *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1990) and *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, and later in *I'll Take you There*, *The Tattooed girl* (2003), and *Black Girl/White Girl* (2006). This is not to claim that these novels center exclusively on race and ethnicity. Rather, they deal more or less with racial questions, as they are pertinent to the social hierarchy and to the construction of identity in the American context.

[63] Bloom 1987, 2.
[64] Boesky 2006, 51.

Oates's view of the racial relations in her fiction is reduced to a black-white binary. She explains vaguely in an interview that she often tends to focus on a Caucasian women's vision of a black man, because the first black people she met in junior high made a strong impression on her, and because Caucasians tend to feel an emotional attraction to blacks.[65] Oates is well versed in the position of the African American male athletes in the history of American Sports, especially in boxing, which partly explains her responsiveness to the dominant image of the black man in American culture.[66] The black-white binary in Oates's fiction evidently represents the paradigm through which the racial formation in the United States takes place. In my view, her depiction of the binary works to demonstrate the simplifying ways in which people perceive each other as well as the dynamics of othering in the constitution of self. She characteristically uses a stereotypical imagery of African American men, and her fiction clings to the process of othering especially from the "Caucasian" point of view, that is, in the ways in which white people manage both their fear and fascination with black people. In my view, instead of just describing the "attraction to blacks" her recent fiction aims to understand elaborately what happens in the process of othering, and what kind of role it plays in the construction of American identities and communities.

Moving a little bit beyond the black-white binary, Oates's fiction deals with issues concerning Jewishness and the in-between status of Jewish Americans, for example, in her novels *Blonde* (2000), *The Tattooed Girl* (2003), and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007). As historians studying the history of immigration policy and the changing nature of whiteness have shown, the racial assignment of Eastern European Jews has changed especially since the late nineteenth century.[67] During the Second World

[65] Johnson 2006, 241.

[66] Cf. Oates's essay collection *On Boxing* and essay "Mike Tyson." Oates 1987b; Oates 1988, 225–53.

[67] See, for example, Brodkin 1998; Jacobson 1998; King D. 2000. Before the great immigration waves, all Europeans in the U.S. were mostly treated as whites. Yet, as Steven Belluscio points out, there is a tension in the debate about the racial position of so-called white ethnic groups (such as Jews or Italians), which concerns the question

War, the Caucasian race was redefined to include all people of European origin, for example, the Jews, the Irish, and southern Europeans.[68] In the post-war America, Jews were considered as white, yet they were also considered as a European ethnic group, and as such, different from the mainstream white Americans. Oates's depiction of Jewish characters discloses the contingent epistemology of race and ethnicity in the United States.

Earlier in her career, some critics found Oates too prolific, and doubted the quality of her work. Her fiction was also criticized for being too violent, repetitive, or representing too often victimized women. After four decades of her literary career, she is considered a distinguished, professional writer. She continues to write about the above-discussed themes by giving them new variations and tones. Some of her recent, epic novels resemble her early novels. For example, her much-acclaimed novels *The Falls* (2004) and *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) are similar to the early novels in their development of the storyline, and by their affinity to the conventions of realism. At the same time, they are recognizable as creations of a proficient writer, who masters the genre and produces compelling stories. As Cologne-Brookes observes, after the 1980s, Oates has returned to realism and both revises and renews its conventions.[69] Joseph Dewey even categorizes her way of writing as new realism.[70] In my view, the most precise term to describe Oatesian realism is, however, psychological realism, which has been, as Johnson states, a typical mode of writing for Oates from the start.[71] As G.F. Waller puts it, her early prose distinctly differs from "pure" realism in that it aims to reach the subjectivity and inner motives of the portrayed characters instead of a simple comprehensive description of the events and reality.[72] Through psychological realism Oates has displayed her ability to "relate the intense

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of whether the white ethnic groups where initially non-white and became white only later. Belluscio 2006, 35.

[68] Jacobson 1998, 91–135; Brodkin 1998, 36.

[69] Cologne-Brooks 2005, 16.

[70] Dewey 1999, 34; passim.

[71] Johnson 1987, 7.

[72] Waller 1979, 104.

private experiences of her characters to the larger realities of American life," to use Johnson's phrasing.[73] Oates often uses the term to describe her manner of writing. For example, she mentions in an interview that her novel *Blonde*, which is a combination of several styles, is mainly written in the mode of psychological realism.[74] Moreover, although Oates clearly aims to depict the contemporary world accurately and plausibly, her relation to various literary genres, conventions, and styles has from early on been self-conscious and playful.[75]

Oates continues to publish books at a stunning velocity and versatility: short stories, drama, and poetry, books for children, young adult novels, and novels of suspense under pseudonym. Because of her versatility and skillful use of literary forms, she is also a popular and current writer not only in the U.S. but also in Europe. In recent years, some of her latest fiction has also been translated into Finnish.[76]

Theoretical and Methodological Approach

Oates's habitual examination of the temporal and spatial limits of identity in her fiction has produced enlightening perspectives into the existing ways of thinking about identity, power, and agency. Using a wide range of narrative strategies, her recent fiction continues to examine the complexities and ambiguities of identity in contemporary American society, that is, a subject's sense of self: who one is and where one belongs. The larger epistemological frames for my study on *the complexity of identity* in Oates's fiction rest on poststructuralist thinking, and recent debates on the boundaries and definitions of 'identity'. The discussion has

[73] Johnson 1987, 8.
[74] Johnson 2003, 145.
[75] Cf. Giles 1995, 167, 172, 181–2; Sage 1992, 186; Daly 1996, xiii, passim.
[76] Three of her novels (*Expensive People*, *Bellefleur* and *Angel of Light*) and a collection of stories have been translated into Finnish earlier. After the immense success of her novels *Blonde* and *The Falls*, both also translated into Finnish, her fiction has received more attention in Finland. Recent Finnish translations also include a young adult novel *Big Mouth & Ugly Girl* (2002) and the novels *The Gravedigger's Daughter* and *Rape: A Love Story* (2004).

focused, for example, on identities as discursive formations, on the multiplicity of identity positions, on the tension between essentialism and anti-essentialism, on intersections between social categories, and on affect and embodiment. In this study, the key concept of identity is understood as a multifarious, ambiguous, and fluid construction, profoundly fissured by different forces and categories.[77] As I understand it, this also means that the question of identity is not assumed as theoretically foreclosed, but instead, as a problem that needs to be reassessed from various points of views. This way of addressing the question of identity works in tandem with the fundamental aspiration of Oates's fiction, that is, its endeavor to render identity constitution, both on the individual and collective level as a mentally, emotionally, and socially convoluted process.

This study is influenced by feminist studies, critical race theory, cultural studies, and postcolonial studies, which are all fields that concentrate on matters of ideology, ethnicity, race, social class, and gender. These influences endow my literary analysis with a multi-disciplinary approach, which I find necessary in order to understand the intricacies of the concepts used in their contexts of changing historical circumstances and cultural practices. Literary studies focusing on race and ethnicity have been largely multidisciplinary with references to related work in a variety of disciplines. In my analysis, I will also draw on several other theoretical fields, such as psychoanalytic theory, queer theory, American literary criticism, literary history, and American history. The use of various theoretical tools is first motivated by the primary texts, but my aim is also to find new ways of combining these theories in order to

[77] This stance to identity has become prevalent after the "death of the subject," social movements and political struggles in the 1960s, and the identity politics ensuing the struggle of social identity. The Enlightenment ideal of the rational, unified and autonomous subject, capable of knowing both the world and itself, was dislodged by French theorists, of which the most central are Louis Althusser, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan. Their work responded to ideas by twentieth-century philosophical movements of phenomenology and structuralism. The development of the concept of identity has, of course, a much more extensive philosophical history. For the history and development of identity as a key concept in the contemporary, post-modern and post-colonial era, see Hall 1990; Hall 1996; Mohanty 1993; Bauman 1996; Dunn 1998, Moya 2000; Alcoff 2000; Alcoff 2004 (2003); Weedon 2004, 5–21.

decipher the compounds between the notions that regulate a culturally specific identity. Indeed, I find the multi-disciplinary approach indispensable in a study that emphasizes the *interconnection* of the concepts as part of the regulating practices that define human subjectivities and social structures.

The impetus for the main question of my study stems, in particular, from the feminist intersectionalist approach to identity, which recognizes the categories of differences as crosscutting axes of power that work in relation to each other.[78] An intersectional approach has been used in various fields of studies, including in studies focusing on whiteness.[79] It offers a useful tool to examine the construction of whiteness in the American context, where race is, indeed, a discourse, which is constantly produced in relation to class, gender, and ethnicity. My intersectional approach could roughly be defined as *intracategorial*, because my focus is primarily on the complexity within a particular social group of white women.[80]

The intersectional emphasis on the relations between various categories has become a theoretical mantra, which has also been critiqued for methodological weakness. In this study, the notion of intersectionality works as a description of the theoretical approach rather than as a ready-made methodology. The complexity of the various categories cannot be explicated by a precise methodological system. In my view, this works as an asset, a step away from clear-cut disciplinary thinking towards an interdisciplinary approach, which contributes to the examination of the constitution and mutations of the categories. The major challenge of the approach is the complexity created by the use of various categories. For example, as Nira Yuval-Davis reminds, although race, gender, and class

[78] Kimberley Crenshaw, a scholar in critical legal studies, was first to offer a definition of the term intersectionality. On the theory and methodology of intersectionality in feminist studies see, for example, Crenshaw 1991; Collins 1990; Andersen & Collins 1994; McCall 2005; Lykke 2003; Phoenix & Pattynama 2006; Yuval-Davis 2006; Berger & Guidroz 2009; Lewis 2009.

[79] See, for example, de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005, 5–16, 27; Banner 2008, 10.

[80] The term *intracategorial* comes from Leslie McCall, who uses the terms *anticategorial, intracategorial* and *intercategorial complexity* to describe the current approaches and methodologies used in studies of intersectionality. McCall 2005, 1773, passim.

share some features as social divisions, it is important to keep in mind that they have a different ontological basis and are not reducible to each other.[81] Moreover, as concepts and classificatory systems they relate to each other differently both in diverse epistemological frameworks and actual historical and cultural contexts. That is, each category may have specific meanings or emphases both separately and in their relation to each other in a specific cultural and historical context or in a particular theoretical framework. My endeavor is to consider the concepts through a range of theoretical discussions and re-conceptualizations. I find this crucial because of the problematic nature of race, gender, and class as explanatory concepts, that is, their use as normativizing attributes of identity, which differentiate subjects from each other. My aim is also to test the feasibility of the intersectional approach in a literary analysis of contemporary literature that attempts to untangle the disturbing qualities of whiteness. Although my analysis concentrates on the level of representation, on how Oates's fiction expresses the intersections of race, gender, and class in her fiction, I do not disregard the political relevance or epistemic implications of the used categories.

In the American version of intersectionality, including literary studies, the focus has been primarily on race and gender.[82] In a way, I agree with Walter Benn Michaels, who argues in his book *The Trouble with Diversity* (2006) that in the age of multiculturalism, class issues have largely been ignored as a reason for inequality.[83] This ignorance reflects a common inability to recognize class differences. That is, although most Americans admit that people do occupy different class positions, they continue to believe that America is a classless society, because they have faith in class mobility.[84] Furthermore, I agree with Arif Dirlik, who maintains that the issue of class cuts more insistently than ever across racial divides in the present-day era.[85] In my study, the trajectories of class

[81] Yuval-Davis 2006, 200–1.
[82] Knudsen 2004, 62.
[83] See Michaels 2006. Cf. also hooks 2000, 5.
[84] hooks 2000, 156.
[85] Dirlik 2008, 1376.

are analyzed alongside with those of race and gender for two reasons. Firstly, because I believe that the intersections of race and class have been salient in the construction of American social hierarchy since its colonial period. Secondly, I find that Oates's fiction, which offers prolific material for an examination of class and its effects on identity in the contemporary U.S. context, calls for a nuanced examination of class, which takes into consideration the complex relations between class, race, and gender.

The idea of race is no longer the same as in the past, but has obtained more subtle, complex, and contradictory meanings in the contemporary context. Race has to be taken into account as a transforming concept; it is a political and cultural dynamics that is constructed in relation to specific communities, times and places, and an idea that organizes experiences and identities, social relations, and hierarchies of power. While the definitions of race as a biological concept have been questioned since the 1920s, the concept is still employed and necessary in order to make sense of the construction of identities.[86] As Paul Gilroy reminds, the persistent common-sense use of the concept of race to denote common characteristics in relation to type and descent is a relatively recent and modern invention.[87] Although the concept of race has changed, a racial difference still functions in the system of social stratification, and it carries the burden of associations and connotations it has had from its creation. As Linda Alcoff notes, at the same time as the old concept of race as a naturalistic classification has eroded, and the legitimacy of racial concept is officially denied, race still has political, sociological, and economic salience.[88] In this study, I understand race generally as a concept that operates in the practices of racialization, which involves both socio-cultural pressures and psychic processes. A certain racial position is imposed on an individual subject within the social hierarchy through the process of racialization. Racialization is not simply

[86] The concept of race and biologically oriented approaches were challenged already in the 1920s by a new paradigm based on the concept of ethnicity, which was advanced especially by the "Chicago school" of sociology. See Omi & Winant 1994, 10, 14–5.
[87] Gilroy 2000, 31.
[88] Alcoff 1999, 16.

reducible to race – although it is clearly an effect of race – because it is not an isolated process, but rather an interrelated component of other discourses and epistemological inquiries.

The theoretical redefining of gender in the so-called third wave of feminism in the 1990s influences my understanding of the concept of gender. The third wave feminism has continued to theorize gender as a social category that intertwines with other discursively constructed categories and formations, *as a difference that matters* in relation to other differences. The third wave feminism includes several diverse strains, theoretical discussions, and debates that focus mainly on poststructuralist interpretations of gender. Most importantly, the third wave challenged the sex-gender distinction. The deconstruction of the sex-gender distinction has been essential especially for questioning the deterministic and essentialist views of gender, and for destabilizing binary, uniform concepts of gender and sexuality. Under the prevailing constructivist view, gender is seen as a performatively constituted social product. Furthermore, gender is observed as being constantly redefined and negotiated in the everyday practices. Theoreticians such as Linda Alcoff, Judith Butler, and Teresa de Lauretis, in particular, influence my understanding of gender. Following the feminist theorization of gender in the last two decades, the basic starting points in examining gender in this study are: first, that gender is relational and context specific, and second, that the concept of gender is unstable and open to reconfiguration and revision.[89]

While race and gender have become central objects of analysis in the literary studies in the past thirty years, and their conceptualization has reached a sophisticated level, the use of the concept of class has remained relatively reductionist. In literary studies, the meaning of class is often taken as axiomatic, and the concept has remained relatively under-

[89] Cf. Alcoff 1988; Butler 1990; 1993. Alcoff suggested in her well-known article, which aims to surpass the limitations of cultural and poststructuralist feminist conceptualizations, a concept of 'positionality' that allows subjects to actively construct meanings and in so doing, to alter the context in which they are engendered. For Butler, the trouble of the indeterminacy of the concept of gender opens up a possibility for subverting and displacing normative structures and discourses of gender.

theorized.[90] In the field of sociology the theorization and analysis of class includes more than a few strands of interpretation. The two major classic theorists, Karl Marx (1818-1883) and Max Weber (1864-1920), notably influenced the theoretical debate and development of the concept in the twentieth century. Both theorists based their thoughts on class as structured by economic relationships in capitalist society. Nevertheless, Weber's account was offered as an alternative vision to Marxist historical materialism. As Rosemary Crompton clarifies, Marx observed class relationships involving the means of production, whereas Weber explained them as structured by the market position.[91] Weber's theory proposed that social stratification is based not only on property but also on prestige and power. Central to ideas developed by Weber is the concept of status (or status groups), which relates to social prestige; an individual's position or rank within the community. In Weber's view, status is stratified in relation to consumption habits and certain life style, and may be the major source for distributing subject's material rewards.[92]

One of the key debates in the theorization of class is related to the so-called cultural turn developed during the 1970s. Research influenced by cultural studies started focusing more on the cultural dimensions of class instead of materialist and economic explanations. The basic argument was that the older theories and concepts became inadequate for the analysis of the complex situation of contemporary, Western society, where the sources of social positions and identities have become manifold and multifaceted. It has been argued that other sources of social differentiation – such as gender and race – have become more important than class due to the increasing identity politics and individualization.[93] Moreover, in the contemporary, late modern era, cultural factors are seen as becoming

[90] Cf. Hitchcock 2000, 20, 23. The problem of reductionism appears also in the field of sociology. As Floya Anthias observes, class is often seen as a division marked by material difference whereas for example ethnicity is treated as something purely cultural or symbolic. See Anthias 2005, 31–2.
[91] Crompton 2008 (1993), 35.
[92] Gerth & Mills 1948, 181; Mackintosh & Mooney 2004, 100.
[93] Devine & Savage 2005, 4; Skeggs 2005, 64; Crompton 2008 (1993), 81–2.

more significant in the production of social divisions than economic.[94] Approaches emphasizing the cultural production of class instead of economic production have been criticized for ignoring material inequalities.[95] Moreover, culturalist approaches that emphasize individual identities tend to over-simplify group identities and collective actions.[96] Consequently, for example Rosemary Crompton and John Scott suggest that "culture" and "economy" should be understood as complexly intertwined, and class analysis should incorporate varying dimensions of inequality.[97]

Theories of the cultural formation of class across a range of fields are particularly influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, whose standpoint is influenced by both Marxist and Weberian approaches to class. Bourdieu understands class as a complex construction that is defined by "the structure of relations of all the pertinent properties."[98] That is, he emphasizes the production of classes as processes related to economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capitals. For the purposes of my study, approaches to class that focus on the role of culture and on the concept of identity are the most substantial ones, although, I want to stress that my intention is not to deny the intertwinement between the cultural and economic production. Following feminist appropriations of Bourdieau, especially that of Beverly Skeggs, I find ideas of the production of class and inequality through social practices in everyday life particularly useful. In her studies, Skeggs emphasizes the symbolic production of class, and the importance of analyzing gender and class

[94] As Beverley Skeggs clarifies, this is not to be understood as a shift from economics to culture, but rather, as a phenomenon in which culture has become a central economic resource. Skeggs 2005, 47.
[95] Frazer 1995; Jones G. 2003, 768; Crompton & Scott 2005, 120; Crompton 2008 (1993), 26. However, much of this critique has been undeserved while studies emphasizing the constitutive nature of culture do understand culture as a material force, not just a matter of discourse, as Skeggs notes. Skeggs 2005, 63.
[96] Crompton & Scott 2005, 200.
[97] Crompton & Scott 2005, 202; Crompton 2008 (1993), 6, 91. However, as Crompton points out, there is no "one best way" of carrying out class analysis, and a unitary approach in which economic and cultural dimensions are scrutinized through a single theory is not feasible. Crompton 2008 (1993), 92, 95.
[98] Bourdieu 1984, 106.

together.[99] She utilizes Bourdeau's ideas of the formation of social space and analyzes how bodies, individuals, and groups accumulate values through different systems of symbolic exchange, which in turn enable and limit their social positions and social mobility. In my analysis of the representation of class and its changing role in Oates's recent fiction, I understand class and the dynamics of social stratification in a similar manner, but in the American cultural and historical frames. In addition, as in the case of race and gender, my understanding of the concept of class concerns its relation to other forms of differentiation.

A contextualizing intersectional examination provides a fertile approach to Oates's fiction that directs a critical gaze to the conditions of contemporary American society. The focus of my analysis is on the intersections of race, gender, and class, but also on sexuality and nationality. I am interested in how the varying relations of the categories are represented as regulating a subject's identity and agency. Through an intersectionally informed reading my endeavor is both to trace and interrupt the representation of white female identity in order to examine, first, how Oates's fiction offers insights into our understanding of the construction of identities in the contemporary era, and second, how it may also challenge and transgress normativizing categories.

The Outline of the Study

I will examine the complexity of white female identity in a selection of Oates's novels and short stories published between 1968 and 2002. The emphasis is on her fiction published from the beginning of the 1990s onwards, which addresses more explicitly questions related to the significance of race in the U.S. context. The selected prose demonstrates a variety of angles to the racial problematic and the complexity of white

[99] See Skeggs 1997; Skeggs 2004. Skegg's *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (1997) is an ethnographic study that focuses on women living in the UK. In *Class, Self, Culture* (2004), Skeggs examines several different discourses and discussions, including sociological theories of class, and develops her theoretical understanding of how the self is classed.

female identity. For a closer analysis, I have chosen four novels and three short stories, "The Molesters" included in the novel *Expensive People* (1968), and "Death Valley" and "White Trash" in *Heat and Other Stories* (1991). The novel *Expensive People* and the short story "The Molesters" represent Oates's early prose, and provide a point of comparison to her more recent novels and short stories scrutinized in this study. From Oates's recent novels, I have chosen for a closer analysis the following three novels: *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart* (1990), *Blonde* (2000), and *I'll Take You There* (2002).

The selected prose is discussed in the following five chapters. I will begin my analysis in chapter two with an analysis of *Expensive People*. The novel depicts the same era, 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, as Oates's later novels *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart*, *Blonde*, and *I'll Take You There*. As a "fictive memoir," *Expensive People* also plays a foil to my analysis of *Blonde,* which reflects the problematic of telling the self through narration. Moreover, the chapter functions also as an introduction to both the historical and cultural context and the pertinent themes in analyzing race and ethnicity in Oates's fiction. Each of the following chapters offers a thematic approach to the complexity of white female identity in the aforementioned, more recent fiction.

The analytical focus in chapter two is on the representation of race and ethnicity and their meaning in a specific cultural and historical context. I will also examine their intersections with gender, class, and sexuality in order to demonstrate how Oates's fiction reveals their significance as normativizing categories. In addition, the chapter introduces two themes that are central in my analysis of the white female development: the oedipal scenario and racial encounter. I will decipher the patterns of the oedipal scenario and racial encounter by utilizing psychoanalytic criticism and theoretical approaches to race (whiteness studies, feminist and postcolonial theory). In the first part of the chapter, I will focus on the representation of a white suburban woman in *Expensive People*. My aim is to make perceptible how her identity is determined by race and ethnicity, and to draw attention to culturally specific themes of immigrant narratives and upward mobility in the novel that are

interweaved with a theme of Freudian family romance. In the second part of the chapter, I will analyze a short story titled "The Molesters," which narrates a memory of a six-year old white girl as she encounters a black man. It offers an early representation of an African American male figure. My goal is to offer a new and versatile reading of the function of the cross-racial encounter in the short story, which will contribute to my examination of interracial encounters and black male characters in Oates's later narratives investigated in chapters three, four, and five.

In chapter three, I will scrutinize the representation of racialization and the constitution of white self in *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart.* The novel illustrates race relations at the end of the Jim Crow era, from 1956 to the beginning of the 1960s, and serves as a good example of Oates's aptitude to examine social hierarchy and its various racialized, gendered, and classed positions. The novel is, perhaps, the most noteworthy of her novels in relation to the racial problematic, and demonstrates a new kind of responsiveness to the complexity of white female identity. The narration employs different viewpoints, but the central focus is on the viewpoint of a white girl. In this chapter, I will deploy in particular the concept of gaze, which stems from Jacques Lacan's theorization, and which has been re-conceptualized especially by theorists of film studies and visual culture. Similar to chapter two, I will make use of theorizations of race, especially those of feminist and postcolonial theorist Sara Ahmed. My overall analytical focus is on how the protagonist constitutes her identity in relation to the racial categorization and social hierarchy dominant in the Jim Crow era. In particular, I will examine the act of looking and its significance to the constitution of racialized identity in the novel's context. I will also examine the viewpoint and the function of another central character, a young African American man, with whom the white protagonist becomes friends.

In chapter four, I will take a closer look at the significance of class by investigating poor white women in Oates's recent fiction. Overall, her fiction rewrites the popular conception of America as classless society. Most of all, her fiction demonstrates how social class is both tenacious

and dynamic. At the same time as class remains a significant dividing category in U.S. society, the understandings of class as well as the experience of class continue to change. In the beginning of the 1990s, Oates's portrayals of poor whites respond to the discussions about white identities in the United States. First, I will examine the representation of a poor white family in *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, focusing on how they are seen from the viewpoint of two female characters. Second, I will analyze the representation of two, poor white female characters in two short stories, "Death Valley" and "White Trash," in *Heat and Other Stories*. My focus in this chapter is primarily on how class is negotiated in the encounters of the poor and lower class characters in their everyday life, and how these negotiations inform their positions in the social hierarchy. In doing this, I will draw on whiteness studies and feminist theorizations of class that emphasize its intersectional nature with gender and race. My aim is to demonstrate how the representations of lower class women disclose the intricate relations between whiteness, power, and privilege.

In chapter five, I will examine the theme of interracial relationship in *I'll Take You There*, which develops the use of the theme in Oates's recent fiction. The novel unfolds a coming-of-age story of a young white female protagonist in the 1960s. In my investigation of this coming-of-age story, I will draw attention to the function of race in the development of the central white female character's identity and agency. The emphasis is on the representation of the interracial relationship in the novel; how it reflects both the old and current cultural anxieties about race, and how it explicates the racial relations in the U.S. context from a white point of view. The overall endeavor of this chapter is to demonstrate how the novel develops the problematic of race in relation to the constitution of white female identity when compared to Oates's fiction analyzed in the preceding chapters. In this chapter, I will deploy American literary criticism that focuses on the questions of interracial relationships and how they reflect American cultural anxieties. Moreover, in my examination of the interracial relationship and its meaning to the white female protagonist, I will employ, again, Sara Ahmed's theorization, especially

her ideas of whiteness as an "orientation" and embodied reality that is shaped by certain historical inheritance.

In chapter six, I will investigate Oates's novel *Blonde*, a fictional autobiography of the famous popular culture icon, Marilyn Monroe. By utilizing the form of memory story and the idea of memory as a crucial site for identity formation, the novel re-imagines the life of Monroe, who comes to represent the apotheosis of a white woman. My focus is, in particular, on the protagonist's process of becoming and embodying the ideal of white femininity, as it is determined by certain time and space, the post-war Hollywood film industry. In the first part of the chapter, in which the analytical focus is on gender and sexuality, I will analyze how the novel represents the idea of a woman's body as a border for negotiations of a cultural discontent. I will employ Elisabeth Bronfen's concept of "hysteric performance", and draw on recent feminist theorizing of gender. In the second part of the chapter, my emphasis is on how the novel undertakes the problematic of whiteness and how the representation of the protagonist articulates anxiety about race. My theoretical tools consist of a combination of whiteness studies, critical race theory, and feminist and postcolonial applications of psychoanalytical theory. My aim is to consider the ways in which *Blonde* represents possibilities of resisting the conditions of the surrounding culture.

Throughout the chapters, the central focus of my analysis is on the white female character's relations to themselves, the ways in which they construct themselves as white females, and in their relations to other people, as members of larger communities such as family, social class, racial group, or nation. My overall purpose is to offer a multifaceted and critical examination of the representation of white female characters' identity-constitution in Oates's fiction. In so doing, my aim is to demonstrate how her fiction works as a way to diversify our understanding of the dynamics between normative categories, identity constitution, and social hierarchies.

CHAPTER 2

ETHNICITY AND RACE IN OATES'S EARLY FICTION

The narrator-protagonist of *Expensive People* starts his narration with the words: "I was a child murderer" (EP 3). The narrator, 18-year-old Richard, is writing his memoirs in order to confess a matricide. The novel is the second of Oates's thematically integrated trilogy written in the 1960s, which consists of the novels *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), *Expensive People* (1968) and *Them* (1969).[1] Oates characterizes the novels "as critiques of America – American culture, American values, American dreams – as well as narratives in which romantic ambitions are confronted by what must be called 'reality'."[2]

The events of *Expensive People* take place in the suburbs of Detroit. Richard starts to unwind the story from the point when his parents buy a house in the affluent suburb of "Fernwood" in the late 1950s. As a satire of a white suburban family, the novel follows a tradition created by Sinclair Lewis's in *Babbitt* (1922) and *Kingsblood Royal* (1947) and continued by Sloan Wilson in *The Man in The Gray Flannel Suit* (1955). In Oates's view, among the most significant portrayals of American, suburban middle-class lives are F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road* (1961). According to Oates, Yates and Fitzgerald share the same subject matter: "the yearnings of middle-class Americans for an idealized romantic love and for the most naïve sorts of 'success' – adulation, fame, money."[3] The very same theme lurks in *Expensive People* although given a distinctive Oatesian flavor.

The novel departs from Oates's first two early novels, *With Shuddering Fall* (1964) and *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, which were defined

[1] Later, the trilogy has become a quartet with the novel *Wonderland*, and reprinted as *The Wonderland Quartet* (2006).
[2] Oates 1990 (1968), 239.
[3] Oates 2005b, 52.

in the 1960s as following the conventions of realism and naturalism.[4] The experimental features of *Expensive People*, in particular, convey a new mode of writing if compared to Oates's earlier fiction. For example, its narration employs postmodernist devices, especially metafictionality.[5] The narration is a pastiche, or rather, a parody of a pastiche, in which the narrator borrows and mixes elements from various genres and styles. The narration explicitly refers to its literary influences, and makes fun not only of different styles, but also of literary scholars, who might try to trace the literary influences. In my view, it is not, however, a postmodernist novel in the same sense as the fiction written by John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Thomas Pynchon or Robert Coover, for example. Rather, its use of self-reflexive playfulness functions as a parody of postmodernist aesthetic, which reached its peak in the end of the 1960s. I agree with Eileen Teper Bender, who argues that Oates wanted to distinguish herself from postmodernist writers (or "fabulators"[6]), and to address herself to "reality" and "story."[7] Moreover, as Brenda Daly argues, Oates in general escapes such aesthetic or stylistic categories as postmodernist.[8] Although the writer experiments with textual strategies, her manner is more often than not motivated by the storyline. As the writer puts it in an interview, she is not interested in experimentation "for its own sake," but if the story or its protagonist "'is postmodernist' in sensibility," it is probably reflected in the narrative style of the story.[9]

The satiric elements of the story are produced through the central narrator, Richard, whose way of narrating alludes to conventions of a memoir and a narrative by a madman. Bender recognizes Richard as a Dostojevskian "underground boy," and also Gavin Cologne-Brookes

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[4] For the classifications made by reviewers, see Waller 1979, 88–9; Bender 1987, 1, 3; Johnson 1987, 4. Nevertheless, both Waller and Bender argue that the early novels are not easily classifiable and that they should be seen as deliberate experiments of several traditional literary conventions and genres. Waller 1979, 88; Bender 1987, 13, 29.

[5] Johnson 1987, 49.

[6] The term comes from Robert Scholes's study *The Fabulators*. See Scholes 1967.

[7] Bender 1987, 4–5.

[8] Daly 1996, 223, passim.

[9] Pinsker 2006, 100–1.

compares Richard's narration to Fyodor Dostoevsky's mentally unstable narrator in *Notes from Underground*[10], which begins with the words "I am a sick man… I am a spiteful man."[11] Like Dostoevsky's isolated and bitter protagonist, Richard is an antihero, who has a hard time coping with the society around him. Shoshana Felman characterizes a genre with a madman's perspective functioning as "an ironic mirror to madness of the world and as a critique of normative behaviors."[12] Felman's idea of the ironic function of madness fits the narration of *Expensive People*. Indeed, it has the very same aspiration: to criticize society and especially the normative frames it imposes on denizens of American society.

In the following analysis, I will examine the representation of Richard's mother, and focus on her identity as a white suburban woman. Critics have offered various competent analyses of her character, but none of them explicates the significance of race and ethnicity to her identity.[13] My analysis is motivated by the question of how whiteness intersects with class and gender, the most apparent features of Natashya's representation. I am interested in her "white ethnicity," understood as a white particularity, which draws attention to culturally specific themes of immigrant narratives and upward mobility. In the second part of the chapter, I will analyze the meaning of race and racial other in "The Molesters," a short story included in the novel's narration. The story offers an example of the representation of race in Oates's early fiction. It includes a depiction of an encounter between a white female and a black male, to which I will also refer as an example of "racial fantasy," which has culturally and temporally particular meanings in the American context.

[10] *Zapiski iz podpolja* [*Записки из подполья*] (1864).
[11] Bender 1987, 32; Cologne-Brookes 2005, 39.
[12] Felman 2003, 4.
[13] For analyses of Natashya, see Creighton 1979, 61–2; Waller 1979, 118; Friedman 1980, 68–70; Johnson 1987, 62–3, 67; Daly 1996, 29, 34–6, 38–9.

Ellen G. Friedman reads *Expensive People* in the American novelistic tradition of family violence, which includes a rebellious protagonist, who murders another, dominating family member. Friedman mentions among the other examples of the exploration of the theme in American literature Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) and Bruce Jay Friedman's *A Mother's Kisses* (1964). In these novels, family violence is related to the protagonist's quest for freedom and autonomy.[14] The protagonist of *Expensive People*, however, reverses the quest for autonomy by fighting against his mother's attempts to force him to be independent. Friedman also perceives the novel as a "variation of Freudian romance."[15] Richard's story has, indeed, the characteristics of a development described by Freud as the neurotic's "family romance."[16] In the Freudian framework, the family romance refers to particular kinds of fantasies about one's origin and family, which are related to the Oedipus complex. The reasons for the fantasies may be various. One of the characteristics of the Freudian family romance is a child's daydreaming, through which he aims to free himself from his parents from whom he feels he does not receive enough love. Hence, the child develops imaginative stories of having another set of parents, who may have a higher social standing. In Oates's novel, Richard feels his parents do not love him enough, and fantasizes that his father is not his real father, and that his mother has a mysterious past. He is not, however, able to free himself from his parents, but remains obsessed with his mother. The mother also demonstrates signs of the same condition by fabricating anecdotes about imaginary parents, who have a noble heritage. She has left her past with familial ties to find her fortune, yet she feels she has lost her freedom after marrying an upper-middle class man.

[14] Friedman 1980, 57–8.
[15] Friedman 1980, 56.
[16] See Freud 1995 (1989), 297–300. Freud's paper on the subject appeared originally as untitled in 1908.

As scholars studying family romances in cultural narratives have argued, instead of being universal, the meaning and the patterns of Freudian family romance vary during different periods of time and for historically and culturally specific traditions.[17] Indeed, also Oates's variation of the family romance is firmly rooted in the American cultural and historical context. Her novel amalgamates the Freudian romance with American cultural narratives of immigrant generations and the obsession with upward mobility. The cultural narratives of immigrant generations and upward mobility concern especially Richard's mother, Natashya Romanov Everett. Her character should not be seen merely as a selfish gold-digger, but as a character through which Oates perceptively depicts a woman's social position in relation to nation, class, and race in American culture. In my view, Natashya manifests the various fantasies and desires that have shaped the construction of an American, white woman's identity.

According to Katherine Jurca, "most literature written before 1960s and set in suburbs engages the topic of race only indirectly."[18] As Jurca explains, the middle-class culture predominant in the suburbs was, from the white writers' point of view, solely a privilege of "non-ethnic" white people.[19] Similarly, Oates's novel addresses the topic of race only indirectly. The race of the suburban residents is not discussed, although, as I will demonstrate in my reading, it is significant. Some of the white residents have African American house cleaners, who live outside the suburb. The white characters in Oates's early fiction are mainly "white people," and do not represent any specific white ethnicity.[20] This reflects the cultural and historical situation after the Second World War, when whiteness was defined as the Caucasian race, and reconfigured to include all people of European origin.[21] By the 1960s, whiteness as a racial

[17] See, for example, Hirsch 1989, 10; Heller 1995, 3–4, 12.
[18] Jurca 2001, 8.
[19] Jurca 2001, 8, 18.
[20] There are, however, the exceptions of occasional Jewish characters. For example, in her short story "The Region of Ice" (in *The Wheel of Love*), there appears a talented but disturbed young Jewish student, Allen Weinstein.
[21] Winant 1997, 42; Jacobson 1998, 91–135; Brodkin 1998, 27.

category was homogenized, and white people were classified as a homogeneous, Euro-American group instead of members of different ethnic groups. Karen Brodkin elucidates that in the post-war vocabulary, the words "white" and "ethnicity" became complementary, and one could "both claim the privileges of whiteness and embrace the institutions and values of a particular heritage."[22]

Natashya Everett is a member of the white elite living in a typical post-war suburb, where the idea of belonging is primarily based on class, and only implicitly on race. In addition, the question of belonging is ultimately connected to the nation, belonging to the collectivity of American citizens. Nevertheless, Natashya chooses to emphasize both her "white ethnicity" and class by claiming to be the daughter of a noble Russian family. After her death, however, it is revealed that she comes from an ordinary working-class immigrant family. She has already confirmed her position within whiteness by marrying Ellwood Everett, who comes from a wealthy Philadelphian WASP family.

Post-War Suburban Woman

The position of a white suburbanite seems to be especially important to Natashya, at least in his son's view, which represents Natashya as an ambitious social climber. He calls her mother Nada. According to Greg Johnson, 'Nada' "suggests that she has nothing to give."[23] Johnson is referring to Natashya's incapability as a mother: she is a bad mother because of her selfishness. On the other hand, it is Richard, who names her Nada, and who, as a narrator, determines how she is seen. As Joanna Creighton puts it, Nada is "unsympathetic as a character," because she is

[22] Brodkin 1998, 154. Brodkin focuses on the period after World War II, when the term 'ethnicity' operated as a liberal approach with recurrent themes of assimilation and pluralism. The development and the use of the term have been developed in relation to the changing social conditions, and ethnicity may have different meanings according to the viewpoint. I agree with Catherine Rottenberg, who suggests that ethnicity as a category of identity, which gained ground after the World War II, stems from a discourse of race, which is in the U.S. context founded on the black-white binary. Rottenberg 2008, 4.

[23] Johnson 1987, 54.

portrayed from Richard's perspective that is "colored with mockery."[24] Richard, who is constantly plotting how to manipulate his parents, let alone the readers of his memoirs, is obviously an unreliable narrator. The nothingness suggested by the name "Nada," implies more of a certain spiritual emptiness than lack of motherliness. Natashya has adopted the suburban life style, and in so doing, she is "the emblem of the nothingness idolized in this materialistic suburban world," as Creighton puts it.[25] The spiritual lack is a parallel to the dullness of the homogenous suburban world. This is a familiar pattern in novels depicting American middle class suburbs.[26] It appears that all the families living in the suburbs are alike. The narrator, Richard, explains that the central driving force in the suburbs is the fear of being socially degraded: "We like to rise without looking back because that is perhaps déclassé, and when there are no true classes, what greater horror than becoming déclassé, unfit for even the classless society?" (EP 30).

In Fernwood, the class status is manifested in appearances and external images. It is important especially for the women, who are responsible for the spinning of the social network around their families. The husbands seem oblivious to the rules of their class, or, they are not expected to follow them in the same way as women do. They are successful executives, who are constantly working and travelling, and who recede themselves from the domestic space. Wives are considered status symbols, as Richard elucidates. In particular her mother had a good exchange value: "And you men, you would all like a Nada of your own, if your income is above a certain level you'd need her to show it off, wouldn't you?" (EP 83–4).

For Natashya, the suburban middle-class status or rather the upper-middle-class status permits more choices and secures her white privilege. She imitates meticulously a "suburban style," which contains in

[24] Creighton 1979, 61.
[25] Creighton 1979, 61.
[26] See Jurca 2001, 17. The idea of American suburbia as a homogenized zone, and its habitants as shallow and bourgeois, is, however, stereotypical. See Teaford 2008, xiii.

itself the categories of American, suburban, upper-middle-class, white and woman:

> Nada had fine clear skin, rather pale. Suburban style dictated her hair, which was "done" once and sometimes twice a week so that from behind or at distance she looked like an ordinary resident of Fernwood, a housewife who had no housewifely chores but wasn't "society" either and was terrified of seeming pretentious. […] Her manner this morning was suburban and wholesomely nervous, American as the flag that rose above the frigid evergreens in the park[.] (EP 34–5)

Natashya's carefully built image is her strategy for gaining more power and control. In Richard's view, she is "intoxicated" by this position and the sense of power and control that comes along with it (EP 50). In the wealthy suburbs, she practices excessive assimilation in order to be an ideal, American suburban woman.

A good social status in the suburban community requires a certain role, especially for a woman. As Asta Balšiūnaitė puts it, Oates shows through Natashya how difficult it is for a woman to balance her life "between motherhood and personal freedom, between family and social engagement."[27] Natashya is living in the 1950s, also called the decade of conformity in the U.S., when being alike and belonging to the community is crucial. The required gendered role, being dependent on her husband and family, frustrates Nada, and she dreams of freedom from familial ties. Her continuing dissatisfaction reminds of the unhappy, suburban, middle-class white women in the 1950s, who suffered from "the problem that has no name," to use Betty Friedan's phrasing. In her highly influential book *Feminine Mystique* (1963), Friedan analyzed American women's lives in the post-World War II era, and maintained that society's expectations confined women to constricted roles of a mother and housewife, instead of a career-oriented woman.

Nevertheless, Natashya is not only a homemaker, but also a writer. The neighbors acknowledge her being a writer, but she avoids

[27] Balšiūnaitė 2009, 46.

talking about it. Creighton explains her evasive attitude as a fear of not being accepted in the suburban community.[28] On the other hand, she wants to free herself from the suffocating demands of being normal, and to "transcend her circumstances," which according to Friedman, is a typical paradox for characters in Oates's fiction.[29] Her dilemma is above all gendered; Nada has difficulties to find her place as a *woman* writer. She tries to fulfill her quest for freedom several times by leaving her family. Nonetheless, she has become dependent of the materialist lifestyle, which she expresses explicitly: "'what point is there living without being normal? A world like this is shit without money[.]'" (EP 207). For her, freedom means the power to do anything she wants to do, and money provides this freedom. Nada's idea of freedom reminds that of American social scientist C. Wright Mills's view in his book *The Power Elite* (1959).[30] According to Mills, in American society the power to do what you want requires money.[31]

Moreover, Nada's character resists the fixation on the socially acceptable role of the mother in the late 1950s America. The social expectations of motherhood in the post-war era required complete devotion to children.[32] The surrounding American society supported the "new cult of domesticity," which included the traditional ideal of a woman, who stays at home and takes care of the children.[33] Nada refuses to live only for her child, and urges on her son's independence: "'No "Mother," no "Son." No depending on anyone else. I want you to be so free, Richard, that you stink of it. You're not going to blame me for

[28] Creighton 1979, 61.

[29] Friedman 1980, 12.

[30] In his book, C. Wright Mills depicts the life style of the men and women, who constituted the elite in America in the 1950s, and criticizes the organization of power in the U.S.

[31] Mills 1959, 162.

[32] See, for example, Chodorow 1999 (1978), 4–5; Hirsch 1989, 16.

[33] This traditional role has its roots in the so-called "cult of domesticity" (or alternatively "the cult of true womanhood"), which arose in the U.S. in the 19th century particularly amid middle-class European American women. Women's place at the private world of home was seen as necessary to the development of society. See Matthaei 1998, 263–6. In the 1950s, suburban housewife as a domestic homemaker became a symbol of new domesticity, which according to Robert Beuka marks a case of reasserting limiting gender roles. Beuka 2004, 152–3.

anything'" (EP 174). Nevertheless, she appears at times as a nurturing mother while Richard pretends to be sick in order to keep his mother home to take care of him. Nada carries the signs of a typical suburban white woman with its exaggerated femininity by seemingly dedicating her life to her child and husband. Her mobility in relation to choices concerning her identity is connected to different discourses and the rules and norms dominated within these discourses. In particular, she is compelled to fill the normative roles linked to her gender and upper-middle-class position.

