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Joyce Carol Oates as postmodern romantic: A postmodern feminist critique of *A Bloodsmoor Romance* and *Foxfire: Confessions of a girl-gang*

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JOYCE CAROL OATES AS
POSTMODERN ROMANTIC

A POSTMODERN FEMINIST CRITIQUE

of

A BLOODSMOOR ROMANCE

and

FOXFIRE: CONFESSIONS OF A GIRL-GANG

Christian HANSEN-KNARHOI

1994

B.A. (Hons). English Studies

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Signature ..

Date 16/2/95

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

PREFACE

"Who am I, a *male* student/critic, to be using feminist thought and theory to my own ends?"

The answer for myself and feminism could be possibly damaging if not addressed, and thus my (male) presence must be justified. The issue is furthermore problematized by the fact that postmodernism is widely considered a male generated/dominated field. However, I believe that my male perspective is beneficial in that I use postmodernism allied with feminist textual strategies and theory to reveal and develop a positive feminist agenda. Following my argument in Chapter Two, I regard my involvement as warranted, as feminism (and the postmodern association) should be an 'open', not 'closed', debate. Thus my contribution should ultimately be accepted, not rejected or seen as 'bad', but as important to feminism. As Joseph A. Boone and Michael Caddon asserts in their anthology Engendering Men: The Question of Male Feminist Criticism (1990): "To [see] with 'fresh eyes' ... is a revolutionary task in which both men and women

can - indeed must - participate if we are to create a
nonsexist future" (p.3).

BACKGROUND

Joyce Carol Oates's novels A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) focus on the struggles, breakthroughs, and ultimate triumphs of women in two periods of American history; the 1800s and 1950s respectively. However, the feminist textual strategies employed by Oates to reveal these triumphs are allied with postmodernist characteristics, thus these novels can be termed *postmodern feminist*. In A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) Joyce Carol Oates uses her twentieth-century postmodernist license to present a critique of the romance novels written during this period through the women in the nineteenth-century Zinn family breaking out of their respective subservient, docile, subordinate stereotypes and roles. A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) is thus a parody of these novels and the women portrayed in them.

A more misogynist male attitude is apparent in Oates's 1950s New York in Foxfire: Confessions of a

Girl-Gang (1993) as the teenagers cope with sexual and physical male abuse in a chiefly male society by retaliating through violence, luring men into traps baited with sex. Utilising various postmodernist characteristics such as the questioning of history, Oates reveals the girls' search for an individual identity.

Ultimately, Joyce Carol Oates in both novels reveals through postmodern characteristics of parody, the reimagining of popular genres, play with history and time, intermingling of fact and fiction, self-reflexivity, and so on, a serious study of the misogynist attitude of the patriarchal American character and society. In these novels, Oates's postmodern feminist position is "romantic" in that she subverts Romance genre traditions in regards to women's roles, and reveals the ideal of individual freedom, autonomy, and liberated selfhood. Thus Joyce Carol Oates as postmodern "romantic".

AIMS

The main focus of this thesis is twofold: justifying Joyce Carol Oates's use of postmodern theory to inform her feminist novels; and ultimately proving that postmodernism *can* and *should* be allied with feminism and develop positive feminist agendas. Postmodern characteristics will be explicitly examined in regards to forming Oates's overtly feminist subtexts, revealing women breaking out of patriarchal, often violent, social and domestic oppression in 'positive', efficient ways.

CHAPTER TWO

A POSTMODERN FEMINISM?

POSTMODERNISM

A concrete definition of postmodernism is more-or-less fruitless as it is not in essence a theory, but a myriad of positions, views, characteristics, and propositions; essentially, a 'collective' of opinion and traits. The diverse characteristics, including pastiche, parody, the decentred subject, intertextuality, problematic history and narrative, may render the term problematic, yet postmodernism can generally be perceived as a critique of one of the fundamental assumptions of modernism; namely Enlightenment thought and knowledge (a single attainable universal Truth; 'grand narratives'; subjectivity as unitary 'consciousness'; and so on.