Noble White Ethnicity

Natashya tells anecdotes about her relatives, emphasizing her aristocratic roots in the "old world" and suggesting that her Russian family was poor but that it had a noble heritage. In fact, Russian emigrants, who had come to America after 1905, had an air of "noble ethnicity" if compared to other immigrants from Europe. After the Russian Revolution, Russian immigrants left their home country for political reasons, whereas immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe were more often motivated by the promise of material comfort in the United States.[34] The United States became a safe place for political dissidents, members of a prosperous class and aristocrats from Russia. Being different from other immigrants, expatriated Russians were considered the exotic people in America.[35] In *Expensive People*, Natashya's way of utilizing the imagery of Russian emigrants is part of her glamour, and conveys her wish to set herself apart from the unimaginative group of white homemakers.

[34] Bachman & Ifkovic 1982, 210. It should be noted here that the Jews formed a notable group of immigrants from Russia to America. The Russian and east European Jewish immigrants (from an area called The Pale of Settlement) fled the anti-Jewish policy already during the czarist regime of Alexander III. Unlike the noble Russians, Russian Jews were mainly poor and uneducated, and represented skilled laborers. The reasons for their migration often included both economic and political reasons. More on this, see Howe 1976, 5–10, 26–9, 54–63; Gitelman 1997, 23–5.
[35] Bachman & Ifkovic 1982, 212.

Moreover, her act of creating an imagined and romanticized family with a noble heritage echoes Freudian family romance. In her study, which focuses on the construction of femininity in plot structures by women writers, Hirsch argues that Freudian family romance has functioned as a distinctive pattern and plot structure in 19th century and 20th century, especially in realist fiction, but also in modernist and postmodernist fiction, where it has multiple variations and resistance to conventional patterns.[36] Nada's fantasy in *Expensive People* is particularly American, because of the themes of immigrant experience and social climbing. Oates treats the themes in her novel with an ironic twist, which can be interpreted as resistance against Freudian family romance as a literary convention. At the same time, she uses the pattern as a narrative strategy through which she represents the normative confines American society and its cultural mythology imposes on certain groups, communities, and individuals.

In the context of *Expensive People*, Natashya corresponds to the stereotype of the second-generation immigrant Marcus Lee Hansen described in "The Problem of the Third Generation Immigrant" (1938). The so-called "Hansen's law" polarized "the second-generation traitors and third-generation redeemers."[37] The second generation wants to forget the ethnic past and become "Americanized" while the third, in turn, wants to salvage the ethnic past, which the second generation wanted to forget. On the surface, Natashya seems to be an exception to the second-generation immigrants, because she keeps telling stories of her noble Russian relatives. However, after her death, she proves to be a second-generation traitor, as it is revealed that she has abolished her Ukrainian roots by cutting ties to her past. This suggests that she has created the fantasy of her aristocratic exotic origins in order to liberate herself from the constraints of her working-class past. Furthermore, if she was to

[36] Hirsch 1989, 9–10. Hirsch understands Freudian family romance both, as a term that tries to represent social and subjective reality, and as a literary convention.
[37] See Hansen 1996 (1938), 202–15. Hansen's study provides little evidence for the law, and it has also been severely criticized by historians. Nevertheless, it became popularized and widely accepted in the U.S. context. Sollors 1986, 214–21.

openly admit as being from Ukraine, she would be seen as a social climber, who only strives for material comfort.

Richard, in turn, can be seen as a representative of the third generation redeemer. He wants to keep alive the story of his "ethnic past" and thus identifies strongly with his imagined Russian relatives, although they are invented characters in the stories told by his mother. He clearly suffers from nostalgia for the past, which is an effect of his weariness of the white suburbs where history is forgotten. Even when it is finally revealed that his mother, whose real name is Nancy Romanow, has a background of being a Ukrainian immigrant family, Richard still tries to picture her origins as somewhat exotic to feed his hunger for a romantic past and ethnic others:

> This Nancy, this sudden intrusion of another person, was born in a small town in upstate New York with a ludicrous name: North Tonawanda. Yes, it must be an Indian name. I have lulled myself to sleep many a night with that name, which hints of mysteries and beauties[.] (EP 231)

Although the name 'Tonawanda' is, originally, a loanword from a language spoken by Native Americans, the name (meaning "confluent stream") and the place itself are not mysterious. In fact, North Tonawanda (NY), also known as "the Lumber City" because it has served as a significant center of lumber business and transportation, is an industrial city with a large community of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe.

Richard is extremely shocked when he learns that his mother's ethnicity is a hoax. Spying on his mother, hiding in her closet, he overhears Nada's discussion with one of her lovers:

> Then she [Natashya] said something I couldn't make out, a phrase sharp and whip-like.The man's voice said, "Natashya, that Russian of yours has always been a farce." "Like everything else, then. Well…" (EP 207)

The scene is a literary allusion to a scene in William Faulkner's novel *Light in August* (1932), where the novel's protagonist, five-year-old Joe

Christmas, is hiding in a young woman's room, squatting behind a curtain. When she finds Joe in his hiding place, she calls him in her fury "nigger bastard," thus putting a racial classification on him.[38] Joe is an orphan, whose mother is known to be white, but his father is of unknown ancestry. The shadow of the hiding incident causing anxiety in Joe about his racial identity follows him his entire life. Richard, in turn, learns that he is not a descendant from noble Russian immigrants. He feels utterly empty after losing this basis for his identity. Consequently, he starts to eat in order to fill this feeling of emptiness. His intention is to follow the example of a distant uncle who committed suicide by eating himself to death: "He decided to kill himself by forcing food down his throat and into his bursting stomach, eating his way through a roomful of food. Admirable man!" (EP 27). Richard has heard the anecdote from her mother, who wanted to emphasize that her relatives were bizarre and peculiar. Hence, by deciding to kill himself by eating, he becomes a victim of the story concocted by his mother.

Reversing the Oedipus Complex

Richard's story is not a father-son struggle, but rather a mother-son struggle, which makes it unconventional. According to Ellen Friedman, the trope of the (oedipal) father is often claimed to be the basis of storytelling, and invoked in explanations of culture.[39] In his theoretical work titled *The Ego and the Id*, which offers an account of the human psyche and its dynamics, Freud discusses the early phases of a child's development and the significance of the first object-choices and identifications. He emphasizes the importance of the identification with the father (which takes place before the Oedipus complex) as the *primary* identification. Using a case of a male child as an example, Freud explains

[38] Faulkner 1990 (1932), 122.

[39] Friedman 2002, 693. One of the often-cited theorists, who offer father and the Oedipus as basis of all narratives, is Roland Barthes. See Barthes 1975, 47. On the persistence and mutations of paternal narratives, see de Lauretis 1984, 103–57; Booth 1998, 289–350.

how the Oedipus complex originates from a phase, in which the boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, and identifies with his father. The relationship with the father is ambivalent since the child perceives him as a rival for his mother's love. The Oedipus complex is later resolved positively in a boy if he intensifies the identification with the same-sex parent, the father, and gives up the mother as a love-object.[40]

Following Freud's train of thought, a "healthy" resolution for Richard would involve a close identification with his father instead of his mother. In a way, Richard is caught in the oedipal crisis, and he regresses to the oral phase.[41] His fantasy of a woman casts his mother as an object of desire and fear, and manifests itself in his desire to destroy the mother. His oral fixation is most apparent in his desire to eat himself to death. To put it simply, his decision to eat himself to death is connected to his obsession about his mother. A female counterpart of a similar oral fixation appears in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), a novel written in the style of Gothic fiction to elucidate the challenges of self-definition for women in contemporary North American society. The protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, writer Joan Foster, is a habitual overeater. Her problems trace back to a problematic relationship with her disapproving mother. Joan refuses to accept her own past, and lives in a constant state of duality. She also keeps creating new identities in order to cope and to please others. Similarly, Richard Everett has a troubled relationship with his mother, which he tries to overcome. Moreover, as a woman writer, who struggles with a divided identity as a woman artist, Joan resembles Natashya in many ways. Natashya's dilemma relating to the problematic of a woman writer is dealt, however, through Richard, who has trouble with the idea of her mother being a writer and feels exasperated by the power her mother has over him. He, for example, confesses that after years of

[40] Freud 2001b (1961), 31–2. Freud underlines, however, that his description represents a simplification of the Oedipus complex, which is far more complicated. Freud 2001b (1961), 33.

[41] In his "Three essays on the Theory of Sexuality" Freud determines the oral phase as a phase of development when sexual activity has not yet been separated from the ingestion of food. See Freud 1995 (1989), 275.

surveillance, he is still not able to describe Nada because she has become a part of him:

> It was as if Nada, my mother, had become a kind of embryonic creature stuck in my body, not in a womb maybe but part of my brain. How can you describe a creature that is lodged forever in your brain? It's impossible, a mess… (EP 85, ellipsis original.)

The plan to kill Nada starts to develop in Richard's mind after one of her escapes. Richard penetrates the forbidden area of his mother's study and reads her notebook, which contains ideas for short stories. One day he goes to the library to read stories written by his mother. The reading of the stories causes him anxiety, because her being a writer does not fit his fantasy of a mother:

> Without her writing she would have been just Nada in the kitchen, Nada in her bathrobe, Nada on the telephone, Nada here, there, hugging me[.]You who've never read the secret words of the familiar, domesticated people you love, you who've never snuggled into their brains and looked out through their eyes, how can you understand what I felt? It's as if I had opened a door and saw Nada as she really was, a stranger, a person Father and I did not know and had no connection with. (EP 164–5)

As Marilyn Wesley concisely puts it, "Richard attempts to kill off Nada's fragmentary selves to fix her in the single role of mother."[42] Similarly, Oates suggests in an afterword (to Ontario Review Press edition published in 1990) that Richard's act of matricide follows from his feeling of powerlessness about his mother:

> When the child-murderer of *Expensive People* realizes that he has become, or has been, in fact, all along, a mere "Minor Character" in his mother's life, he is made to realize absolute impotence; inconsequence; despair. He has slipped forever "out of focus. (EP, 239)

[42] Wesley 1993, 103.

For Richard, killing Nada is the only way to save his illusion of power and control.[43] After shooting her, he is frustrated because no one believes it is he, who has murdered his mother. Even his psychiatrist, Dr. Saskatoon, does not believe him, because it does not fit the Freudian model of the Oedipus complex. According to this Freudian psychiatrist, Richard loved his mother so much that he could not believe anyone could have killed her except himself. Dr. Saskatoon also states how "poor deluded" Richard wanted to establish forever a relationship with his mother, and his attitude toward his father was "ambivalent and rather negative" (EP 234). Dr. Saskatoon's way of forcing Richard's story into a model of the oedipal conflict is clearly ridiculed in the story.[44] Instead of dismissing the psychoanalytic thinking or Freud's theories altogether, Oates invites readers to be critical of how psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic models, particularly the Oedipus complex, have been adapted and become part of cultural mythologies that both explain and determine how subjects are constituted. Through the protagonist-narrator Richard, who is hyperbolically captivated by the culturally entrenched narratives, *Expensive People* draws critical attention to the submission to the fantasies that lie behind American obsessions about familial relations, psychoanalysis, generations, and national origin.

The prevailing presence of Richard's writer mother in the story also draws attention to a question about authorial power. Richard, who claims to be the author of the story, acts out his mother's story in two ways. Firstly, he identifies with the noble relative invented by his mother, determined to follow his example of eating himself to death. Secondly, he gets the idea of murdering his mother from one of Nada's ideas for a short story called "The Sniper."[45] By "assassinating" his mother, he, in a sense, becomes a character created by Nada's imagination. Daly suggests that by

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[43] Cf. Daly 1996, 35.

[44] Cf. Daly 1996, 36–7. As Daly brings out, this is just one example of the parody of the psychoanalytic discourse in the novel. For example, as Richard anticipates the reviews of his memoirs, one of the imagined reviewers offers a Freudian reading of *Expensive People* and recognizes "easily the familiar triangle here, of a son's homosexual and incestuous love for his father disguised by a humdrum of Oedipal attachment to his mother" (EP 123–4).

[45] Cf. Waller 1979, 121; Daly 1996, 35.

assuming the role of the sniper in his mother's outline, and killing his mother Richard becomes an author himself.[46] I argue that he nevertheless remains captured within a story created by his mother. The fact that he is never taken seriously as his mother's murderer frustrates him most. In the end, it is the mother, who indirectly destroys her own creation. The irony is emphasized in Richard's "last words," as he ends his memoirs by saying that his only consolation in the face of his own death is the thought of free will, that whatever he did, he did "out of choice": "But I must confess that there are moments when I doubt even this consolation…" (EP 236).

Oates's satire of suburban middle-class life includes a much more multifaceted social critique against the normative discourses of gender, class, and race within American society than appears at first. As I have suggested above, Oates's version of American family romance includes the story of a European immigrant and white ethnicity. Her novel does not simply deride the prevailing cultural narratives regarding immigrants but, by emphasizing the role of the mother, also draws attention to the gendered nature of the discussion about immigrant generations, which still in the 1960s was discussed on the father-son continuum.[47] In addition, although Natashya is not the central protagonist in the story, Oates's satirical portrayal concerning suburban gender roles and women's socially accepted roles in the 1950s is ahead of its time. In general, fiction criticizing the patriarchal culture of the same era (1950s and 1960s) emerged later, in the 1970s, in tandem with the women's liberation movement in the U.S.[48] Natashya's choice to emphasize white ethnicity as "Russian-American" is tied to a politics of belonging both at the level of individual and national history. Firstly, she wants to secure her position in the racial order, which is somewhat ambivalent because of her working-class past and gender. By emulating a certain, normed suburban style, she

[46] Daly 1996, 35.

[47] In this discussion, the relationships between immigrant fathers and grandfathers, and their sons and grandsons were emphasized. For the discussion on American immigrant generations, see, for example, Nahirny & Fishman 1996 (1965), 266–81.

[48] For example, Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977) is often mentioned as one of the most influential novels in this sense. See, for example, Lauret 1994, 110; Radstone 2000, 205; Loudermilk 2004, 43.

believes it will secure her the full privileges of whiteness. Nonetheless, belonging to the community of the privileged does not make her content, quite on the contrary: in the process, she becomes nothing, "Nada."

THE RACIAL OTHER IN "THE MOLESTERS"

The novel includes a short story titled "The Molesters," embedded in the narrative as a story written by Richard's mother. The story was published independently in *The Quarterly Review of Literature* earlier in the same year (1968). For the most part, critics have avoided a closer analysis of the story and instead considered it in the context of the novel through Richard's interpretation; he thinks that her mother wrote the story out of guilt she felt for neglecting his son, and sees the characters of the story as Nada's reflections of herself as her child's molester.[49] Alternatively, as Daly reads it, the story deepens Richard's feelings of abandonment by his mother.[50] Although I find these interpretations relevant, I would associate "The Molesters," if read in the novel's context, more precisely with the dilemma of Natashya and her position as woman than that of Richard. Like the young girl in the story, whose position is revealed as problematic in relation to the dominant cultural order, Natashya also has difficulties in relation to the norms of gender, class, and race by the surrounding society that determine her position as an upper middle class white woman.

Marilyn Wesley offers a reading of "The Molesters" as an independent story, and as an example of Oates's transgressive model of oedipal theme.[51] In her study on Oates's fiction, Wesley recognizes symbolic incest as a recurring narrative pattern that deals with the feminine oedipal transition. It occurs in the case of daughters, who seek to reverse their "perceived powerlessness through a connection to a symbolic father."[52] Wesley's elaborate reading of the oedipal theme in "The

[49] See, for example, Friedman 1980, 68; Johnson 1987, 61.
[50] Daly 1996, 38.
[51] Wesley 1993, 112–15.
[52] Wesley 1993, 14.

Molesters" moves beyond the surface of the limiting family story, and is able to uncover a narrative strategy that resists and aims to subvert the patriarchal gender system. Yet, I find Wesley's reading insufficient in relation to the meanings of race. In the following analysis, I will pay more attention to the meaning of race in the story. In my view, the story presents a racial fantasy, which is connected to the theme of white female identity and its constitution. Variations of the racial fantasy will resurface in Oates's later fiction, and they may have varying functions. Most often, they occur in relation to white female characters, which are going through a crisis or a certain phase of development. Similar to Wesley, I will analyze "The Molesters" as an independent story in order to explicate the meaning of race and its significance to American white identity in Oates's fiction.

Recognizing Stranger

The story tells about an unnamed white girl, who recalls an incident from her childhood when she was six years old. In her recollections, she goes down to a creek where she meets a stranger, who is, according to her description, a black man. She recalls the same memory three times. Each recollection adds new significations to her memory. The slightly different variations reflect the idea of memories as constructions, which evokes Freud's established ideas of the functioning of the memory, in particular his notions of screen memory and "Nachträglichkeit"[53]. In his notion of screen memory Freud questioned, "whether we have any memories at all *from* our childhood," and suggested that we may have "memories *relating to* our childhood."[54] Screen memories are, as Jean Laplanche and Jean-

[53] Freud never actually offered a definition or a full theory of the notion of Nachträglichkeit. French poststructuralist thinking (e.g. Lacan, Derrida, Laplanche) has used the concept and expanded it. For the definitions and development of the concept, see Laplanche & Pontalis 2004, 111; King N. 2000, 17; Mitchell 2000, 283–4. The term has various English translations such as "deferred action," "deferral" and "afterwardness." To prevent confusion, I will use the original term "Nachträglichkeit."

[54] Freud 2001a (1962), 322.

Bertrand Pontalis elucidate Freud's account, compromise-formations.[55] In a similar vein, the concept of Nachträglichkeit proposes that memories are always already re-interpretations. That is, as the subject recalls memories of the past events, he or she inadvertently revises these events and gives them new significations. Hence, memories are not simply representations of past events, but rather, revisions constituted in the present.[56]

In "The Molesters" the narrator's three versions of the encounter with the black man are childhood memories, or, rather "memories relating to childhood," to use Freud's choice of words. The narrator starts each version with the same words: "I am six years old" (EP 147, 154, 160). The perspective is that of a child, although at the time of recalling the incident the narrator is older than six years. All versions are told mainly in the first person and in a present tense that creates an effect as if the narrator is reliving the events when reminiscing about them. The first version of the memory strives to represent the encounter in a way a six-year-old might experience it. This creates an illusion that the first description of the memory is more "authentic" than its subsequent versions, which are "tainted" by added new details and significations. In her analysis of "The Molesters" Wesley draws attention to the impetus of the parents and their social context to the child's recollection of the memory.[57] The girl's understanding of what actually happened is, indeed, influenced by his parents' reactions to the incident depicted in the second and third versions of the memory.

The narrator's viewpoint is gendered and racialized, which may partly determine the reader's interpretation of the story, at least, if the reader is presupposed as white. Oates was probably not consciously writing to a white audience, but her choice of constructing the perceptive as that of a *white female* is, nevertheless, deliberate. The narrator's white

[55] According to Laplanche and Pontalis, a compromise-formation is a form that a repressed memory takes "in order to be admitted to consciousness." In the process, repressed memories become "distorted" so that "both the unconscious wish and the demands of defense may be satisfied by the same formation – in a single compromise." See Laplanche & Pontalis 2004, 76, 411.
[56] Radstone 2000, 207; King N. 2000, 16–24; Laplanche & Pontalis 2004, 111–12.
[57] Wesley 1993, 112–13.

racialized viewpoint becomes apparent especially in the description of the stranger, an anonymous black man. In the first part of the story, the narrator goes to the creek without her mother's permission. By the creek, she sees a fisherman, who has a "strange dark face" (E 149). She remembers that she "saw someone like him in a movie once" (E 149). At first, she does not refer directly to his racial difference. In the subsequent versions, she nevertheless identifies him as a "colored man." In her book *Strange Encounters* (2000), Sara Ahmed examines the production of the figure of "the stranger" in various discourses and texts. According to Ahmed, as we recognize a stranger, it is not simply because it is strange but because it is a figure that is "familiar in that very strange(r)ness."[58] This is why Ahmed speaks of *recognizing* the stranger, knowing *again* the stranger. This kind of recognizing functions, as Ahmed puts it, as a "visual economy" which "involves ways of seeing the difference between familiar and strange as they are (re)presented to the subject."[59] Ahmed suggests that the recognition of others is essential to subject constitution. The proposal applies to Oates's story, which can be interpreted as a depiction of a certain developmental phase in the white girl's subject constitution. In other words, as the girl recognizes the man as a stranger, she, at the same time, constitutes herself. I will first elaborate on how and why she sees the man as a stranger, and return later to the significance of recognition as the narrator's mode of constituting herself.

Following Ahmed's idea, I suggest that the narrator's recognition of the man as a stranger requires that she has already absorbed ways of seeing, which enable her to recognize him as a stranger. The girl articulates this literally by saying: "This man is different" (E 150). Her way of constituting the "difference" is dependent on a particular point of view, from which she sees the man as different from herself and people familiar to her. The difference is at first a positive difference, which she makes in comparison to her father: the stranger has time to talk to her, unlike her father, who is always "driving back and forth in the car" and has "too many things going on" (E 150). Next, she compares the

[58] Ahmed 2000, 21.
[59] Ahmed 2000, 24.

stranger's appearance to her father and brother Tommy. Now the difference is attached to the stranger's body, his eyes, hair, and skin:

> His eyes are dark like Daddy's. He left his hat back on the bank. His hair is funny. He must have been out in the sun because his skin is dark. He is darker than Tommy with his suntan. (E 150)

Significantly, she uses the attributes of skin and hair, which are, according to Kobena Mercer, two of the most visible stigmata's of blackness.[60] At this point, the reader realizes that the stranger is probably a black man. The realization rests on an ideology that sees certain bodily features as marks of racial difference.

In the context of "The Molesters," it is important to keep in mind that the way the "colored man" is seen, is culturally and socially situated. In her book *American Anatomies* (1995), Robyn Wiegman elaborates how Western thought became to attach racial meanings to the body and define race as a "visible economy."[61] Race was to be understood through a discourse of visual and typological language that described specific physical features as characteristic to different races. According to Wiegman, each visual moment, whilst the eye sees and interprets what it sees, is itself "a complicated and historically contingent production."[62] Correspondingly, a closer analysis of "The Molesters" reveals that the narrator's way of seeing stems from stereotypes specific to the North American cultural and historical context, and reflects fears typical of white Americans. The fears are connected to a certain cultural myth of the black man as dangerous, and as a sexual threat to a white woman.

Black Man as Sexual Taboo

As the girl is playing by the creek the man starts asking her questions, such as, does she live close by, how old she is and so forth. The questions

[60] Mercer 1994, 101.
[61] Wiegman 1995, 21–42. Cf. also Brah 1996, 3.
[62] Wiegman 1995, 24.

help him to get closer to the girl, both emotionally and physically. Next, he comments on her muddy knees and arms and remarks: "'Little girls shouldn't get dirty,' he says. 'Don't you want to be nice and clean and pretty?'" (EP 151). Henceforth, the narration alludes that the man might be a child molester. He talks slowly "like he was doing something dangerous," and touches her hair and shoulder (EP 151). He also asks if she would like to have another daddy, and suggests that he could be this other daddy. In so doing, he is temporarily taking the position as a father figure to get closer to and have authority over the girl. He insists that she should wash herself by the creek so that her mother would not get angry and "spank her for being dirty" (EP 152).

From this point on, race and sexuality are persistently intertwined in the narration. The man's blackness and his insinuated anomalous sexuality incessantly refer to each other. The white child, in contrast, seems to remain both raceless and asexual. Thus, the characters create opposite poles of an adult, black, sexual, male *and* a child, non-racial, asexual, genderless. The construction of a close linkage between race and sex is a form of white anxiety that descends from a certain historical context of racial discourses. Many scholars have noted that it was the Europeans, who first made the linkage between race and sex and eroticized people from other continents.[63] In general, Americans have been more preoccupied with the sexuality of the black man whereas Europeans were anxious about the sexuality of the black woman.[64] In the North American context, the demonizing stereotype of African American men as hypersexual and dangerous had distinct features and served special purposes. The stereotype evolved in the seventeenth century in the colonial period, when English settlers founded colonies in British North America. The first Africans were brought to the colony of Virginia in 1619. They became indentured servants, who, in principle, could earn their freedom. The racial-based slavery, however, was quickly

[63] See, for example, Jordan 1977 (1968), 33–40; Roberts 1994, 10–11; Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 172–3; Jahoda 1999, 31–2.
[64] Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 187.

institutionalized. It was at that time that European white men created the black man as a sexual taboo.[65]

At the same time, white women were represented in popular narratives as powerless and in need of the white man's protection. The so-called captivity narratives represented a story line where cruel Indians abducted a frail white woman or her children.[66] Many of these stories and illustrations in their covers also suggested a possible sexual violation of a white woman that reflected a growing anxiety about white sexual and racial purity.[67] As the number of African Americans increased and the economic conditions weakened in the colonies, criminal narratives became a means of mediating the new tensions. As in the captivity narratives, white women were represented as weak and powerless. The criminals were almost exclusively African Americans, and virtue and moral superiority was always attached to white people. The title pages of the narratives often combined race, some kind of sexual degeneracy and sexual violation, which was also a means of selling the books.[68] As Valerie Babb recapitulates, the written narratives of crime alongside other writings by white men became during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an essential part of constructing the hegemony of whiteness.[69] The creation of the black man as a sexual taboo was, in general, a strategy for white males to maintain their power. It aimed to prevent sexual relations between black men and white women, to control the social status of black men and to maintain white supremacy.

Later, after the Civil War, as the Thirteenth Amendment officially abolished slavery as a legal institution, the racist myth of black man as a rapist was used as the justification for the lynching of African American men from the Reconstruction period into the twentieth century. Again, the sexualization of the black man was allied with the safeguarding of white supremacy. According to Robyn Wiegman, the reason for the

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[65] See Jordan 1977 (1968), 151–63; Higginbotham & Kopytoff 2000; Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 174.
[66] Vaughan & Clark 1981, 25; Babb 1998, 73.
[67] Babb 1998, 76.
[68] Babb 1998, 80–2.
[69] Babb 1998, 87.

emergence of the myth of the black rapist in the end of nineteenth century was linked to the new status of the black family freed from slavery and to the new masculinized status of the black man.[70]

The myth of the black rapist appeared also in literature and film. Thomas Dixon Jr., for example, used the racist myth in his best-selling "Trilogy of Reconstruction," which consisted of the novels *The Leopard's Spots: A Romance of the White Man's Burden – 1865-1900* (1902), *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), and *The Traitor* (1907)[71] D.W. Griffith's notoriously racist film *The Birth of Nation* (1915) was based on Dixon's two abovementioned novels.[72] *The Leopard's Spots* includes a scene, where a mob of black troopers abducts a young white bride, Annie Camp, from her wedding. As some friends of the bride's father rush to save Annie, they accidentally shoot her in the head. Annie dies, but his father is grateful that her daughter is saved from the black men's rape, which he finds "worse than death": "'[…] My God, I can't think of what would 'a happened! Now it's all right. She's safe in God's hands'."[73]

The narration of "The Molesters" utilizes the old myth of the black man as a sexual threat to the white female. In addition, it fuses two sexual taboos together: miscegenation and pedophilia. In American literature, the miscegenation taboo often intersects with the incest taboo.[74] "The Molesters" can also be read as intersecting miscegenation and incest, to which I will return in more detail later. The presence of the miscegenation has to be unraveled in relation to the significance of the racial problematic in the U.S. context. For a century until the civil rights movement, American religious activists and politicians argued that God

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[70] Wiegman 1995, 95–6. On the sexualization of the black men in the Southern Reconstruction politics, see also Fredrickson 1972 (1971), 275–82; Hodes 1997, 147–8, 165–175; Hale 1999, 232–4; Nagel 2003, 111–5.

[71] The trilogy has also been called the Ku Klux Klan trilogy. The novels, situated in the antebellum South, promoted ideas of white supremacy. On the use of the racist myth in Dixon's fiction see, for example, Fredrickson 1972 (1971), 280–1; Nederveen Pieterse 1988 (1992), 177; Andrews 2000, 312–3; Stokes 2001, 134, 143–8.

[72] For the representation of black men in Griffith's film, see Doane 1995, 227–32; Wallace 2003.

[73] Dixon 1902, 126.

[74] On the recurrence of the theme in American literature, see Sollors 1997, 286–335.

made the races separate and therefore they were not to be mixed. The argument served to reproduce white supremacy. The motivation behind most miscegenation laws, which outlawed interracial marriages, was not so much to limit the sexual relationship between white men and black women, but to protect white women and ensure the purity of the white race.[75]

The narrative represents the black man as showing signs of the behavior of a child molester. First, he tries to develop a friendship with the child. Second, he offers her a gift, licorice, which he promises to give her if she lets him wash her. The licorice alludes, again, to his race. That is, a black person associated with brown or black colored commodities as chocolate or licorice is a clichéd image familiar from advertising.[76] Third, he keeps repeating that she is not to tell about this to anyone. Yet, it remains uncertain, if the black man is a child molester, as the composition of the story hints that the narrator might have added the sexual undertones to her memory afterwards.

Although the narration conjures up the stereotype of the black man as rapist, the white girl is not physically violated; at least she is not giving such details in her narration. As he washes her arms and legs, she asserts: "There is nothing that hurts" (EP 152). Her description of the man's facial expressions hints that the cleaning of the child has some special significance for him; "his face is serious" and "his eyes seem to be going in, looking somewhere inside him" (EP 152). After washing her legs and arms, he moves his hand on her back "like you pet a cat," and watches her walking in the water (EP 153). The girl is pleased by his attention as he sits and watches her closely. Nothing else happens, except that he gives the girl her reward, the licorice stick. As he hands it to her, he repeats that she should never tell anybody about him or what happened by the creek. He also states that the girl now has "another daddy" (EP 154). The first part of the story ends as the girl leaves the creek.

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[75] Shea 1997, 22. The first anti-miscegenation statutes are from the seventeenth century. For the history of anti-miscegenation laws, see Pascoe 1996; Saks 1997; Kennedy 2000.

[76] See Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 193, 204.

The second part of the story gives more clues to the fact that the narrator re-constitutes her memory. For example, she sporadically interrupts her narrative by referring to the present moment or comparing the time of the memory to the time that has come after. Some details of the girl's memory are repeated in the second version, while others are reversed. In the second version, as she first sees the strange man, she has a shivering sensation, a feeling of danger. He reminds her of a man who had drowned in the creek. As he takes his hat off, she immediately recognizes him as a "colored man":

> Now I know what he is: a colored man. I know what a colored man is like. But this one isn't black like the one my grandmother pointed out when we were driving. This one has a light brown skin. (EP 156)

The color of the man's skin appears to the narrator similar to her brother's sun-tanned skin. At the same time, the realization of his skin color imbricates with a feeling of danger. Namely, as the narrator recognizes the stranger as a "colored man," she "knows" she should run away: "I know this. Mommy told me so" (EP 156). Consequently, she has a sensation of an indeterminate danger: "Everything is prickly and strange. Like when you are going to be sick but don't know yet and are just waiting for something to happen. Something is going to happen" (EP 153). What her mother has told her remains implicit, but evidently, it has to do with "colored men," who might do something bad to (white) girls. Nevertheless, she decides to stay, "to make her mom sorry" (EP 156).

The narrator mentions specifically that the man has light brown skin. A closer look at the significance of the skin color is necessary here, because it seems to be a threat to the narrator. To begin with, the light brown skin suggests that he is a "mulatto," and thus an ambiguous figure. I want to point out though that he is not to be considered as a "Tragic Mulatto," a well-known trope in American literature.[77] A mulatto has also

[77] On the Tragic Mulatto/a figure (most often represented as female) in American literature see, for example, Berzon 1978; Carby 1987, 89–90; Christian 1997, 3–4; Sollors 1997, 221–45.

been seen as a hybrid figure.[78] In American literature, hybrid characters have been apparent especially in Southern Gothic literature.[79] The mulatto man in "The Molesters" may be read as a narrative element descending from the American gothic tradition. Nonetheless, it evokes the old fears about hybrid bodies, and, once again, about miscegenation.

In the second version of the memory, the description of the man is allied with ambivalent feelings. The narrator seems to emphasize the details that refer to his racial difference, which symptomatically occur in the narration after the narrator has referred to her "knowledge" about "colored men" passed down to her from her grandmother and mother.

> His eyes are funny. The eyelid is sleepy and would push down to close the eyes, except the eyeball bulges too much. I can't see enough. […] Dark skin like that is funny to me, I never saw it so close. I would like to touch it but I' don't dare. […] His teeth are yellowish. The top ones are big, and when he smiles I can see his gums – a bright pink color, like a dog's. When he breathes his nostrils get small and then larger. I can almost see the warm air coming out of him, mixed with the smell of licorice and the dark smell of his skin. (EP 157–8)

The passage underlines the narrator's fascination with the man's racial features: his eyes and dark skin. The description of the man's features in the second version is overstated and stereotypical, bristling with allusions to disparaging stereotypes. The imagery reminds of the visually represented racial caricatures with exaggerated facial features: bulging eyeballs and big teeth. Moreover, the man is associated with an animal through a comparison with dog. His bestiality is further stressed by the image of warm air streaming out of his nostrils. Although the story

[78] For example, in the nineteenth century, the discussion about the mulatto as a hybrid referred to a biological mixture of bodies and blood. In this discussion, the term mulatto had pejorative meanings. In the twentieth century, the terms mulatto and hybridity gained new significations, and became much more neutral. On the use of the terms, see Young 1995, 6–12; Sollors 1997, 129–35; Edwards 2003, 67.

[79] Justine Edwards takes as a representative example Edgar Allan Poe's gothic novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838), which he reads as "an investigation of the peculiar attitudes to racial difference and hierarchies" at the time of slavery. See Edwards 2003, 3.

underlines how the memory, including the image of the black man, is reconstructed and problematic as such, it does not impugn the narrator's stereotypical way of seeing the man or the racist ideology on which it rests. As Mikko Tuhkanen points out in his article "Of Blackface and Paranoid Knowledge," re-appropriations of racialized stereotypes, even when used as a counterstrategy, have resiliently retained an "ambivalent relation to a damaging history of the black-white past."[80] So far, the relation to the past fears and stereotypes concerning race in "The Molesters" has been ambivalent.

In the end of the second version, the narrator describes her mother's reaction when she returns home. Before this, the narrator describes, for the second time, how the "colored man" washes her. In this version, he takes her clothes off and she gets scared: "I say I want to go home, and my voice is a surprise, because it is ready to cry" (EP 158). Again, she emphasizes that he does not hurt her: "I wait something to hurt me but nothing hurts me" (EP 158). At home, the mother notices traces of licorice on her teeth, and demands to know who has given it to her. Finally, the daughter admits that it was a man by the creek. The mother suspects that he did something to her: "'He took your clothes off, didn't he?' she says. 'He took them off. He took them off – this is backwards, this is…'" (EP 160). Not only is the significance of the encounter permanently changed for the girl, but also the relationship between the mother and the daughter: "I know from the way her eyes stare at me that something terrible happened and that everything is changed" (EP 160). Along these lines, the memory is attached to a crucial phase of development in the girls' life.

Racial Fantasy

The third part of the story is the shortest. The focus is now on the consequences of the encounter. The depiction of the encounter is reduced to sixteen lines, represented as the girl's dream. In her dream, or rather, in

[80] Tuhkanen 2001, 12.

her nightmare, the man's behavior is explicitly sexual and threatening. He asserts that he is going to be her new daddy and approaches her forcefully:

> He touches me with his mouth, and then I can feel his teeth and his tongue all soft and wet on my shoulder. "I love you," he says. The words come back inside my head repeatedly, so that I am saying that to him: "I love you." (EP 161)

He touches her "everywhere" and she starts to scream. At this point, her mother pulls her awake or, as the girl expresses it, "saves" her (EP 161).

The narrator's unsettling dream has a striking resemblance to white women's racial fantasy in psychoanalytic discussions. In most cases, psychoanalytic discourse has tended to ignore questions concerning race. Nevertheless, as psychiatrist and philosopher Franz Fanon insists in his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), which analyzes the effects of racism and colonialism, the racial other has been present in the psychoanalytic discourse as an unconscious obsession to the white mind. Fanon offers an interpretation of the white woman's racial fantasy, "A Negro is raping me," as an expression of the white woman's inner wish, as a form of masochism: "[I]t is the woman who rapes herself."[81] Mary Ann Doane finds structural difficulties in Fanon's analysis and criticizes him for situating rape only as a white woman's fantasy.[82] She also criticizes Fanon for failing to see the significance of the fantasy in a certain historical and cultural context. A British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere analyses a similar fantasy of an American (white) woman patient, a black man attacking a white woman, in her famous essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (first published in 1929), which contributed to the discussion about female development. According to Riviere, the woman created her fantasy to avoid anxiety about powerful father figures. Accordingly, Riviere argues

[81] Fanon 2002 (1967), 222. Fanon refers to the fantasy familiar to him from the works Helene Deutsch and Marie Bonaparte, who both worked closely with Sigmund Freud and theorized on female sexuality.

[82] Doane's point is that Fanon, as white feminists after him, excludes the black woman from his analysis, and ignores the status of the rape fantasy "as the historical relation between the white male and black female both in the colonial context and that of slavery." Doane 1991, 222.

that the anxiety manifested the castration complex, that is, a fear of being degraded. Thus, roots of the female patient's anxiety were in an unresolved oedipal situation. In her fantasy, the woman imagines defending herself by offering herself to the black man sexually, "by making him kiss her and make love to her."[83] Jean Walton criticizes Riviere for reading the black man in the white woman's fantasy only as another variation of the father figure and ignoring his racial difference.[84] Similarly, Anne Pellegrini calls attention to the fact that Riviere does not consider the meaning of racial difference or the presence of miscegenation (a culturally specific taboo) in the fantasy.[85] I agree with Doane, Pellegrini, and Walton that the psychoanalysts' readings of the white women's racial fantasies, even that of Fanon's, have been insufficient with regard to race and cultural context.

Nevertheless, I find the idea of the black man *as a father figure* noteworthy in the context of "The Molesters" Oates' fiction, especially, when read as a story about female development, and as alluding to symbolic incest, as Marilyn Wesley does in her analysis of the story. She interprets the black man functioning as a dream father, who offers the girl "developmental freedom."[86] As I have already mentioned, the black man asserts that he is the girl's "new daddy," which signals his role as a symbolic father in the story. In addition, he offers the girl liberties to do things her parents would not let her do, such as, letting her walk in the water with her shoes on. In the same vein, the girl's need to free herself from the constraints of her parents is emphasized by her wishes to do things without their permission. Wesley reads the memory as representing a developmental phase, which she understands in Lacanian terms as the protagonist's entrance to the symbolic order, which depends on the unconscious recognition of difference.[87] As she explains, for a female the

[83] Riviere 1986, 42.

[84] Walton 2001, 19–20. Yet, Walton also notes that to perceive the black man as a father figure in the fantasy may be read as endowing the black man with a position of power that had been historically denied from him.

[85] Pellegrini 1997, 136.

[86] Wesley 1993, 115.

[87] Lacan's notion of the symbolic, which he elaborated especially in the 1950s, re-conceptualizes Freud's ideas of the oedipal transition and the development of infantile

entrance to the symbolic, a system of language and culture, is more problematic because "she stands for lack and is formally restricted to powerlessness."[88] This means, in other words, that female is restricted to a marginal position within the symbolic, and forced to submit to the socially determined position for woman.

As I have already mentioned, Wesley does not consider the significance of racial difference in the context of the story. In my view, the encounter with the black man should be considered in relation to the culturally specific miscegenation taboo. Consequently, the encounter between the white girl and the black man epitomizes not only a transgression of the incest taboo through the symbolic incest, as Wesley interprets, but *also a transgression of the miscegenation taboo*. Both transgressions express the girls' defiance against social rules and norms, although the miscegenation taboo is not equivalent to the symbolical incest. The prohibition of miscegenation has had a more altering significance in American history than the incest taboo. The legal prohibition of interracial marriage was called into question after the Second World War. The process of overturning the anti-miscegenation laws was initiated in 1958 by the case of Loving v. Commonwealth of Virginia.[89] The legal debates about miscegenation laws arouse a lot of public attention in the 1960s, around the time Oates wrote "The Molesters." Seen in this context, the presence of the miscegenation taboo in the story reflects cultural anxieties concerning race around 1960s, that

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sexuality. The Oedipus complex involves the child's giving up his or her first love-object and an entry into culture. In Lacan's model, the entry into the symbolic order depends on a privileged signifier, 'the name-of-the-father' that has a socially regulatory symbolic function, and represents law, order, and authority. The child emerges as a subject through the symbolic order and, at the same time, assumes a sexual position in relation to the primary signifier of the phallus. See Lacan 1991 (1988), 220–35. Significantly, Lacan emphasized the function of language as a signifying system in the constitution of the subject; as he puts it: "The form in which language is expressed itself defines subjectivity." Lacan 1977, 85. For readings of Lacan's notion of the symbolic, see Grosz 1990, 50–80; Minsky 1996, 141–2, 150–4; Laplanche & Pontalis 2004, 439–40; Dean 2000, 41–3, 84–6.

[88] Wesley 1993, 123.

[89] For Loving vs. Virginia, see Higginbotham & Kopytoff 2000, 132–5; Pascoe 1996, 64–7.

is, whites' fears concerning the disintegration of white racial privilege and the shifting power relations.

Before continuing my analysis about the meaning of the black man in the white girl's nightmare or fantasy, I want to return to the psychoanalytic discussion about the white woman's racial fantasy. I will draw on Jean Walton's idea of the significance of the racial difference in the racial fantasy of Riviere's patient. Namely, Walton suggests that if the patient's fantasy is considered in the American historical and cultural context in the 1920s, the woman may have imagined the black man "as occupying a position similar to her own," and "sharing her own problematic relation to the symbolic."[90] I find the suggestion worth considering especially in my interpretation of the end of the "The Molesters," where both the white girl and the black man appear as victims and share a powerless position in the social order. The girl becomes a victim already by the end of the second recollection of the incident, as the mother makes her own conjectures about what happened by the creek.

In the third version of the memory, both parents are involved in the daughter's victimization. It seems now that the parents are the molesters to which the title of the story refers.[91] There has even been a doctor, who has examined the girl. Referring to her parents and the doctor, the narrator-girl declares how she "hated them all" and "wanted them to die" (EP 161). As the father enters the room, where the mother is trying to soothe the distressed daughter, the gendered division in the family is underlined. He speaks "in a voice like the doctors," and stares at the narrator and her mother, "wondering who we are" (EP 161). Here, the father is associated with the inspecting gaze. Furthermore, the narrator uses the pronoun "we" for herself and her mother for the first time.

After the parents have gone out of the room, the narrator overhears them arguing. She tells how she once heard them arguing about

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[90] Walton 2001, 20.

[91] This is suggested by Richard, the narrator of *Expensive People*: "[T]he title refers to more than one molester; hence we see that all adults are 'molesters'" (EP 163, emphasis added). He does not explain this further, but states plainly: "[T]hey molest and are adults; they go about their business of adulthood, which consists partly (it would be selfish to say wholly) of molesting" (EP 163).

the "nigger." As Wesley observes, her use of the pejorative word 'nigger' represents her father's diction.[92] According to the narrator, the father has avenged on the assumed molester:

> The nigger was caught and a state trooper that Daddy knows real well kicked him in the face – he was kicked in the face. I can't remember that face now. Yes, I can remember it. I can remember some face. He did something terrible, and what was terrible came onto me, like black tar you can't wash off, and they are sitting out there and talking about it. They are trying to remember what that nigger did to me. They weren't there and so they can't remember it. (EP 162)

At this point, the black man, kicked in the face by a *white male* police, the representative of the law, becomes a victim. What is noteworthy is that the black man may not even be the same man who was by the creek. This is suggested by the fact that the narrator does not remember his face. It could even be that he was later re-signified as black by the narrator. Even if he was the same man, the girl does not remember what he did to her.

The position of the white girl is parallel to that of the black man, because the white adults, particularly the white father, do not take into consideration their accounts of what happened. Even the mother suggests that nothing bad has happened to the girl, that she was not molested in the first place: "'She wasn't hurt, it's all in her head. It's in her head[.]'" (EP 161). In the end, the white father has the decisive power to determine how things are signified, while the white girl and the black man share a powerless position in this regard. That is, the shared position is a denied position as a speaking subject in a master discourse, owned by the white male.

The white male power culminates in the physical violence against the black man by the white trooper. His act, kicking the black man in the face on the grounds of another white man's word, is reminiscent of

[92] Wesley 1993, 114. In my view, the using of the father's word reminds of the poststructuralist idea of how language produces subjectivity, identity and meaning. If the use of the father's words is read in the Lacanian framework, it refers to a stage of development where the subject enters the symbolic order, that is, the process in which subjectivity is assumed and defined through language.

violence against black men in the history of the U.S., which was often based on fabricated allegations.[93] On a larger scale, the scene draws attention to the history of racial inequality and white racism in the U.S. It does not only refer to the past, but reflects the situation at the time of the writing. Although the discriminatory Jim Crow laws were already dismantled, and the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) officially recognized African Americans' civil-rights, racial discrimination did not disappear.[94]

In the literary context, the unjust situation of the black harks back to Harper Lee's bestseller *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), which depicts racism in the South in the 1930s. Although Oates's earlier fiction is clearly influenced by Southern fiction, the influence is not so apparent in *Expensive People*, except for "The Molesters." In Lee's novel, Atticus Finch, a lawyer and the father of the six-year-old narrator Scout, decides to defend a black man, Tom Robinson, who is wrongfully accused of raping a white girl.[95] Finch takes the case although he knows that Tom does not have a chance in front of the all-white jury. He loses the case because the jury refuses to believe Tom's word over that of a white man, the father of the raped girl. Hence, Tom has to suffer for the society's racial prejudice and violence. Lee's novel represents a critical negotiation with racial injustices and social hierarchies in the American society both in the past and at the time of the writing. Like Lee's novel, "The Molesters" mirrors the moment of crisis and change in racial relations in the 1960s.

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[93] This phenomenon has been studied especially in the Southern context. According to Hale, between 1890 and 1930, there existed "private violence" against black men, that is, lynching and violence that were executed by small groups of white men in private settings. Hale 1999, 201.

[94] In fact, the civil rights movement also engendered racial violence and racist murders. This racial violence is reflected also in literature written by white authors. For example, Eudora Welty's famous short story "Where is the Voice Coming From" (1963) is based on an actual incident, the civil-rights activist Medgar Evans's murder in Jackson, Mississippi.

[95] Tom's case has parallels to the infamous "Scottsboro Boys trials" (1931-1932), which occurred in Alabama when Lee was five years old. Nine black teenage boys were accused of raping two white girls. Eight of the defendants were sentenced to death. For more on the Scottsboro cases, see, for example, Murray 1977.

The Regulation of White Woman's Sexuality

If "The Molesters" is read as a story of a white girl's development in Lacanian terms, the racial fantasy can be interpreted as pointing to the phase, in which the girl (unconsciously) recognizes difference and simultaneously becomes aware of the rules she has to accept in order to become a subject. Through the embedded themes of symbolic incest and miscegenation, the story draws attention to the rules that regulate the sexual relations and sexuality of white female in American culture.

Referring to Claude Lévi-Strauss's account of society as both exogamous and endogamous[96], Walton argues that the concept of kinship is central for understanding both racial and sexual subjectivity. Walton considers exogamy and endogamy in the context of colonial, European, and U.S. societies, where the rules relating to marital or sexual relationships are enforced by incest and miscegenation taboos. Her point is that also Lacan's notion of the symbolic (which she finds problematic to begin with) must involve rules about racial subjectivity, and that it should be re-conceptualized so that it also includes the aspect of race.[97] Walton's idea that race, gender, and sexuality are discursively produced *together* resonates with my reading of the racial fantasy in "The Molesters" as an expression of resistance to the social norms concerning gender, race, and sexuality. This resistance is uttered through the symbolic transgression of two social laws regulating kinship relations.

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[96] Anthropologists have proposed different theories about the origins of exogamy and endogamy, the social rules of kinship. Generally, the rules of exogamy prohibit marriage between relatives of near kin, while the rules of endogamy require that marriages should be contracted within particular social groups due to social norms. What counts for near kin or particular social group varies in different cultures. In Lévi-Strauss's account, it is the universal incest taboo that mandates human groups towards exogamy. The function of the incest taboo is to institutionalize exchange-based relations between families, especially between men representing patrilineal clans. The taboo is a rule that secures the exchange system in which women, the mother, daughter or sister, is to be given to others as a gift. For Lévi-Strauss's views on kinship relations, incest taboo, and exchange system, see Lévi-Strauss 1970 (1969), 29–41, 42–51, 478–97.

[97] Walton 2001, 11. Walton's call for re-conceptualization follows the same line of critique articulated, for example, by Jan Campbell, who finds psychoanalytic discourse as an example of Western, white and ethnocentric imaginary. Campbell 2000, 14, passim.

Although I have referred to the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality throughout my analysis, I have not yet considered the significance of heterosexuality, or rather, heteronormativity in the outline of the fantasy.[98] In her article "Quandaries of the Incest Taboo," which focuses on the question of incest and normative kinship, Judith Butler argues that the prohibition of non-normative sexual exchange also involves the regulation of the norms of heterosexual kinship.[99] That is, prohibitions concerning endogamy and exogamy include the regulation of the norms of heterosexuality. Walton, who discusses fantasized racial difference in psychoanalytic texts by white women in the 1920 and 1930s, understands racial fantasies as a white woman's way to "negotiate the tension between this [psychoanalytic] discourse that undermines their authority and their own desire to be legitimated by the same discourse."[100] She goes on to suggest that the use of racial fantasies may also be read as their resistance to heteronormativity.

Walton's proposition has to be understood in the context of the cases she discusses in her book, but her idea is worth considering also in the reading of "The Molesters." What happens to the rules concerning heterosexuality, if the racial fantasy is read as transgressing the kinship

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[98] Following the definition by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, I understand heteronormativity as a set of practices, institutions and social structures that produce and reinforce heterosexuality as privileged and "normal." Berlant and Warner also emphasize heteronormativity as a concept distinct from heterosexuality. See Berlant & Warner 1998, 548n2; Warner 1991.

[99] Butler 2004, 157. Butler's argument refers to the psychoanalytic discourse, which proposes a path to the normalization of gender and sexuality through the oedipal model and the prohibition against incest. In Butler's view, the oedipal model and the incest taboo include an assumption that gender is achieved through heterosexual desire. Butler's argument can be called into question in relation to the Lacanian model. I agree with Tim Dean, who points out that Butler generally eschews the Lacanian idea of desire, and in so doing, neglects the potential it may offer for the theorization of sexuality. Butler does this every time she postulates that the Lacanian account (and its conception of desire) is dogmatically heterosexist. An elaborate examination of this critique or the concept of desire in Lacan's theory is not, however, crucial in the context of my analysis. What I find essential, instead, is Butler's central argument in the above-mentioned article about the certain prohibitions and their normative role in relation to heterosexuality. For Butler's misconceptions of Lacan, see Dean 2000, 178, 186–7, 199–200.

[100] Walton 2001, 13. The texts in question are by three female psychoanalysts: Joan Riviere, Melanie Klein, and Marie Bonaparte.

rules? Although the question may seem irrelevant at first, it becomes more pertinent if we remind ourselves, once again, of the ways in which race and sexuality have been produced together in the cultural and historical context of the U.S. For example, Siobhan Somerville inspects in her article "Queer Loving" an often made "miscegenation analogy" in the public debate about same-sex marriage in the U.S. context. She argues that the legal construction of interracial heterosexuality concerns both the history of sexuality *and* race. Through a careful historicizing of the miscegenation analogy, Somerville shows how the categories of race and sexuality were produced and constructed *in relation to one another* (particularly in juridical and legal discourses) during the 1950s and 1960s.[101]

When race and sexuality intersect in representations, it often marks a moment when "the desire for whiteness meets its own ambivalence," as Mason Stokes puts it. I agree with Stokes, who argues that a closer look at miscegenation reveals a messy desire that is partly a product of homosocial desire, which Stokes understands as "a constitutive component of both whiteness and heterosexuality."[102] In other words, Stokes views white supremacy as a homosocial network that appropriates white women and black men in order to consolidate both whiteness and heterosexuality as dominating ideologies. Following Stokes's line of thought, I suggest that "The Molesters" also reveals the prevailing homosocial network present in the U.S. society. The developmental phase of the white girl, situated in a certain cultural context and depicted in "The Molesters," involves the acceptance of the social rules that include the culturally dominant oedipal model, which concern, as I have repeated several times, race, gender, and sexuality. If the racial fantasy is considered as a transgressive pattern, it challenges *all* cultural injunctions against non-normative sexual choices, not only those concerning interracial (hetero)sexual relations. In other words, the anti-normative,

[101] As Somerville notes, this period encompasses shifts both in the legal status of interracial marriage and simultaneous criminalization of homosexuality in U.S. laws. Somerville 2005, 337.

[102] Stokes 2001, 17–8. A homosocial network is a logic of male relations that requires a woman in a mediating position.

transgressive pattern in the narration works as a driving force that destabilizes not only the normative rules concerning identity, but also the social regulation concerning a subject's desire. In so doing, the short story offers a narrative that aims to transgress and challenge the existing cultural taboos and myths that regulate individuals as gendered, racialized, and desiring subjects.

White Female Characters and Intersectionality

As I have suggested, "The Molesters" offers illuminating insights into the problematic of the constitution of a white female subjectivity in the American context. I have read the representation of the girl's recalling a memory as expressing her resistance to the rules that regulate the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. In addition, the transgression through the symbolic incest and miscegenation taboo draws attention to the rules regarding the white woman's sexuality within American culture. The story also demonstrates the rigidity oedipal scenario, which promote particular postulations for how gendered and racialized subjects are constituted.

The black man is needed in the white girl's narrative as a mirror to elucidate the problematic concerning the construction of her white female identity in a culturally specific social order. As Toni Morrison argues, African American characters have not been represented as actual characters in American literature, but rather, as Africanist presences serving different functions. According to Morrison, Africanist presence frequently reflects the contradictions of white identity.[103] Indeed, in Oates's story, the black man functions as a racial Other through which the problematic of the white female is reflected. In a way, his presence offers the white girl a possibility for defiance and transgression. The white

[103] Morrison 1992, 59. This kind of theme, where a white character (especially a white woman) is in conflict with the community and its expectations, and is accompanied by an enigmatic black character, who appears as a presence instead of fully developed character, has appeared (and studied) especially in Southern fiction. Cf. Entzminer's (2003) analysis on Eudora Welty's novel *Delta Wedding* (1946).

protagonist comes to recognize her own social position and its limits through the process of recognizing and situating the stranger in the place of the Other. In this manner, the racial difference functions as a conduit that elicits the problematic construction of the white woman's identity.

Moreover, the story confirms how the process of racialization, or the appropriating of the significance of racial difference, includes a stereotyping of the African American other. As we have seen, the black man's representation is built on certain assumptions and gendered stereotypes about black people. The use of stereotypical images of black men in the story evokes the history of the black-white relations in the U.S., especially white anxiety over miscegenation, that is, anxiety over interracial sexual relationships.

In the first two versions of the memory, it is questionable whether the story aims to criticize racialization, and the arrangement of social relations based on it. However, towards the end of the story, it becomes more palpable that the narration's relation to the racial relations might be critical. This is realized by the repeated references to the white parent's involvement in the construction of the girl's memory. The re-presentations of the girl's memory reveal that the idea of the black man as a molester is projected on her story by her parents. The description of the father's unjust punishment of the black man in the end of the story highlights that it is ultimately the white man, who has the power to construe the "truth." What the scene also implies is that the narrator identifies with the black man, because they are both repressed others in the oedipal narrative and both denied a speaking position. In so doing, the story illustrates the damaging effects of racialization and gendering and draws critical attention to the white male power within American society.

In this chapter, I have interpreted Oates's novel *Expensive People* and her short story "The Molesters" as examples of her early fiction. Following the representation of white females in both narratives, I have demonstrated how the significance of race and ethnicity in these stories is rooted in American cultural narratives about family and nation. Moreover, both narratives display schemes that disclose how the norms of race, gender, and sexuality are produced in relation to each other, and

how they are firmly established in a specific cultural and historical context. Although *Expensive People*, a satire of white suburban middle-class, criticizes in various ways American society, its founding myths and the normative discourses of gender, class and race, its approach to race and ethnicity remains ambivalent. A closer analysis of "The Molesters" shows, in turn, that the short story already reveals a critical attitude towards the problematic of race in the American context.

CHAPTER 3

RACIALIZATION AND THE CONSTITUTION OF WHITE SELF IN *BECAUSE IT IS BITTER, AND BECAUSE IT IS MY HEART*

As concluded in the previous chapter, Oates depicts racial issues in her early fiction rather covertly. In the beginning of the 1990s, Oates starts to portray effects of race on the society and constitution of American identities more directly.[1] In this chapter, I will focus on her novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, first published in 1990. It is the first one of Oates's novels that takes the racial theme as its central subject. As Joanne Creighton eloquently puts it, in this novel, "Oates casts her portrayal of the self and 'the other' in a racial context" and enhances, "a potent new dimension to her study of American character and society."[2] Oates's evolving interest in the racial problematic is to be seen already in her novella titled *I Lock My Door Upon Myself* (1989), published a year before *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. The novella tells the story of a white woman, Edith Margaret Freilicht, born in 1890. Edith's story is narrated from her granddaughter's viewpoint. What she knows about Edith is based on the rumors and gossip of relatives and local people. Edith, or "Calla" as she prefers to be called, marries at the age of seventeen to a wealthy, white farmer, George Freilicht. Dissatisfied with her marriage Calla has a defiant relationship with a black man around 1911. After the affair, she remains silent about the matter, and stays in one room, "locks her door upon herself," for the remainder of her life. The

[1] It should be noted, however, that Oates already addresses racial issues directly in her *Miracle Play*, published in 1974. In the end of the 1980s and in beginning of the 1990s, she wrote plays that also attend to racial issues such as *Black* and *Negative* (reprinted in a drama collection *The Perfectionist and Other Plays*, 1995). As Cologne-Brooks observes, Oates commonly focuses in her plays much more sharply on racial issues than in her novels. Cologne-Brookes 2005, 151. The plays are not included in my study because the ways in which race is dealt in Oates's plays substantially differ from those of her prose.

[2] Creighton 1992, xi.

structure of the narrative as well as the narrator's (the fictional granddaughter of Calla) voice emphasizes how the truth about Calla's life is never to be discovered. The narrator is puzzled by Calla's story, but she never tries to assume or reconstruct the ultimate reasons and motives behind her actions. This and her perplexity about her own role as the narrator of Calla's story stir up, as Sally Robinson perceptively observes, draws attention to the politics of representation; about who speaks and in whose interests the story is reconstructed.[3]

The events of *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* take place at the end of 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s, the last years of Jim Crow era. Some might argue that Oates's return to the past, to the age of segregation, signifies a nostalgic longing for the past, when the social hierarchy was more fixed, and benefited especially white people. On the other hand, it may be that the writer felt obliged to wait until the 1990s to be able to reflect the racial issues from a white point of view. Moreover, the task of returning to the racial past was easier to take in the wake of African American writers, such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Toni Cade Bambara, who had shaped and established the American literary convention that critically observes the social conditions of the white society and its racialized practices. In particular the black women writers returned in their works to past in order to find insights to the present. In addition, the beginning of the 1990s was the time when the discussion about whiteness became topical. In my reading of the novel, I will demonstrate how Oates's return to the past is, in effect, also critical. As a fictional re-visit to the changing construction of history, her novel demonstrates how fiction offers space for diverse perspectives in the form of a narrative that prevents a fixed story about racial practices of the past.

The novel introduces four families, each of which represents a different social position. The central focus is on the white girl, Iris Courtney, who belongs to a working class family that strives to embody middle class status. After her parents' divorce, Iris lives with her mother.

[3] Robinson 1992, 403.

The mother becomes an alcoholic and eventually dies of alcoholism. The other central character, a talented basketball star, Jinx Fairchild, comes from a working class African American family. Iris and Jinx attend the same high school and hope to continue their studies in college. Their chances to realize their plans are difficult, although not equally so. Their opportunities in life in the age of Jim Crow differ from each other considerably because of race.[4]

In his review of the novel, Henry Louis Gates pertinently describes it as "akin to the photographic technique or 'deep focus', through which Oates creates porous boundaries between characters."[5] Indeed, the novel emphasizes the meaning of visual field and the dialectic of looking between the characters. The different viewpoints and experiences of the characters give insight into the practices of looking as a complex arena of power. In the following analysis, I will scrutinize how looking and being looked at are represented in the novel as fundamental to the construction of identities. The starting point of my analysis bases on the concept of gaze, especially on the re-conceptualizations and revisions of the concept. Lacan has conceptualized the gaze as a signifying visual order in which the subject comes into being and is defined.[6] Influenced by psychoanalytic conceptualization, film theory understands the gaze as a psychic and social viewing relationship.[7] Through Michel Foucault's work, the gaze is also understood as inspecting and normalizing, both processes enacted in social and institutionalized contexts through frameworks of power.[8] As criticism of imperialist gazes influenced by Foucault has demonstrated, acts of looking both frame and capture power relations.[9] In this sense, the look or the gaze is often understood as a fixed

[4] Cf. Cologne-Brookes 2005, 170.

[5] Gates 1990, 27.

[6] Lacan 1988 (1977), 67–119.

[7] On the concept of the gaze in the field of film theory see, for example, Mulvey 2003 (1975); Doane 2003 (1981); Kaplan 1983, 23–35; Silverman 1992, 125–56; hooks 1992, 115–32; Sturken & Cartwright 2001, 76–93.

[8] See, in particular, Foucault 1979 (1975). Taking the example of Panopticon design for prisons, Foucault explains how modern society exercises its controlling systems of power and knowledge through visibility.

[9] See, for example, Spurr 1997 (1993); Kaplan 1997.

and colonizing mode of looking. Mieke Bal finds the Lacanian gaze a useful concept in analyzing the ideological charge of the subject-position. As Bal explicates, the subject, involved in the process of meaning making, "lives in a dynamic situation that is neither totally subordinated by the gaze […] nor free to dictate meaning as the master of reference, which the subject has often been construed to be."[10] I find Bal's revision of the gaze especially useful as she understands the relation between the gaze and the subject as *a constant negotiation* of meaning production. In my reading of Oates's novel, I will display the ways in which the narration gives emphasis to how the central characters are defined in the visual order and how they *constantly negotiate* their positions within its confines.

In *Because it is Bitter*, the visual field is significant especially for Iris's constitution of self, but the dominant ways of looking affect also Jinx's sense of self. My focus is on Iris, and her constitution of identity as a white girl/woman, but I will also analyze the perspective of Jinx, which offers an opposite experience of the dominant, cultural gaze. Referring to the two characters gendered, classed, and racialized positions, Creighton argues that both Iris and Jinx have no choice but try to "pass," to try to "look the part."[11] Yet, although Iris comes from a lower-class family, the fact that she enjoys the privilege of whiteness cannot be ignored. In other words, I want to emphasize that Iris's effort to pass has to be seen in relation to her striving for the privileges of whiteness.

Visual Economy and Racialization

The narration describes carefully how Iris's process of learning to "see" plays an important role in her constitution of the self. Iris, who is named by her mother after the iris of the eye, learns to see things through a certain set of norms that produce visual order. In the previous chapter, I referred to Sara Ahmed's ideas about the recognition of other as central to the constitution of the subject, and the function of the process of

[10] Bal 2002, 43.
[11] Creighton 1992, 103.

recognition as a visual economy. As Ahmed also notes, visual economy "involves differentiating between others on the basis of how they 'appear'."[12] Quite like the white girl in "The Molesters," Iris learns to differentiate people based on their appearance. This process of learning to differentiate comes apparent, for example, in the following passage, in which she stares at churchgoing "Negroes" on the street:

> Men with their slicked-down pomaded hair. (And how it strikes Iris's eye, the strangeness of Negroes with gray or silver or white hair.) The boys in suits, white shirts, neckties. *Are these the sloe-eyed boys Iris sees in the park, the boys she knows she should be wary or avoid?* […] Iris stares greedily. These skins like cocoa…milk chocolate…bittersweet chocolate. A darkish purple sheen like the sheen of fat Concord grapes. And shoe polish: the rich black oily polish Daddy allows her to dab on his good shoes with a rag, then rub, rub, rub until the leather "shines like a mirror…can you see your own face?" (BB 22–3)

As my analysis of "The Molesters" demonstrated, black characters in Oates's earlier fiction serve a metonymic function to reflect the problematic of the white self and its relation to the social order. In *Because It Is Bitter*, Oates aims to examine the problematic of black-white relations more explicitly and critically. This is discernible, for example, in the above excerpt, as a deliberate implication about the significance of African Americans to the constitution of white identity. The comparison of the skin color to shoe polish on leather implies the meaning of black people as a mirror for the white identity. In addition, black people function throughout the story as a mirror to Iris as she constitutes her identity. She also constantly reinvents herself in this ongoing process.

As Iris stares at the black people, she wonders why they are "different from us?" (BB 23). Her mother, Persia, prohibits her from staring at them, and as Iris asks her why, she answers: "They don't know any better, some of them. *But we do*." (BB 23, italics original). In her view, white people know how to behave and have civilized manners. Persia's

[12] Ahmed 2000, 24.

comment reveals a hierarchization between "we," the white people and "they," the black people.

Iris's process of differentiating between black and white people is also underpinned through language and naming. Her relatives use different words for black people that echo various levels in the discourse of race. What is more, the way they use the words exposes their social position, which varies according to gender, class, or generation. This is confusing to Iris, who does not fully understand the rules of existing social hierarchy based on the color line:

> Iris has been taught that "Negro" is the proper word, in two equally stressed syllables: "*Neg-ro.*" Say it too fast, or carelessly, and you get words you don't want: "nigra," "nigger." "Colored" is acceptable too, sometimes; it's the word Aunt Madelyn prefers. […] Aunt Madelyn has many "colored" friends, she says, women friends, and fine people they are too, but the race as a whole…"the-race-as-a-whole"…can't be trusted. (BB 23)

By listening to adults, Iris learns the white attitude: the importance of making the difference between the white self and black other. What confuses Iris is that she is also taught not to use words that sound derogatory or vulgar. This is linked to her speaking position as a white girl and to the rules concerning white females of a certain class. The gendered rules, intersected by class and race, are highlighted in the narration by a contrast between Iris and her father.

> "Jig" is one of the words Iris has been told she must not say ever. Like "nigger," "coon," "spade," "spook," "shine." Yet when Duke uses the word everyone laughs, it's so…unexpected. (BB 24)

When Iris's father, Duke, uses undesirable words, it is only funny. As the excerpt suggests, the rules for men are less strict, and they seem to allow more space to transgress the implicit codes and rules of class and (white) race.

As a teenager, Iris becomes conscious of herself as being looked at as an object of desire. She is particularly fascinated by the black boys, of which her father warns her:

> Duke says, "These colored kids, you know…don't get too friendly with them. And don't ever be alone with them. The things a black man would like to do to a white girl…Christ, you wouldn't even want to think." (BB 93)

Again, similar to "The Molesters," the stereotypical image of a black man as a sexual threat to a white girl is rooted in the white anxiety about miscegenation, and thus in the white fear about losing power. This time, however, the use of the familiar stereotype through Duke's words markedly draws attention to white racial attitudes. Duke also convinces Iris that "they [black men] hate us." (BB 93) His warnings induce both fear and excitement in Iris.

In her book on the cultural politics of emotion, Sara Ahmed argues that objects do not cause emotions, but rather, they are shaped by the subject's contact with objects.[13] As Iris walks under the eyes of black men in the neighborhood, she experiences a bodily sensation: "[S]cared tremulous, eyes straight ahead, a tingling in the pit of the belly like minnows darting in the shadowy water" (BB 93). If we consider Ahmed's proposition in reading the above quote, it could be said that the emotions and sensations Iris experiences are not caused by the fact that black men are fearsome as such, but by the knowledge that black men are dangerous to white girls. As the narration deliberately underlines, the knowledge Iris has learned from her father and girlfriends affects how she relates to black people and, simultaneously, how she presents herself. The knowledge of black men as dangerous has its roots deeper in the history of the black and white relations in the U.S. To use Ahmed's words, as Iris encounters the neighborhood black men, her contact is shaped by "past histories of contact."[14]

[13] Ahmed 2004, 6. Cf. also Ahmed 2010, 32–3.
[14] See Ahmed 2004, 7.

Even though Iris learns to racialize African Americans according to certain racial beliefs and classifications, she is not able to define herself similarly: "Iris confides in one of her girlfriends, brash, not thinking how it might get repeated at school, 'If I was colored…I'd know who I was!'" (BB 93). Iris's remark reflects the social situation in which black people know, indeed, who they are supposed to be, because they have no other choice. Her attitude is enforced not only by the social situation of the Jim Crow era, but also by the past, American racial history. Moreover, the remark exposes how Iris is unaware of her privilege of not being classified by her "color." Instead, she experiences a kind of absence of a specific identity, which would determine who she is.

White Self-Awareness, Shame, and Guilt

The lives of Iris and Jinx cross as Iris is harassed by "Little Red" Garlock, a malevolent white boy from the same neighborhood. She runs to a nearby store where she knows Jinx works, and asks for his help. As Jinx walks her home he gets into a fight with Little Red, who accidentally dies during the fight. Jinx dumps his body in the river, where it is found by the police. Neither Iris nor Jinx's role in the incident is ever discovered.

After witnessing Little Red Garlock's accidental death, Iris starts to reflect her own identity as white. The realization of her social position as white and thus privileged is not entirely a conscious process. The process starts, as she feels guilty over Little Red's death. She feels guilty initially, because she cannot tell anyone about what happened. Hence there is no reconciliation, which would free her of the guilty feelings. Secondly, she feels guilty, because she is the one who had asked Jinx to protect her:

> *I'm the one. I'm to blame. Not you.* Glancing down at the whiteness of her skin she feels the sensation of vertigo, a physical sickness, as if this whiteness were the outward symptom of her spirit's etiolation, a profound and unspeakable not-thereness. For she'd failed him, really, in not running for help and protecting him from his own instinct for self-survival. (BB 155)

In the above excerpt, Iris's feeling of guilt is curiously linked to the "whiteness of her skin." The reason for this is that because Jinx is black, they cannot go to police. He would not be treated fairly. Thus, Iris's guilty feelings bring forth an awareness of her position as socially privileged.

I want to complicate the analysis a little further by asking what is at stake when Iris's guilty feelings are attached to a sensation of "physical sickness" about the whiteness of her skin. Perhaps the question is not only about guilt, but also about shame, because the feeling of shame is related to "what" she is and how she feels about it. It may be that both guilt and shame are present here, and it is not possible to distinguish between them.[15] Then again, a conventional way of understanding the difference between shame and guilt is to consider them at the level of the subject's relation to itself. In this view, guilt concerns a subject's misconduct or violation of some rule, what the subject has done, whereas shame concerns some *quality about the self* and thus escalates the subject's relation to itself.[16] As I have already mentioned, Iris's guilt concerns her involvement in Red Garlock's death and its concealment. She has violated the law against concealing the death of another person, and thus committed a misdemeanor. That is, she is *guilty of doing something*. Because the reason for the concealment is related to the injustice of racial segregation, she becomes conscious of her racial privilege. At this point, her self-identification as white causes a feeling of *shame*, which she experiences in relation to the unearned privilege of whiteness. This is fundamentally a question of identity, of what she *is*. As Amelia Jones notes, an awareness of one's white privilege is disturbing, because it entails that others might suffer from the very same structure that bestows one's privilege. Jones describes how this awareness is accompanied with "painful, often guilty feelings."[17] Jones's way of describing the feelings of

[15] For example, Silvan Tomkins defines shame and guilt as "one and the same affect," and suggests that it is "the differences in the other components which […] are experienced together with shame" that make the experiences of guilt and shame different. Tomkins 1963, 118.
[16] Sedgwick 2003, 37; Ahmed 2004, 105.
[17] Jones 2003a, 91.

guilt sounds more like shame if shame is understood as a feeling that intensifies the sense of what one is.[18] Moreover, as Linda Alcoff observes, a feeling of being white, when connected with an awareness of white privilege, may disconnect the white subject of a feeling of community and history, and disorient identity formation.[19]

What is noteworthy in the case of shame, as Ahmed points out, is that when it is understood as a subject's exposure to others, it is not insignificant, who the "others," to which the subject feels exposed, are. Referring to Silvan Tomkins, Ahmed emphasizes that a feeling of shame entails that the subject is interested in the other.[20] In other words, shame involves a subject's relation to another, whose view *is of importance* to the subject. Indeed, Iris's shame is evoked as she tries to imagine what "he [Jinx] is thinking, feeling, whether he blames her, whether he hates her bitterly[.]" (BB 155) His point of view is important to her because she identifies with Jinx; they share a secret and have become friends.

It is also striking that Iris associates her white skin with "un-speakable not-thereness," which causes her anxiety. One of Richard Dyer's well-known remarks on whiteness is that it is "often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death."[21] Dyer demonstrates his argument by using three films as an example. All three films relate to a situation in which whites hold power in society, but are materially dependent upon black people. Furthermore, whites are aware of this dependency. According to Dyer's reading, the dependency and awareness of it problematizes the legitimacy of white domination.[22] In the context of Oates's novel, the emphasis lies on the dependency of different social

[18] Scholars discussing whiteness speak more often of "white guilt." See, for example, Kincheloe & Steinberg 1998, 10; Zack 1999, 81; Ryde 2009, 49–52. A negative affect evoked by the awareness of whiteness or its privilege may generate a productive process towards anti-racist thinking or anxiety and anger. Nevertheless, the negative affects connected to racial issues are a complex matter; an awareness of why is not simply followed by a change of attitude or a process towards affirmative thinking. The affects generate a process, which may take unpredictable turns, depending on the varying components and circumstances involved in the situation.

[19] Alcoff 1998, 7.

[20] Ahmed 2004, 105. See also Tomkins 1963, 154–5.

[21] Dyer 1993, 141.

[22] Dyer 1993, 143.

groups upon one another. That is, the social hierarchy is not represented merely as a racial division of power between white and black people, but also between people of different genders and classes. Nevertheless, the feelings Iris identifies in relation to her white skin are related to the question of white privilege. She is not so aware of her dependency of Jinx. Iris's moment of self-awareness also recalls a paradox of whiteness articulated by Dyer: "to be really white is to be nothing."[23] As she becomes aware of her whiteness, she feels she is nothing in particular.

Because of the shared secret, Iris imagines herself and Jinx as "soul-mates." Such feelings towards Jinx intensify as Iris loses her contact with Jinx after she starts her studies at Syracuse University. Unlike Jinx, who misses his chance to go to college because his career as a basketball star ends, Iris is able to go continue her studies although her family cannot finance them. She is successful in school and wins a scholarship. Jinx, in turn, drops out of school, gets married, and works in a factory.

At the University, Iris gets a position as Professor Byron Savage's assistant and starts to socialize with his upper-class family. She finds the upper class white world as "a world of surfaces, many-faceted, infinite" (BB 281). As Creighton observes, the name of white upper-class family, "Savage" is ironic, because the members of this family "are exemplars of the most civilized of human traits."[24] At the same time, however, their attitude is self-righteous. At the Savages' Thanksgiving dinner, Iris has difficulties following the conversation, which relates to such topics as politics, university administration, and travels to Europe. Instead, her mind keeps drifting to Jinx:

> [T]her's the perpetual memory, or is it by now sheerly fantasy, of herself in Jinx Fairchild's arms, in his car above the river, Jinx Fairchild kissing her gently but teasingly[.] …that curl of desire in her loins flaring up, up, up in to flame. *I love you, I would die for you. You are the only real thing in my life*. (BB 291)

[23] Dyer 1993, 142.
[24] Creighton 1992, 102.

In addition, she ends up helping Mrs. Savage's black maid, Mercedes. She offers to take the empty wine bottles to the kitchen, where no guest is welcome. Mercedes stares resentfully at Iris, "this pushy white girl" (BB 293), who has intruded into her kitchen, and Mrs. Savage leads Iris vigorously back to the dinner table. Iris's sudden need to help Mercedes takes place after she has spoken knowledgeably about a painting by Hieronymus Bosch. She feels embarrassed, because she had "spoken disparagingly of the very enterprise of art history and of iconography, Dr. Savage's religion […]" (BB 292–3).

In the party of self-assured upper class white people, Iris identifies with black people, whose lives seem more real to her. This is related, again, to her shame about being white. In general, white people tend to conceptualize non-white cultures as more authentic and natural. This may occur in historical and political conditions, where white identities are in crisis.[25] In the context of Oates's novel, Iris's case is more complicated. The narration treats Iris's identity struggle, and her emotions in relation to herself, as concerning not only race, but also to other aspects, such as class to give an example. This comes apparent also in the representation of the Thanksgiving dinner. At the dinner table, Iris is continuously asked about her origins. This is discomforting to Iris, who methodically tries to hide her lower class past. To prevent any further questions, she tells that her mother has died, which is also true. As the other guests murmur words of sympathy, Iris feels a sudden wave of nausea and excuses herself from the dinner table. Her first attempt to enter the upper class white world causes her a crisis, which is expressed in her nostalgia and longing for black people. She will later resolve her crisis by re-constituting her identity to fit better into the upper class white world.

Opposition of White Gaze

In Oates's fiction, African American men are mostly seen from the viewpoint of a white female character. In *Because it is Bitter*, Jinx is more

[25] Kincheloe & Steinberg 1998, 10.

often than not seen from Iris's point of view, but occasionally the narration shifts to the young black man's point of view, which is rare in Oates's fiction. This means that also the white people are represented through Jinx's viewpoint; how he sees and experiences them. Nevertheless, it is the white people, who seem to have the agency in looking, whereas the black people are more likely to be fixed by the white people's gaze. The narration represents through Jinx the experience of the effects of the white gaze. For example, the following passage represents his experience of being looked at by white people as he is playing basketball:

> [H]e's well aware of the eyes riveted to him – the "white" eyes – how he appears through the prismatic lenses of their vision. He understands that whites study him as if he were not even a specimen of sorts but an entire category. They study at him, amazed by his athletic gifts, admiring his personal style, deceiving themselves they are learning something about this category when in fact they aren't even learning anything about Jinx Fairchild the specimen. (BB 183)

In the above passage, Jinx's experience of the white people looking at him is paralleled with the white gaze. Although the gaze is external to the subject, the subject's look is often understood as a signifier of the gaze for that other, who occupies the position of the object. Jinx feels the white people's gaze fixes him, and his viewpoint reveals an effect of "the colonial gaze," which does not allow him to be an individual, but only a racialized subject. His experience also recalls the burden of "the double-consciousness of American Negro" described by W.E.B. du Bois in his seminal essay "Of Our Spiritual Strivings."[26] Nevertheless, he is able to recognize and isolate his visual image, as white people see him, which suggests that he is not entirely a passive object of the gaze.

In her book, which provides a psychoanalytic examination of the field of vision, Kaja Silverman emphasizes a point in Lacan's theory that has mostly been ignored. It implies that the subject does not always just

[26] du Bois 2000 (1903), 3.

passively allow the gaze to congeal him or her in the frames of a pre-existing image. Silverman suggests that the subject "may give him- or herself to be apprehended by the gaze in a certain way, by assuming the shape of either a desired representation or one that has come through less happy circumstances to mark the physical body."[27] Following Silverman's argument, I suggest, that Jinx tries to reject the image he is fixed in by identifying with it *at a distance*. That is, he pretends to assume the image offered by the gaze as a kind of shield to protect himself. He neither submissively succumbs to the white gaze nor gives himself to be seized by it in a particular way, in relation to preexisting stereotypical images of black athletes, but, indeed, adopts an active role and assumes an agency, although a limited on. To use Silverman's phrasing, Oates's narrative demonstrates *a political imperative*[28], through Jinx's representation.

In the 1950s, when the segregation in team sports started slowly to diminish especially in the North, some white colleges and universities allowed blacks in their teams. In the context of the novel, Jinx plays in an interracial high school team. The college scouts and recruitment officers have noticed Jinx, and everyone expects him to be picked to some good college team, which would simultaneously offer him a possibility for a college education. His career, however, ends abruptly as he breaks his ankle on a basketball court. According to Creighton, Jinx seeks to avoid white peoples' expectations when he ends his basketball career.[29] Brenda Daly sees the accident as Jinx's "ritual of self-punishment" for killing Red Garlock.[30] Daly follows the same reasoning as Iris, who wants to see the accident as a deliberate act, because of her own feelings of guilt. Nevertheless, the accident has to do with Jinx's resistance; his way of repudiating the stereotypical role of a black athlete, which enforces the idea of African Americans as physically talented, but limits their role as a kind of circus performer or entertainer.[31]

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[27] Silverman 1996, 201.
[28] Silverman 1996, 206.
[29] Creighton 1992, 103.
[30] Daly 1996, 198.
[31] On the stereotype of the black athlete see, for example, Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 149; Hoberman 1997, 30–4.

Jinx's resentment and resistance to the stereotypical role of a black athlete starts evolving a few days before the accident as his brother, Sugar Baby, who has also played basketball, mocks him:

> All you is [sic], boy, is a performin' monkey for them, same as I was, and if you don't perform, you on your ass…and they turn their attention to the next monkey. You think they give a shit about *you*?" (BB 193)

Just before the game, Jinx's mind keeps returning to the image of himself as a performing monkey for white people, and he ponders if he should decide to stop "performing." Shortly after the accident, Jinx drops out of school.

Near the end of the novel, Jinx enlists as a private in the U.S. army, and he is shipped out to the Vietnam War. He is drawn to "the most tragic stereotype, that of GI in the futile Vietnam War," as Creighton puts it.[32] African Americans had served in America's previous wars, but the Vietnam War was the first war in which they fought in desegregated units. Moreover, they had, at least ostensibly, the same opportunities for military service as whites. In the early phases of Vietnam War, military service was seen as an opportunity, a chance for social and economic advancement. Thus, African Americans were enlisted in the forces twice as much as whites. The old myth of black inferiority was dismantled, although it was replaced by new stereotypes of African Americans. One of them was that of the "good soldier," who was dedicated to his duties and did not question the war.[33] Jinx's decision to join the army is partly an effort to escape his life, which he finds shameful.

Before leaving for Vietnam, Jinx visits Iris's uncle Lester Courtney, a photographer, to have his photograph taken in his dress uniform. He tells Lester he wanted "to give his mother a formal picture of himself as a birthday present" (BB 401). Jinx asks Lester to give a copy of it to Iris. As Iris sees Jinx in the photo, she is overwhelmed; she feels weak and her eyes sting with tears. His formal and stiff posture in the photo

[32] Creighton 1992, 103.
[33] Westheider 1997, 2, 8–10.

seem peculiar to her, so "unlike Jinx Fairchild" (BB 403). On the backside of the photo, Jinx has written a note: "Honey – Think I'll 'pass?" (ibid.). Silverman suggests that although a pose, through which the subject gives himself to be perceived in particular way, is generally assumed as something deliberate, the subject posing is only partly capable of control. To be exact, as Silverman explicates, the subject's agency in the pose is limited to *what is at a given moment culturally and representationally possible*.[34] Silverman's proposal is congruent with the representation of Jinx's photographic pose, which undoubtedly imitates preexisting photos of soldiers in their uniforms. His pose and his note behind the photograph express both his control over his image as well as his powerlessness within the cultural situation of the Jim Crow era. Firstly, his note can be read as an ironic remark on how he, as a black man, must fit himself into a certain role to be able to "pass" for white people. Ultimately, there are only a limited number of positions available for African American men under the white gaze. Secondly, his note signals his ability to become detached from the culturally accepted roles for black men.

Even to pass as an African American within the society dominated by white supremacy, Jinx has to play a certain part or role in order to be recognized, and through recognition, to belong to a certain social group, and to the nation. As Sara Ahmed perceptively states, *any identity* involves passing in some way: "It involves assuming an image that has no proper 'fit' with the structure of the subject."[35] What passing demonstrates, in Ahmed's view, is that subjects assume images that they cannot fully inhabit. Passing for something that one is not already assumed to be involves a structural difference that demonstrates how passing relies on certain history of identifications that constitutes the limits to the subject's mobility.[36]

Unlike Jinx, who demonstrates an ability to become distant from the image determined by the white gaze, Iris moves in the opposite direction. Iris and Jinx seek, as Ronald Curran puts it, "belonging and

[34] Silverman 1996, 203–4.
[35] Ahmed 2000, 126.
[36] Ahmed 2000, 127.

competence," which is partly fueled by "a feeling of familial and social abandonment."[37] Indeed, they share similar experiences and emotions. As David Jacobson reminds, the idea of nation-state has amalgamated the geographic, communal, and political dimensions of belonging that they seem indistinguishable.[38] In the context of *Because It is Bitter*, the characters need to belong implies, primarily, that they want to belong to a community. Moreover, the sense of belonging, an affectively comprehended perception, is for Iris and Jinx a significant determinant of identity; it entails a feeling of knowing who one is within certain conditions. Ultimately, the need to belong concerns the status of citizenship, and possessing the social rights granted by the citizenship. In the context of the novel, the status of citizenship is intertwined mainly with race, class, and gender. Iris is more determined in her quest for belonging inasmuch as she has the access to the idealized white image supported by the dominant cultural gaze. That is, she is capable of belonging to the community (of whites) that epitomizes American citizenship. Yet, her feeling of belonging has also to do with a sense of place. That is, as she moves from her hometown to Syracuse, to new and unfamiliar surroundings, her feeling of belonging diminishes, and she has to adjust to the new situation. Jinx wants equally to belong, but as an African American, belonging does not automatically bring him the same rights as for Iris. Although Jinx refuses to fulfill white people's expectations in order to belong, he cannot resist "Uncle Sam's call":

> Seems Jinx Fairchild is always seeing that damn billboard poster upside the East Avenue post office, Uncle Sam in his cartoon red-white-and-blue uniform pointing his crooked finger I WANT YOU, and Jinx knows it's bullshit but his eye is drawn to the giant poster and the pointing finger […] but I WANT YOU makes you think *somebody* wants you at least[.] (BB 349–50)

[37] Curran 1991, 709.
[38] Jacobson 2002, 3–4.

Serving his country expresses Jinx's wish to belong to something or more accurately, to be recognized as an American, to fully belong, and to be equally worthy of citizenship as white people. After all, this is the time of a new era for "the black man":

> Now's the time! John F. Kennedy opening the White House to Martin Luther King […], united with the black man to change the cruel face of the United States forever! In the Blue Moon Lounge Jinx Fairchild was acting the fool, carrying on: I got a dream too! I got a dream too! I got my rights and I got a dream too! (BB 351)

On the one hand, Jinx cannot resist his need to follow the dominant ideal of male citizenship and to identify with it. On the other hand, he feels that he has no other possibilities left; whatever he does it will not change his position in society:

> [W]hen he leaves the neighborhood, he isn't "Jinx Fairchild" in anyone's eyes but a black man, a man defined by his skin and by his facial features and by his voice and by the look in his eyes, how to be something other than what another sees, and seeing, defines, defines without knowing or caring in actual resistance to knowing and caring[.] (BB 358)

The viewpoint of Jinx is significant in the novel for two reasons. Firstly, if compared to Iris's viewpoint his experience adds to the representation of the meaning of visual field and racialization in the constitution of American identity. In particular, his character illuminates the racial inequality in relation to the regulated frames of identity constitution in the Jim Crow era. Secondly, his view emphasizes the power relations involved in the gaze and the possibility of resistance, even though a limited one.

Whiteness as Unattainable

The novel contests the truth of vision by drawing attention to the relation between seeing and knowing. As Iris matures, she starts questioning the

way she has learned to see things. The narration refers to some kind of transformation in her way of seeing. This happens as she is still living in Hammond, and attending to high school. Once, as she is waiting to meet Jinx in a restaurant, she starts questioning her way of looking at things:

> […] Iris wonders can you always trust your eyes; the process of vision is a sort of photographic process, and photography always lies…the one clear truth Lesley Courtney has taught her. *No visual truth, only inventions. No "eye of the camera," only human eyes.* Here, in this place Iris has come perhaps wrongly to trust, it seems that the edges of things are too sharp, too emphatic. (BB 236)

The metaphor of the camera emerges frequently in the narration. In the above excerpt, Iris's experience of "vision as a photographic process" refers to the culturally specific level, apart from vision's reference to apparent truth. She becomes aware of the fact that the meaning of vision is produced within the dynamics of social power and ideology. Nevertheless, she continues to "trust" her eyes as a way of telling people visually apart. This is because she cannot fully separate herself from the meanings that rely on the cultural and historical context and her lived knowledge of those circumstances.

After moving to Syracuse to start her university studies, Iris begins to erase her painful past. The most painful event has been her mother's slow decline as an alcoholic. As she becomes acquainted with the Savage family, she is painfully aware and embarrassed by her working class past, and works hard to keep this from Savages. According to Daly, Iris lies about her past "in order to become part of what she deems a 'good' family."[39] Indeed, Iris wants to be accepted by the Savages, and hence to feel part of a community created by this family. Like Jinx, who cannot resist the idea of joining the army in order to belong, Iris never turns down an invitation from the Savages.

Mrs. Savage starts to invite Iris frequently to her home for family dinners, and Iris accepts her invitations with gratitude. At the same time,

[39] Daly 1996, 195.

she is puzzled why she is doing it. She is not comfortable with these people, who seem not to be aware of their privileged position.

> Iris perceives too that her friends' very magnanimity is granted them by means of an infrastructure that surrounds and protects them yet remains unexamined as the air they breathe: their inherited wealth, their social position, the color of their skin. The Savages' great good fortune is an accident of history they seem to assume is not accidental but natural… their God-given birthright. (BB 312)

Their inability to see their privileged position granted by race and class is connected to the "nothing-in-particular" quality of whiteness. As Dyer argues, this is exactly why the hegemony of whiteness is maintained: "white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular."[40] First, Iris feels she functions as a kind of mirror for the Savages: "*What am I but a sort of mirror or reflector for them, beaming back their happiness to them? Magnifying their happiness to them. And do I mind?*" (BB 321). Quite soon, however, she starts to mimic the manners of the Savages, especially those of Mrs. Savage. In the process of developing and constructing a new self as an upper class white woman Iris learns to deploy the common perceptions of how body is understood to carry visible signs on its surface. She starts to perform her new identity through her bodily appearance under the eyes of the Savages. Mrs. Savage plays an important role here; if Iris is approved in her eyes, she feels she has succeeded.

According to Daly, "Iris's camera-like capacity for observation" helps her to regulate her emotions and modify "her behavior in order to appear 'normal'."[41] I agree with Daly, but I would specify that Iris's endeavor to appear "normal" is connected to normed whiteness, which entails certain requisites of class and gender. Iris has learned from her uncle Lester some things about the nature of images. For example, Lester has once remarked:

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[40] Dyer 1993, 141.
[41] Daly 1996, 200.

> [T]hat he never took self-portraits as so many photographers did […] because he was always embodied in the photograph he took of other people …even of landscapes, whatever. You couldn't see him, but he was there. An absence, he said, but there. (BB 57)

Iris has to work hard to attain a norm-like whiteness; she gains it by adapting a position of camera-like observer, who seemingly controls how things are seen. As the photographer who "stays absent but still there," she tries to reach the invisibility offered by a white racial, upper-class position.

For Iris, the status of whiteness has at its core the idea of the subject's position of mastery over its visual field. The photographic action associates itself also with the Foucaultian idea of surveillance, a discourse of mastering and regulating the subject. Iris seems to think that she controls her feelings and the image of herself, but the narration implies that this kind of total control is not possible. For example, at the Thanksgiving dinner Iris does her best to control herself. The dinner ends up embarrassingly for her, as she suddenly has to hurry from the table to the bathroom to vomit. She has just told the guests how her mother's death was "peaceful." Iris feels guilty not only for lying, but for denying her past.

Just before the end of the novel, shortly after Iris has heard the news about President Kennedy's assassination, she wanders in a black neighborhood. She finds her own tears hypocritical since President Kennedy's death really "does not have anything to do with her" (BB 370). Why she escapes to a black neighborhood remains vague. Creighton proposes, that Iris is seeking a connection to "the black Other world" and especially to Jinx, about whom she feels so guilty.[42] In my view, guilt is not necessarily the dominant motive. Instead, it is the feeling of dislocation within the white culture that draws Iris to the black neighborhood.

When Iris hears the news, she sits in American literature class at the University. The campus and the inner city is a space occupied by

[42] Creighton 1992, 102.

white people. In the "amid sea of Caucasians" Iris sees only a few black faces, all workers among white students and professors. She stands there with all the other (white) students just in the same way as she was, the other night, "with the Savages and their relatives" (BB 370). Her only hope is that the sniper who killed Kennedy "will not turn out to be black" (BB 370). She imagines how Mrs. Savage will be grieving for Kennedy. Next, she runs to Dr. Savage's office in order to speak with him. Nevertheless, the office door is shut, and she feels she has nowhere to go. At this point, Iris feels dislocated among privileged white people. Again, she starts to think of Jinx. She feels tired and light-headed, and her vision starts to blur:

> Everything has begun to turn soft, to blur, time too has become soft; you blink to bring your vision into focus but this *is* focus, this *is* world…not evil but madness. Objects, and we among them, objects in other's eyes, losing their shapes, definitions, names: the boundaries separating them gone, their very skins torn off or peeled deliberately away as in that deathly painting at which Iris Courtney stared for a very long time one day in Dr. Savage's library[.] (BB 378)

Again, Iris's blurring vision refers to her awareness of the way vision is shaped by different discourses of knowledge. This could indicate that she is gaining a new awareness and understanding. Daly argues that Iris's vision is transformed already after witnessing Red Garlock's death, and she is able to see in more complex terms, "beyond simple (binary) terms of black and white."[43] I agree with Daly, although I would emphasize that Iris's ability is still somewhat limited: even though she becomes aware of racial inequality, she is still not able to move beyond thinking through racial differences in the social and cultural situation she is living. This is proven by her feelings of guilt and shame, which emerge whenever she starts thinking of Jinx. Her feelings are partly the reason why she cannot let go of Jinx, why her obsession with him continues.

[43] Daly 1996, 200.

When Iris walks back home from the black neighborhood, some black men beat her up. The incident is described in the narration in flashback. Iris is in the hospital emergency room, and she cannot explain to the police or the doctor why she was walking alone at night in a black neighborhood. Iris claims that she did not see the face of her attackers, but admits that they were black (BB 381). What has happened is that a group of drunken young black men has driven by, as Iris wanders in an empty street. One of the boys asks if Iris is looking for a ride. As Iris murmurs no thanks and turns to walk in the opposite direction, the men stop the car, block her way, and drag her into the car. Iris panics, starts kicking and screaming (BB 382). What exactly happens after this is not revealed at this point. The above-mentioned description ends the third part, after which follows the epilogue. In the epilogue, it is revealed that the assault was not rape, although it was partly "sexual" as the black men approached her by offering her a ride (BB 392).

In commenting on the novel, Oates says that Iris needs to "exorcise" her "attraction to, yearning for black people." Racial discrimination, she says, is a "mutual loss," and Iris experiences the "gravitational pull" between the races deeply.[44] Indeed, as Oates implies, after the beating, Iris seems to come in terms with her obsession with black people, at least to some extent. That is, she is no longer drawn to black people, but instead, avoids any encounter with black people out of fear: "A lifetime of flinching when she sees black skin" (BB 393). She decides to marry Alan Savage. Her decision has to do with her desire to belong to the family and to feel safe, but also to leave her past behind for good. She also sweeps away all her memories about Jinx, because he reminds her of her past life, which includes guilt and shame. Whether she is able to do this remains uncertain. In the morning of her wedding day, she hears the echoes of the black men's words attacking inside her head: "*White cunt. We know you*." (BB 404). Again, Iris thinks she can have a total control over her mind and feelings, which is, as we have seen, not possible.

[44] Quoted in Creighton 1992, 102.

Despite her feeling of dislocation within the normed whiteness, Iris chooses to "play the part" of her new social status, which she will be granted as the wife of Savages' son, Alan. She is feeling safe because the Savages, a close family circle, accept her. She keeps convincing herself that she is "finally happy" after losing her own family. Moreover, as Daly suggests, she does not marry Alan because she loves him, but because she loves his mother, Mrs. Savage.[45] Nevertheless, Iris's desire to be part of the Savage family is also a yearning for whiteness and its privilege, a kind of whiteness that erases her lower class past. This is an endless desire; as Dyer proposes: "[O]ne can never be white enough. Whiteness, really white whiteness, is unattainable."[46] For Iris, already her gender and class cause ambivalence in relation to power and whiteness, not to mention the unattainable nature of whiteness. She keeps over-valuing whiteness even though she learns to see the social hierarchy in terms that are more complex.

The process of adjusting to her new role does not come without difficulty. This is suggested by the metaphor of Iris's white wedding dress, which used to belong to Mrs. Savage's mother. The dress has to be altered for Iris several times because she keeps losing weight. As Iris looks in the mirror she sees only her white bride's costume, not herself, and experiences a feeling of pleasure:"[S]ilken luminous white, dazzling white; her heart lifts with anxious pleasure" (BB 405). Her pleasure is connected to the idea that she has accessed a flattering corporeal image of an upper class white woman. As she looks at her mirrored reflection, she asks Mrs. Savage and the seamstress: "*Do* you think I'll look the part?" (BB 405). Creighton sees Iris' decision to marry Alan Savage as a tragedy of estrangement and interprets that Iris "questions her ability to play the role she has chosen for herself."[47] As Cologne-Brookes interprets, her words echo Jinx's words written on the backside of the photograph.[48] The question hints ironically at her struggle towards the image of herself as a

[45] Daly 1996, 182.
[46] Dyer 1997, 78.
[47] Creighton 1992, 103.
[48] Cologne-Brookes 2005, 172.

white upper-class woman. In the same way as in Jinx's case, her striving for this image is also a struggle to accord with a normed identity in a particular time and place.

I agree with Daly that *Because It Is Bitter* can be interpreted as an act of resistance against the privileges of class, gender, and race.[49] Moreover, I also agree with Cologne-Brookes, who reads the novel and its characters as recapitulating the tragedy of America's vision of itself at that time, and in racial terms.[50] The novel renders whiteness visible in ironic and critical ways, but most of all, it epitomizes the intersection of class, race, and gender, and thus manifests the complexity of white femininity. The protagonist, Iris Courtney, is constituted as a subject that is complexly embedded in socioeconomic, socio-cultural, and psychic interrelations. As any racial category, also whiteness proves to be a changing category, which can be re-invented and reproduced.

The novel treats the question about "passing" with irony. Iris and Jinx mirror each other in like manner as Irene and Clare, two mixed-race mulatta characters in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), which complicates the problematic of racial identity by displaying the intricate relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality in the formation of identity. Like Iris and Jinx, the liminal female characters have taken different paths of life. Clare is passing for white and marries a white man while Irene, also light-skinned enough to be able to pass as white woman, marries a wealthy black doctor. In *Because it is Bitter*, Iris's and Jinx's urge to pass as members of their own particular racialized, classed, and gendered American community, and to belong to the nation, is as an anxious and contradictory process, especially in Iris's case. Jinx is more aware of the limited variety of images there are for him to "pass." The surrounding society and its various discursive practices regulate all the images, for both Iris and Jinx. Neither of the characters is outside the necessity to pass in order to belong. If we compare Iris and Jinx and their "social posing" with each other, it becomes clear that their position and relation to the history of identifications within the U.S. is not parallel. They are similar

[49] Daly 1996, 197.
[50] Cologne-Brookes 2005, 173.

in that their positions are both limited by what is possible to a subject in a particular time and place. Primarily, the limits have to do with race and gender, two social differences that are most dependent on a visual articulation.

Although the truth-value of the camera image has been contested, we are still inclined to perceive the photograph as an unmediated copy of the real world. In *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* Oates deploys the metaphor of the gaze as a photographic action, and reflects the myth of photographic truth in questioning the dialectics between truth and appearance in negotiating social relationships. Focusing on the fears of both the white woman and the black man, her novel represents various sides of the visual field, and complicates the notion of the gaze. It illustrates how the ways of seeing the other are affected by the ideological condition of visibility. Oates's strategy is to depict identity struggles in relation to different classifications of identity, and the way the viewing position appropriates certain racial formations of the visual field. In understanding how the dominant visual order constructs identities and realizing that all images have an ideological intent makes space for the possibility of taking a conscious distance from the dominant images. The representation of different experiences of the gaze and changes of perspective function in Oates's novel as narrative devices in demonstrating how race – as well as gender and class – and its cultural boundaries are constantly negotiated as the characters engage the forces and discourses that shape them.

CHAPTER 4
POOR WHITE WOMEN

According to Harold Bloom, Oates identifies in particular with the American lower classes.[1] Indeed, Oates represents lower class characters in her fiction both in rural and urban surroundings throughout her career, and especially in her early fiction. Since the beginning of the 1970s, however, she has portrayed characters representing an array of different social classes and positions. According to Asta Balšiūnaitė, Oates has distanced herself from the representation of lower classes and shifted her attention increasingly to the American middle class over the last two decades. [2] In my view, Oates has continued the depiction of underprivileged and lower class characters, as her recent novel *The Gravedigger's Daughter* exemplifies, but her representations of lower class Americans have gained new nuances and reflect the topical discussions about whiteness and white identities in the United States.

Several of Oates's early story collections and novels, such as *By the North Gate* (1963), *Upon the Sweeping Flood* (1966), *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967), and *Wonderland* (1971), portray poor white characters and families, whose lives are deeply affected by the Great Depression. The early novels follow, partly, the American realistic and naturalistic literary conventions of representing poor whites initiated by Stephen Crane and Theodore Dreiser, and developed into depictions that are more symbolic by John Steinbeck. For example, the Walpole family in Oates's second novel, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (2007), has left their home farm in Kentucky due to economic pressures. The family travels searching for work quite like the Joads in John Steinbeck's award-winning and

[1] Bloom 1987, 2.
[2] Balšiūnaitė 2009, 3.

immensely popular novel *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939).[3] The Joads exemplify the so-called "Dust Bowl migrant workers" from Oklahoma, which, along with other southern regions (Kansas, Texas, New Mexico, Colorado), was drought-stricken in the 1930s. Millions of people migrated from the drought areas to the west, mainly to California.

Oates's early prose differs from "pure" realism in that it aims, as G.F. Waller argues, to reach the subjectivity and inner motives of the portrayed characters instead of a simple comprehensive description of the events and reality.[4] In other words, Oates's early fiction already epitomizes a manner of psychological realism that is distinctive of her fiction in general. For example, *A Garden of Earthly Delights* concentrates more on the development of individual characters than on the social phenomena of migrant workers in the age of depression in general. The attention shifts from the Walpole family to Carleton Walpole's daughter, Clara, already in the first part of the novel. At the age of fourteen, she runs away from her family, and starts her life anew. Clara's portrayal eludes the stereotypes of poor white women, because she is not represented as a victim, and because the novel makes understandable the choices, she is forced to make. Without education and sufficient income, Clara is dependent of men throughout her life. Yet, she works actively to find her ways to survive. Thus, the novel can also be seen as following the path laid by Harriette Arnow's best-seller novel *The Dollmaker* (1954) that transcended the negative images of rural poor people.[5] Arnow's novel depicts a migrant family focusing on the strong female character, Gertie Nevels, and her struggle to take care of her family as they move from rural Kentucky to urban Detroit. In contrast to Arnow, Oates does not focus as straightforwardly on strong female characters in her early fiction, as Arnow does.

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[3] A great part of the success of the novel was that it represented a current social phenomenon in the 1930s: the predicament of the white, American underprivileged during the Great Depression. Steinbeck made efforts to meet the migrant families in their camps to learn their stories. Before writing his novel, he also wrote several newspaper articles about the migrants. See Reef 2004, 1–6.

[4] Waller 1979, 104.

[5] Oates herself finds *The Dollmaker* impressive, and profiles it as a novel that "has a permanent effect upon the reader." See Oates 2005a, 59.

Whereas Oates's early representations of underprivileged white people focus on the depicted characters' lives from their point of view and reach for their lived experience, in the 1990s, her poor white characters are often portrayed from the outside, how other people see them. For example, her novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* represents a poor white family, the Garlocks, only from the perspective of their neighbors. Consequently, the Garlocks are for the most part seen as a stereotypical representative of a poor white family. Some of the stories in *Heat and Other Stories*, first published in 1991, complement the representation of the Garlocks by considering more transparently the contradictory and problematic relations between whiteness and privilege within contemporary American society.

In the following, I will continue my analysis of the novel *Because It Is Bitter* focusing now on the representation of the Garlocks. In particular, I will examine how they are seen from the viewpoint of two female characters, Persia and Minnie, Iris's and Jinx's mothers. As I have already acknowledged in the previous chapter, the novel illustrates how differences of race, gender, and class matter in the subject's identity constitution. A closer analytical focus on class reveals further, how class and its intersections with other differences operate at the level of the characters' everyday lives. In the latter half of the chapter, I will examine the representation of poor white women in two short stories in *Heat*. The selected stories, "Death Valley" and "White Trash," offer a representation of urban poor white women living in the contemporary era, and put forward a slightly different view to the poor white women if compared to the Garlocks. The stories prove the variety of angles Oates's recent fiction brings not only to the representation of poor white women but also to the subject of white identity, and to the relations between whiteness, power, and privilege.

As the pejorative names for poor whites, such as "white trash" and "hillbilly", first came to use they referred to people, who have rural origins, and who live in the Southern states.[6] Hillbillies and white trash have not merely been defined by their geographical origin or material poverty, but also by their way of life, codes of behavior and propensity to transgress and resist cultural norms and modernity.[7] In Oates's fiction, poor white characters referred to as "white trash" or "hillbillies" are not necessarily of rural or Southern origin, which manifests how the use of terms have changed and become widespread. The Garlocks in *Because it is Bitter* have roots in the South: they have moved to Hammond (NY) from West Virginia in the early 1940s. They appear dislocated in Hammond, especially as they violate the codes of behavior and implicit rules of the neighborhood community. Other people consider them as being "out of place," because of their deviant behavior, attitude, and appearance. For example, Little Red Garlock is said to enjoy behaving badly and transgressing rules just enough not to get in trouble with the police. He trespasses in backyards and breaks things out of "malicious pleasure" (BB 107). Once he even "pushed his way into a woman's house, saying he wanted to use her bathroom, and urinated on her kitchen floor" (BB 108). Other members of the large Garlock family also behave in ways that are disapproved by their neighbors.

[6] On the origins of the term 'white trash' in the 19th century, see Newitz & Wray 1997b, 2; Wray 2006, 42–3. The term 'Hillbilly' refers to a more specific group of people from the rural southern mountain area of Appalachia and the Ozarks. See Harkins 2004, 5; Mason 2005, 41.

[7] According to Carol Mason, the Appalachian hillbillies have been portrayed since the 18th century as transgressors of middle class gender roles and sexual boundaries. Mason 2005, 42. In addition, the hillbilly and white trash imagery has served a purpose of reflecting a rural, romanticized past with noble heroism and primitive deviance of pre-modern, uncivilized society. As such, they have provided a counterpoint to the progressive, industrial, and urbanizing United States. See Cameron 2002, 412; Algeo 2003, 32; Harkins 2004, 6–7; Mason 2005, 43; Wray 2006, 50.

The Garlock family is outlined in the beginning of the story as Little Red's corpse is found in the Cassadaga River. Two members of the family have come to identify the dead body. The narrator underlines that these two are *not* the boys' parents, Mrs. and Mr. Garlock:

> Not Little Red's mother, who is known to be sickly and erratic in her behavior – "not right in the head"' – and not Little Red's father, who isn't living with the family in Gowanda Street though he is known to be in Hammond somewhere. (BB 7)

In the above excerpt, the narrator, whose point of view represents the neighborhood's opinion, refers to the gossip around the Garlocks, and indicates that the family is out of the ordinary. The narrator gives further details of the family using stereotypes and attributes commonly attached to poor white families: they are violent, alcoholics and excessively reproductive.[8] The Garlocks are said to be "that kind of family" (BB 7). They are originally from the South and have lots of children and relatives "spilling over into two or three rented places" (BB 7).

The neighborhood men, who have gathered by the river to watch the police officers to drag the corpse out of the water, obviously disapprove of the Garlocks although they avoid calling the family "white trash":

> Haugen, Lukacs, McDermott…they all know Vernon Garlock, he's the kind of guy you shake your head over, a hard drinker, hot-tempered, always in some sort of trouble…and his kids, his older boys especially, everyone knows what they're like. ("White trash," some Hammond residents might say, but not these: these are neighborhood people whose judgments are more subtly calibrated.) (BB 8)

[8] The stereotypes of poor white people evolved after the Civil War. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, mainly fiction writers, magazine writers, social workers, and academics created the stereotypical images of poor whites. Many of the current stereotypes can be traced to the Eugenic Family Studies produced from the 1880s to the 1930s. See Newitz & Wray 1997a, 2; Wray 2006, 65.

Although Vernon Garlock most likely lives up to his reputation, the above excerpt discloses that his neighbors disapprove of him and the rest of the family. Everyone seems to know what "they" are like. The men have clearly produced a community of "us" by differentiating and excluding "them" from us. The fact that they would not call the Garlocks "white trash" underlines their own classed position: the use of decent language is conceived as an indication of a better social position in the neighborhood. The narration draws attention to how the neighbors speak about the Garlocks, which discloses their attitude towards the Garlocks. A reader, who recognizes the Garlocks as a (stereo)typical white trash family, may first identify with the viewpoint of the neighborhood people. Nevertheless, as the narration develops the portrayal of the working class characters, the reader is also called in to challenge and diverge from the general attitudes towards poor whites.

Class and Respectability

Beverley Skeggs argues in her book *Formations of Class and Gender* that class divisions are often made on the basis of respectability. According to Skeggs, in the historical production of class, respectability has been central especially to the notions of femininity and nationess.[9] As a class signifier, respectability informs, for example, "how we speak, who we speak to, how we classify others."[10] Similarly, in the context of Oates's novel, respectability concerns especially working class people to whom the above-mentioned "neighborhood people" fall into. They make every effort to appear as middle class, and perceive themselves as middle class rather than working class. As Rita Felski observes, scholars often tend to oppose middle class and working class in ways that pay no attention to various class fractions. Felski takes the lower middle class as an example of contradictory positioning that falls out of this opposition. As Felski puts it,

[9] Skeggs 1997, 2–3. Skeggs follows here several other studies that have showed respectability as a central class signifier.
[10] Skeggs 1997, 1

the lower middle class sees itself as "culturally superior to working class," at the same time as they lack "the cultural capital and the earning power of the professional-managerial class."[11]

Felski takes as an example Hanif Kureishi's novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which is situated in Britain. Felski sees the narrator Karim Amir's family as representing the lower middle class, who worry about their status and respectability.[12] I find Felski's observations about class fractions noteworthy also in the context of Oates's fictive world of Hammond, although her novel takes place in a different era and country. What both novels have in common is that they represent a class society.[13] A close reading of the working class families in *Because It Is Bitter* reveals fractions and divisions. Quite like Karim's family, the neighborhood people in Oates's novel are worried about their social standing, which is manifested, for example, in their persistent need to classify people to respectable and unrespectable. The classification of the Garlocks by the neighborhood men is informed by respectability based on moral judgment. Vernor Garlock is said to be a person "you shake your head over," which functions as a gesture of disapproval. Respectability is even more important to the working class white women. In my view, this is apparent especially in the representation of Persia Courtney.

Persia Courtney is introduced to the reader through a description of her encounter with Vesta, Vernon Garlock's wife. Vesta steps in her way in the street, and asks for her help. Persia stares at Vesta, and pays attention to her soiled clothes and manner of speaking: "Her voice is a low hoarse scraping sound like steel wool scouring of pan, but Persia can recognize the accent: hillbilly" (BB 13–14). Persia uses the term 'hillbilly', which is in Hammond considered a more neutral word than 'white trash'. When Ms. Garlock tells her someone, "a nigra," is following her, Persia

[11] Felski 2000, 35.

[12] Felski 2000, 37. In Kureishi's novel, Arims's father is also an Indian immigrant, which further complicates the social position of the family members.

[13] Overall, Britain and America have generally similar economic history and class structures. For more on this, see Devine 1997. As Devine shows in her comparative study, there are also differences between the two countries, such as the size of the different classes or the rates of social mobility.

pretends she does not understand. She wants to make a point that such a vulgar word, as 'nigra' does not belong to her vocabulary. Besides, she wants to get rid of Vesta:

> Persia speaks sharply, impatiently; she isn't the kind of person to suffer fools gladly. Nor is she the kind of person who feels much sympathy for crazy folk like Vernon Garlock's wife, whose people shouldn't let her wander around loose; Persia thinks maybe these crazy folk bring it all to themselves, their hard luck, even the way they look, blotched skin and missing teeth. (BB 14)

The above passage reveals, as Persia refers to Vesta as "crazy folk," how she sees Vesta as belonging to a fixed group of poor whites, who are solely responsible for their poverty and misfortunes, an often-made claim about poor whites.

According to Skeggs, a bodily disposition functions as a signifier of class.[14] That is, the relations of class, gender, race, and sexuality are epitomized through bodies. In the case of women, the embodiment of these relations involves an enormous amount of regulation that reverberates to women's worries about how they are seen and how they want to be seen.[15] The idea of the regulation and significance of bodily appearance as a signifier of class becomes apparent in *Because It Is Bitter*, which depicts how the social hierarchy is constructed in everyday life, in the interplay between characters. For example, the narration reiterates how Vesta's appearance disturbs Persia. For her, the idea that a man would look with lust upon Vesta would "be comical if it wasn't so sad" (BB 15). Her judgments on Vesta indicate her fixation on an idea of a respectable white woman's body, which is affiliated not only to class but also to whiteness, femininity, and heterosexuality. That is, for Persia, Vesta's appearance transgresses the norms of a white middle class woman.

[14] Skeggs 1997, 82. Skeggs applies Pierre Bourdieu's idea about the significance of bodily appearances to class distinctions. As Bourdieu exemplifies, class distinctions are inscribed into gestures and ways of walking, talking, and eating. Bourdieu 1984, 466.
[15] Skeggs 1997, 82–3.

Vesta's transgressing of norms is to be seen as neither empowering nor intended. Her appearance and odd behavior seems to be explained, at least from Persia's view, by her madness, which is based on a stereotype of hillbillies as genetically degenerated.[16] As Persia's daughter Iris meets years later a female relative of Vesta, Edith, we learn that Vesta may not be mad after all. Iris is visiting Persia, who is hospitalized because of her alcoholism. According to Edith, Vesta is "all improved now":

> "[…] Vesta's all improved now…she went back home to West Virginia that she never wanted to leave…poor woman was just so unhappy here. And I don't blame her none, the nasty weather we got to put up with, and" – casting a covert glance at the nurse-receptionist close by – "the kinds of people you run into that give a damn if you live or die once they get the word on you ain't *rich*[.]" (BB 229)

Edith's words overthrow Persia's earlier opinion about Vesta, and suggest that the reason for her odd behavior was in her unhappiness caused by feelings of dislocation and social discrimination. Ironically, it is Persia, who is now lying in the hospitable in a pitiful condition. Persia's denigrating attitude towards Mrs. Garlock becomes more comprehensible, however, if we take into consideration her own ambivalent social position.

Crossroads of Social Privilege

Persia's viewpoint reveals how Vesta and the rest of the Garlock family functions as a social other to her. Her need to see Vesta as other derives from her own ambivalent position within whiteness. As Anthony Harkins brings out, the images and naming of poor whites have bolstered up not only the self-esteem of middle- and upper class whites, but also that of

[16] The origins of the stereotype date back to the late 19th and early 20th century, when researchers representing Eugenic Family Studies tried to prove scientifically that rural poor white families were genetically degenerated. On the American Eugenic Studies, see Rafter 1988; English 2004; Wray 2006, 65–95.

working class whites.[17] In the same vein, John Hartigan suggests that white trash exists particularly "in the fears and fantasies of those American middle class and working-class whites who occupy a place 'just above' the class divide from poor whites."[18] This is apparent also in the narration of Oates's novel. The Garlocks exist, indeed, as an appalling archetype of poor whites especially in the minds of white working class families, who strive to be middle class.

The Courtneys are always short of money, because Persia's husband, Duke Courtney, is always between jobs, and wastes his money in racetracks. Persia has to struggle to maintain an image of herself as a middle class white woman. In view of this, her well-groomed appearance is suitably underpinned as she stands next to Vesta, conscious of people staring at them:

> Staring at Vesta Garlock, and staring at *her*. Persia Courtney with her gorgeous red-blond hair, "strawberry" blond as it's called, her black and white polka-dot silk dress, her spike-heeled black patent leather pumps…the pretty outfit she wears in her position (Persia does not refer to it as a "job") as hostess at Lambert's Tea Room downtown. Persia Courtney, wife of Duke Courtney, and the hillbilly Garlock woman, who is ranting in her ear about nigras[.] (BB 15)

The above excerpt indicates, the comparison between the two women underlines, in particular, Persia's femininity. A certain ideal of femininity, which included the idea of what a lady looks like, was established by the end of the nineteenth century as a given to white middle class women to which working class black and white women were coded as the deviant other. Middle class women could use their "femininity" in order to create and maintain distinctions between themselves and others. Their display of femininity and status through appearance was a means to judge those who lack the right kind of femininity.[19] The comparison between Persia and Vesta works for Persia in the same way, to create a distance between

[17] Harkins 2004, 6.
[18] Hartigan 1997, 50.
[19] Skeggs 1996, 99.

herself and Vesta. It proves to Persia that she is the total opposite of Vesta: good-looking and composed in her demeanor. Vesta, in turn, embarrasses Persia with her unpredictable behavior and slovenly appearance. Persia imagines how she will tell about the incident to her husband and how they will laugh about it together (BB 19). This further props her endeavor to keep a distance between herself, the subject who knows, and Vesta, the object of knowledge.

Minnie Fairchild, Jinx's mother, also demonizes the Garlocks. Minnie does not hesitate to call them "trash" and "worthless peckerhead hillbillies" (BB 136). Unlike Persia, she is not worried about falling down in the social hierarchy, while, as an African American woman in the age of segregation, she is already positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy. On the other hand, the Fairchilds are doing rather well on this scale: Minnie has a steady employment with a white doctor, Dr. O'Shaughnessy, and although her husband is unemployed, they own their little bungalow house. Minnie does not want to "judge white folks," at least not her upper class employer (BB 133). The Garlock family, in turn, represents to her all the bad sides of white people:

> "*Garlock!* Everybody knows what *Garlock* means in this town! Just trash! Dirt! Lowest of the low! It's enough to make you sick to your stomach, all the fuss in the newspaper, the police asking questions! Hadn't better ask *me* any questions, I'd tell 'em some answers! Those hillbilly trash beating' and killin' their own wives and children…worst kind of white folks exceptin' actual Nazis. And if it'd been a Negro boy instead, nobody'd give a good goddam!" (BB 136)

Minnie's irritation is evoked by the attention given to Red Garlock's death in the local newspaper. It reminds her of the inequality between white and black people. Indeed, if the victim had been a black boy, there would not have been a police investigation in the first place.

The attitudes of African Americans towards poor white people in the Jim Crow era were largely resentful. This is recalled in many scholarly and non-fiction texts. bell hooks, for example, cites Constance Penly, who comments that "to most respectable black people, poor whites and white

trash were the lowest of the low."[20] According to hooks, the relations between poor white people and black people were filled with "bitter conflict" because of the power and privilege given to any white person.[21] hooks' evocation of the black-white relations refers to the Southern Jim Crow era, but it pertains also in Oates's fictional north. For Minnie, the Garlocks are, indeed, "the lowest of the lowest," and her resentment towards them stems similarly from the privileges given to white people in general. Although the Garlocks lack many privileges that whiteness bestows, especially if compared to other white characters, they benefit from being white. For example, the spatial segregation in the neighborhood reminds Minnie of their white privilege. Even though the Fairchilds live in the same "poor section" of Hammond with the Garlocks, they would not be allowed to rent from the "white folks lily-white block," where the Garlocks' decaying house is located (BB 139).

Minnie also states that the Garlocks are almost as bad as "actual Nazis" (BB 136), referring to their racist attitudes. For her, the Garlocks function as scapegoats for the prevalent racism. The Fairchilds are painfully aware of being discriminated because of racism. For example, the father, Woodrow Fairchild, is fired from his job as a janitor, because a little white girl has bad dreams about him. The Garlocks are, indeed, virulently racist, and carry out the stereotype of poor white people as racists. For example, Vesta sees black people as bestial and devilish, and has an absurd fear of black people. Her son, Little Red Garlock, shouts insults at Jinx, such as "Big juicy-black nigger cock!" (BB 113). His words echo the old racial myth about black men as overtly sexual. Quite like in "The Molesters," the embedded reference to the myth of black man as a sexual threat epitomizes white anxiety. Because of Little Red's recurring insults, Jinx sees automatically all poor white people, even a three-year-old little boy he sees playing near the Garlock house, as racists. He

[20] hooks 2000, 112; Penly 1997, 90.

[21] hooks 2000, 111. The ambivalent and frictional relationship between poor whites and African Americans dates back to the Antebellum South. See Craven 1930; Roediger 1999 (1991), 56–60, 65, 86; Hurston 1979, 158; Lockley 1997, 59.

reasons that while "hillbillies hate Negroes so their children must hate them too" (BB 140).

The narration draws attention to different standpoints and grounds for racism in the echelons of the segregated class structure. For example, Vesta explains to Persia how she is not used to black people:

> "Down home we don't hardly have them at all," Mrs. Garlock says excitedly, "or if we do, they keep to themselves. You can go miles and miles, I swear, all the way across the state…never see a nigra face. *Not a one*." (BB 15)

This suggests that the reason behind her racism is the lack of knowledge and experience. Persia responds to Vesta's above-mentioned explanation by praising a famous blues and jazz singer, Billy Eckstine[22]: "'Me, I'm crazy for Billy Eckstine. I'd drive across the state, to hear *him* sing." (BB 15). Here, Persia's pretended appreciative attitude is put in contrast to Vesta's open racism. Yet, although African Americans' musical talents fascinate Persia, she sees herself categorically as more civilized and superior to black people, as the narration recurrently reminds.

In the age of segregation, the role of black entertainers was to serve the white audience and feed their fantasies.[23] For Persia, black male musicians serve, indeed, as the object of her fantasies that are related to the representation of her white self. After leaving her husband, Persia has a younger, brown-skinned lover, Virgil Starling, a jazz clarinetist. When married to Duke, she is constantly worried about her respectability as a white woman. After leaving Duke, she nevertheless enjoys the negative attention her new lover provokes in the all-white neighborhood. Referring to Virgil's light brown skin color, she confirms how she needs him to reinforce her status as white: "'There's some men don't need to be pure *black* to make a woman feel pure *white*,' Persia Courtney has said" (BB 152). After divorce, her social status falters as she becomes a single parent, and moves to a shabbier neighborhood. In this situation, Virgil

[22] Billy Eckstine was one of the first African American singers to have a mainstream success. On Eckstine's career, see DeVeaux 1997, 318–63.
[23] Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 141.

consolidates her racial status in the same manner as Vesta bolstered up her femininity and class.

The representation of the Garlocks is stereotypical, and each of them is somewhat a fetishized object, especially Ms. Garlock, who is described as a peculiar and unappealing woman. In general, the Garlocks function in the fictive Hammond as social other to which especially the working class inhabitants project their fears and anxieties. Depending on the viewpoint, the Garlocks are seen both within and outside whiteness. Yet, their position in the social order seems fixed, and they do not have social mobility in the same way as, for example, Iris and Persia Courtney do. Whereas Persia and Iris manifest the possibilities of mobility within whiteness, the Garlocks demonstrate the tenacity of class distinctions. The representation of the Fairchild family, in turn, brings out how the idea of race sets limits to the social mobility. All the characters, regardless of their classed or racialized status, seem to need social others to the constitution and processing of their identity. In so doing, the novel draws attention to the social hierarchy as a complexly intertwined system that incurs and maintains social inequality.

URBAN WHITE TRASH IN *HEAT AND OTHER STORIES*

Some of the stories of *Heat and Other* represent poor white female characters that seem much more self-reflective and conscious of their classed position than Vesta. The major difference to Vesta is that they are young and urban, and live in a different era. In Oates's stories, in general, rural life is more restricting to poor people, regardless of the period, whereas the urban poor women of the present-day era give the impression that they do what they want. The second part of *Heat and Other Stories* includes a string of stories, which represent working class and lower class characters of different ages in rural and urban surroundings.[24] The stories are not placed in the past, but in a non-specific moment in the present.

[24] Oates often divides her story collections into three parts each of which may focus on stories representing characters of a specific social class.

The stories I am about to examine, introduce two young, white female characters, Linda and Melanie, who represent urban white trash. Both stories focus on an encounter between a white woman and a man. In my view, they demonstrate through the heterosexually motivated encounters various complications caused by differences and their intersections.

In "Death Valley," a white woman meets an unnamed white man, who ostensibly represents middle class. The story recalls a typical Las Vegas tale, which according to Hal Rothman and Mike Davis, frequently offers a "male gambling adventure," where women feature only as "bimbo props" and commodities to white men.[25] The narration of "Death Valley" focalizes on the viewpoint of an arrogant white man, who has come to Vegas to play craps and experience a sexual adventure. He picks up a blonde woman named Linda at a Casino, spends a night with her, and takes her to see Death Valley with his rented BMW. His attitude to Linda is condescending, and he expects her to satisfy his sexual needs. The story titled "White Trash" is narrated by a white woman named Melanie, who has recently lost her premature-born baby, and left her husband. She goes to a jazz bar, flirts with a black jazz musician, Mayweather Smith, and ends up in a motel room with him. In the following, I will first focus on how the women characters are represented as white trash. Second, I will examine how various social and spatial circumstances have an effect on how power relations shift in the stories, and thus reveal the complexity and instability of class, gender, and race.

Classed Style and Mobility

Both Linda and Melanie are easily recognized as representing a certain class. The narrations of the stories give clues that refer to a certain classed style that these women embody. For example, in "Death Valley" Linda is introduced from the unnamed white man's perspective, who quickly categorizes Linda based on her appearance:

[25] Rothman & Davis 2002, 5.

> Not a hooker but a small-town girl, a secretary or a beauty salon worker, here in Vegas for a three-day weekend with a girl-friend from the office or the beauty salon, come to play slots and to test her luck. With her hair cascading in shiny synthetic-looking curls halfway down her back, and her eyes like an owl's with makeup, and glossed lips, wasn't she there to bring him good luck? Her or someone like her. (H 312)

Linda's exaggerated make up and synthetic looking hair, demonstrate to the man poor taste. Her appearance refers to a present-day stereotype of a "trashy" woman, described in more detail in "White Trash." Linda, who does not have a name at this point, is seen as one among the many girls, who are alike. The man's supposed competence of knowing Linda simply by glancing at her emphasizes his position as the subject of knowing. Even the scent of her perfume reveals to him her lower class position: by smelling her perfume he sees "the bargain-rate motel room she and her girlfriend were renting for the weekend, the beaverboard walls, the stained venetian blinds pulled against the sun […]" (H 313). The reader is not given much details of the man himself. Yet, his sharp-pressed chino pants and rented BMW suggest that he might be middle class, or that he at least perceives himself as middle class.

In "White Trash" already the title tunes the reader to interpret Melanie's appearance as signs of white trash. This time, it is Melanie, the woman character herself, whose narrative voice describes her appearance. Even so, her "trashy" look is clearly recognizable:

> Funky clothes I got on sale where the high school girls shop, pink V-necked sweater spangled with tiny silver stars, slithery black rayon skirt, black mesh stockings, and these spike-heeled shoes I love with the ankle straps, open toes: sexy, giggly, Melanie's looking good again and feeling good to match. (H 322)

The above description reveals that Melanie finds pleasure in her appearance: she loves the clothes she is wearing, and feels good about herself. Moreover, she is deliberately dressed to arouse men's attention.

If compared to Vesta, the appearance of Melanie and Linda is not slovenly, quite on the contrary. Both have used time to their make-up and chosen their clothes carefully. Linda has "perfectly manicured pink-lacquered nails" (H 313) and Melanie's hair is bleached "a perfect bone-white" color (H 322). Moreover, unlike Vesta, Melanie is aware of her appearance creating negative associations in people who do not know her:

> You get into conversations on the bus with people you never saw before and will never see again, older people especially, they are kind-hearted, they know how the world is, once they get past not liking me 'cause of my hair and the way I dress, the eye shadow, et cetera. (H 325)

In addition to her clothes, hair and make-up, Melanie's class position is recognizable from the language she uses: she swears and uses earthy expressions. Linda differs from Melanie in this. Yet, her vocabulary is somewhat limited, which implies a lack of education. Both women give an impression that their schooling has ended with high school. What remain uncertain are their occupation and their material conditions. In other words, their classed identity seems not so much defined by their work and income, as by lack of education and knowledge, and by a certain classed (and gendered) style. Moreover, they appear to have chosen their classed style. The same concerns Melanie's white husband, who wears a flashy "pimp's outfit" purchased at "Louis the Hatter's" (H 325). Moreover, if compared to Vesta, Linda and Melanie, who live in the present, late modern era, seem to have more freedom of making choices.

Since the 1980s, a number of sociologists started paying attention to the significance of lifestyle and consumption instead of work as a source of identity.[26] For example, according to Zygmunt Bauman, being poor is not primarily linked to their work or being unemployed, but

[26] On the theoretical views of the so-called "sociology of consumption" in the 1980s and 1990s, see, for example, Campbell 1995; Bradley 1996, 69–70. The sociologists in the United States have been latecomers in the discussion on consumption if compared to Europe (and especially France and United Kingdom). See Dunn 2008, 2.

rather, to their capacity to consume in the society of consumers.[27] Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who argues in his book *Distinction* (1984) that habits of cultural consumption both establish and express social differences, also examines the interrelationship between class and consumption. One of Bourdieu's noteworthy arguments is that class is as much defined by its position in relations of production as by its consumption. Oates's depiction of lower class women in "Death Valley" and "White Trash" seems to represent class as primarily a question of style. Nevertheless, the story collection as a whole gives a view of class as a complex and relational definer of identity, quite as Bourdieu suggests.

As Skeggs notes, class informs (one way or another) access to how subject positions can be taken up.[28] That is, the access to various subject positions is also always somewhat constrained. A limited access to mobility is not so explicit in the representation of Linda and Melanie, but rather in some other stories of the same collection, which represent poor white characters living in rural surroundings. The urban women have more spare time, especially if they do not have a family with children, which is the case for Melanie and Linda. They also come across as having more opportunities and freedom, as I have already suggested above. Nevertheless, their freedom to choose predominantly concerns their life style, which is made visible through their appearance.

On the other hand, the aim of making life style visible (through consumption) may also be seen as the opposite of the freedom of choice. As Bauman suggests, although consuming has become in the present late-modern era a compulsion to the extent that living one's life in any other way is impossible, this way of living reveals itself to the consumers "in the form of a free exercise of will."[29] The culture of consumerism persuades a modern subject's ways of defining herself in compelling, and often invisible ways. In a way, the representation of Linda and Melanie mirrors the society in which they are in a state of constant choices, and in which

[27] Bauman refers to the poor of today as "flawed consumers," who are not able to meet the norm of the consumer. Bauman 2005, 113.
[28] Skeggs 1997, 94.
[29] Bauman 2005, 26.

each choice emphasizes individuality. Yet, although they may feel they have choices, their freedom to choose is ultimately limited not merely by compulsory consumerism but also by their life circumstances both as women and as members of lower class. The representation of the stories focuses, however, less on the subjects' limited capacities to express classed life style in consumer society. Instead, I suggest, that the two stories draw attention to social positions, intersecting differences, and changing relations of power, which in turn, accentuate more explicitly the limited social positions of the two characters.

Space and Power Relations

Oates's fiction reflects the spatiality of social relations and differences in perceptive ways. For example, as we have already learned, her novel *Because It Is Bitter* draws attention to the social significance of residential segregation. I see her impression of the significance of space in line with the recent theorization of place and space by geographers, who understand places as being defined by multiple and changing boundaries that are both social and spatial.[30] Indeed, places are not fixed, but instead, saturated with various power dynamics that structure social life. In general, Oates's narratives pay attention to the significance between space and identity; not only how the changing boundaries of space may define identity, but also how the ways they are imagined by subjects may shape the constitution of social and cultural identities, and the common beliefs of who belongs to a certain space or not. In the following, I will focus on the representation of the shifting power relations in relation to spaces in "Death Valley" and "White Trash." In particular, I will demonstrate how the stories play with dualisms of binary thinking by using such dichotomies as man-woman, black-white, culture-nature in relation to space.

Linda and Melanie move in different spaces, which offer them both some degree of freedom and danger. Freedom and danger are present

[30] See, for example, Massey 1994, 3; McDowell 1999, 4.

in spaces inside and outside the city depending on the implicit conventions, rules, and power relations that demarcate these spaces. Both Melanie and Linda move in places away from home and the spheres of their everyday lives. Linda has come to Las Vegas with a girl friend to have fun. Melanie, in turn, escapes from home, because she does not feel safe there anymore. She is going through a phase of instability or identity crises; she does not know where she belongs or where she wants to go. Nevertheless, she enjoys spending time at malls, moving around using city buses, and going to a bar by herself.

Although Las Vegas is an unknown territory for Linda, her trip to Vegas is not related to a crisis. In general, "Death Valley" tells more about the white man, his attitudes, and self-image, while Linda remains a minor character. Nevertheless, the story depicts a typical situation in Oates's stories where wastelands and wilderness are dangerous places for urban women. This does not suggest, however, a simple separation of nature and society, but instead, makes use of wilderness as a disturbing space that engenders questions about the self and the social that remain under the surface in the urban space. Moreover, the wilderness functions as a space that reveals how nature is as much permeated in the processes that define human identities, agency and the social relations between individuals as in social structures, norms and values.

In "Death Valley," the unnamed male character treats courteously Linda at the casino, where men play the "serious games," and women watch men playing and remain more passive. As Linda meets the unnamed man by the craps table, her role is to play the good luck talisman for the gambling man. Moreover, she is automatically sexualized through the Casino's heterosexually coded space. After spending a night together in a hotel room, the unnamed man takes Linda away from the city, to the desert, where there are no other people around. The American desert has had various significations in literature. According to Catrin Gersdorf, who examines the effects of the cultural imagery of desert in the American context, most of the work by nature writers draws on the tradition, which discusses the relationship between American ideals and realities "by

evoking the cathartic effect of wilderness."[31] In Oates's story, the white male character attaches similar meanings to the desert; he imagines it as a kind of reviving space, which pacifies his position as a white and middle-class man. In the desert, his feeling of power and authority over Linda is intensified. In fact, he persistently searches ways to affirm his position as superior to her, and enjoys every opportunity to do so.

As he chats with Linda, he realizes that he is a lot older than she is. Consequently, he answers to Linda's questions like a father or a teacher would respond to a child. Occasionally he smiles or laughs at her ideas. Yet, some of Linda's musings surprise him, as the following excerpt shows:

> "Is that tumbleweed?" she was asking. "I always wondered what tumbleweed was."
> "It's something like tumbleweed," he said, "some kind of vegetation that dries out, tumbles in the wind, scatters its seeds that way. It's a weed."
> "Everything's a weed, isn't it, in a place like this?"
> He laughed; she had him there. "Everything's a weed," he conceded.
> She had a way of surprising him now and then. He liked her; he really did.
> "You have named the secret of the universe," he said, smiling. "*Everything's a weed*." (H 314)

The philosophical dimension of Linda's words is unintended, of course, but playfully construed as such by the man. He feels he is intellectually superior to Linda, and keeps insinuating this to her. For example, he asks if Linda has ever heard of Rilke and starts reciting *Duino Elegies*, although she mutters she has not read much poetry since high school.

Moreover, the man takes pleasure in embarrassing Linda by whispering obscenities to her ear, and demanding her to tell how it feels to have an orgasm. When she refuses to talk about her sexual experiences, he makes condescending remarks. Consequently, she asks him to take her back to Vegas. Apparently, Linda is scared and wants back the safety of the urban crowd in Vegas. The narration discloses that the man has brought another young woman to the desert a few months back (H 314).

[31] Gersdorf 2009, 159.

In the desert, he may transgress the rules of the urban, public places, where he is, under the surveillance of other people. He has deliberately chosen a spot "where no one was likely to come" (H 314). Moreover, the desert incites his feeling of danger. He even fantasizes of Linda as a threat to himself by imagining she has a razor blade hid in her purse (H 313). Yet, it seems more likely that it is Linda, who is in danger. The reader is given hints of this as the man recalls playing "a little rough" with her the night before. As Linda repudiates him in the desert saying he has the wrong idea about her, he responds to her coarsely: "You've got an ass, don't you? You've got a cunt. You *are* a cunt. So where's the 'wrong idea'?" (H 318). Gradually the situation turns more threatening to Linda.

In the car, the man forces Linda to have sex with him, although she repeats she does not want to have sex in the desert. The man drifts off fantasizing about how Linda would cut his neck with a razor blade, and leave him dying. When he finally takes Linda back to her motel, he says he will call her around nine. Linda replies "face puffy and her mouth bruised-looking. 'Fuck you, mister,' she said, 'in no uncertain terms'" (H 320). She walks away without glancing back. The story ends as the man watches Linda walk away:

> Holding herself with dignity in that wrinkled miniskirt that barely covered her thighs […], as if it mattered, and she mattered, which actually scared him a little—that evidence of the difference between them he hadn't believed there could be, much. (H 321)

The end of the story complicates a typical Vegas tale by giving an unexpected dignity and agency to Linda in contrast to the white man. Although everything seems to proceed exactly as the man wants, and he treats Linda like a commodity, ultimately it is Linda, who has self-respect, even in his eyes. The man wants to emphasize himself as a cultured white man by behaving courteously and citing Rilke. Nevertheless, he fails in his attempt to appear superior to Linda by behaving offensively. He even performs his gendered power by forcing her to have sex with him in the desert. Linda is too scared to fight back after he warns her by saying:

"'Here's as good as anywhere, cunt,' so that quieted her, and she did it, she went through with it […]" (H 319). He has his moment of control and authority in the desert, but he loses the remnants of his superiority as they return to Vegas. At a more general level, the story reflects the conditions of a contemporary American society in which various groups of marginalized subjects have gained a new kind of agency that creates anxiety, and appears both as threatening and as perplexing to a white male subject, the possessor of the long-established, hegemonic power position.

The narration never explicitly tells if the man is white, but he is white by definition. For example, he stays unnamed, which purposely signals his invisible and indefinite position as a white male. Both his maleness and whiteness are "unmarked" categories. Whiteness, in particular, works as an unmarked category, which refers to a *no particular* group of people.[32] As a white middle-class man, the unnamed man represents the norm, and his identity is more open and neutral if compared to that of Linda. Linda, in turn, is clearly described not only as a white woman, but also as representing a certain class. The man's relation to Linda reveals their dissimilar positions in relation to power. Despite of the differences of age, gender, and class, which make Linda inferior to the white man, she seems to know who she is. This is the difference between them, which he "hadn't believed there could be" (H 321). In a way then, the end of the story suggests a symbolic meaning of "Death Valley" as a spatial metaphor that reflects the crisis of white masculinity.

In "White Trash," Melanie first meets Mayweather Smith, an African American jazz pianist, in a bar, where she listens to him playing the piano for two nights in a row. She is drawn to him because he is black: "[…] Jesus that man is *black* like *black* only got invented not just the outermost part of the skin that you can see but going deep inside" (H 323). Melanie's idea about his blackness "going deep down" demonstrates explicitly how she sees him as essentially different from white people, and

[32] Cf. Chambers 1997, 189. McKee 1999, 10.

especially from white men, as we learn a little later. Similar to "Death Valley," the characters' naming follows the socio-cultural logic of their status as unmarked/marked in relation to categories of race, gender, and class. The narration never mentions the name of Melanie's white husband, although he is also "marked" through his class status. He is, however, white and male, which are in their cultural and social context the most unmarked categories. Melanie, in turn, refuses to tell her last name to Mayweather when he asks about it, and explains that she has "too many last names" referring to her two white ex-husbands (H 326). Contrary to Melanie and the unnamed white husband, Mayweather, who represents the most marked category because he is "black," is according to rule, referred to in the narration always by his full name, as 'Mayweather Smith.'

Unlike the white men in the bar, Mayweather does not pay any attention to Melanie, who is the only white woman there. She tries to call his attention by buying drinks for him. In so doing, she daringly takes an active role, which is related to her position as a white person. Melanie experiences a pronounced sense of herself as white, which becomes apparent, for example, as she imagines how she would lick his face in front of the white male audience: "Run my tongue along his skinny little mustache, push it in his mouth right with everybody watching like they never saw a white woman before, independent like me" (H 326). The active role and closeness to the black pianist supports her independence and individuality, which she associates with whiteness. Quite like Persia, who needs a mulatto lover after she has left her white husband, Melanie needs Mayweather to consolidate her precarious position within whiteness. In both cases, the need for interracial relationship is connected to class, and, at the same time, expresses the character's defiance against social rules concerning white women.

When Melanie finally gets to talk to Mayweather, she starts to explain to him how she has been discriminated by white men. She believes he will understand because he is black:

> A man capable of jazz piano like that – you know he's going to understand. Specially a black man 'cause they know how it is with women, they're the ones really know. Not these shithead white men that always let you down. (H 325)

Again, like Persia, Melanie seems to have a stereotypical image of black musicians reinforced by American popular culture. Jan Nederveen Pieterse suggests that the entertainer's role typically assigned to black males has frequently been a feminized role, which indicates a special capacity to emotional expressivity and thus empathy.[33] Mayweather submits to the stereotypical, feminized role, which includes being empathetic, and lets Melanie make all the moves. In fact, Mayweather is very cautious, and says he does not want to cause trouble, which implies his awareness of the history of social rules concerning relations between black men and white women.

As the couple moves from the bar to a place, where there are no other people, the situation changes significantly. Henceforth, it is Mayweather, who is in control of the situation. He leads Melanie to his car, and helps her to climb into it. He drives to a neighborhood unfamiliar to her. As he takes hold of Melanie so that it hurts, she swears she is not going to cry: "He's gripping my buttocks so they'll bruise but I'm not going to cry: they don't like tears. Somebody told me once (my momma?) and that's surely so. Black or white or whatever, they don't like it" (H 328). At this point, the gender difference becomes more significant than the racial difference, at least from Melanie's point of view, and she has to remind herself of it:

> (Almost I'm forgetting who this is: a big black man with a face carved out of something hard and oiled, panting and grunting and near-snorting. Pop eyes. Wide black nostrils like a horse. […]) (H 328)

What Melanie seems to need most in her relation to Mayweather, is a sense of solidarity based on discrimination. The story re-represents the

[33] Nederveen Pieterse 1998 (1992), 141.

idea of a parallel position between white women and black men in the social structure that appears already in the "the Molesters." In "White Trash," however, the reference to the parallel social position is made explicit, and above all, reflected with a sense of irony. Firstly, the narration makes clear that the idea of a shared social position comes from Melanie. Secondly, the narration calls for the reader's ironic distance to Melanie's attempts to evoke Mayweather's sense of solidarity. This is carried out in the narration by a careful description of her persistent attempts to stir up Mayweather's compassion. The end of the story questions the idea of a shared position through Mayweather's intervention.

To evoke Mayweather's sympathies, Melanie explains to him how her white husband has treated her badly. She has a fight with him after her return from the hospital, where she has been because of her miscarriage. She feels her husband blames her for the miscarriage. After her husband goes out, Melanie packs her things and walks out of their home. She is scared he would kill her, which is why she is moving from one place to another so that he would not find her. Next, she recounts how she was treated discriminatorily in the hospital; she has been regarded as "white trash" and blamed for her baby's death:

> I told them I wasn't a junkie, think I'm crazy? Tried some things over the years for personal reasons but not while I was pregnant. "White trash" I know they been calling me on the street, but I wasn't ever a junkie and surely not this past year. […] Saying it was my fault my "condition" to blame for the baby never drawing breath like he did (or they said: how do I know they're telling the truth?)[.] (H 324)

Whether Melanie has actually been treated unjustly in the hospital, remains ambiguous, because the story is told only from her point of view. She has threatened, for example, to "burn the place down" so that the staff has called a guard and put her in restraint (H 324–5). Both Melanie and her husband, who has stood "shamefaced staring at the floor like he didn't know English" when the intern asked them questions (H 325), are out-of-place in the hospital. In relation to whiteness, this suggests

that Melanie and her husband fail to perform the "right kind" of whiteness within the defining confines of normed whiteness. As Warren Hedges argues, racial norms have functioned in the United States not only by excluding racial others but also "by narrowing the range of acceptable white behavior." For example, the deviation of "irregular" white men, who acted in ways that called into question the difference between "self-regulated white men" and "undisciplined racial others," could be explained through class distinction: they were "white trash" and not really white men.[34] In the context of "White Trash," the hospital seems to exemplify a space where the significance of the white norm is heightened. The deviant, out-of-place behavior concerns especially Melanie, who swears, shouts loudly and refuses to be quiet, and thus disrupts the norms of a white woman intentionally. The husband, in turn, acts too humble, because of his shame caused by what he is.

Melanie turns the situation around by accusing the doctors and the nursing staff for the death of her baby. She believes that the baby would have survived if they had let her nurse him (H 329). In addition to the nursing staff's lack of judgment, she offers another explanation for her baby's death, which refers peculiarly to the idea of race. She maintains: "if that baby was black he'd be alive right now" (H 325). The significance of race becomes more intelligible if her position as a "white trash" mother is analyzed more closely. According to Dyer, the importance and responsibility of white mothers as reproducers of white race are frequently underlined in the white discourse.[35] As he puts it, white women are "required to display the signs, especially the finery, of the social group to which they are bonded in heterosexuality, be it class or race."[36] When the hospital staff suggests that the reason for her baby's death is her "condition," which Melanie understand as referring to her position as "underclass," she is simultaneously made to feel that she is not good enough to be the mother of a *white* baby. In other words, she is not eligible to reproduce white race. Melanie is far from being interested in playing

[34] Hedges 1997, 228.
[35] Dyer 1997, 25–7. Cf. also Stokes 2001, 35.
[36] Dyer 1997, 29.

her part as a "civilized white woman," quite on the contrary. Nevertheless, the implicit obligations contained in the idea of a white mother as the reproducer of white race poses a dilemma to her. Melanie does not fulfill the society's demands for the qualities of the white woman as the reproducer of white race. According to this logic, if she had delivered a "black" baby, she would not have been required to carry out her duty in the same way as a mother of a white child.

After listening patiently to Melanie's outburst, Mayweather starts to tell a story about his brother Carlyle, who was killed "like a dog" by white police in 1958 just because he resisted arresting. He even demonstrates the "police choke hold" that killed his brother, and closes his hands around Melanie's neck (H 329–30). Melanie's is scared, and thinks he is going to strangle her, although she knows he does not want to hurt her. She asks Mayweather to let her go:

> [B]ut he don't appear to be listening, he's kissing me up and down my opened front using his tongue that's wet and floppy saying things I can't hear. Pretty little white cunt, he's saying, pretty little platinum-blond white honey-cunt, he's saying[.] (H 330)

The threatening situation questions the idea of parallel inequality between Melanie and Mayweather. His story tells of something that happened in the age of segregation; of racial discrimination directed at a black person. As such, it draws attention to the fact that the injustices caused by race and class bear the weight of their own past of a particular time and place, and that they are constructed differently depending on the viewpoint. What is also noteworthy is that Mayweather calls Melanie "white cunt," which not only names her as a racialized and gendered object of desire, but also expresses his contempt towards Melanie as a white woman. In a way, from a white point of view, his act consolidates the stereotypical myth of a black man as a sexual threat to white woman. Most of all, however, it is an expression of anger towards racism and white supremacy.

The story makes visible the vacillating relation between whiteness and power. Melanie's way of seeing Mayweather as a representative of his race is stereotypical, and it is made to appear naïve in the narration. Even though it is obvious that the linguistic strategies of stereotyping Mayweather are attached to the narration through Melanie's narrative point of view, he still functions in the novel as an Africanist presence; he is needed in the narration to reflect the ambiguities of whiteness. As Toni Morrison suggests, black images in American literature "can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable – all of the self-contradictory features of the self."[37]

In "Death Valley" and "White Trash" spatial circumstances, which have to be seen also in relation to time, have significance to the dynamics between the characters interaction and differences they represent. The spatial changes turn the situation at some point threatening to white female characters. What is common to both of the stories is that the spatial changes enable an intensification of gendered, male power in relation to the female character. In both stories, the culmination of the interaction between the characters is situated in the cars owned or possessed by male character, a rented BMW in "Death Valley" and Mayweather's Cadillac Eldorado in "White Trash."

On the other hand, the stories also turn around the traditional dualisms concerning gender and race in relation to space, social relations, and power. In particular "White Trash" disrupts clear-cut ideas of how spaces are conventionally understood as being formed as gendered, racialized or classed. For example, Melanie moves freely in urban, public places, and in so doing, simultaneously confirms her position within whiteness. In the bar, she takes an active role in relation to Mayweather, a black man, to enhance her individuality as well as her position within whiteness, which she has lost after being treated as "white trash." Both stories disturb the fixed ideas or images attached to spaces, and reveal the interaction between social differences and power relations as an unstable process, in which they are constantly being realigned. Overall, the stories

[37] Morrison 1992, 59.

demonstrate how power relations are constantly changing, and how the subject's mobility is not simply influenced by class, gender, or race alone, but by the intersections and conflicts of different discourses.

In-Between Position

The representations of poor white women in Oates's recent fiction illuminate, in part, how the category of "white trash" has changed and expanded. In the 1990s, at the time when the above-analyzed novel and short stories were published, there was a revival of representation of poor whites in Hollywood films TV sitcoms, and the media.[38] Oates representations of poor whites offer, however, a much more intricate view of the social position of American lower class white people than the visual representations of that time. Overall, her stories demonstrate how power relations are constantly changing, and how the subject's mobility is influenced by the multifaceted crossings of class, gender, or race.

According to Newitz, after the civil rights movement, Hollywood and the media representations of lower-class whites are to a greater extent marked and othered. White trash is more often than not portrayed as primitive, violent, criminal, and savage. Newitz gives as examples such films as *California* (1994), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Bad Lieutenant* (1992).[39] As Newitz elucidates, these representations, which involve a reevaluation of racial stereotypes, are created in a situation, where whites themselves suffer a kind of anxiety, a loss of control over a stable idea of white, racial identity.[40] Lately, films, such as *8 Mile* (2003) and *Million Dollar Baby* (2004), no longer represent white trash characters as savage and dangerous, but rather as discriminated characters, who struggle their way to success and transcend their fate. A classed and racially marked white identity offers the characters a position that comes close to that of victimized racial or ethnic groups. In my view, the whiteness of Jimmy

[38] Newitz & Wray 1997a, 176; Newitz & Wray 1997b, 7; Harkins 2004, 213–14.
[39] Newitz 1997, 135–6, 138.
[40] Newits 1997, 133.

"B-rabbit" played by Eminem in *8 Mile*, to give one specific example, is further to be seen as symptomatic response to the politicization of ethnic, gender, and sexual minorities in the post-civil-rights-era. By assuming a victim mentality, these films partly act in response to the crisis of whiteness, the cultural situation in the turn of the millennium, in which the normative and unexamined nature of whiteness and white privilege are challenged.[41] The story of white male (and occasionally white female) victimhood has been circulated especially in film and popular television.[42]

Oates's stories reflect the same phenomenon. At first, both Linda's and Melanie's representation seem to appropriate them a position as victimized white trash. Nevertheless, as I have shown in my reading, the stories problematize their position as simply victimized on the grounds of their class and gender, and in so doing, draw attention to the various manifestations of whiteness. The comparison between poor white characters in Oates's recent fiction reveals the author's perceptive view of class and its relationality, and discloses how classed positions within whiteness are connected to various times and spaces. The Garlocks in *Because It is Bitter* display the rigidity of certain classed status, which is related to their material poverty, rural origins, and the era they are living in. Because they are seen through the eyes of others, their representation is deliberately filtered through the stereotypical white trash imagery. If the Garlocks are compared to the representation of the poor white women in "Death Valley" and "White Trash," it becomes perceptible how the representation of Melanie and Linda, two urban women living in the contemporary, late-modern culture, exemplifies that class boundaries have also changed and become more obscure than in the past.

The poor white women characters examined above are positioned at the crossroads of racial privilege. In so doing, they make visible the unstable relation between whiteness and privilege. Seen together, the poor white female characters in Oates's recent fiction occupy an in-between position. This does not mean that they go through a liminal process or gain something (e.g. knowledge or agency) from their in-between position.

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[41] For an in-depth analysis of this cultural situation, see Doane 2004, 3–18.
[42] Carrillo Rowe 2007, 125.

Rather, I suggest, their in-between status – both in relation to racial privilege and to other characters of different social positions – works to problematize cultural classifications, to address questions about the inequality inherent in American society, and finally yet importantly, to reveal the instability of the boundaries and epistemologies of class, race, and gender. Moreover, the examined white female characters display in various ways the indefinable human need for a sense of identity, and, at the same time, the unattainable and complex nature of identity.

CHAPTER 5

INTERRACIAL RELATIONSHIP IN *I'LL TAKE YOU THERE*

Similar to *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart*, Oates's novel *I'll Take you There*, first published in 2002, deals with questions concerning race, gender, and class in American society in the civil rights era. In *I'll Take You There*, the events take place in the early sixties, a decade later than in *Because It Is Bitter*. Both novels unfold a coming-of-age story of an ambitious young female character, who has a lower class background and who receives a scholarship for studies at the Syracuse University. In the university surroundings, the protagonists feel displaced and alienated. What makes these novels typical coming-of-age stories is that they depict a process in which a young protagonist is initiated into adulthood through certain experiences and knowledge.[1] In particular *I'll Take you There* depicts how the central protagonist experiences disillusionments, undergoes a set of phases and changes, and moves towards a mature understanding of herself, her relationship to the surrounding society, and its history, existing social structures, and institutions.[2] Gavin Cologne-Brooks distinguishes *I'll Take you There* as a reworking of an "alienated-scholarship-girl scenario" in Oates' fiction.[3] Moreover, both novels include a theme of interracial relationship, which has, in particular in *I'll Take You There*, a central role for the protagonist's development.

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[1] I prefer using the term 'coming-of-age story' instead of 'Bildungsroman', because it allows a wider and less genre-bound understanding of the novels. My focus in this chapter is on the significance of the interracial relationship in a story of white female development instead of the problematic of genre.

[2] According to Kenneth Millard, contemporary American coming-of-age novels are often narrated from the point of maturity from which they aim to explain the origin and foundations of the protagonist. Moreover, in the contemporary coming-of-age novels, the protagonists' relations to a certain historical context often play a significant part in how they come to understand themselves. That is, they come of age specifically by understanding their place in history. See Millard 2007, 9–11.

[3] Cologne-Brookes 2005, 151.

Joanne Creighton compares *I'll Take You There* to Oates's novel *Marya: A Life* (1986), and characterizes the two novels as stories about "the conflicting stresses and strains experienced by a young woman from backcountry origins trying to negotiate a university culture."[4] *Marya* and *I'll Take You There* resemble in many ways of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963), which takes place in New York City in the early fifties. All three novels share closeness to their writers' own life experiences.[5] They all play, more or less, with the problematic of the autobiographical genre.[6] Although Oates has often stated that her above-mentioned novels are autobiographical, and that she identifies strongly with the protagonists of the novels, she seems to be uncomfortable with the idea that they would be characterized as autobiographical novels. Instead, she emphasizes the fictive nature of the novels. For example, *I'll Take You There* represents, according to Oates, a "memoir-fictive genre," which is based more on fiction than autobiographical.[7] Her stance to the 'autobiographical novel' is suggestive of the critical account by numerous postmodern and postcolonial theorists, who find the term 'autobiographical' inadequate to delineate the range and diverse genres and forms of life writing.[8] Indeed, Oates's use of the word 'memoir-fictive genre' suggests that she is conscious of the different definitions and variations of the so-called autobiographical narratives, and that she wants her novel to be read as a work of fiction although it uses narrative and rhetorical devises similar to a memoir.

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[4] Creighton 2002, par. 7.

[5] *The Bell Jar* has been perceived as an autobiographical novel by the critics, and until the publication of some of Plath's letters, it was the primary source of biographical information about her. Nevertheless, as Lynda Bundtzen notes, Plath's novel cannot be interpreted as a straightforward autobiography. See Bundtzen 1988, 109; Lindahl-Raittila 2002, 11.

[6] Autobiography is in itself difficult to define as a distinct genre. In literary studies, the genre of autobiography is often referred to as a sub-genre. According to Sidonie Smith's definition, autobiographical narratives are driven by fictive conventions, and have incorporated novelist techniques. See Smith 1990, 145–6. The definition of the genre has been unsettled, in particular, by feminist questionings of universalist assumptions. Cosslett, Lury & Summerfield 2000, 2–3, 17n1.

[7] Björkman 2003, 45.

[8] Gilmore 2001, 2; Smith & Watson 2010 (2001), 3. Theorists often prefer to use such terms as 'autobiographical discourse', 'life writing' or 'life narrative'.

The novel is similar to a memoir on the grounds of some of its formal features. For example, the narrative voice is an interior monologue in the first person. According to Oates, the narrator's voice is identical with the voice of a memoir narrator as it follows the principle of "now I am going to tell how it was" – a voice that is telling the past from the present moment.[9] The narrator reflects on her past, in particular the crucial times and events of her coming-of-age, from the present. In so doing, the novel makes use of a narrative structure typical for a memoir in order to reflect the identity development of the protagonist. If compared to the highly ironic narrative voice in *Expensive People*, which also imitates memoir narrator, the narrative voice of the unnamed protagonist in *I'll Take You There* seems much more austere, and lacks explicit metafictional features typical of Richard. On the other hand, as Leigh Gilmore contends, autobiographical genres are not so much defined by formal elements than by a rhetorical setting in which a person places herself or himself within various traditions and conventions of testimonial contexts.[10] Indeed, in *I'll Take You There*, the way in which the first-person narration is used brings a confessional tone to the narration. Consequently, the narrator and her story come across convincing and unaffected as she observes her reality and inner conscience. Moreover, unlike Richard, she seems capable of working out the context of her own personality.

I'll Take You There is divided into three parts of which each focuses on a certain phase in the protagonist's development: "The Penitent," "The Negro-Lover," and "The Way Out." In the first part, the protagonist depicts her freshman and sophomore years at the University of Syracuse as a member of Kappa Gamma Pi sorority. The first part also draws a picture of her background, and in so doing, makes her yearnings comprehensible. The second part illustrates how the protagonist falls in love with a black philosophy graduate student, Vernor Mathieus. In part three, she goes to Utah to visit her father on his deathbed. The encounter with the dying father, and finally his death, helps the protagonist to reach a desired level of independence and

[9] Björkman 2003, 160.
[10] Gilmore 2001, 3.

maturity. Fundamentally, this means that she is freed from her familial ties, and starts actively to live her life as an adult.

In the end of the novel, the protagonist recalls a moment at his father's funeral, where she stands by the joint grave of her parents and contemplates: "I would not be joining them in that rocky soil, but my family was now complete" (ITYT 290). In my view, this suggests that the protagonist has successfully processed her troubled relationships with both of her parents. The novel ends enigmatically in the words: "If things work out between us, someday, I'll take you there" (ITYT 290). It remains enigmatic what the narrator-protagonist means by "us," but by "you," she refers to the reader, or to the narratee: the audience to whom the narrator addresses her words. In this case, the narratee, who is addressed at the level of the narrative, comes so close to the real reader that they are hardly separable. The effect is somewhat strange, because usually, it is the authorial narrator, who has the possibility of addressing the real reader. The assimilation between the narratee and the real reader is explicable, because the narrator's voice is identical with the voice of a memoir narrator. That is, in a memoir, a non-fictional text, (in most cases) the narrator inside the narrative would be identical with the authorial narrator. Oates's deliberate use of the possibility to address the real reader works as an effective rhetorical device that aims to encourage and influence reader's responses to the story.[11] In my view, an equally noteworthy question concerning the above-mentioned quotation is what the narrator means by "us" in the end of the novel, when she returns to the present, to the moment of telling her story. I suggest that she refers by "us" to her relationship with her parents, family, and past. Thus, the last sentence of the novel implies that after she has properly processed her relationship with her family and past, the narrator-protagonist, a promising young writer, may return to the past by writing her story, and in so doing, take also "you," the reader/narratee there with her.

In this chapter, I will focus on the theme of the interracial relationship in *I'll Take You There*. If compared to *Because It Is Bitter*, the novel takes the

[11] My view is influenced by James Phelan's (2007) theorization of the ethics of rhetorical purpose.

interracial theme a few steps further. Instead of representing interracial intimacy merely at the level of the character's fantasies, *I'll Take You There* describes the central protagonist's actual relationship with a black man through various phases, from acquaintances to lovers. As many critics have argued, the issue of miscegenation and interracial love has posed both fears and hopes concerning racial purity, nation building, and national identity.[12] I want to draw attention to how the representation of cross-racial love in *I'll Take You There* reflects the contemporary cultural anxieties keeping in mind that in American literature, the representations of interracial love often reflect white anxieties rooted in the old miscegenation taboo.

In American literature, the theme of a white character's development through his or her relationship with a man or a woman of color has been recognized as a persistent theme.[13] The interracial theme has appeared (or recognized) especially in Southern literature. As Jeff Abernathy puts it, "the South is but the stage upon which the drama of race in America is performed."[14] According to Suzanne W. Jones, the racial relations and attitudes towards race in the South in the present day are not very different from the rest of the country, although some may argue that they still are. In Jones's view, Southern writers are exceptional in relation to the issues of race, because they have always had a more persistent need to think and write about black-white relations.[15] To write explicitly about the black-white relations in the U.S. context evokes a close link to the Southern literary tradition. That is, regardless of which part of the United States a writer, who writes about racial relations, is, the influence of

[12] See, for example, Brah & Coombes 2000, 4; Kaup & Rosenthal 2002, xi; Carrillo Rowe 2007, 122.

[13] See, for example, Sollors 1997, 8–9; Abernathy 2003, 4. As Sollors notes, there is a vast amount of literary works about interracial couples and their descendants, and they have not appeared exclusively in the literature of the United States. From American authors Sollors lists, for example, Walt Whitman, William Wells Brown, William Dean Howells, Rebecca Harding Davis, Louisa May Alcott, Joel Chandler Harris, Francis E.W. Harper, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Pauline E. Hopkins, Thomas Dixon, Ellen Glasgow, Paul Green, Langston Hughes, William Faulkner, Lillian Smith, and Sinclair Lewis.

[14] Abernathy 2003, 9. Cf. also Jones 2006, 4.

[15] Jones 2006, 2–3.

Southern literature seem inevitable. Oates's act of embedding the interracial theme in her novel and situating it in the northern milieu could be seen as an endeavor to modify the conventions relating to interracial relations within the national context. On the other hand, her representations of interracial relationships are in many ways similar to those depicted in Southern literature and its conventions, which works as a source of inspiration to her fiction in general. Moreover, Oates's recent fiction, which delves into the racial relations, focuses especially on the drawbacks of a (Northern), white perspective, and reflects, most of all, broader narrative conventions of the present-day relating to the themes of racial problematic and multiculturalism.

In Oates's recent fiction, the white perspective is frequently revealed as constricted or inexperienced, lacking historical perspective to racial relations and racism in the United States, embracing an attitude of innocence, which may have precarious consequences to a white character. Her fiction does not pay too much attention to the historical details of racial relations and social changes. The emphasis is more on the questions of how the idea of race is signified and viewed from a white perspective, and what kind of functions race and racialization have to the constitution of white self. Yet, I argue, that her recent fiction, including *I'll Take You There*, does not disaffiliate the question of race from the history of racial relations.

I will examine the first two parts of the novel, which I find relevant to my overall question about the complexity of white female identity. I will first analyze the first part of the novel, which sheds light on how the protagonist gradually starts to become conscious of the significance of race in the American society. My aim is to display the effects of this realization to the protagonist. Second, I will produce a close reading of the interracial relationship depicted in part two, focusing on various stages and potential functions of the interracial relationship in this coming-of-age story.

Desire for Transformation

In the first part, the protagonist goes through a developmental phase, which deals with her relation to her dead mother. Her mother, Ida, dies shortly after her daughter's birth. After Ida's death, the father, Eric, leaves his daughter and three sons to be raised by his German parents. The protagonist believes throughout her childhood that his father blamed her for Ida's death. The father exacerbates his daughter's agony by staying distant from her. She tries to attract her father's attention with her excellent performance in school. When she starts her studies at the university, her thoughts turn more to her mother.

At the university, the protagonist has a desperate need to belong. Consequently, she initiates into Kappa Gamma Pi sorority. As a member of the sorority, she seeks transformation that would free her from her past, and give her a new identity. In fact, one of the protagonist's central thrusts in the novel is her wish to transform herself. The protagonist reminds of Iris Courtney in her persistent need to free herself from the past. Similar to Iris, this need is intertwined with the protagonist's processing of her identity as a white girl, who wants to overcome her class background. *I'll Take You There* offers, however, a different turn of events. In the first part, the protagonist yearns to be accepted by the sorority girls. Later, she becomes distant from her desire to belong, which she has pursued by joining the sorority.

The novel offers a critical view of sorority life. The narrator-protagonist starts recalling her story with a description of a sorority house, and how she, as a freshman, dreams of belonging to the Kappa Gamma Pi sorority. As a narrator, who recalls the events from the present, she also questions her yearning as immature and naïve. In an interview (originally appeared in 1978), Oates was once asked about her experiences as a "sorority girl" during her years at the University of Syracuse. She describes her experience as "despairing," and states that belonging to a sorority is one of the things she would never do again. She gives a long list of disadvantages of the sorority, which includes "racial and religious bigotry" and "the bullying of the presumably weak by the presumably

strong." Moreover, she says she will never write about her experiences as a member of the sorority.[16] Over twenty years later, she nevertheless utilizes her experiences in *I'll Take You There.* The first part of the novel focuses on how the sorority life suppresses the protagonist, who is, above all, an intellectual, and who has come to the university to study.

The sorority house is of neo-Classic style, and has an ivy-covered facade with Doric columns. The protagonist is impressed by the building, and actually believes that life inside it would transform her "cursed" life, which has hitherto been like a "cruel, crude fairy tale":

> Yet I believed in Kappa Gamma Pi without question. I believed that such transformation were not only possible, but common. I believed that such transformation were not only possible, but inevitable. Not I, not I exactly, but another girl with my name and face, a girl *initiate*—an *active*—would one day soon live in that house; with tremulous pride she would wear the Kappa pin, gleaming ebony with gold letters and a tiny gold chain above her left breast, where all the privileged sorority girls wore their sacred pins, in the proverbial region of the heart. (ITYT 6)

The sorority girls are privileged, and they enjoy a certain social power gained through the membership of Kappa Gamma Pi. The social power works also as a path to a certain amount of agency in the university surroundings. The Kappa girls are popular, and they "do what they want" in the limits set by surrounding social and ideological systems. In order to be a Kappa, however, one has to be white, and preferably, from an affluent family, since living in the Kappa house is expensive. The protagonist's scholarship does not cover all the expenses, and she has to work in order to obtain the rest of the money.

The sorority housemother, British-borne Mrs. Thayer, emphasizes the upper class mentality of the Kappa sorority. The omnipresence of this maternal figure uncovers a gothic undertone in the first part, which makes also other gestures towards gothic conventions, for example, in the form of the gothic style sorority house. According to Clare Kahane, the protagonist of a gothic story is

[16] Phillips 2006, 79.

typically a young woman whose mother has died. She is compelled to solve a mystery, and following clues she enters a labyrinthine space, which has a secret room in its heart. In addition, a gothic story often has a surrogate mother.[17] In *I'll Take You There*, the sorority house has, indeed, an air of a gothic castle, the housemother functions as a surrogate mother, and her room represents a secret room, which the protagonist eventually enters in the end of part one. Mrs. Thayer cannot be approached casually, and even the nearness of her private quarters causes anxiety to the protagonist. She dares not to enter Mrs. Thayer's inner quarters, a symbol for female space, but recalls standing at the door "staring at the open door with a vague fixed smile and hearing, though not listening to, murmurous voices within, and even laughter[…]"(ITYT 12). Her standing at the threshold of the door metaphorically expresses her condition; her simultaneous desire and incapability to join the space of normed, white femininity, which all the other sorority girls and the housemother seem to share.

In the Kappa house, the protagonist starts to comprehend the significance of the idea of race in the society, and sees herself, for the first time in her life, belonging to a racial group: "These are all what's called white: to be among them, I too must be white"(ITYT 13). The norm-like whiteness requires that she transforms herself from an "American farm girl" to a "lady." A little later, she experiences moments of being ashamed of her skin: "In the Kappa Pi house that autumn of my sophomore year I knew for the first time what it was to be ashamed of my skin" (ITYT 52). A Kappa girl is required "nothing less than 'ladylike' –'gracious' –'well-bred' behavior," as Mrs. Thayer phrases it (ITYT 27). To be able to fit into the sorority the protagonist adopts a "Kappa self," who was "no one I knew personally but an inspired composite of a dozen Kappa girls" (ITYT 44). Yet, her appearance lacks the right kind of racialized and classed femininity, because she cannot afford to buy clothes. She is the only Kappa, who wears the same threadbare clothes day after day. Nevertheless, she manages to win her place in the sorority by helping the other girls in their course assignments.

[17] Kahane 1985, 334–5.

A "Kappa identity" is not only intertwined with race, gender, and class, but also with the confines of heterosexuality. A Kappa girl is expected to date boys from the university fraternities, and to become engaged before graduation. The protagonist feels particularly pressured by the codes of behavior, which concern sexuality. Her quandary with sexuality goes hand in hand with her troubled relationship with her female body that precedes her sorority membership. At first, the protagonist is pleased about being included to the sorority. Before long, she starts suffering from insomnia, reads philosophy obsessively, and develops an eating disorder. Eventually, she is so confused that suddenly she does not know her name (ITYT 75). This marks a moment of disintegration of her sense of self. Her membership in the sorority comes to an end at a Kappa alumni reception, where she confides in one of the guests, an honorary Kappa, that she is not certain if she has the right to belong to the sorority: "'Because I'm – I have – I think I have – Jewish blood'" (ITYT 80). If she really has Jewish ancestry remains ambiguous, some of her relatives only *believed* that the family was partly Jewish (ITYT 44). Nevertheless, the claim works as a way out of the sorority. Foreseeing her expulsion from Kappa Gamma Pi, she repeats to several guests that she is not Christian, and does not belong to this sorority, which is for Christian white girls only. Unlike Oates, who confessed in the above-mentioned interview that although she wanted to escape the sorority she could not, the protagonist finds a loophole, which frees her from the membership of the sorority.[18] Although the protagonist is in a distraught state, she knows that if she were formally de-activated by Kappa, she would still be eligible to re-enter an undergraduate women's residence, and continue her studies (ITYT 87).

Immediately after the "scandal" at the alumni reception, the protagonist intrudes into Mrs. Thayer's private quarters, and rummages through her bureau drawers. Mrs. Thayer catches her in the act, seizes her by the arms, and starts shouting at her. Unable to break free from her grip, the protagonist feels like "a child, a penitent, a child who has been punished, my heart broken" (ITYT 93).

[18] Phillips 2006, 79. Oates explains that her escape was impossible, because of some legal contract she had signed when becoming a member of the sorority.

During her membership in the sorority, the protagonist seeks Mrs. Thayer's appreciation in various ways. As I have mentioned above, Mrs. Thayer is a gothic figure, who functions as a surrogate mother for the protagonist's dead mother, and as such, as a character through which the narration deals with the protagonist's vexed relationship to femininity. Moreover, the above-described passage, positioned in the end of part one, resembles a recurring pattern in Oates' fiction that Brenda Daly defines as "a return to the maternal past." As Daly recapitulates, this kind of return must "re-revision the past if it is to make possible a rewriting of the narrative of female development."[19] The confrontation with the mother figure in *I'll Take You There* has a similar developing effect on the protagonist; it liberates her from the burden of feeling guilty for her mother's death, and thus helps her to reconcile the non-existent relationship with her dead mother. Unlike a typical heroine of the old gothic tradition, the protagonist does not remain a passive victim. Instead, she stands up against the housemother in a way which none of the sorority girls would have dared to do.

The protagonist's incursion into Mrs. Thayer's private quarters also expresses her disengagement from the suffocating role of good girl. The role of good, virtuous girl concerns also normed whiteness. By claiming to be Jewish, and clinging to an identity, which does not fit into the normed whiteness stipulated in the Kappa community, she also becomes distant from whiteness. Although she simultaneously repudiates her strong desire to belong, her problems are not solved, and her crisis about identity continues. It seems that her strong need to belong ceases, but she continues to search for ways to transform herself.

[19] Daly 1997, 130. According to Daly, Oates's fiction changes in the 1980s, when the attention in her novels shifts from father-identified to mother-identified daughters. In my view, *I'll Take You There* differs from this pattern in that the protagonist's relationship with both of her parents is equally dealt in the novel. The first part depicts the protagonist's relationship to both, her father and mother, but the end of first part, as I have analysed above, shifts the emphasis onto the mother-daughter relationship. Part three, in turn, turns the focus onto the father-daughter relationship.

Denying the Idea of Race

The second part of the novel titled "The Negro-Lover" focuses on the relationship between the protagonist and Vernor Mathieus. The expression 'Negro-lover' comes from a former employer for whom the protagonist worked at the age of fourteen. According to the protagonist, the employer, Mrs. Farley, was a well-to-do woman by the local standards:

> She didn't say *nigger-lover*; this wasn't a term a woman of her pretensions would have said. Instead she said *Negro-lover* in reference to something that had been reported that morning on the radio; the acquittal of white murderer of a black man in Georgia, by an all-white jury; the protest by a scattering of church leaders and politicians in the wake of the acquittal. (ITYT 159)

The title recalls the continuing legacy of racism in the U.S. civil rights era, which demanded significant changes and advances to racial equality. It draws attention to the ambiguous nature of the expression at the time when whiteness goes through a crisis. The title also works as an ironic reference to the white protagonist, who becomes a "negro-lover," obsessed with a black man.

According to Abernathy, the theme of interracial companionship in contemporary Southern literature follows often the same patterns. One of the typical scenarios depicts a white protagonist, often a teenaged white girl, who has a feeling of being different, and who is nurtured by the black community. The African American characters and black culture emerge as the catalysts for the moral growth of the white protagonist. After sharing briefly the black community with the black character(s), the white protagonist frequently comes to abandon it. Some of the contemporary Southern novelists explicitly attempt to move beyond the old parameters by subverting and reworking the literary parameters.[20] Oates's novel does not directly rewrite the patterns described by Abernathy. Rather, it continues to revise the racial theme in the context of

[20] Abernathy 2003, 105–6; 108; 126, 156.

Oates's fiction. Nonetheless, as I have already stated, the interracial theme inevitably engenders a relation to Southern literature. Indeed, *I'll Take You* conveys lot of similarities to the conventions mentioned by Abernathy. For example, Vernor Mathieus clearly functions as a catalyst for the white protagonist's development in this coming-of-age story. Moreover, he acts as a mentor to the protagonist. At times Vernor, who is also older than the protagonist is, overdoes his role as he treats her as if she was his pupil, which she finds humiliating. The protagonist does not share the black community or black culture with Vernor, even briefly. What they share is a passionate commitment to western philosophy, which represents, in many ways, "white culture." Whereas Anellia merely thinks through and reasons her own actions in relation to western philosophy, Vernor, a highly intelligent and dedicated philosophy graduate student, is decidedly more critical of the doctrines of philosophy, and tries to develop his own thinking.

Vernor's position as a black intellectual is demanding. As Cornel West phrases in his essay on the dilemma of the black intellectual, becoming a black intellectual in the American context involves "a self-imposed marginality," which means a marginal position both "in and to the black community."[21] Vernor is blatantly determined to follow the path of an intellectual, which partly explains why he, for example, persistently keeps his distance from the black community, and civil rights activities, which he sees as "distraction from purity of the philosophical quest: to know what *is*" (ITYT 133).

The portrayal of Vernor uses a narrative strategy that deliberately attempts to avoid the discursive trap of stereotypes of black men. Consequently, it is even more important that a reading of his representation remains sensitive to the narration's anxious relation to stereotypical representation and its *productive* ambivalence.[22] The second part starts with the narrator's careful account of a man's voice, which is later revealed to be that of Vernor Matheius:

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[21] West 1985, 110.

[22] Cf. Bhabha's idea of the productive ambivalence of stereotypical discourse, and his method of analysing the construction of colonial discourse in order to understand "the processes of subjectification[.]" See, in particular, Bhabha 1994, 66–84.

> …a voice of logic, reason, conviction; a voice of irony, cajoling; a seductive voice; an arrogant voice; a young impetuous voice; a voice of occasional hesitation, uncertainty; a voice that provoked, annoyed, beset like the bared teeth of an attack dog; a shrewd voice; a *Now just listen to me, I'm the one to tell you* voice; a voice of humility; a voice of (mock) humility; a voice sharp and cruel as a knifeblade; a voice like warm butter; a low throaty trombone voice; voice of hurt; a voice of sorrow; a voice of pain; a voice of yearning; a voice of rage; a voice sinewy and sly as a glimpsed glittering snake; a voice I would have wished for myself if I'd been born *male* but *female*[.] (ITYT 98)

The gesture of describing the various qualities of the voice seems to disavow the likelihood that the narrator-protagonist is drawn to Vernor because of his racial difference. To be exact, it disrupts the process of recognition through visual economy, which would inevitably attach certain culturally constructed ideas of racial difference to Vernor. It is in the domain of the visible that we commonly think race works: we experience race through our eyes, through visual perception.[23] By describing the voice, instead of what the owner of the voice looks like, the narration aims to describe Vernor firstly as a person, as an ambitious and intellectual man. Moreover, his educated voice may suggest to the protagonists, that he is white. If he is perceived as a white person, he is automatically granted a certain position of invisibility. This is an often-made observation among whiteness critics, according to which whiteness seems to be invisible, especially for "white" people, because it is not thought of as race, and because it represents the norm.[24]

Nevertheless, the effect is only superficial. What is noteworthy is that Vernor clearly functions as the object of the protagonist's desire. Although her desire is not displayed through gaze (scopic drive), the above description displays the partial manifestation of her desire through voice (invocatory

[23] Cf. Alcoff 1999, 20–1.

[24] See, for example, Dyer 1993(1988); Dyer 1997, 2; Erickson 1995, 166; Chambers 1997; Aenerud 1999, 37. As Ruth Frankenberg astutely notes, the invisible status is not delimited in particular times and places; the presumptions of whiteness can vary even in the same time and place. Frankenberg 1999 (1997), 5–6.

drive).[25] Moreover, if the above depiction and the auditory imaginary it evokes is considered more closely, it is discovered that the description adds certain epithets to the voice that hint towards a racial difference. The description of the voice is full of contradictions, which point towards the ambiguous nature of its owner from the standpoint of the white protagonist. Moreover, the man's voice seems to expose to the narrator an experience of hurt, sorrow, and pain. This explains her attraction to the owner of the voice. The experience of hurt and pain means for her an awareness of being different, and brings the owner of the voice closer to her, because she is familiar with an experience of being different. Indeed, a little later, the protagonist thinks: "*He has been wounded to the heart! He, too!*" (ITYT 118). For the protagonist, the experience of being different is primarily associated with gender; she thinks she is "not truly female" (ITYT 121). She starts to display herself in new ways when Vernor is present, and tries to make herself attractive as a female in order to win his attention.

The protagonist hears Vernor's voice at the Ethics class, where he sits out of the range of the narrator's vision (ITYT 103). When he speaks, all the students around her turned "to frow; with disapproval" (ITYT 104). According to the narrator, Vernor turns heads, because he often boldly argues with the professor. Yet, it is noteworthy that he is the *only* African American student in the philosophy class. In the beginning of the sixties, the presence of a black man in the white northern university is still extraordinary. This is also acknowledged in the novel: "[…] there were not many non-Caucasian students, but a few" (ITYT 126). His arrogance arouses disapproval especially among the white male students, and he is considered a "'personality' – everyone knew him, or was aware of him" (ITYT 112–3).

[25] The terms of scopic and invocatory drive, and the idea of the two drives as partial manifestations of desire come from Lacan. In his re-conceptualization of Freud's drive (*Trieb*) Lacan identifies four partial drives of which the scopic drive and invocatory drive are related to desire. According to Lacan, the invocatory drive "is the closest to the experience of unconscious." See Lacan 1988 (1977), 104. Moreover, Lacan understands drive (in comparison to instinct) as different from biological needs, which can be satisfied. For Lacan, drive is an effect of the symbolic law (thus a cultural and symbolical construct), which cannot be satisfied; the aim of drive is to return to a circular path of drive. According to Lacan, "this is the only form of transgression that is permitted to the subject in relation to the pleasure principle." See Lacan 1988 (1977), 161– 73, 177–86.

Vernor's description functions also as a narrative strategy that deliberately draws attention to the white protagonist's ways of thinking about race. A little later we learn that the description is motivated by her idea, that race does not define a person. The narration also makes clear that the protagonist is inexperienced, especially when it comes to questions about of race. She comes from Strykersville, a small county in the state of New York near Buffalo, where there was no "civil unrest" or "racial strife" (ITYT 160). At this stage, she reasons and rationalizes everything through philosophy, which she studies vigorously. She compensates for her lack of experience by leaning on her knowledge of philosophy, and takes the doctrines of philosophers literally.

Vernor's physical appearance is not depicted until fifteen pages later, when the protagonist narrates the moment when she first dares to speak to him. First, she describes Vernor's face as "beautiful as something carved out of mahogany" (ITYT 115). After using the word "negro," she describes his racial features, and compares the color of his skin to that of her own:

> Negro. "Negro." A word, a term, that had come to fascinate me, too. Vernor Matheius's features were "Negroid" features" and Vernor Matheius was, if you were compelled to categorize the man in blunt racial, or racist, terms, "Negro." For his skin was the color of damp earth; sometimes it was dull, and without lustre; at other times it was rich and smooth with something smoldering inside; a coppery-maroon; skin I imagined would be hot to touch. (Unlike my pale winter-chapped skin that felt cold to me, the tips of my fingers often icy.) (ITYT 116)

After the above description, she explains that because she "had come to him through his voice, language, his obvious intelligence, Vernor Matheius's race was not his predominant characteristic to" her (ITYT 116). She admits that had she seen Vernor somewhere else (than in the philosophy class), she would have categorized him as "Negro." Although she claims that race does not define Vernor, she is simultaneously romanticizing her idea of Vernor *because* of his racial features. For example, she finds his "woolly-springy" hair "a work of art" (ITYT 116). Moreover, the opposition she makes between dark skin, which she has imagined as *hot* to touch, and her own pale skin, which feels *cold*, suggests

that she makes a clear division between "black" and "white." That is, although her thinking may first seem purely anti-essentialist, her impression of Vernor is partly allied with lay beliefs and familiar fantasies of black people that reflect essentialist thinking.

The protagonist reasons that race does not define Vernor any more than it does her: "Any more than I was a *white* girl, a *Caucasian*. What did that mean?" (ITYT 117). Above all, she thinks that race does not matter, because there are no races, thus her being "white" does not mean anything. Her standpoint explains why she wants to distance herself from the visual economy, which naturalizes racial meanings. Moreover, her attitude reflects color-blindness, which has had different stages, meanings, and aspirations in history of the United States. In the recent theorization, which examines the post-civil rights era, colorblindness is understood as part of a paradigm or an epistemology of racial thinking that has various elements and effects.[26] At the time of the early civil rights movement in the 1950s, it represented radical thinking, which embraced utopian ideas of emancipation, based on ideas that racial classifications would no more have any validity in classifying people.[27] After the civil rights struggle, and especially since the 1980s, it has been criticized for maintaining the racial status quo instead of dismantling racial divisions.[28]

In the case of the protagonist, colorblind thinking means, primarily, that she relies on the idea of race neutrality. She is aware of the existing racial inequality, but she has made an individual decision that race is an idea that does not affect her thinking. If this is put in the context of the early 1960s, her attitude can be read as relying on the prevalent positive emancipative thinking. Nevertheless, I argue, the novel echoes of the contemporary discussion about color-blindness, and altered attitudes to racial problematic in the U.S. society. That is, the protagonist's attitude reflects also the pitfalls of the color-blind thinking in the context of the post-civil-rights era. As she claims that race does not define her, she unintentionally reflects her social privilege of being white, the

[26] See, for example, Gutiérrez-Jones 2001, 48–89; Bonilla-Silva 2006 (2004), 4–8; Haney López 2006, 147–8, 156–62.
[27] Brown 2003, 2–3; Haney López 2006, 157.
[28] McCristal Culp 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2006, 9–10; Haney López 2006, 158; Sullivan 2006, 5.

facility to choose racial neutrality. As Shannon Sullivan, who focuses on the unconscious habits that maintain white privilege, notes, this kind of assumptions may restrain conscious reflection on the meaning of race.[29] In my view, *I'll Take You There* demonstrates through the development of the white protagonist, the importance of critical reflection on the complications of race for both an individual and society. The process of gaining this knowledge is not easy for the protagonist, as we learn as the narrative of her relationship with Vernor evolves.

In part one, the protagonist wanted to be similar to the sorority girls, which led to a personal crisis. By claiming to be Jewish, she rejects a certain, culturally normed idea of white woman. In a way, the abrogation of her sorority membership opens up a way out of the repressive normativity the membership entails. A relationship with Vernor offers her an opportunity to reflect who she is. That is, her fascination with Vernor is closely connected to her processing of her identity. Moreover, a relationship with Vernor supports her wish to transform herself. In fact, when she first introduces herself to Vernor, she claims her name is "Anellia," because she finds her true name too ordinary, and believes, that if she is differently named she would be a different person (ITYT 144). This kind of denial of a one's name is typical for Oates's characters in general, and signifies the characters' repudiation of their past and attempt to create their own identity, as Ellen G. Friedman observes.[30] Vernor pronounces the name symptomatically as "Annul-ia," which evokes the verb 'annul': to reduce to nothing. As Vernor observes (after learning her real name), as "Anellia" she is posing as someone she is not: "'Anellia' – she-who-is-not" (ITYT 189).[31] In her efforts to be well liked, and to belong, she adopts constantly new personalities. Her adopted personalities are combinations of constantly shifting characteristics: "My so-called personality had always been a costume I put on fumblingly, and removed […]; it shifted depending upon circumstances, like unfastened cargo in the hold of a ship" (ITYT 129). At the time when she

[29] Sullivan 2006, 6.
[30] Friedman 1980, 37.
[31] Cf. Friedman's example of a character, Natashya in *Expensive People*, who changes her name from Nancy Romanow to Natashya Romanov. The new Natashya is also called 'Nada', which signifies "nothingness." Friedman 1980, 37.

tries to win Vernor's attention, she uses an expression of "making herself visible" to Vernor (ITYT 127 130). In order to do this, she has to "reinvent" herself, which she does by buying secondhand clothing, and by creating a certain feminine style. Although her becoming visible in this context is, above all, associated with her gender, it has also to do with her whiteness.

Interracial Intimacy as a Rite of Passage

As the protagonist walks beside Vernor on the street for the first time, because they happen to be going in the same direction, she notices how people pay attention to them:

> So it happened that we walked together; people on the street, glancing at us, might have imagined us as a couple; an interracial couple, of whom there were a few at the university[.] (ITYT 126)

In the early sixties, a relationship between a white woman and a black man is still a prevailing social taboo. The protagonist seems not to be aware of the miscegenation taboo, and she has not given thought about how other people might react to an interracial relationship. Immediately as she is perceived as a white woman in an interracial relationship (even though it does not even exist yet), she becomes visible in the eyes of others. As this happens, even a friendly relationship with Vernor is thrilling to her, and has the allure of doing something prohibited. As she sits in a pub with Vernor, she notices being observed by some Kappa girls, and feels excited: "I felt a thrill of defiance, vindication. They had known I was a bad girl, and this was the proof" (ITYT 152). If compared to Melanie in "White Trash," Anellia's relationship with Vernor is less an act of trying to confirm her whiteness. Similar to Melanie, however, her involvement with Vernor displays an act of defiance against norms and social rules, especially concerning white female identity.

Unlike the protagonist, who is excited about the disapproving attention, Vernor, in turn, acts very cautiously in the company of a white girl, quite like

Mayweather Smith in "White Trash." Whereas Mayweather is more vigilant mainly in the public spaces, under the eyes of other people, Vernor behaves rigorously, according to his principles, at all times and in all spaces. At first, he shows no interest in the protagonist. Nevertheless, once, after spontaneously accompanying Anellia to a coffeehouse, he takes her to his apartment. Anellia assumes they will have sex together, but Vernor seems to take her to his apartment only to test her. He demands to know why she came with him to his apartment. Finally, he says: "Look, Anellia, you don't want to do his, and I don't, either'" (ITYT 141). Anellia is humiliated, but after the rejection, she becomes even more drawn to him. She starts hanging around in places where she knows Vernor usually spends time. He notices this, and asks her directly what she wants from him. He seems to be well aware of the protagonist's frantic attempts to endorse her identity through a relationship with him.

As Vernor and Anellia start to spend time together, he warns her that he is not a man for any woman to count on and that Anellia should not love him or even try to know him (ITYT 173). They never plan to meet, and all meetings "must be accidental, or seeming so" (ITYT 172). Their relationship changes abruptly after an incident, when a group of white young males shouts racist slurs at them. As they are walking on a street one evening, they provoke as an interracial couple a carload of drunken young white men: "[…] yelling 'Nigger!' – 'Nig-ger!' – 'Nig-gers's bitch!" – swerved in our direction; a jeering horn, beer cans flung at us spraying beer like urine" (ITYT 174). Anellia and Vernor are both shocked, but the incident has a stronger influence on Vernor. He is very upset, and as they walk to his apartment, he asks Anellia to stay with him for a while. In the apartment, he demands her to take off her clothes. The shadow of the incident is heavily present in the room as Vernor approaches Anellia:

> […] his eyes were deep-socketed and glistening; without his glasses he was a man I didn't know; the flying skeins of beer like urine had defiled us both, though not touching us; jeering ugly white-man voices *Nig-ger!* in this room with us struggling in the dark so Vernor Matheius grunted what sounded like '*Nig-ger! who's a nig-ger?*'" (ITYT 176)

Vernor's behavior is aggressive although he does not force Anellia to have sex with him. Feeling oppressed and hurt by racist insults, Vernor discharges his frustration by taking the role of the sexually aggressive black man, which is the opposite of how he usually behaves.

Vernor's behavior recalls the familiar pattern, a use of the stereotypical image of a black man as a sexual threat to a white woman, which already appeared in "The Molesters" and "White Trash." In Oates's fiction, the pattern is most often connected to a white woman's identity crisis, or, to a certain phase of development. The pattern also appears in a story titled "Phase Change," in *Haunted: Tales of the Grotesque* (1994), where a white middle-aged woman named Julia has a dream of four black waiters attacking and raping her. Similar to "The Molesters," the black man's involvement in a violent scene occurs at the level of dream (or fantasy). More often than not, when a black man is concretely present in the situation, as Mayweather in "White Trash," the situation involves a threat of violence instead of actual violent acts. Moreover, the threatening situation is closely linked to white racism and racial discrimination. That is, the scene motivates a reading that sees the black man's reaction as a backlash to white racism. The use of the pattern in Oates's recent fiction not only reminds of the racism of the past, but also shows how the racism of the past and present recoils on whiteness.

According to Christine Atkins, in Oates's female coming-of-age stories a violent fantasy, such as rape, functions as rite of passage for girls and women in the process of attaining growth and agency. Atkins takes an example of Oates's short story "Naked" in *Heat and Other Stories* (1992), where a middle-aged woman is attacked and stripped of her clothes by black children. She reads the story as focusing on the "fear of being victimized by cultural rape scripts themselves – particularly the belief that women want or deserve rape," and sees the violent act as pushing the white woman towards self-discovery.[32] Although I disagree with Atkins that "Naked" focuses primarily on the woman's fear that the incident would be interpreted as a rape, or that the story works as an example of a coming-of-age story, her observation of the function of the violent

[32] Atkins 2002, 436.

incident in the story is noteworthy. I agree that in Oates's stories, which epitomize coming-of-age and include violent acts, the violent incidents may function as a rite of passages, which may work towards maturity and self-discovery.[33] Already her early novels include a trajectory in which the main character's development is dictated by a series of violent events and extreme experiences, as Friedman notes.[34] Nevertheless, I suggest, that in Oates's recent fiction, instead of a violent act, an interracial encounter induces a process, which may or may not lead to an improved sense of agency for a white woman. That is, an interracial encounter, which may include violent incidents, but not necessarily so, works as a crucial stage in the constitution of white female identity or the re-evaluation of white womanhood in a moment of crisis. This is a culturally determined process, which is linked to questions about national identity; what being an American involves.

Moreover, I would stress that the actual incident in "Naked" is less violent than it is humiliating for the white woman, and that the fact that the attackers are black children has more significance in the context of the story. What I find enlightening concerning the issue of race is that, as Sally Robinson interprets, the woman's outrage of her attackers "is accompanied by *shame*[.]"[35] Similar to my analysis of Iris's guilt and shame in chapter three, I suggest, that her feeling of shame stirs up her self-awareness as a white woman, her social position as white. My interpretation is supported by the woman's persistent fear that she might be accused of being racist if she were to make a report to the police. As Robinson notes, the story criticizes a certain "self-congratulatory liberalism,"[36] or as I would phrase it, *colorblindness* typical of a white person living in the post-civil-rights era. Although the story treats the woman, who is not able to move beyond her colorblind view, with irony, it is through her

[33] Yet, I also contend that violent acts in general do not always function in the same way in Oates's fiction. For example, in her novel *Rape: A Love Story* (2003), the rape (by several white men) of a white woman functions differently and has various consequences.
[34] Friedman 1980, 139–40, 194.
[35] Robinson 1992, 409.
[36] Ibid.

contemplation on the different aspects of her identity that she reaches – if only for a moment – "a greater sense of agency," as Atkins suggests.[37]

Nevertheless, the end of the story, as the woman is hiding naked near her own house unable to grasp why she is waiting (H 138), leaves her future ambiguous. A prospect of an uncertain future is typical for Oates's recent fiction that reflects on whiteness.[38] Mason Stokes suggests that a critical practice should focus on "an unsettled and disturbed whiteness," because it is a moment when whiteness reveals itself and exposes its anxiety about the future.[39] In the context of "Naked," whiteness becomes disturbed after the woman's encounter with the idea of race that forces her to consider her identity as white. Furthermore, the end of the story suggests that the future of the white woman (and of whiteness) remains ambiguous as long as she is not able to understand why she is waiting. Thus, I argue, the end of the story emphasizes that in order to resolve her dilemma, she has to understand and take responsibility for what and who she is not only at the individual level, but also in relation to the social and historical context.

As I have already mentioned, in *I'll Take You There*, the interracial relationship is represented as a phase in the white protagonist's development. In the depiction of the cross-racial relationship, there is no single event, which would perform as the decisive moment for her identity constitution. Nevertheless, the above-described scene, which represents interracial intimacy as a repercussion to an experience of racism, is one of the culmination points of the interracial encounter in the narration. At first, when Anellia and Vernor are seen together and misinterpreted by others as a couple, Annelia has a sense of defiance. The moment she actually becomes Vernor's lover, however, marks a kind of anticlimax for her, and her sense of defiance disappears. Subsequently, Vernor becomes moody, despises Anellia for adoring him, and humiliates her in various ways. Anellia still hopes for Vernor's love, and stays in the

[37] Atkins 2002, 444.

[38] The pattern appears also in "Death Valley" and "White Trash", in which the end of the story leaves the central white character, the unnamed white man in "Death Valley" and Melanie in "White Trash", confused and indicate his/her future as ambiguous.

[39] Stokes 2001, 191.

unsatisfactory relationship. As long as she stays in the relationship, her process of gaining independence seems to be in a halt.

Racialization, Self-reflexivity, and Agency

Before the relationship between Anellia and Vernor finally ends, the protagonist learns more about the significance of race and racialization in a society, which contributes not only to a more intricate awareness of the racial problematic, but also towards independence and agency. Although her relationship with Vernor's instigates negative attention, which is related to racial anxiety and white fears concerning nation building, she disaffiliates herself from the politics concerning racial issues. In this, she is largely following Vernor's conviction.

The process of the protagonist's individual development comprises an ability to reflect on whiteness and her own white identity critically, as it is affected by racialization. This is not a straightforward process, but involves several stages. The process ripens as she is summoned to the dean's office, where she is questioned about her relationship with Vernor (ITYT 206). The dean leads the protagonist to believe that she has the power to expel her from the university. As the protagonist listens to the dean, she becomes angry. Most of all, her anger is directed to the dean's "white" way of looking things: "*She believes white skin is sacred, you've defiled it and her*" (ITYT 209). She defends herself fiercely, and even threatens to sue the dean.

> "[…] You have no right to intimidate me. I am twenty years old, an adult! My friend Vernor Matheius is associated with the American Civil Liberties Union and we'll sue you, you and the university both, if you continue in this racist persecution, we know our rights as – American citizens" (ITYT 211).

Vernor's association with the Union is, of course, a lie. So far, he has been intent on ignoring the civil rights struggle. Her proclaiming loyalty to Vernor and American Civil Liberties is not so much about her sense of solidarity to African Americans as it is her way of asserting herself and expressing her

independence. The incident at the dean's office makes her feel "the thrill of the outlaw" (ITYT 212). By renouncing white solidarity, she resists social rules, which gives her a sense of independence and agency: "*So I am a nigger-lover, and a pathogen. That is what I am*" (ITYT 212). For her, white skin is "a camouflage" she "might wear through life" (ITYT 212). Even so, her whiteness is not just a camouflage, which she can freely choose, but a position assumed through the process of racialization, which provides her certain privileges and social mobility.

Sara Ahmed, who looks at ways in which race is about embodied reality – a phenomenological issue – observes that seeing oneself as white does affect what one "can do," that is, whiteness is an orientation that determines what is and is not within reach.[40] Ahmed's proposition contains the idea that bodies are shaped by histories of colonialism, which they know implicitly, received as an inheritance from others, even if they do not remember or know them. Although the protagonist has been dispelled from whiteness, she is also "shaped by what she inherits," to use Ahmed's words.[41] That is, she is in a contingent proximity to whiteness, which shapes her: she is seen as a white person, who shares a bodily likeness to whiteness (bodily inheritance), and she has been raised as a white American, which means that she has been "passed down" a certain history (historical inheritance).[42] The historical inheritance is something of which she is not so consciously aware, and from which she, on the other hand, tries to distance herself.

The protagonist has another "lesson" of her interracial relationship as Vernor takes her out for the first (and last) time. For Anellia, to appear publicly with Vernor is "a giddy thing" (ITYT 218). In the restaurant she is, however, painfully aware of the disapproving staring of middle-aged and well-dressed white people:

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[40] Ahmed 2006, 112. Ahmed's understanding of "orientation" involves the question of how bodies inhabit spaces, the intimacy of bodies, and their dwelling places. Moreover, it concerns "finding ones way" in spaces, which involves a dynamic negotiation between familiar and unfamiliar. On Ahmed's understanding of orientation see, in particular, Ahmed 2006, 6–9.

[41] Ahmed 2006, 124.

[42] Cf. Ahmed 2006, 124–5; Ahmed 2007, 154.

> I was beginning to feel the oppression of *white*; the ubiquity of white; for everyone in the Brass Rail was white except the busboys in white (dazzling white!) uniforms, and these busboys were black. (ITYT 219)

This time, the protagonist does not experience a sense of defiance. Instead, she feels, quite concretely, the presence of white supremacy in the public space, which echoes the inheritance of the past colonial history of masters and servants. At the same time, it is an enduring condition of the present, where racialization and racism continue to exist and evolve.

In the restaurant Vernor, "who'd seemed until this moment to have no personal history" starts telling about his ancestors (ITYT 220). Moreover, he wants Anellia to answer his question: "What do you want from me, Anellia?" (ITYT 222). Anellia says she only wants to be with him, which does not satisfy Vernor. The dinner is, again, one of Vernor's ways of testing Anellia. Throughout their acquaintanceship, Vernor makes efforts to help Anellia to gain self-reflexivity. His persistent question about what Anellia wants from him is an attempt to make her realize what her "wanting to be with" Vernor, a black man, signifies for her. Once again, Anellia fails to answer the question. Yet, she is stirred by her experience in the restaurant, where people openly show their disapproval toward the interracial couple. She seems to be conscious of the ways in which white supremacy shapes the social divisions between white and black, and how it concerns her, although she would like to stand apart from it. She starts thinking, for the first time, that she might not be strong enough to have an interracial relationship. When Vernor and Anellia leave, after the waiter has humiliated them, Anellia asks herself: "*Can I live this life, am I strong enough?*" (ITYT 224). This suggests that she becomes aware of the complexity of the racialization and its historical inheritance, as it permeates the world around her, and has an effect on her as an individual.

Henceforward the events related to the civil rights movement start to have an effect on Vernor. He is not able to ignore the shocking news about the murder of NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, and his willfully controlled demeanor starts to disintegrate; he drinks heavily, and refuses to leave his

apartment. Although Vernor has suggested that they should end their relationship, Anellia refuses to stay away from him. When he gets sick, Anellia stays in his apartment taking care of him despite his objections: "*I don't' want you, your cunt, the color of your skin repulses me*" (ITYT 228). The final conflict takes place as Anellia goes through his personal papers, and finds some snapshots. In one of the photographs, Vernor is in a company of a young black woman and children, obviously his wife and children. Vernor finds Anellia in the act, gets furious, and drives her away cursing after her: "*Get out of here don't ever come back God damn you! fuck you! fuck you white bitch!*" (ITYT 233). Hurt and stunned by the episode, the protagonist decides to annul her role as "Anellia" and to "step into history":

> […] I would step into history, as Vernor has scorned; I would join demonstrators marching and chanting and waving handmade signs; I would join CORE, I would join SANE; I would find a way of bringing my inner life, my questing life, into balance with history; I would be fearless, or give that impression; I would be fearless though frightened; I would march with Negroes and whites and confront the race-hatred of my race; I would expose my heart, as I would expose my body; I would make myself vulnerable, I would expiate my guilt; I would remake myself another time, empowered by loss, grief. No longer Anellia. Waiting to see who I might be, after Anellia. (ITYT 236)

The protagonist's outpouring suggests that in order to gain a desired agency as a white woman, she has to take responsibility of both her own life and what is happening around her. This includes that she stops pretending to be someone else, someone who is "not there," and lets herself act in the world. Being involved in the political activism concerns her future as a white woman. In other words, the conflict with Vernor empowers her to test the limits of her agency, the ability to make the choices to act, which she has so far evaded. She seems to acknowledge how the continuing legacy of racism both enables and limits her actions, and faces who she is. This does not mean that she would simply fit in or align herself within the normative contours of gender and race that have an effect on her identity.

Vernor comes after her, one more time, and starts to explain. He starts by saying that he does not have "a black soul" or that he does not believe in personal identity "[t]he way a color-blind person doesn't believe in color because he hasn't experienced it" (ITYT 236). His point is that there is a difference from which position you claim that race *does not define* a person. He also tells the handed-down secret about his ancestors, who were brought to North America as slaves but who had been slave traders themselves. He has learned this when he was twenty, and it is probably one of the reasons why he has disconnected himself from his relatives. He does not offer, however, this as a straightforward explanation. Instead, he states, that it is not the protagonist's concern, who or what he has left behind, and who or what he is (ITYT 237). By telling about his ancestors he implies that no matter how much he would like to, he cannot escape either the history of his ancestors or the fact he is African American. In addition, his story demonstrates that belonging to a certain (racialized) community, which can be seen both as a bodily and historically inherited proximity to a group, is a complex and contingent matter. His belonging to a community of African Americans does not completely determine who he is, or what he can do. The protagonist remarks that Vernor is not his ancestors "any more than I am my ancestors" (ITYT 238). Yet, Vernor answers to this by saying: "Then I'm no one. I don't know who the hell I am" (ITYT 238). The protagonist does not understand why this should matter, but Vernor is the one to have the final word: "Yes, why should it matter? Yet it does" (ITYT 239). If the protagonist understands her black mentor remains unknown. The narrator-protagonist does not comment or reflect the discussion in any way.

What follows in the narration after Vernor's final word, is, however, momentous. The second part ends as the protagonist describes how she sits next to Vernor:

> How strange to be sitting beside this man on these wooden stairs smelling faintly of rot, at such a time; gazing out toward the rain; a couple seated together gazing out into the rain; they live upstairs and have come outside for fresh air, the man smoking and the woman seated close beside him […] How strange, how uncanny and how wonderful, what elation flooded my small gnarled heart on the eve of my twentieth birthday as I sat beside Vernor Matheius on the stairs at the rear of the shabby stucco building at 1183 Chambers Street, Syracuse, New York on the rain-swept night of June 18, 1963. If you'd driven by, and noticed that couple, wondering who they were, they were us. (ITYT 239)

What I find momentous in the above excerpt are the transitions in the narrator's voice: from the narrating I, who sits beside "this man," to the voice in the third person that sees the man and the woman (herself) from the outside, and then back to the first person, I, who sits in a specific place at a specific time. The transitions draw attention to how she is able *to see* herself from the outside, and to imagine herself *to be seen* by others, which may be interpreted as a new stage for her as a subject, as a white woman, who is capable of self-reflexivity in some new manner. Finally, she addresses the narration to "you," the reader (narratee), who might have seen her and Vernor, "us." The addressing of the reader unsettles the situation between the author, the narrator, and the audience. It emphasizes that there is a change at the level of the story, and encourages the reader's response to the situation by enclosing the reader and the narrator to the same space and time.[43] It is as if the narrator-protagonist and Vernor belonged in the past to a real world with the reader instead of being characters in a narrative world.

The scene may also be interpreted from a phenomenological point of view as a moment of (the narrator-protagonist's) *re-orientation*. Here I am referring, again, to Ahmed's investigation of whiteness as an orientation. The moment of re-orientation is followed by a process, through which the protagonist has started actively to discern and reflect who she is, and where she might be going. This includes a prospect of the future. If the coming-of-age story

[43] My idea of the significance of the change of dynamics in the narration is inspired by James Phelan and his rhetorical understanding of narrativity. See Phelan 1996; Phelan 2007.

as a whole is interpreted following Ahmed's idea of re-orientation, the novel describes *a series of moments of re-orientation* from the point of view of the white female protagonist. In the context of the novel, these moments lead to an increased agency for the protagonist, and relate to an array of intersections between gender, class, and race.

To the question of what the moment of re-orientation means in relation to race and whiteness, there is no simple answer. The novel leaves it open, and moves on to part three, which deals with the protagonist's final process towards independence and adulthood. Yet, at the same time, it also leaves open a "possibility of changing directions and finding other paths," to use Ahmed's words.[44] After all, this is a story, which is told from the present and which looks back to the past. In my view, the narration does not simply tell the protagonist's story, but "takes us there," to the past, and in so doing, invites the readers to ponder the possible other paths for racial relations in general, and for the white woman's agency in particular, in the U.S. context.

The theme of white female agency in the framework of an inter-racial relationship has previously appeared in earlier representations in American literature (by white female writers), such as Louisa May Alcott's short stories "My Contraband" and "M.L." published in the mid-nineteenth century, as Diane R. Paulin brings out. Paulin asks why is it that these stories imagine white female agency in relation to black male powerlessness. She contends that even if the stories do not redefine the relationship between blackness and whiteness, or overturn the era's racial and gender hierarchies, they do offer an alternative to white women and disrupt the hegemonic, white supremacist discourses that include an idea that white women need protection from black men.[45] As a coming-of-age story, *I'll Take You There* deals with the questions of a white woman's agency in more complex ways and disrupts simple divisions between powerful and powerless. Firstly, the story depicts in many ways how the protagonist is neither free nor totally determined by external forces.

[44] Ahmed 2006, 178.

[45] Paulin 2002, 127. Alcott's stories also significantly differ for *I'll Take You There* in that they focus on the white middle/upper class identity women's identity, and that the depicted relationships with light-skinned black men (or mulattoes) remain platonic.

Moreover, her negotiations are multiple and concern complications of the intersecting points of class, gender, and race. Secondly, she develops and gains agency through various relationships (with her parents, her brothers and Kappa girls), not merely through the interracial relationship.

The most significant relationships (with members of her family and a black man) that have an effect on the protagonist are the very same that are represented in "The Molesters." If compared to this early story, or to the more recent novel *Because it Is Bitter*, *I'll Take You There* displays more successful negotiations concerning the relations with the significant others and with the normative contours of gender, class, and race. For example, the end of *Because It Is Bitter*, as Iris decides to pass as a white, upper-class woman, suggests that she aligns herself within whiteness in order to enjoy the privileges of whiteness fully. In other words, she settles on the comfort of whiteness.[46] Instead of going through a process, which would help her to deal with her past in ways that could contribute to an amplified self-reflexivity, Iris decides bluntly to learn to forget about the past. She writes in her journal: "*I must learn to forget, I am learning to forget. I live in present tense and have never been happier*" (BB 402). Her aim to live in the present tense exposes her fragileness and her coming-of-age as a kind of failure; instead of moving towards the future, she stays fixed in the present. The importance of understanding the significance of past experiences as a guide for the future is a prevailing theme in Oates's fiction, especially in her coming-of-age stories.[47] Both Iris and Anellia gain agency, and their coming-of-age stories include passages of rite that involve encounters with anxiety (including facing with whiteness) that require elucidation by each protagonist. This further opens up to a self-awareness, which partly contributes to their development and increased sense of agency. Nevertheless, the narrative of *I'll Take You There* leaves more space or potential for a (self)critical relation to race

[46] A feel of certain comfort suggests, as Ahmed elaborates, not only well-being and satisfaction, but also easiness. Accordingly, whiteness may function as a "public comfort" that allows bodies to fit into space, to move with comfort through space, and to be extended by the social spaces they inhabit. Ahmed 2007, 158–9.

[47] Cf. Theriot's (2007) analysis of Oates's most famous early short story, "Where Are Going, Where Have You Been?" (1966).

from a white point of view, which also points towards a more positive future for the white subject. This is suggested not only by the protagonist's active dealing with of her past in relation to herself, who and what she is, but also by her stirring awareness of American history; how it continues to exist in the present in the social hierarchy and mobility of diverse individuals and communities.

As my reading of "The Molesters" demonstrated, the representation of Oates's interracial intimacy evokes the old miscegenation taboo, and the stereotypical myth of the black man as a sexual threat that reflects both old and current racial anxieties. The story makes explicit the cultural construction of this threat by displaying how the white girl attaches threatening significance to racial difference, and how she becomes aware of certain cultural rules. Furthermore, as I concluded in chapter two, although the story reflects racial anxieties typical for whites, it also demonstrates an attempt to examine the problematic of race critically. Oates's story "White Trash," examined in previous chapter, demonstrates notably, how the representation of interracial intimacy may reflect the problematic of whiteness. The representation of interracial intimacy between a white woman and a black man still carries an ambiguous air of threat (from the point of view of the white woman), but it is also given a reason through a reference to an example of racial discrimination in the age of legal segregation. As such, the story reminds of the history of racial relations that cannot be ignored in the present.

The portrayal of Vernor in *I'll Take You There* evades the stereotypical roles of a black man, but the myth of the black man as a sexual threat still lingers as a haunting image in the story. Thus, the novel demonstrates how the stereotype (which belongs to a condition inherited from the past) still is an inevitable fantasy or obsession for white Americans. Yet, it also shows signs of an attempt to see how cross-racial relationships may contribute to the adoption of a new stance to racial relations in U.S. society by drawing attention to what happens in the everyday cross-racial encounters from a white point of view. This kind of approach to the racial problematic rises to the challenge offered by Toni Morrison, who in her essays calls attention for intellectual efforts "to see what

racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters."[48] The novel aims carefully to depict from a white viewpoint the ways in which racial identities are shaped in a situation that the readers recognize as a representation of a past American "reality." Consequently, the novel draws attention to the complexity of the practices of racialization in U.S. society. The coming-of-age story of the unnamed white female underlines the importance of knowing and understanding history, and its inheritance at both an individual and communal level. This includes a call for a further investigation of the culturally situated subject, in particular, of what being white American means. It does not offer a clear ethical stance to the racial relations in the U.S. in the contemporary era, but instead, invites us to think of how the past continues to shape the ways we inhabit the world, what the past might mean in the present, and what we may still learn from it.

[48] Morrison 1992, 12.

CHAPTER 6

THE APOTHEOSIS OF WHITE WOMAN IN *BLONDE*

Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Blonde*, first published in 2000, is based on the life of the iconic Hollywood movie star Marilyn Monroe. As a central figure of American post-war popular culture, Monroe has inspired a vast amount of biographies and novels, documentaries and films, which try to answer the question of who she really was.[1] Because of the countless replications of Monroe's life, every attempt to examine the complexity of her life is an "elusive process," as Carl Rollyson puts it.[2] According to Richard Dyer, star images consist of different elements, which are complex and articulate the experience of being an individual. [3] Correspondingly, as Oates reflects on the intense writing experience of *Blonde*, she connects Monroe's life with epithets of gender, class, and Americanness in the following way:

> [S]he came to represent certain "life-elements" in my own experience and, I hope, in the life of America. A young girl, born in to poverty, cast off by her father and eventually by her mother, who, as in a fairy tale, becomes an iconic "Fair Princess" and is posthumously celebrated as "The Sex Symbol of the 20th century," making millions of dollars for other people – it's just too sad, too ironic. (Johnson 2003, 146)

Oates also states, how she started writing *Blonde* as a novella, but instead created an "'epic' form to accommodate the complexities of life."[4] Her description suggests that Monroe's life story ultimately articulates the

[1] After her death, Monroe is seen as a figure emblematic of 1950s America. See, for example, Monaco 2001, 124; Dyer 1986, 19; Mulvey 1996, 47
[2] Rollyson 2005, 16.
[3] Dyer 1986, 18.
[4] Johnson 2003, 145.

complex experience of being an individual, that is, a famous woman in the post-war America.

As Paige Baty appositely describes, the experience of having Marilyn Monroe as the object of research requires "a kind of productive schizophrenia," because Monroe "refuses the simple dichotomies of fact and fiction, fantasy and history, as she is made up over the years, and even as she made herself up during her lifetime." [5] Oates's novel deliberately blurs the lines between fact and fiction. Consequently, the reader experiences the protagonist based on a myth as both authentic and imaginative. This is why Oates's invention of Monroe's life story has frustrated some critics. Some claim that *Blonde* is fantastic or inaccurate; others find that the novel's genius is exactly "in its refusal to sift out the fantasies and images into the texture of a fully realized character."[6] Oates herself emphasizes that she had "absolutely no interest in a purely biographical or historic book." [7] Critics' possessive attitude towards Marilyn is quite revealing. As Luc Sante observes, Marilyn has become "common property." [8] Indeed, Oates's fictional story draws upon collective memory, which is constructed of both visual and textual images of Monroe.

The act of remembering the story of the famous film star is to be seen as a strategy for re-examining the past, and hence delving into the identity of an American white woman through the collectively shared myth of Marilyn Monroe. The novel responds to the contemporary increased interest in memory, the so-called memory boom, which is apparent in the wide range of theoretical explorations, literary memoirs, films, heritage museums et cetera.[9] The growing interest and publication of memoirs has pervaded into the field of fiction as semi-autobiographical novels and memoir-like fictions.[10] The attentiveness to the significance

[5] Baty 1995, 6n6. Cf. also Churchwell 2005 (2004), 6–7.
[6] Vidimos 2000; Gray 2000, 82; Mizejevski 2000.
[7] Johnson 2003, 148.
[8] Sante 2000, 22.
[9] There are a number of diverse perspectives offered on the reasons for the emergence of the memory boom. See, for example, Huyssen 2003, 11–8; Breyer 2007, 22.
[10] Radstone 2007, 2, 193–4.

and dynamics of memory develops in Oates's fiction from early on, as for example her story "The Molesters" demonstrates. Nonetheless, in her recent fiction, she explores the problematic of memory in more reflective and complicate ways. Most of all, the significance of recollection is linked and observed in her fiction as a crucial site for identity formation under the predicaments of the contemporary cultural situation in the United States.

Sharon Oard Warner offers an insightful reading of the novel's relation to both fact and fairy tale.[11] Warner is not interested in how much or little Oates's version of Monroe's life resembles the "true story," but considers a much more important question of how the story is revised and subverted and for what purposes. Gavin Cologne-Brookes, in turn, reads *Blonde* as an exploration of fame and examines the protagonist as a woman reaching for iconic status.[12] In the same vein, I contend that the novel calls for a variety of detailed investigations of how the protagonist becomes a cultural icon. Monroe's star image evokes, for example, a plethora of attributes of woman and sexuality. Many scholars agree that she is the very archetype of female sexuality, and that her appearance makes sexuality explicit.[13] Oates also refers to the centrality of female sexuality in *Blonde*, and expresses a wish that her portrait of Monroe "transcends sex and gender."[14] Indeed, one of the endeavors of the novel is to display an effort to move beyond the regulating discourses of sex and gender. Nevertheless, as I will suggest in my reading, the protagonist's becoming a cultural icon is to be seen as a complex process conditioned by normative ideals, not only of gender and sexuality, but also of race, class, and nationality.

Blonde offers manifold angles to the theme of identity. In this chapter, I will offer two readings of the white female protagonist's various negotiations and struggles with the regulating, normative discourses that

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[11] Warner 2006.

[12] Cologne-Brookes 2005, 215–20.

[13] See, for example, Haskell 1987, 254–60; Dyer 1986, 19–66; Mulvey 1996, 48. Applying a Foucaultian approach to sexuality both, Dyer and Mulvey, see Monroe as a part of the new discourse of sexuality in the post-war context.

[14] Johnson 2003, 151.

demarcate her identity constitution. My endeavor is to consider the ways in which the novel represents possibilities of resisting the limiting conditions of the surrounding culture. In the first part of the chapter, I examine how the novel is concerned with the idea of a woman's body as a border for negotiations of a cultural discontent. The analytical focus in the first part is on gender and sexuality. In the second part of the chapter, I offer a detailed analysis of how race appears as a significant category of identity, which the protagonist identifies with. That is, how the representation of the blonde actress expresses anxiety about race and racialization. The negotiation with race and racialization is represented as determined by a certain time and space, which refers to a specific regime within American culture: the Hollywood discourse of visibility.

GENDER, EMBODIMENT, AND PERFORMANCE

Memory Work

The narration of *Blonde* is constructed by using several styles and polyphonic narration. Oates defines the viewpoint of narration as "a posthumous narration by the subject," which she has chosen in order to gain a "distancing effect" to the narrator's voice.[15] The narration is, however, a polyphony of narrative voices, that of Marilyn as well as those of other people involved in her life: mother, husbands, lovers, directors, and producers. Nevertheless, I agree with Lawrence Joseph, who perceives that the protagonist's narrative voice is so intense that it dominates the narration.[16] Thus, I suggest that *Blonde* is to be read as a kind of fictional autobiography by the narrator-protagonist. As such, and similar to *I'll Take You There*, the narration reflects both the characteristics and problematic of the autobiographical genre. The narration of *Blonde* follows some of the formal conventions of autobiography, such as the idea

[15] Johnson 2003, 145.
[16] Joseph 2000, 42.

of the narration as a representation of the process of self-construction.[17] Moreover, the time of the story follows a linear narrative. After the prologue, which begins *in ultimas res*, near the end of the protagonist's life story when "Death comes ringing the doorbell" in the early evening of August 3, 1962[18] (B 4), the narration is a sequence of the memories of the protagonist's life in a chronological order, opening with her early childhood, and ending at her death.

The narration uses different names for the protagonist. The shifting naming of the protagonist as Norma Jeane or Marilyn gives emphasis to the protagonist's different roles and identities. She prefers to call herself Norma Jeane, which signifies to her a private or "real" self, an authentic source of identity. Marilyn Monroe, in turn, is from her point of view, a public role and a construction created for the needs of the audience. She affirms that her public role is just an act, a voluntary performance. She even speaks of Marilyn in the third person as if she was another person, and claims that she can easily make a distinction between her private and public roles. Yet, towards the end of the novel, she is not able to separate her public and private roles from each other. Occasionally, she even forgets whom she is supposed to perform or who she actually is, and feels that she has lost her sense of self.

The narration reflects features of so-called memory work, which Annette Kuhn defines as "a conscious and purposeful staging of memory."[19] Similar to Oates's earlier fictive reflections of the nature of memory, such as "The Molesters" discussed in chapter two, the narration of the protagonist's memory work follows the principle of "Nachträglickeit." What is noteworthy in *Blonde*, though, is that the protagonist's omniscient narrative voice, which now and then emerges to comment on her own life from a posthumous point of view, is aware of the obscurity of memories, and that they are, in fact, re-interpretations of the past:

[17] On the formal conventions of autobiography, see Kuhn 2000, 180.
[18] Monroe died two days later, on August 5, 1962.
[19] Kuhn 2000, 186.

> An actress draws upon all she's lived. Her entire life. Her childhood especially. Though you don't remember childhood. You think you do but you don't really! And even when you're older, in adolescence. Much of memory is dreams, I think. Improvising. Returning to past, to change it. (B 482)

What I find striking in the above excerpt is that the idea of memories as always re-interpretations is perceived by the narrator as a *possibility*. This implies that the idea of the memory work by the narrator-protagonist has a creative and transformative significance in the story. In other words, her reason to return to her memories at the time of her death is motivated by an endeavor to transform her story. By returning to the past, she revises her dreams, and creates herself anew.

The Impact of Hollywood

Not only does the protagonist compare her memories to dreams but also to movies. The narration emphasizes from the very beginning the impact of the movie industry and classic Hollywood movies on the protagonist. Norma Jeane, the narrator-protagonist, compares her life story to a movie: "*This movie I've been seeing all my life, yet never to its completion.* Almost she might say *This movie is my life*" (B 9). A little later, she claims hauntingly: "For there is no meaning to life apart from the movie story" (B 10). As a narrator positioned at the time of telling, she is conscious of the impact these visual images have on her. In her memories, movie stories and images intermingle with those of her own life:

> And these women [on the movie screen], too — they were close enough to be touched, they were visions of yourself as in fairy-tale mirror, Magic Friends in other bodies, with faces that were somehow, mysteriously your own. Or would one day be your own. *Ginger Rogers, Joan Crawford, Katharine Hepburn, Jean Harlow, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Constance Bennet, Joan Blondell, Claudette Colbert, Gloria Swanson*. Like dreams dreamt in confusing succession their stories melded together. (B 53)

As a spectator, Norma Jeane identifies with the desirable images of the Hollywood movies. What she is looking at, and how, is entangled with how she positions herself as the object of gaze. She grows up under the magic of Hollywood movies that put forward a certain kind of female subjectivity to which she adjusts herself. Later, as her career as an actress begins, she in effect becomes a desirable image herself as "The Studio" modifies her image to correspond to the Hollywood ideal of a white woman. As film theorist Laura Mulvey argues in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," the Hollywood style partly arose "from its skilled and satisfying manipulation of visual pleasure."[20] According to Mulvey, Hollywood mainstream films coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order in which the image of woman as an erotic spectacle is playing and signifying the male desire.[21] Norma Jeane invests in the fantasies offered by the movie screen by occupying the position as the object of gaze, the image of a woman as a spectacle. To be the object of attention gives her pleasure, and becomes an obsession for her.

In addition to the influence of the movies, Norma Jeane's mother, Gladys Mortensen, teaches Norma Jeane to perceive herself through the mirror as if it was the eye of the camera:

[20] Mulvey 2003 (1975), 45. In her article, Mulvey put forward the theoretical concept of the male gaze that has been later criticized, because it suggested the idea of fixed gendered viewing relationships. The concept has been re-conceptualized (also by Mulvey herself), and many theorists have since argued that all kinds of women and men can occupy the active position of the so-called male gaze. For re-conceptualizations see, for example, Mulvey 1984; Rodowick 1991; hooks 1992; Straayer 1996. Nevertheless, Mulvey's idea of woman as an erotic spectacle is connected to a particular historical context. Hollywood films of a particular era (1930s) provided and supported certain representation of women, as well as certain kinds of identifications for the spectator. Mulvey's observations are useful in my analysis of the protagonist, who is influenced as a child by films dated to this particular era.

[21] Mulvey 2003 (1975), 48.

> We learned mirror-looking. There was my Friend-in-the-Mirror. As soon as I was big enough to see. My Magic Friend. There was purity in this. Never did I experience my face and body from the inside (where there was numbness like sleep), only through mirror, where there was sharpness and clarity. In that way I could see myself. (B 30)

The above description of the child looking at the mirror with her mother recalls Jacques Lacan's account of the mirror stage, which describes the infant's encounter with its specular reflection. The mirror image is the basis for the child's future identifications. In Lacan's view, the process of becoming a subject is a process of trying to fix the chain of signifiers so that a stable illusion of "I" becomes possible. The reflection of him or her as a whole in the mirror is only an image, an identification that is "misrecognition" (*méconnaissance*). The child's mother reinforces the recognition by assuring that the image of the child's body in the mirror is indeed real.[22] In the process of identification, the body is the screen upon which the subject projects its misidentification. Lacan suggests that since our sense of our body and self is based on *misrecognition*, we cannot really see our body/ourselves. The image in the mirror is already a fantasy, and the identification is "the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image[.]"[23]

Kaja Silverman, who focuses in her reading of Lacan's mirror stage on the principle of the "self-same body," emphasizes how the development of a subject's bodily ego is profoundly shaped by its surroundings, both by desires addressed to it and by cultural values imposed to it. According to Silverman, it is only with an idealized image of self that the subject can "experience him- or herself to be at least momentarily and pleasurably one."[24] This also partially explains the crucial role of idealization in human existence.[25] In *Blonde*, the identification with the Magic Friend represents the identification with an idealizing image of self. By "coming alive in her borrowed body" (B 557),

[22] Lacan 1977, 1–7, 77–107.
[23] Lacan 1977, 2.
[24] Silverman 1996, 24.
[25] Silverman 1996, 40–1.

as the protagonist describes it, she feels a certain pleasure. This is linked to her experience of her body through the mirror, where she is able to see herself as a unity, as a whole person.

By looking at her mirror image, and posing in front of the mirror as if it was the eye of a camera Norma Jeane learns to employ her "Friend-in-the-Mirror" in order to transform herself into the desired image. Her exceptional talent as a film actress is described in the narration by one of the studio employees in the following way:

> Monroe was flawless. A real professional. Once every word, every syllable, every note, and every beat was memorized, she was clockwork. […] She must've had the ability to see herself already on film, like an animation. This animation she could control from inside herself. She was controlling how the animation would be perceived by strangers, in a darkened theater. (B 412)

As an actress, Norma Jeane poses to the camera as if she already sees herself as the object of others' gaze. Her relation to the dominant cultural gaze is similar to that of Jinx in *Because It Is Bitter*; that is, she identifies with the cultural gaze at a distance, and assumes the image offered by the gaze. In other words, she is aware of the image-determining cultural gaze, and thus, of the cultural constructedness of her visual image. Her femininity and sexuality is a kind of performance based on the external demand she relentlessly aspires to satisfy. Yet, her passion *to be the ideal*, which means that she strives to embody a culturally normative set of bodily values, is also damaging to her. Moreover, because it is a continuous desire, it is never to be satisfied.

Hysteric Performance

The novel offers detailed depictions of the protagonist's multiple performances. What I find particularly striking is the ways in which the narration aims to describe elements of her performances that are beyond description. In order to untangle the significance of these elements in the narration, I read her performances as part of her *hysteric performance*,

understood as a mode of expressing resistance.[26] I have adapted the concept of "hysteric performance" from Elisabeth Bronfen (1998) in order to distinguish it from the hysterical performances of Jean-Martin Charcot's patients in the nineteenth century. My idea of the hysteric performance is inspired by feminist interpretations of hysteria. For example, Mady Shutzman, who analyzes advertising through the lens of hysteria, proposes that hysteria may be used as a strategy of resistance if we become conscious of ambivalent performances of hysteria and processes involved in performance.[27] The feminist concern with the concept of hysteria began in the wake of the so-called second wave feminist movement. Feminist interpretations recognized representations of female hysteria "as a conflict over the meaning of femininity in a particular historical context."[28] The language of hysteria was re-conceptualized as women's objection against the social and symbolic laws of the father. During the 1990s, scholars from different fields took up the subject of hysteria because "it poses fundamental questions about gender and culture, and offers insight into language, narrative, and representation."[29] In this view, the hysteric performance is understood as a mode of communication that manifests a psychic conflict, which is connected to unconscious processes. What I find noteworthy in this view is that it acknowledges the potential of unconscious processes. That is, as Rosi Braidotti argues in her book *Metamorphoses* (2002), unconscious

[26] A focus on the protagonist's hysteric performance instead of analyzing her as a hysteric contributes more to my reading of the representation of resistance. On the history of hysteria as a psychosomatic illness in the late nineteenth century, see Gilman 1993, 345–452; Showalter 1998 (1997), 30–46. Some claim that hysteria disappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. Others argue that hysteria has its contemporary forms distinct from hysteria characteristic of the turn of the 19th and 20eth century when it was associated with the names of Jean-Martin Charcot, Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud. See Showalter 1998 (1997), 4; Bronfen 1998, xi; Mitchell 2000, 109.

[27] Schutzman 1999, 4. Shutzman's proposal echoes Freud's therapeutic method, which was based on a discovery that if a hysteric was made to remember a repressed memory of the event by which her hysterical symptom was provoked, and to put the event into words, she would be cured. See Breuer & Freud 2001, (1955), 255.

[28] Showalter 1993, 288. Hysteria has been constructed as a female disorder, but feminist scholars speak of male hysteria as well. See Showalter 1993; Showalter 1998 (1997), 62–77; Mitchell 2000, 43–81.

[29] Showalter 1998 (1997), 7.

structures may have a dynamic role in "processes of resistance to social roles and norms" and "enable the subject to take some distance from socially imposed models."[30] In the same vein, I argue that Norma Jeane's hysteric performance, entangled with unconscious acts, expresses resistance to social norms. Her hysteric performance is connected to her problematic position as a woman and as a public figure in American culture in the 1950s and in the beginning of the 1960s. At this time, the prevailing political atmosphere in the U.S. was prefiguring significant social changes set in motion by the civil rights movement, followed by several new social movements, which all demanded the legitimization of marginalized bodies, especially those of women, various ethnic groups, and homosexuals.

The protagonist hovers between excited and depressive states of mind, and her narration, especially after she becomes a star, resembles a hysterical narrative. Freud defined hysterical narrative as a defying closure, and drew attention to the fragmentation of the hysterics' narrative in particular in a case of a patient to whom he gave the name "Dora."[31] Unlike Dora, who had no voice in Freud's text, Norma Jeane's voice is omnipresent in *Blonde*. Her narration is discontinuous and fragmentary as it combines different styles and genres such as poems, letters, stream-of-consciousness, and memory story. The deliberate mimicking of memory story comes apparent in the protagonist-narrator's continuous interrupting of the chronologically proceeding story, while it makes references to the future, comparisons between the past and present, and introduces fragments and anecdotes.[32] Furthermore, the narrative resists closure, and invites an unending series of interpretations. The manner is similar to the narrative of the hysteric described by Elisabeth Bronfen: "[T]he hysteric resiliently resists closure, producing ever new conversions and ever

[30] Braidotti 2002, 40–1.

[31] See Freud 1997 (1963); Breuer & Freud 2001 (1955). In particular feminist poststructuralist critics, such as Jacqueline Rose, Toril Moi, Jane Gallop and Clare Kahane, have written about Dora's case and criticized Freud's hostility to Dora. A century after Freud, Dora became a kind of cult heroine of literary and feminist criticism. She has also returned as a heroine in plays and movies in the 1990s. See Kahane 1995, 14–33; Showalter 1998 (1997), 57–8.

[32] On the features of memory stories, see Kuhn 2000, 179–96; Kuhn 2002, 11.

changing narratives."[33] As I have already mentioned, the novel starts with a "Prologue: 3 August 1962," two days before she dies. The end of the novel returns to the moment of approaching death. The end also illustrates a movie theatre experience and a particular fantasy offered by the movie, which are represented already in the first chapter. The open-ended story refuses closure, and gestures towards a circle by returning to the themes introduced in the beginning of the story. The closure defying structure leaves the myth of Marilyn in a process of change.

The protagonist's hysteric performances arise at the point, when the story proceeds to the period from 1949 to 1953, depicted in a chapter titled "The Woman." This is the time when she gets her first film role. Before entering the phase of "The Woman" Norma Jeane is re-named as Marilyn Monroe by her agent and the studio producer. After the re-naming, the protagonist feels as if a new life has begun. On the other hand, as she is returning home, she experiences a feeling of being lost. A sense of being lost returns to the narration at times when she reaches another level of fame or tries to distance herself from her public life. Her difficulties in relation to the public life are connected to questions about gendered identity and visibility.

The protagonist's public performances, understood as segments of her *hysteric* performance, include unconscious elements that she is not able to control completely. In her public and cinematic performances, her body becomes a border for negotiating the demands of the outside world. For example, she mimics (both consciously and unconsciously) representations of women, especially those of mediated by movies and magazines, which suggest certain discursive roles for women. Her various performances produce a collection of self-representations. As a result, her subjectivity becomes explicit as a chain of performances that refer to each other and draw upon another. As she is building one of her film roles ("Angela" in *The Asphalt Jungle*) she compares herself metaphorically to a layered Russian doll:

[33] Bronfen 1998, 54.

> She was "Marilyn" – no, she was "Angela"– she was Norma Jeane playing "Marilyn" playing "Angela" – like a Russian doll in which smaller dolls are contained by the largest doll which is the mother[.] (B 256–7)

The metaphor of a Russian doll highlights the protagonist as the creative source of her self-representations. All her self-representations are part of the entity that is composed by Norma Jeane. Yet, as the excerpt suggests, sometimes the protagonist is not sure which layer of the entity she is or who she is supposed to be; she is not always able to distinguish her film roles from her public role as Marilyn or her private self as Norma Jeane.

The protagonist is also represented as a tragic victim of the Hollywood industry. Her agent and producers oblige her to adjust to the role of a "dumb blonde" convincing her that it is her only possibility to succeed. With her new identity as "the Blonde actress," Norma Jeane gains publicity and visibility, which puts her at the center of attention and fulfills her desire of being adored. Peggy Phelan questions in her book *Unmarked* (1993) the political power assigned to the domain of visibility. Following Lacan's initiative, she argues that visibility is a trap as it provokes voyeurism, and economies of vision as surveillance.[34] In so doing, as Phelan argues, the terms of visibility may weaken the supposed power of the identities in question.[35] Indeed, although the visibility attained by the film roles and carefully constructed appearances offer a promise of certain privileges and safety for Norma Jeane, she feels trapped by her new visible appearance: "*I am trapped here! I am trapped here in this blond mannequin with the face*" (B 616). The more famous she becomes the more the studio controls the image of "Marilyn," a rigidifying model of femininity and beauty.

As the protagonist produces her performances as the "dumb blonde," she is also puzzled by her role. This becomes apparent, for example, as she describes her experience of different film roles, such as "Sugar Kane" in *Some Like It Hot* (1959):

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[34] Lacan speaks of the matter of visible as something in which "everything is a trap." Lacan 1998 (1977), 93.
[35] Phelan 2001 (1993), 6–7.

> […] she was Sugar Kane Kovalchick of Sweet Sue's Society Syncopaters she was dazzling-blonde Sugar Kane girl ukulelist she was the female body she was the female buttocks, breasts she was Sugar Kane dazzling-blonde girl ukulelist feeling male saxophonists her ukulele was pursued by male saxophones just another variant of the sad, sick cow but they adored her & a man was falling in love with her onscreen I wanna be kissed by you alone but was this funny? was this funny? was this funny? why was this funny? (B 613–4)

As the above excerpt suggests, the reason why the protagonist submits to her role is that she wants to be adored. In her performances of the variants of "the sad, sick cow" her body functions as a kind of matrix where conventional cultural representations of women as the object of desire are repeated. Although her performance is fashioned in multiple ways, it is always produced as the object of men's desire.

The narration describes frequently moments when the protagonist's meticulous efforts to perform her film roles reach hysteric dimensions:

> To repeat to repeat to stammer & repeat & begin again & again begin & stammer & repeat & retreat & lock herself away & return at last only to repeat & repeat repeat to get it perfect to get whatever it is perfect to get perfect what is not perfectable to repeat & repeat until it was perfect & unassailable[.] (B 619)

It is only through endless repetitive self-representations as the object of interpellation that the protagonist feels she comes to existence.

The protagonist's aim for a perfect performance is linked to her awareness of the lack of identity. In the novel's context, one of Norma Jeane's lovers, Cass Chaplin, asserts that her performance is so perfect because she is conscious of the emptiness in her:

> Because Norma didn't have a clue who she was, and she had to fill this emptiness in her. Each time she went out, she had to invent her soul. Other people, we're just as empty; maybe in fact everybody's soul is empty, but Norma was the one to know it. (B 348)

The idea of being aware of the lack of identity recalls Judith Butler's theory of performativity that focuses on "doing" instead of "being." That is, the representation of the hysteric performance in *Blonde* can be seen as highlighting the *performative* quality of identity. One of Butler's most often cited arguments maintains that what one considers as the essence of identity is an effect of a stylized set of acts. Such acts are performative in a sense that, as Butler puts it: "There is not gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results."[36] Butler has clarified the difference between performance and performativity by calling attention to the discursivity of performatives. According to Butler, the act of performativity is not a singular or deliberate act, but must be understood as a repetition and citational practice, by which the discourse produces the effects that it names.[37] Moreover, the representation of the hysteric performance in *Blonde* displays the "irresolvable ambiguity," which Butler defines as the subject's *dependence of power* for its own formation.[38] To be exact, the narration displays how Norma Jeane has her moments of performing cultural codes at her will, and how she, at the same time, falls back on the same cultural codes that she self-consciously restages.

The hysteric performance of the blond actress mediates not only the distress of a woman, but also that of a culture that produces Marilyn Monroe. That is, the protagonist's hysteric performance is an expression of both an *individual* and a *collective* cultural discontent. The individual discontent has to do with the distress caused by the social conditions and different fantasies projected on the protagonist. The collective discontent is connected to the effects of the cold war project of normalizing discourses and regiments of power. This is the era of political paranoia and anxiety about national security. The novel explicitly emphasizes how Marilyn's star image is born out of feelings of paranoia in the fifties:

[36] Butler 1999 (1990), 33.
[37] Butler 1993, 2.
[38] Butler 1997, 15.

> She would be born in the New Year 1950. In a season of clandestine radioactive explosions. […] It was a time of "defensive nuclear testing." It was a time of ever-vigilant drama. Though the war had been over since August 1945, and it was now 1950 and a new decade. It was a time, too, of flying saucers: "unidentified flying objects" sighted predominantly in the western American sky. […] On the far side of the world, remote as the moon, the mysterious Soviets detonated their nuclear devices. They were communist demons, bent upon the destruction of Christians. (B 244–5)

In addition, the rise of "The Red Scare," Senator McCarthy's crusade against Communism, is described in the novel. The House of Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) investigates the Hollywood Industry, and accuses several actors and writers of holding left-wing views. The protagonist is also under surveillance, or at least she imagines she is being spied on. At the time she becomes a star, the narration introduces a mysterious "Sharpshooter," who observes her life. The narration fuels the conspiracy theory by giving a description of the Sharpshooter as Marilyn's murderer; he sneaks to her bedroom and injects a fatal dose of barbiturates into her heart (B 737). The exact motive for the assassination remains undecided for the Sharpshooter himself. He sees Marilyn as a threat to national security, but he is not sure whether she has to be killed to protect the President or because of her "involvement with subversive organizations" (B 735).

The protagonist's hysteric performance carries also a message of her discontent against paternity; how she as woman has to be determined by the Oedipus conflict. This is related to her personal history and her anxious relationship with her parents. The mother, Gladys Mortensen, abandons Norma Jeane as a baby, and gives her to Grandmother Della's care. After Della dies, Gladys has to take her daughter back. Before long, Gladys is committed to a mental institution, where she stays for the rest of her life, and Norma Jeane is put to an orphanage. Norma Jeane does not even have an idea of a father, until her mother starts talking about him. Her becoming aware of the father is related to a memory of a certain event on her sixth birthday. Gladys has brought little Norma Jeane to her apartment to celebrate the birthday. Pointing her finger at a photograph of

a man, Gladys says: "That man is your father" (B 20). Little Norma Jeane is stunned: no one has ever told her anything about her father. She is convinced that the man in the picture is really her father, and that he will return any day soon.

According to Roland Barthes, "[t]he Photograph does not necessarily restore what has been abolished (by time, by distance)" but it attests "that what I see has indeed existed."[39] The photograph has an imposition of reality and past; therefore its very essence is what Barthes calls "That-has-been."[40] In *Blonde* the photograph of the father does not call up the past for Norma Jeane, because she has neither memory related to the photograph nor to the man in the photograph. Rather, following Barthes' thought, it offers proof to Norma Jeane that *the father has been there*. At the moment of seeing the photograph and attaching it to an idea of the father, Norma Jeane becomes aware of the lack of memories or of something lost. Her longing for the "return" of the father is sustained in the narration throughout the novel. The repetition of the above-mentioned memory does not, however, refer to the feelings of loss of the father, but instead, functions as a sign for the loss in general.

According to Ellen G. Friedman, a typical pattern of the oedipal in narratives comes apparent, for example, in the longing for an absent father.[41] Some of the narratives can reject oedipal determinism, but the father is still present as an "asomatic presence," to use Friedman's phrasing.[42] The pattern described by Friedman applies also to *Blonde*. Indeed, the father retains his power until the last pages of the novel, and it seems that the narrative cannot surpass oedipal determinism. The memory of seeing the photograph signifies the moment when the authority of the father is established. In Lacanian terms, the scene re-presents the first stage of the subject's entrance into the symbolic, which starts when the child experiences its first sense of loss in the pre-oedipal

[39] Barthes 1981, 82.
[40] Barthes 1981, 76.
[41] Friedman 2002, 695. Friedman examines in her article examples of "postpatriarchal endings" in the recent U.S. fiction that abandon the oedipally-driven narrative. Her examples include Joyce Carol Oates's novel *We Were The Mulvaneys* (1996).
[42] Friedman 2002, 696.

world of the imaginary. At the same time, the subject starts to accomplish an identity (that is only an illusion of an organized self) independent of the mother. The father (or the substitute for the father) created after seeing the photograph functions not only as an imaginary father, but also as a representative of the paternal law. The experience of the loss of the object, a moment of crisis, produces Norma Jeane's fantasy of the father. She reflects her fantasy of the father on all of her relationships with men. In these relationships, she always plays the role of the daughter, and the men play the part of the father and paternal authority. Near the end of the protagonist's life, it is revealed that one of her lovers, Cass Chaplin, has been writing and sending letters to Norma Jeane, pretending to be her father. After the revelation, the protagonist's burns all the letters "from her tearful father" in the fireplace (B 728). This signifies the death of her fantasy of the father. At the same time, it marks the end of her life. She will die in a few days after. The end suggests that the life of the protagonist has been possible as such, *because* of the oedipal determinism.

The representation of the protagonist's hysteric performance, as well as her memory-work, bring back the repressed experience of loss projected on her by the oedipal, and draws attention to the limiting ways in which the oedipal fantasy functions as the central structuring principle of her subjectivity. Neither the protagonist nor her hysteric performance can change the process of identifications for her, but as I have demonstrated in my analysis, her hysteric performance expresses the contradictions of her condition. That is, it expresses her discontent of how she as a woman has to submit to certain discursive rules concerning gender and sexuality. Moreover, it reflects the symptoms of a set of certain social values that constitute American culture.

So far, I have analyzed the protagonist's hysteric performance as concerning gender and sexuality, but it is also a *racialized* performance. Thus, it is permeated by a particular anxiety about the racial ideal, that is, whiteness. In my view, the question about whiteness is unavoidable in an analysis of a novel about Marilyn Monroe. I agree with Louis Banner,

who stresses that Monroe's whiteness, which was obviously important to her look, merits more investigation in general.[43]

ANXIETY ABOUT WHITENESS

Toni Morrison and several other pivotal African American writers even before her – Nella Larsen, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, to name but a few – have depicted the painful effects of the white ideal on African Americans in their fiction. White mainstream American writers, in turn, have had a limited aptitude to reflect on whiteness and its effects on identity, especially when it comes to whiteness as a privileged position. Although a number of white American writers have dealt with the racial problematic, they often end up reifying the white racial privilege.[44] If white writers depict the negative effects of whiteness and its privileged status, it is more often than not implicit. At first glance, race, or anxiety about racial ideal, is not the prevalent theme in *Blonde*. A closer look reveals that the novel, indeed, considers also the effects of race to identity. In particular, it draws attention to the negative effects of the normativizing whiteness.

Oates has compared her novel *Blonde* to Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (1851), which Richard Dyer reads as one of the most famous expressions of the anxiety about whiteness as non-existence.[45] In the following citation, Oates elaborates her comparison between *Blonde* and *Moby-Dick*, and distinguishes them as novels employing mythical images:

[43] Banner 2008, 6.
[44] Aenerud 1997, 55; Newlyn 2002, 1042.
[45] Dyer 1997, 211–2.

> I suppose I had in mind something like *Moby-Dick*. There was actually a white whale, and Melville was writing in meticulous detail about whales. And part of that novel that's so wonderful, I think, is the reliance upon the objective world. It's very catalogued and very beautifully written. But then it's mythic, and one would not think that Moby Dick was just any whale. So I guess Marilyn Monroe became my Moby Dick, so to speak; I'm working with mythic structures and images and much that is imagined. (McGrath et al. 2001, para. 14)

As epic novels, both novels function as mediating narratives that offer ways of making sense of the complexities of human experience.

In my view, Oates's intertextual reference to *Moby-Dick* inevitably evokes the problematic of whiteness.[46] In the most enigmatic chapter of *Moby-Dick*, titled "The whiteness of the whale," the narrator Ishmael describes how there was some "nameless horror" concerning the whale, and that it was "the whiteness of the whale that above all things appalled" him.[47] When trying to describe the quality of whiteness as a color, Ishmael finds that it is the elusive quality, "which causes the thought of whiteness […] to heighten that terror to the furthest bounds."[48] As an object of description, Marilyn Monroe seems to have a same kind of elusive quality. The elusiveness of her life story is a much more complex matter than in *Moby-Dick*. In Ishmael's account, the terror of whiteness arises, as Dyer puts it, "because of its blankness and emptiness which evokes meaninglessness and pointlessness." For Dyer, this suggests, "to be white is to be a thing of terror to oneself."[49] Monroe's image does not exactly suggest a "terror of whiteness." In fact, her image was constructed as "the apotheosis of desirability," to use Dyer's words.[50] Yet, as Dyer also argues, one of the prerequisites of becoming desirable in the 1950s was to

[46] Like *Blonde* also *Moby-Dick* can be read as a novel about the obsession with the white ideal, although this is not how the novel has been interpreted until recently. According to Babb, *Moby-Dick* has been discussed in the racial context only after the civil rights era that. See Babb 1998, 94–7.
[47] Melville 1971 (1851), 287.
[48] Melville 1971 (1851), 288.
[49] Dyer 1997, 212.
[50] Dyer 2000 (1993), 161.

be white.[51] Desirability was refined by the Hollywood film industry, which produced its stars through a complex image-making system.[52] Dyer interprets Monroe's whiteness mainly as representing a racist ideology, but as Louis Banner demonstrates through her adept intersectional reading, Monroe's whiteness draws on the symbolism and definitions attached to the color of white in different times that are connected not only to race but also to class, sexuality, and gender.[53]

The cinema has been successful in its production of whiteness as a cultural norm in general, and especially classic Hollywood movies have maintained the hegemony of whiteness.[54] According to Anna Everett, the mainstream cinema produces racialized cinematic narratives "wherein spectatorial identification is achieved via the lure of highly desirable racialized characters as ego-ideals."[55] In the context of *Blonde*, the protagonist's star image is disclosed as a complex and anxiety-ridden negotiation with the surrounding cultural conditions. As a character, she bears likeness to Ishmael as well as Captain Ahab, the tragic hero of *Moby-Dick*. Like Ishmael, she suffers from feelings of estrangement and isolation from the surrounding society as she tries to find her place as a public female figure in the American post-war era. As she enters her career as a film star, the Studio modifies her image to correspond to its ideal of white woman. A Studio executive, who gives Monroe her first film role, has emblematically an aviary of dead stuffed birds, which remind her of the female silent-film stars, who "were beautiful & lifelike not seeming to grasp that they were dead" (B 211). Indeed, in order to become desirable according to Hollywood standards, she has to submit to the limiting and humiliating discursive aviary of gendered whiteness produced and maintained by the Hollywood industry.

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[51] Dyer 1986, 42.
[52] Dyer 1986, 4.
[53] Banner 2008, 22.
[54] Bernardi 2001, xiii, xiv; Foster 2003, 2.
[55] Everett 1997, 281.

White Doll

Unlike the black girl Pecola Breedlove in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970), who wishes for a white girl's blue eyes, the blue-eyed and fair-skinned protagonist of *Blonde* has access to the white ideal. Morrison's novel illustrates the strain that African American girls undergo within a culture that idealizes white femininity. Although a white ego ideal is an unachievable bodily ideal, black girls are irresistibly drawn to it: Pecola drinks several cups of milk just to have the opportunity to gaze at Shirley Temple's face on the cup, and Pecola's mother Pauline remembers being happy only when she watched perfect white female images on the silver screen.[56] In *The Bluest Eye*, the power of the white ideal also manifests itself in the adult's favoring of blond, blue-eyed baby dolls as the most precious gift for a little girl. When Pecola's friend Claudia, one of the central narrators in the story, receives a blue-eyed baby doll as a Christmas gift, she is puzzled because everyone around her agrees that the "pink-skinned doll was what every child treasures."[57] Claudia, in contrast, finds the doll revolting, and destroys all her white dolls by dismembering them. Moreover, to her dismay she has the desire to do the same to little white girls, whom she envies for getting adult attention.

The white doll became a symbol of the white ideal in the U.S. through the famous "Clark doll test" carried out in the 1940s. The test was organized by Kenneth B. Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark to determine whether African American children recognized racial difference and how it affected their self-awareness. When asked to choose which doll – a brown one or a white one – they would prefer to play with, black children

[56] As Rachel Connor and Charlotte Crofts argue, references to Shirley Temple in Morrison's novel emphasize the special impact of film in maintaining and circulating the white ideal. Ann duCille sees Morrison's novel as a counter-narrative to the reading of "Temple as everybody's darling." See Connor & Croft 1999, 119; duCille 1997, 20.

[57] Morrison 1994 (1979), 14.

always favored the "nice" white dolls over the "bad" brown dolls.[58] As Anne Anling Cheng notes, the children not only recognized racial difference, but also attached a symbolic value to that difference: white dolls connoted whiteness and goodness.[59] The test revealed that the white doll represented the ideal in American culture, and that this ideal was in effect damaging to young black children. As Cheng argues, the kind of racial wound exposed by the doll tests is inherited across racial groups: racialization, which operates through the institutional process of producing a dominant white racial ideal, affects all racial groups within U.S. culture.[60]

Like Morrison, Oates uses a blonde baby doll as a metaphor for the dominant white ideal in *Blonde*. The protagonist, Norma Jeane Baker, receives a blond baby doll from her mother on her sixth birthday in June 1932. Contrary to Claudia, Norma Jeane finds the blue-eyed, golden-haired doll the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. The doll becomes a precious thing to her, because her mother, whom she rarely sees, gives it to her. She identifies strongly with the doll, and even names it "Norma Jeane" following her mother's suggestion. Yet its flabby and lifeless quality bothers her: "Except: it made her uneasy that the doll's arms and legs were so clearly boneless, and loose, and could be made to flop about oddly. If you laid the doll down on her back, her feet just *flopped*" (B 28). The lifelessness of the doll suggests the artificiality and deadening effect of the white ideal.

In the orphanage, where Norma Jeane is placed after her mother is committed to a mental institution, all of her belongings are stolen by other children except for the doll:

[58] On the "Clark doll test,"see Jackson 2001, 137; Fishbein 2002, 183–5.
[59] Cheng 2001, ix.
[60] Cheng 2001, x.

> No one stole Norma Jeane's doll, which was bald now, naked and soiled, her wide-open glassy-blue eyes and rosebud mouth frozen in an expression of terrified coquetry; this "freaky thing" (as Fleece called it, not unkindly) with which Norma Jeane slept every night and hid in her bed during the day like a fragment of her own yearning soul, weirdly beautiful in her eyes though laughed at and ridiculed by others. (B 74–5)

The doll becomes the only comfort for Norma Jeane, who feels displaced in the orphanage. It functions for her as proof of the fact that she is not really an orphan, and that her mother still exists. Her eager attraction to the doll parallels also her future obsession with the racialized bodily ideal. In a way, her obsession is connected to her longing for her mother, and her need to belong in general. It is the mother, who has taught her the importance of white looks, and the need to be desirable. To become the ideal contains the promise of being complete. Furthermore, the doll corresponds to the contradictory elements of Marilyn Monroe's future star image, which implies both extreme sexuality and childlike innocence, both impurity and purity. Like her "freaky" doll, she too will be mocked and stared at by others.

As I have discussed earlier, if understood in a Lacanian framework, Norma Jeane's image of herself is based on misrecognition. According to Sara Ahmed, in the process the body image is also immediately differentiated and divided from what is "not-I." That is, the ego is also racialized. Moreover, as Ahmed also argues, a white person, who passes as white has "a degree of comfort and security about identity as the crisis of not-being is, so to speak, hidden from memory."[61] Accordingly, Norma Jeane has already assumed whiteness, and she unconsciously observes herself as passing for white. As white, she has access to national belonging, to a feeling of being at home. She is not, however, either capable of distancing herself from her racial identity, or opposing the ideal because it is invisible to her. As Kaja Silverman argues, identification with what is culturally decreed to be ideal is more

[61] Ahmed 2000, 23; 43; 126–7.

unconscious than conscious.[62] White people especially are less conscious of their identification with the ideal of whiteness because it is simultaneously unacknowledged as such. Norma Jeane is not capable of opposing the ideal, because it is invisible to her.

Whiteness as Performance

In the process of becoming the public figure of Marilyn Monroe, the protagonist is literally made a few shades whiter in the matrix of what is considered white in the cultural situation of the fifties. The more famous she becomes, the more the studio executives and her agent control her appearance. According to Gwendolyn Foster, in early Hollywood the production of white performance was dependent on "whiteface."[63] Foster defines "whiteface" as a space of representation that requires homogenization of class and ethnicity.[64] The creating of whiteface included lighting and a makeup, which suggested, "that white people themselves where not quite *white* enough."[65] Ideal whiteness in Hollywood was something that could not be achieved by anyone. Therefore, the representation of whiteness was exaggerated, if not artificial.

Oates's novel depicts meticulously how Norma Jeane's image is remolded after she starts working at the Hollywood studios. She does not represent any specific ethnicity within whiteness, but she has a working class background, which has to be erased. First, the studio executives change her name: "'Norma Jeane' is a hick name, an Okie name they were saying 'Norma Jeane' has no glamour or allure[.]" (B 216) Second,

[62] Silverman 1996, 81.

[63] Foster uses the term 'whiteface' in reference to blackface minstrelsy. The blackface minstrelsy show, which was popular in the mid-19th century, provided a space for white people to ridicule and caricature black people. On blackface minstrelsy, see Lott 1995; Rogin 1996. Foster's idea of whiteface performance, however, does neither involve racial crossing nor include mocking elements. Furthermore, a blackface performance does not purposefully aim to authenticity in the same way as a whiteface performance.

[64] Foster 2003, 51, 53.

[65] Foster 2003, 4.

she is groomed to look glamorous and white. This entails an astonishingly blonde hair and white dresses, which her agent, Mr. Shinn, buys her:

> In a fifty-seven-dollar dazzling-white silk-and-chiffon cocktail dress purchased for Norma Jeane by Mr. Shinn at Bullock's in Beverly Hills, a chic-sexy dress with a low-cut bodice and a slender fitted skirt that showed her figure to advantage. Fifty-seven dollars for a dress! […] The dress was as glamorous as Angela's costume in the film, which perhaps it was meant to resemble. (B 249)

Norma Jeane's white dress creates a mesmerizing contradiction: it is expensive-looking, yet, provocative and sexy. Her look emphasizes her image as a classy, white, heterosexual woman. Her glamorous appearance follows a particular white look created by Hollywood. As Banner explicates, the Hollywood film designers adapted a white vogue for blond actresses as well as for the settings of films in the 1930s. The new vogue, which became a standard, was related to many things: the cycles of fashion, developments in technology and attitudes about class, sexuality, and gender. Simultaneously, ideas of presumed natural superiority of blonde and light-skinned Nordics were circulated in the United States and Europe. Moreover, immigration became more restricted in the United States and Fascism and Nazism gained more power in Europe.[66]

An important element in creating an illusion of whiteness in Hollywood was an unnaturally white make-up, which was used both live and on screen.[67] Oates's novel describes the finishing of the protagonist's makeup, which often takes a lot of time. The result is a thick "pancake makeup," which is so white that it appears bizarre. For her role as "Cherie" in *The Bus Stop* (1956), her skin is painted exceptionally pale. The following excerpt Norma Jeane describes how strange Cherie appeared:

[66] Banner 2008, 10–11.
[67] Foster 2003, 4.

> We made her pale, a special chalky-white makeup for me, not just for my face but everywhere you can see on me. She's the only one in the crowd who looks like…this strange sad moon-pale thing. A female. (B 550)

Norma Jeane identifies with Cherie, a woman with lower class origins. There are differences between the shades of whiteness of Monroe's film roles, and Cherie is the palest looking. Arguably, the extreme white makeup is connected also to Cherie's lower class background in the film story. This does not become, however, apparent in the novel's context.

Norma Jeane is made to look grotesquely white not only on screen but also in her public role as Marilyn Monroe. Speaking of herself as Marilyn in the third person, Norma Jeane compares the creating of Marilyn's makeup with the preparing of a cadaver: "Five hours was the minimum the makeup people spent on her for these occasions. Like preparing a cadaver, Norma said" (B 347). As in the case of her blonde doll, the protagonist's exaggerated white look is connected with lifelessness, and even with death. Dyer argues that in various representations the link between whiteness and death is connected to the anxiety about whiteness as non-existence.[68] Indeed, this kind of anxiety emerges in Oates's fiction as transitory moments where a white character feels an emptiness that is connected to the essence, or rather, the non-essence of whiteness. A similar kind of anxiety comes into view also in *Blonde*. For example, the above-mentioned association between the white make-up and the dead body is linked to the idea of non-essence or non-existence. The white mask connotes the artificiality of whiteness that is produced on the surface of her body. That is, it proposes that whiteness is a performance about passing. What is significant here is that whiteness appears as something that does not exist. As such, it also denies the essence of race. This does not necessarily create anxiety about whiteness for the protagonist, at least not directly. Her anxiety becomes apparent as she consciously starts to contemplate the idea of race, which I will analyze in more detail through her relationships with Jewish men.

[68] Dyer 1997, 21.

After her first success in *Asphalt Jungle* (1950), dressed up "*like a big doll looking so glamorous and sexy*" (B 263), the protagonist imagines herself good enough to be the bride of the Dark Prince: "[…] lifting her high for all to admire and to applaud and kissing her forehead in blessing *I anoint you my Fair Princess my bride*" (B 264). Her romantic fantasy stipulates a close linkage between race, gender, and sexuality. To be good enough and to live out her fantasy, she has to be able to deliver not only a certain white glamour, but also the norm of heterosexuality. A detailed analysis of the narration reveals also, how the protagonist's white look is displayed as an intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and nationality. The intersection is emphasized, for example, in the representation of one of Monroe's most memorable film scenes. The chapter titled "The American Goddess of Love on the Subway Grating" describes her performance in the famous film scene in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955):

> The Girl on the Subway Grating. The Girl of Your Dreams. It's 2:40 A.M. and glaring-white lights focus upon her, upon her alone, blond squealing, blond laughter, blond Venus, blond insomnia, blond smooth-shaven legs apart and blond hands fluttering in a futile effort to keep her skirt from lifting to reveal white cotton American-girl panties and the shadow, just the shadow, of the bleached crotch. […] Between the legs, you can trust her she's clean. She is not a dirty girl, nothing foreign or exotic. She's an American slash in the flesh. That emptiness. Guaranteed. She's been scooped out, drained clean, no scar tissue to interfere with your pleasure, and no odor. Especially no odor. The Girl with no Name, the girl with no memory. (B 473)

As we can detect in the above excerpt, the words 'girl,' 'white,' and 'blond' are repeated. This creates a linkage between gender and race. The use of the word 'girl' does not necessarily refer to the young age of the actress, but rather to her childlikeness. Furthermore, her blondness is associated with purity, nation, and sex. This is evoked by references to how clean she is ("Not dirty," "no odor"), to her Americanness ("nothing foreign or exotic"), and by references to the female sexual organ ("shadow of bleached crotch," "between the legs"). Banner, who analyses a famous

photo of the very same film scene, interprets how Monroe "both ratifies American Puritanism and mocks it."[69] In *Blonde*, the repetitive tone of the narration has also a mocking effect, which draws attention to the compulsory linking of nation, race, sex, and gender in the visual representation of the American white woman. The vocabulary attaches Monroe with the qualities of emptiness and namelessness. The words and their associations evoke, again, an intertextual link to Ishmael's pondering of whiteness in *Moby-Dick*: "Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color[.]"[70]

Feeling of Lack

In the context of *Blonde*, the absence of other American ethnic or racial groups is almost conspicuous. At the time when Monroe became a film star, Hollywood was dominantly a world inhabited by white people. There is, however, one ethnic group that is significantly present, namely Jewish Americans. The majority of the Hollywood studio producers at the time were Jewish men.[71] The novel describes how Norma Jeane becomes fascinated by Jews after meeting Otto Öse, a photographer who initially discovers her. This works as an enlightening pattern in relation to her processing of whiteness in the narrative. American Jews have had a changing position in relation to whiteness, and their position within American citizenship divulges the curious malleability of whiteness, and provides beneficial insights on history of race and racial assignment in the United States. As Karen Brodkin puts it, the American Jews provide a kind of double vision that includes various experiences of both of marginality and belonging in relation to whiteness.[72]

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[69] Banner 2008, 4.
[70] Melville 1971 (1851), 295–6.
[71] In the beginning of the Hollywood's studio era (1920s), the executives were all immigrant Jews. They were followed by a younger generation, who were also mostly Jews. On Hollywood's Jewish moguls, see Rogin 1996, 78–9, 88–9; Gabler 1989 (1988).
[72] Brodkin 1998, 2.

According to Nicholas Sammond and Chandra Mukerji, before and during the Second World War it was possible for most white ethnicities to erase their ethnicity by assuming white middle-class values, except for American Jews. The assimilation was more complicated for Jews, because it was unclear if "being Jewish was a matter of race, culture, or religion[.]"[73] Norma Jeane shares the same popular mind-set about Jews. She believes that being Jewish meant all three at the same time. As she reads in *Life* magazine about Hitler and the death camps, her fascination is stirred up not only about Jews, but also about the idea of race:

> Hadn't Gladys said that Jews are a chosen people, an ancient and fated people? Norma Jeane had been reading about the religion, which seeks no converts, and about the "race" – what a mystery, "race"! The origins of human "races" – a mystery. You had to have a Jewish mother to be born a Jew. Was it a blessing or a curse to be chosen? – Norma Jeane would have liked to ask a Jew. But her question was naive, and after the horror of the death camps she would certainly be misunderstood. In Otto Öse's dark-socketed eyes she saw a soulfulness, a depth, and a history lacking in her own eyes, which were clear, startling blue. *I'm only an American. Skin deep. There is nothing inside me, really*. (B 227)

Although the word 'race' is inside quotation marks, it does not indicate that Norma Jeane questions the idea of race. Rather, it implies her bafflement by the concept. She seems uncertain what it means, but understands the concept in an essential, taxonomic sense. What is significant here is that she distinguishes herself from the Jewish people: she is "only American," nothing in particular, while Otto, a Jew, has "a depth." In so doing, she essentializes Otto. In addition, she seems to long for the experience of a shared history, which she thinks all Jewish people have. Her view demonstrates how a white American identity is characterized by the experience of lack, which is connected to an awareness of whiteness as an empty category.

[73] Sammond & Mukerji 2001, 6.

In her book *Desiring Whiteness* (2001), Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks's explicates racial anxiety. Her discussion conveys moments of racial anxiety that emerge when the subject encounters the historicity of race. The consequence of racial anxiety is a production of an object through the so-called pre-discursive marks on the body, such as skin and hair. According to Seshadri-Crooks, this is how racial visibility, the visible difference recognized because of physical marks on the body, is related to an unconscious anxiety about the historicity of Whiteness.[74] In other words, as the subject encounters the historicity of whiteness, that is, the knowledge of whiteness as a social construction, it evokes anxiety and urges the subject to find an object that fills the gap created by this knowledge. The physical signs on the surface of the body function as such an object. Certain marks on the body reinforce our reliance on the idea of race. As Seshadri-Crooks puts it, "[i]f we can find a non-discursive basis for our faith in race, then the function of Whiteness, as the unconscious promise of wholeness, is preserved."[75]

The idea of race and Jewish people being different from her induce Norma Jeane to encounter her own racial identity. Nevertheless, it remains uncertain if her awareness of herself as "only American" reveals to her the artifice of the origins of her white identity. To be exact, her anxiety has to do more directly with the sense of lack, her awareness of the emptiness and non-essence of whiteness. This signifies *also* that whiteness is a social construction. However, Norma Jeane seems to be more puzzled by the idea of race in general. In fact, the historicity of the idea of race confuses her more than the knowledge of whiteness as a construction. Consequently, she tries to find an object to reinforce her belief on the racial system. The "depth and soulfulness" in Otto's eyes works for her as a sign of racial difference, and suggests that race is

[74] Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 21. Seshadri-Crooks emphasizes that she does not mean by Whiteness a physical or ideological property, but instead, understands the term as a master signifier in the signifying chain that provides subjects with certain symbolic positions such as "black" and "white." Following Lacan's schema of the subject constitution, it works as a signifier that is grounded in the unconscious and structured like a language.

[75] Seshadri-Crooks 2000, 59.

something more than a discursive construction. This is not enough for Norma Jeane to preserve the unconscious promise of wholeness, and her anxiety about race continues. What follows is that she tries to find other ways of filling her sense of lack.

When Marilyn's agent, Mr. Shinn, unexpectedly proposes to Norma Jeane, he reminds her that he is a Jew. Norma Jeane is startled, draws on her "dumb blonde" performance, and invents for herself a Jewish lineage.

> "I'm a Jew too. In my heart. My mother so admired the Jewish people. A superior race! And I think I am part Jewish too. I never told you, I guess? – Mary Baker Eddy was my great-grandmother.[76] You've heard of Mrs. Eddy? She's famous! *Her* mother was a Jew. Jewess? They didn't practice the religion because they had a vision of Christ the Healer. But I am a descendant, Mr. Shinn. *The same blood beats in my veins*."(B 284)

This kind of concocting is typical of Norma Jeane, who is perpetually creating alternative narratives about her past and thus re-inventing her identity. By claiming to have the "same blood" with Jews, she does not simply lie, but, in a way, becomes "part Jewish" in order to fulfill her unconscious wishes for wholeness. This is another strategy to prevent a collapse of the idea of unified self, and to maintain the idea of race.

Ahmed examines different modalities of how Western subjects aim to become "the stranger," the one that is different from "us." As Ahmed argues, fantasies of becoming the stranger may function as a way to get closer to the other in order to maintain a difference between the "I" and "the stranger."[77] Ahmed reads a Hollywood film *Dances with Wolves* (1990) as an example of a narrative of becoming the stranger. She focuses on the white male anti-hero, Dunbar, who is alone in the frontier, which suggests for Ahmed a sense of lacking, a need for "something beyond the

[76] In the context of the novel, Norma Jeane receives a book by Mary Baker Eddy (1821–1910), the founder of the Christian Science movement. She identifies strongly with Mary Baker Eddy because her name is Norma Jeane *Baker*.
[77] Ahmed 2000, 119.

structure of the self who stands alone."[78] The lack experienced by the white hero appears in relation to Indians, of whom he gradually makes acquaintance. Dunbar becomes fascinated by the Indians, and goes through a transformation: he unlearns the bad stereotypes of the natives, and finally becomes an Indian. As Ahmed encapsulates her reading, Dunbar's story of becoming is not only about the de-structuring of white masculinity, but also its restructuring in relation to the other, who stands for what is lacking in the white man. By overcoming the differences, the white man reasserts his agency.[79]

Norma Jeane, however, is not exactly becoming the stranger in the same sense as the white male hero of *Dances with Wolves*. Rather, she has a desire to be Jewish. Ahmed terms a desire to be the other as a mode of *passing*; a mechanism for the white subject to assume the place of other and to "become without becoming." Unlike the mode of becoming, passing works "as reproducing the other as 'not-I' *within* rather than *beyond* the structure of the 'I'." The white subject affirms his identity as white through this practice.[80] Indeed, for Norma Jeane the desire to be the other is another strategy to maintain the idea of wholeness, and to affirm her identity as white. Her sense of lack in turn, as Ahmed suggests in her idea of becoming the stranger, is a need for something beyond the structure of the self. In a way, Norma Jeane drifts between practices of becoming the other and passing for the other, beyond *and* within the structure of the "I." Either way, the difference between self and other is sustained. The invented Jewish ancestry suggests for her a way beyond the emptiness of homogenized whiteness. However, she does not choose to become completely Jewish, only partly, as a descendant. The narration treats her desire to become or be Jewish with irony; even Norma Jeane herself realizes that her wish is preposterous.

Monroe's third husband was the Jewish playwright Arthur Miller. The novel's narration includes a description of the protagonist's marriage to "the Playwright," a character who remains unnamed. The marriage

[78] Ahmed 2000, 120.
[79] Ahmed 2000, 121, 123–4.
[80] Ahmed 2000, 132.

with the Playwright re-establishes the protagonist's obsession with Jews. Once more, Norma Jeane creates a story of her past that is linked to Jews. She claims that her father was a friend of a famous Jew, whose funeral she attended as a child: "'[…] I was too young to understand much. The language was Hebrew? – it was so strange and wonderful. I guess I thought it was the voice of God. […]'" (B 516). This makes the Playwright uncomfortable, because for him, being Jewish is primarily about culture, not necessarily about religion or the shared, traumatic history of the Holocaust.

> He wasn't a Jew who believed that the Holocaust was the end of history or the beginning of history, even that Holocaust defined Jews. He was a liberal, a socialist, a rationalist. He wasn't a Zionist. (B 516.)

For him, Jewishness is not the determining aspect of his identity, and he experiences Jewish identity as a fixed entity especially when other people stigmatize him as a Jew. In private, he nevertheless believes that Jews were extraordinary people. His thoughts not only call attention to his ambivalent attitude to Jewish identity, but also how difficult it is to define what is meant by 'Jewish' in American culture. His ambivalent feelings are connected to the historical condition of Jews in America after World War II in particular.

During her marriage with the Playwright Norma Jeane becomes obsessed with the Holocaust. Her husband thinks that it is not healthy to wallow in the grief and suffering of others. Norma Jeane cannot understand why she cannot share the grief: "*Oh, but I'm a Jew too. Can't I be a Jew? Is it only how you're born? In your Soul?*" (B 598). The Playwright explains to Norma Jeane that it was not *her* responsibility. His feelings echo the general attitude towards the Holocaust in the U.S. in the 1950s. In general, Americans did not want to discuss the Holocaust immediately after World War II, even though there were many plays, books, television and radio shows devoted to the subject.[81] The Holocaust memories were

[81] Lipstadt 1996, 195.

suppressed partly because people found it so difficult to comprehend.[82] Moreover, they wanted to normalize their lives after the war.

Norma Jeane's obsession with the Holocaust can also be seen as an allusion to Arthur Miller's play, *Broken Class*, published in 1994. Its central character, Sylvia Gellburg is obsessed with the news accounts about "Kristallnacht," the pogrom against the Jews in November 1938. Nevertheless, Norma Jeane's desire to grieve over the Holocaust is ultimately connected to her crisis about white identity, and brings to the surface, again, her desire to be or pass for a Jew. She even tries to imagine the feelings the wartime atrocities might evoke in Jews: "Whatever emotions this man [the Playwright] was feeling, which were beyond her ability to imagine (if she were a Jew, what would she feel at such a time? she believed she could not have borne it), he would hide from her" (B 598). Moreover, her fascination with the Holocaust marks her desire to belong to some specific community. Through a shared history, Jewish people share a feeling of communality. As Judith Butler proposes, belonging may take place also in and through a common sense of loss: "Loss becomes condition and necessity for a certain sense of community[.]"[83] Arguably, the Holocaust trauma fascinates Norma Jeane, because it is a *collectively* shared trauma unlike her individual suffering. All the same, after listening to her husband, she apologetically admits that she is not a Jew (B 598). In the end, her attempts to be or to become a Jew fail, and she stays fixed in homogenized whiteness. Towards the end of her life, her sense of self becomes increasingly distorted, and she dies as an unhappy and confused woman.

The representation of the protagonist's engagement with the idea of whiteness and racial identity brings out both her desire and anxiety about whiteness. She wants to be white, but on the other hand, she wants to be something other or more than white because of the anxiety and discomfort the white ideal brings her. The discomfort is present quite

[82] The reasons to suppress the Holocaust memories were also connected the post-war global politics. The tendency to circumvent the subject lasted until the late 1970s. The 1990s saw a multiplying interest in the Holocaust in the United States. See, for example, Ben-Bassat 2000, 404; Ahokas & Chard-Hutchinson 1997, 10.
[83] Butler 2003, 469.

concretely in her everyday life when she has to submit to the idea of whiteness as homogenous, as it is required by the Hollywood star system. Inhabiting the homogenized "Hollywood whiteness" creates her experience of being nothing in particular.

Blonde draws critical attention to the effects of racialization and the power of the dominant racial ideal by depicting how they affect the protagonist. As I have argued, the narration links the creation of the film star's exaggerated white look to death, and consequently to the idea of whiteness as non-existence. The idea of non-existence incites feelings of anxiety and lack in the protagonist. The feelings are intensified in her relationships to Jewish men. Jews and the Holocaust, which compels her to consider the idea of race, fascinate her. On a deeper level, her sense of lack is caused by the encountering of the historicity of race, the knowledge of race as a social construction. This, in turn, urges her to find ways to reinforce her belief on race understood as an essential category, because the knowledge of race as a discursive construction threatens to collapse the idea of a unified self. As all her attempts to fulfill her unconscious wishes for wholeness, and to repress the crisis of not-being and not belonging, fail, she gradually feels even more confused and isolated.

Towards Transformation

Oates states in an interview that she does not "recommend, for anyone, writing a psychologically realistic novel about any 'historic' individual who is said to have committed suicide" because it is "too…painful."[84] *Blonde* leaves open the actual cause of the protagonist's death, that is, it remains unclear if she dies of a self-inflicted drug overdose or is killed by the Sharpshooter.[85]

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[84] Johnson 2003, 151.

[85] When Monroe died in 1962, it was generally believed that she had committed suicide. Later, especially after the publication of Norman Mailer's novel *Marilyn* (1973) there began a public questioning of the suicide as the cause of her death. The circulation of conspiracy theories linked to Monroe's death increased especially during the 1980s. On the conspiracy theories surrounding Monroe's death, see Paty 1995, 126–42; Churchwell 2005 (2004), 5–6, 324–30.

As I suggested in the first part of the chapter, the narrator-protagonist's memory work has a creative and transformative significance in the novel. Her efforts to confront the tragic conditions of her life in memory and narrative open up a way for becoming conscious of the central processes involved in her life that have caused her unhappiness. Furthermore, the return to the memories signifies an endeavor to transform her story, to provide space to the potentials of the past into the present. The idea of transformation is also introduced in the story as one of the features of an actor. After the heading of a chapter titled "Nell 1952," there is the following quotation from a Russian-American actor and director Michael Chekhov's [86] book *To the Actor* (1953): "*Transformation* – that is what the actor's nature, consciously or subconsciously, longs for" (B 291). For Norma Jeane, every role is a transformation to another person. Yet, after all the transformations she goes through, she gradually loses herself. It is only at the moment of her death, or rather, after her death, that a more productive transformation can be envisioned.

As I have already mentioned, the end of the novel illustrates a movie theatre experience and a fantasy offered by the movie in a similar manner as in the first chapter. The last two pages display three crucial memories of the protagonist's life: a memory of her experience of the movie theatre as a spectator, a memory of her experience as a performer, and the memory of her mother pointing at a picture of a handsome smiling man. First, the protagonist is recalling a memory from her childhood sitting in the darkened movie theatre, "her happiest time" (B 737). She is watching a film closure where the Dark Prince is brooding above the dying Fair Princess. According to John Ellis, the pleasure of the movies consists of two performances: that of the movie theatre and of the movies itself.[87] The narration brings both performances to the present in

[86] Michael Chekhov, a former student of Constantin Stanislavski, is known from his acting technique, which was based on the idea of utilizing the unconscious creative self. In the 1940s, he became an acting coach to the stars of Hollywood, including Marilyn Monroe, and published his book, *To the Actor*, which has been influential among Hollywood actors.

[87] Ellis 1992 (1982), 26.

the description of Norma Jeane's experience in the movie theatre. She is sitting in the theater audience, close by two older women, and feels safe and happy although she finds the end of the movie scene sad. As a part of the cinema crowd, she shares a "sense of belonging and loneliness", to use Ellis's phrasing.[88] The protagonist's memory of sitting in the movie theater is one of the happiest memories she has, exactly because it includes a sense of belonging.

The movie theater experience of the spectator includes a series of identifications, which is according to Ellis, a complex process in itself; it is multiple and fractured, and it involves fantasy and desire. For example, it involves identifications with the various fantasy positions invoked by the narrative.[89] The series of identifications are different depending on the spectator's gender, although not completely fixed to it.[90] Teresa de Lauretis reminds that a spectator is not only a gendered subject but also a *historical subject*, who has "a series of previous identifications, by which she or he has been somehow engendered."[91] As a gendered and historically located spectator the protagonist of *Blonde* is in a position where her identification with the movie (either with the images on the screen or with the fantasy positions within the narrative) is a result of interaction between her personal and social semiotic history, and of certain public fantasies offered by Hollywood film. In addition, as I have argued, her identifications are always entwined with a particular oedipal fantasy.

After witnessing the film closure with the Dark Prince and the dead Fair Princess, Norma Jeane leaves the movie house, and is on her way home. Suddenly she realizes she is mistaken of the place, and that she is confused about the boundaries between past and present. She is not quite sure whether she is Norma Jeane as a child trying to find her way back to her mother's apartment or the adult Norma Jeane walking back to her home, Hacienda at Highland Avenue. As she sees the Hacienda, she is suddenly afraid (B 738). The confusion of time signals the significance

[88] Ellis 1992 (1982), 26.
[89] Ellis 1992 (1982), 41–4.
[90] See, for example, Ellis 1992, 44; Sturken and Cartwright 2001, 85; Jones 2003b, 34–5.
[91] de Lauretis 1985, 36.

of the temporality in the story. It is a moment in which both the past and the present are realized as coexistent. In relation to the idea of transformation, the coexistence of the past and present also includes, in my view, an implication for a transformation.

Elisabeth Grosz theorizes in her book *The Nick of Time* (2004), following Charles Darwin's, Friedrich Nietzsche's, and Henri Bergson's conceptions of time and the future, time "as active, positive, with its own characteristics, features and specific effects."[92] Moreover, as a positivity, time confirms the virtual relevance of past in refiguring the dominant forces of the present. That is, as Grosz explicates, "[t]he past produces the resources for multiple futures, for open pathways, for indeterminable consequences, as well as for those regularities and norms that currently prevail."[93] Hence, as Grosz suggests, the persistence of the past in the present may benefit a rethinking of questions of change and the future. The present is active, and what it makes, "is the condition of the transformative effects of the future."[94] Before unraveling what this might mean in the context of *Blonde*, I will describe what follows in the narration after the protagonist's confusion of time.

Next, the narration recalls Constantin Stanislavski's piece of advice to an actor standing alone in front of the audience, with slightly altered words: "*Keep your concentration Norma Jeane don't be distracted the circle of light is yours you enclose yourself in this circle you carry it with you wherever you go*" (B 738).[95] The words refer to the protagonist's experience of solitude in front of the audience, which entails a dimension of intersubjectivity with the audience. The circle of light does not include the audience, but it requires the presence of the audience. The modified quotation reminds of the protagonist's ability to be conscious of how her image will be perceived by spectators, and of her ability to infinitely

[92] Grosz 2004, 244. See also Grosz 2005.
[93] Grosz 2004, 253.
[94] Grosz 2004, 251.
[95] The epigraphs of the novel include the original quote from Stanislavski's book, An actor Prepares: "In the circle of light on the stage in the midst of darkness, you have the sensation of being entirely alone….This is called solitude in public….During the performance, before an audience of thousands, you can always enclose yourself in this circle, like snail in its shell….You can carry it wherever you go."

modify her performance. This capacity prevails in the present even after Norma Jeane dies. Hence, the description works also as a reference to the real Marilyn Monroe and her life story, which has disclosed the past as open to continuous rewritings and re-readings.

Right after Norma Jeane's adapted citing of Stanislavski's words, the narration comes back to the memory of her sixth birthday. The protagonist is at her mother's apartment, back in the past, when "what was to happen had not yet happened" (B 738). The novel ends with Gladys's words, as she lifts Norma Jeane to look at a photograph of a handsome smiling man: "Norma Jeane, see? – that man is your father" (B 738). The memory circles to the crux of oedipal scenario, points to its persistence in the presence, and brings the reader to the starting point of the story of a woman, who becomes the famous "Blonde."

At first, the ending does not appear as a narrative with a "postpatriarchal ending," in which, according to Friedman, instead of the quest for the past law that justifies the present there is a movement towards the present and *future* rather than the past.[96] The novel does not offer any prospects of articulating her story differently, and *it seems to end with a moment of past* that seals the destiny of the protagonist. Nevertheless, as I have suggested above, the novel proposes the returning to the past as a possibility, and confronts the memories of loss through a polyphonic narration. Furthermore, it gestures to the coexistence of the past and present in the last page of the story. As Grosz elaborates the persistence of the past and its dual role, the past provides all the resources that the systems of power and domination utilize, but, at the same time, it provides other resistant resources, which are the conditions of efficiency to the dominant movements or parties, and which are not necessarily recognized as oppositional forces to the dominant ones. As such, the past is always already contained in the present as its *potential for being otherwise*. In other words, the past is a condition of every possible future that may arise from the present.[97]

[96] Friedman 2002, 697.
[97] Grosz 2004, 254; Grosz 2005, 3.

Blonde represents the conditions by which a woman as an image is produced within a certain culture, and highlights this in the end of the story by bringing the narration back to the starting point, to the moment when things might have taken a different path. In so doing, the end calls for the project of undoing the myth of the fantasy of a father, which has also been expressed by the protagonist's hysteric performance, and entails the possibility of changing the rules of the scenario. The changing of the rules is the transformation for the white female subject. That is, the end of the novel provokes us to think of alternative identifications and subject positions; to refigure a future of a white woman. This is a future transformation, which also entails *new ways of thinking* about subjectivity and its formation. In other words, the end of the novel leaves the image of Monroe in the process of transformation, of becoming other. The question of what the future entails remains indeterminate, because, following Grosz's line of thought, the above-described moment of the past contains a number of imaginable futures that may be recognized in the present.

The narration of *Blonde* highlights how the protagonist is drawn to the ideal of white femininity by the post-war Hollywood film industry. The ideal becomes significant to her identity already as a child as she watches the desirable images of white women on the film screen. As she enters her career as a film actor, her image is modified to follow a specific Hollywood vogue and prevailing cultural ideal. The representation of her strenuous process of becoming and embodying the ideal offers the reader a way to see the negative effects the process has on the protagonist. The novel's representation of her hysteric performance, in turn, emphasizes the critical salience of what cannot be represented. As I have demonstrated above, the protagonist's hysteric performance expresses resistance, her discontent against her problematic position as a woman, which reproduces the cultural ideal. In particular, her hysteric performance mediates the resistance to the normative discourses of gender and sexuality. In so doing, her performances show increased agency and surprising potential for transformation. The aim to draw attention to the potential of change and transformation is further supported by the novel's narrative style and the closure-defying structure, which, by returning to

the themes introduced in the beginning of the story, point out the moment, when the story may be rewound and imagined again. It is also the moment, which encompasses a potential for a different future.

In the context of the novel, whiteness, in particular, seems to pose a fundamental crisis for the protagonist. The idea of whiteness as an empty category, to which her desirable public image is fundamentally based, causes her discomfort, which deepens in the course of her life. In the end, her obsession, a strong wish to be desired and loved by everyone, which requires her submission to the gendered and racialized ideal of an American white woman, becomes, indeed, a terror to herself. Like Captain Ahab, who is dragged with his ship to the depths of the sea by the harpooned whale, Norma Jeane is eventually destroyed by her public role as Marilyn Monroe. Yet, although the protagonist is represented as a tragic figure, especially in the end of the novel, the novel unsettles whiteness in ways that refuses liberation from the racial problematic. It insists that race is a complex construct, which is produced and maintained in connection to other identity categories, as well as other racialized identities and the history of racial thinking. Moreover, if considered in the perspective of my reading of the end of the novel, also the problematic of whiteness has to be seen as a kind of resource for multiple futures, that is, the past history of whiteness may induce unknown, new lines of deviation. In my view, Oates's novel does not suggest any possible futures in this sense, but it calls for interpretations that offer critical views to the power alignments of the contemporary American society concerning racialization.

CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

The recent debates concerning whiteness demonstrate an effort to maintain critical reflexivity in theorizing, and to perceive whiteness studies as an effect of larger epistemological debates regarding Western modernity, identity, and politics. What I find crucial is that the studies on whiteness stick to the goal of unsettling and disturbing whiteness. To quote Homi Bhabha: "The subversive move is to reveal within the very integuments of "whiteness" the agonistic elements that make it the unsettled, disturbed form of authority that it is[.]"[1] This goal demands an on-going analysis of *what whiteness is doing* and *in which ways it occurs* in our contemporary world.[2]

In this study, I have examined the complexity of white female identity in Oates's fiction in order to show how her female characters' elucidate the processing of white identities in the American context. Critics have noted Joyce Carol Oates's interest in the intricacies of identity, but largely ignored the function and significance of race and racialization in relation to identity in her narratives. Oates's revisiting the racial past in her recent fiction is linked to the enduring debates concerning race and ethnicity, and is to be seen as an attempt to consider the contemporary situation and to probe contingencies for cultural change. As such, her fiction offers noteworthy views to the problematic of race and to the complexity of identity in the American society in the age of multiculturalism, as the official politics clings to the widespread argument that racial and ethnic differences no longer matter.

Whiteness or the significance of race does not need to be the subject of each examination of Oates's fiction. Yet, I contend that the issue of race, in general, cannot be ignored in studies that examine

[1] Bhabha 1998, 21.
[2] Cf. Ahmed 2007, 150.

questions of identity, agency, and power. Although my overall emphasis has been on the problematic of race, I have stressed the importance of taking into account the intersections of the discourses of race, gender, and class. I have focused on the level of representation, deciphering the ways in which the differences of race, gender, and class matter as normative categories in Oates's fictional depictions of identity-constitution. This kind of focus supports, in particular, a reading of her recent fiction that renders the significance of race, gender, and class not only for personal identities, but also at an interactive and communal level as these categories also shape the socio-cultural hierarchies.

Although the overall emphasis of my study has been guided by an intersectional approach, my intention has not been to produce an analysis, which would proceed by focusing equally and inflexibly on all the categories. Instead, I have given emphasis to the culturally and historically specific meanings of race, gender, and class, and their situatedness within particular cultural narratives and literary conventions. In my view, the understanding of the culturally and historically situated significance of these categories and their intersections is crucial for understanding the construction of white female identity in the American context in the first place. In addition, my endeavor has been to show how an intersectionally perceptive examination of whiteness may facilitate to elucidate the multiple, complex ways in which white privilege and prevailing social hierarchies are sustained. This kind of analysis requires a reflective look at the genealogy and clustering of the categories and discourses that do not automatically follow a consistent path.

In this study, I have approached the problematic of white female identity with the help of different emphases, angles, and themes. The major themes of my analysis consist of the white female character's relations to themselves, the ways in which they construct and perceive themselves as white females, and to other characters, in particular to family members and black males. As I have maintained throughout my study, white female development is dealt in Oates's fiction especially through the patterns of oedipal scenario and racial fantasy (or interracial encounter). These patterns appear already in her early fiction of which I

have examined the novel *Expensive People* and the short story "The Molesters" included in the novel's narration. As I have argued, both narratives display how race and ethnicity are firmly established in a specific cultural and historical context. In addition, they demonstrate, even though implicitly, the centrality of race and ethnicity in the core of being American.

Expensive People displays and parodies a theme of Freudian family romance, which refers to particular kinds of fantasies about one's origin and family, related to the Oedipus complex. Rooted in the American cultural and historical context, the novel's representation of the family romance draws attention to culturally specific immigrant narratives and the obsession with upward mobility. The importance of race, ethnicity, and class for being American is apparent especially in the character of Natashya, who manifests the various fantasies and desires that have shaped the construction of an American, white woman's identity. She, for example, emphasizes her particular white ethnicity as "Russian-American," which is tied to a politics of belonging both at the level of individual and national history. Her character, which plays a certain normed role of a typical upper-middle-class white woman living in the post-war suburbia, functions also as an example of how whiteness is gendered and classed. The carefully constructed role grants her a certain white privilege and mobility in relation to choices concerning her identity that is connected to different discourses and the rules and norms dominated within these discourses. Although this satire of white suburban middle-class criticizes American society in various ways, its critical assessment of race and ethnicity remains somewhat ambivalent.

As I have concluded in chapter two, "The Molesters" already reveals a critical attitude towards the problematic of race in the American context. This early representation of an interracial encounter that focuses on the problematic of the constitution of a white girl's subjectivity draws attention to the representation and function of race. In "The Molesters," a black man is needed in the white girl's narrative as a mirror to illuminate the problematic concerning the construction of a white female identity in a culturally specific social order. He does not appear as an actual

character, but instead, as an Africanist presence, to use Morrison's term. On the surface, his function as the racial Other, through which the problematic of the (American) white woman's identity is reflected in the story, is rather simple. His representation uses the culturally specific stereotypical myth of the black man as a sexual threat, and as such, evokes the old miscegenation taboo that reflects both old and current racial anxieties. The story confirms how the process of racialization, or the appropriating of the significance of racial difference, includes a stereotyping of the African American other.

A closer look at the interracial encounter between the white female and the black male character reveals, however, other significant functions of race in the context of the story. My psychoanalytically motivated reading of the story as a representation of feminine oedipal transition endeavors an analytical dimension that reveals a transgressive pattern, which expresses resistance to the rules that regulate the interrelations of race, gender, and sexuality. That is, the African American presence enables a possibility for defiance and transgression in a story about white female development. The white protagonist comes to recognize her own social position and its limits through the process of recognizing and situating the stranger in the place of the Other. Furthermore, the transgressive theme draws critical attention to the rigidity of the oedipal scenario, which promotes particular postulations for the constitution of gendered and racialized subjects. As my reading of the end of the story pinpoints, the story shows signs of a critical attitude towards the problematic of race and the racial relations in the American context. This is implied, for example, by a scene in which the white protagonist identifies with the black man, because they are both repressed others. In so doing, the story illustrates the damaging effects of racialization and gendering and draws critical attention to the white male power within American society.

Particularly Oates's recent novels and short stories published since the beginning of the 1990s explicitly represent the complexity of the practices of racialization in U.S. society. The anxiety about race prevails as a continuous and persistent theme in Oates's recent fiction, especially

in her coming-of-age stories that depict white female characters. It appears in the representation of interracial encounters and relationships in *Because it is Bitter, and Because It is My Heart*, and *I'll Take You There*. Evidently, these stories depict the problematic of black-white relations and white racial anxiety in a more reflective manner if compared to "The Molesters." In these novels, Oates's evolving interest in the effects of race on the society and constitution of American identities is connected to the increased racial tensions in the post-civil-rights America, and to the discussions about whiteness from the 1990s onwards. Both novels return to the past, to the era of the civil rights struggle, in which whiteness is in crisis. The return to this particular era works as a way of assessing the contemporary situation, when whiteness and white identities are, again, in crisis. The more critical and reflective manner is decipherable, for example, in the narration of *Because it is Bitter*, which stresses how black people function as a mirror to the white protagonist's identity constitution. The white protagonist befriends a black male character, but their paths lead to dissimilar directions in the story, because their positions are differently determined and limited by what is possible to a subject in a particular time and place. Instead of serving only a metonymic function in the novel, the black male character is a central character in the story.

The portrayal of the black male character in *I'll Take You There*, which includes a representation of cross-racial love between the central white female character and the black man, tries to evade the stereotypical roles of a black man, yet, the myth of the black man as a sexual threat prevails in the story. Thus, the novel demonstrates how the old miscegenation taboo and the stereotype of the black man inherited from the past still functions as an inevitable obsession and prerequisite for an American white female identity and agency. The novel is forthright in its depiction of cross-racial love, and draws attention to the significance and consequences of cross-racial sexual encounter in the context of the civil rights era from a white point of view. In so doing, it shows signs of an attempt to understand and deplete the obsessive attitudes concerning interracial relationships in the American context. Moreover, the emphasis is more on the positive effects the cross-racial relationship has on the

white subject's development, and on how cross-racial relations may contribute to the adoption of a new stance to racial relations. The novel underlines the importance of knowing and understanding history and its inheritance at both an individual and communal level. This includes a call for taking responsibility of giving a more self-critical and responsible investigation of a culturally situated subject, in particular, what being white American means in relations to other racialized groups; what it has been in the past, and what it is in the present.

One of the leading themes of *Because it is Bitter* is the problematic of vision and its complicated relations to power. The novel draws attention to how the two central characters are defined differently in the visual order, and how they negotiate their positions within its confines. The narration includes the experience of a black male character that discloses ways in which he is affected by the dominant white gaze and racialization. The representation of the opposite experiences of the gaze functions in the novel as a narrative device that displays how the differently positioned characters constantly negotiate and also resist the cultural boundaries of racialization. Similarly, *I'll Take You There*, which focuses more exclusively on a white woman's identity-constitution and agency, represents the protagonist's negotiation with discourses and ways of thinking about race, and unveils how she is neither free nor completely constrained by them. If compared to *Because it Is Bitter*, *I'll Take You There* displays more successful negotiations concerning the relations with the normative contours of gender, class, and race. Both stories include rites of passages that involve encounters with racial anxiety that require elucidation by each protagonist. This opens up to a self-awareness, which partly contributes to their development and increased sense of agency. Whereas the white protagonist in *Because It Is Bitter* settles on the comfort of whiteness instead of going through a process, which would contribute to an amplified self-reflexivity, the protagonist of *I'll Take You* shows more potential for a critical relation to race from a white point of view.

The representations of poor white women in Oates's recent fiction complicate and complement the representation of the complexity of white female identity. Positioned at the crossroads of racial privilege, the gamut

of differently positioned poor white women characters in *Because It Is Bitter* and *Heat and Other Stories* offer a versatile view to the significance of class, and draw critical attention to the various manifestations of whiteness. The comparison between the poor white characters in Oates's recent fiction reveals the author's perceptive view of class as a complex and relational definer of identity. This is accomplished by a careful depiction of the intersections of class with other differences at the level of the characters' everyday lives, and by using changing narrative perspectives by differently positioned characters. Moreover, the use of the differently positioned characters discloses how classed positions within whiteness are connected to various times and spaces. The various poor white characters also display both the possibilities of social mobility within whiteness and the tenacity of class distinctions. For example, the representation of the underprivileged white family, the Garlocks, in *Because It is Bitter* exemplify the rigidity of certain classed status, which is related to their material poverty, rural origins, and the era they are living in. If compared to the representation of the poor white women in "Death Valley" and "White Trash," the representation of two urban women living in the contemporary, late-modern culture, demonstrates how class boundaries have changed and become ambiguous, and as such more difficult to define in simple terms of material and economic conditions. Overall, as I have suggested in chapter four, the poor white women characters are represented as occupying an in-between position that works to problematize cultural classifications, and to disclose the instability of the boundaries and intricate relations of class, race, and gender.

Oates's highly acclaimed novel *Blonde*, which employs the myth of the iconic Hollywood movie star Marilyn Monroe, offers manifold angles to my overall question about to the complexity of white female identity. Similar to *Because It Is Bitter* and *I'll Take you There*, the novel delves into the past. *Blonde* explores the significance of memory in various ways, especially as a crucial site for identity formation in a specific time and place. In my reading, I have focused on the question of how the protagonist becomes a cultural icon, and how this process is conditioned by normative ideals of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nationality. Her

story of becoming a cultural ideal is tragic, because of her strong wish to be the ideal that is a desire never to be satisfied. Nevertheless, as I have suggested in my reading, the narrative of her tragic life story includes also seeds of resistance and transformation. From the very beginning, the narration, utilizing the form of fictional autobiography by the narrator-protagonist, implies that the act of returning to the protagonist's memories has a creative and transformative significance in the story.

In my analysis of *Blonde*, I have focused especially on the protagonist's performance. That is, I have offered a reading of how the protagonist's body functions as the border where conventional cultural codes and demands concerning the woman as the object of desire are repeated and negotiated. On the one hand, the protagonist is able to fashion her performance in multiple ways in the limits of the Hollywood discourse of visibility. This becomes possible, because she is conscious of the cultural codes that regulate her visual image. On the other hand, she finds the culturally constructed roles of a white woman she submits to through her performance as limiting and disparaging. I have also analyzed the protagonist by using the idea of hysteric performance, understood as a mode of expressing resistance. Hysteric performance is entangled with unconscious acts, which means that it includes elements that the performer cannot control completely. As I contend in my interpretation of *Blonde*, the hysteric performance of the protagonist mediates an expression of both her individual discontent as a woman and a collective discontent of culture that produces Marilyn Monroe. The individual discontent is caused by the social conditions and the different fantasies projected on the protagonist. The collective discontent, in turn, is connected to the effects of the normalizing discourses and regiments of power in American culture in the 1950s and in the beginning of the 1960s.

Blonde also tackles the problematic of race and racialization. In this novel, the African American male is not used in the depiction of the protagonist's white racial identity. As my reading of *Because It Is Bitter*, "White Trash," and *I'll Take You There* demonstrates, the representation of interracial intimacy may reflect the problematic of whiteness critically. Yet, *Blonde* manages to disturb and disclose more of white racial anxiety

than the above mentioned novels and stories, perhaps, because its delving into the problematic is outside the persistent conventions, stereotypes, and fantasies of the interracial pattern, which draw on the over-determined opposition of black-white categories. The novel's probing into the problematic of white identity unsettles whiteness, and draws critical attention to the effects of racialization and the power of the dominant racial ideal. The processing of the white self is realized in *Blonde* partly in relation to Jewish characters. That is, the protagonist's relationships with Jewish men work as an impetus that forces her to encounter her own racial identity. The novel depicts how the protagonist is drawn to the ideal of white femininity represented in the Hollywood films, and how her need to embody the ideal is reinforced by the film industry, as she becomes an actor. Moreover, as my reading demonstrates, the narration also discloses how whiteness poses a fundamental crisis and dilemma for the protagonist. At the same time as she desires to fulfill the idea of whiteness, she wants to be something other than white because of the anxiety and discomfort the white ideal brings her. Instead of giving the protagonist some kind of redemption of whiteness, the novel ends with her death. That is, she is partly destroyed by her contradictory desire to embody the white ideal.

The familial relations and the oedipal theme are also central in *Blonde*. Her hysteric performance carries a message of her discontent against paternity, and of how she as woman is determined by the Oedipus conflict. In addition, the narrative as the protagonist's memory-work brings back the repressed experience of loss projected on her by the oedipal. The protagonist longs for the father throughout the novel, and it seems, that the narrative cannot refuse oedipal determinism. Yet, as I have suggested in my reading, the end of the novel entails the possibility of changing the rules of the scenario, and a potential for transformation. That is, the narration gestures towards a transformation in the future, which remains indeterminate in the present. In my reading, I have suggested that this gesture towards future transformation can be seen as an invitation to think alternative identifications and subject positions for a white woman. *Blonde* does not suggest any specific alternatives for the

future of a white woman, but it calls for interpretations that offer critical views to the power alignments of the contemporary American society concerning the normativizing forces of gender, sexuality, and race.

Oates's fiction manifests the complexity of white femininity in ways that offer a critical gaze to what being American is. As I have argued throughout my dissection of the carefully chosen novels and short stories by Oates, her fiction works in multiple ways to both understand and challenge current understandings of white identity. In particular her recent fiction discloses white identities as complex, unstable, and constantly changing. To be exact, Oates's stories disturb a straightforward and fixed understanding of subject's identity, agency, and society, and reveal the interaction between social differences and power relations as an unstable process, in which they are constantly changing and being re-negotiated. Her fiction does not offer a clear ethical stance or solution to the unequal distribution of power in society in the contemporary multicultural era, but instead, illuminates the contradictions of human desires and relations, and challenges us to think beyond normativizing categories, including race. Although her anxiety-ridden white female characters are not able to move beyond whiteness, her fiction does not lose a prospect of a different kind of future.

This, I believe, is a future, which comes possible when we recognize the present ways of understanding identity, and how our way of thinking is situated in a certain culture and history, more profoundly. As I have shown in my readings of Oates's fictional accounts of American identities, works of fiction may offer various views to the complexity of identity-constitution in the contemporary era, and function as a channel in trying to understand more of the ways in which we inhabit the world. There are still questions and discussions that remain unexamined, yet to be unveiled, which may open up towards new kinds of epistemologies for thinking about the subject-constitution in general, or better, towards a change that displaces whiteness as an a priori epistemology. This requires that we dig even deeper in order to understand the disturbing facilities of a white subject and its relation to privilege and supremacy.

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