As there is no one understanding of postmodernism, there is consequently debate between those that resist, embrace, and remain neutral towards its usefulness. In this introduction, then, I will outline three critics' respective resisting, embracing and abstinent views of postmodernism: Fredric Jameson, Jean-Francois Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard.

Fredric Jameson in Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism (1991) views postmodernism's disappearing of the individual subject and thus individual thought through pastiche and parody, forming a "dead language" (p.17), is a negative aspect, as our lives are thus controlled by capitalist "(f)aceless masters" (p.17) in a depthless society which has given up on 'meaning'. Jameson (1991) essentially views the following as damaging: postmodernism's rampant nostalgic cannibalising of the past; its intertextual borrowing of past styles, traits, and so on, rendering pastiche "blank parody" (Jameson,1991, p.17) or the "imitation of dead styles" (Jameson,1991,p.18). In this respect, then, all originality is lost and modern society is formed by past referents and thus is a 'copy' of the past, and we revel in this timelessness, addicted to 'surfaces'. Jameson (1991) sees this as a "waning of affect" (p.15) whereby centred subjectivity has been renounced, thus postmodernism is a series of 'ends': "the end, for example, of style, in the sense of the unique and the personal, the end of the distinctive individual brush stroke" (p.15).

Jean-Francois Lyotard, on the other hand, in The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (1984) views postmodernism as an "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (p.xxiv) through the de-legitimation of narrational knowledge claims. Where previously contemporary postmodern society and culture's legitimation of knowledge empowered Western society, values and ideals, postmodernism questions these grand narratives which posit "narrative as the validity of knowledge ... as a hero of knowledge or a hero of liberty" (Lyotard,1984,p.31). The subsequent result is that the "grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of whether it is a (philosophically-based) speculative narrative ... or a (politically-based) narrative of emancipation ... (where) "(k)nowledge is ... in the service of the subject: its only legitimacy ... is ... that it allows morality to become reality"(p.36)] (Lyotard,1984,p.37). Lyotard (1984) thus asserts that the grand narrative is no longer important in postmodern society as "(m)ost people have lost the nostalgia for the lost narrative" (p.41), and

that the only legitimation accessible is "from their own linguistic practice and communicational interaction" (p.41). Ultimately, then, an important aspect of postmodernism to Lyotard (1984) is its rejection of traditional Western totalising grand narratives, allowing plurality and heterogeneity. Thus in proclaiming no one essential knowledge, postmodernism can empower disenfranchised groups, allowing their 'voices' to be heard.

Jean Baudrillard's emphasis in his essay "Simulacra and Simulations" in Mark Poster's Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings (1988) is on postmodernism's concept of the 'real', whereby the referent cannot precede the sign because the original has been indefinitely reproduced; "a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself" (Poster, 1988, p.167). Thus there is no 'real' but only simulacra: 'simulations' of an 'imaginary' reality. Baudrillard views this condition as a hyperreal 'mood'; "the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere" (Poster, 1988, p.167). He thus

views the simulacra (copy without an original) as the "death sentence of every reference" (Poster, 1988,p.170) where "there is no longer any God ..., nor any last judgement to separate truth from false, the real from its artificial resurrection, since everything is already dead and risen in advance" (Poster,1988,p.171). Thus ironically the simulacra *is* Truth, albeit a "second-hand" (Poster,1988,p.171) one.

FEMINISM

Feminist thought in regards to liberating women from largely male societal oppression through, for example, challenging traditional Western man-made theories and political agency, are many, varied, and consequently lead to disagreement amongst feminists. To introduce feminist thought, then, I will outline briefly several of these strands as defined in Valerie Bryson's Feminist Political Theory: an Introduction (1992) and Rosemary Tong's Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction (1989): radical feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, and socialist feminism.

Radical feminism's thought is based around the belief the women's oppression is most prevalent in a patriarchal system "characterised by power, dominance, hierarchy, and competition, a system that cannot be reformed but only ripped out root and branch" (Tong, 1989, pp. 2-3). However, for radical feminists, "(i)t is not just patriarchy's legal and political structures that must be overturned; its

social and cultural institutions (especially the family, the church, and the academy) must also go" (Tong,1989,p.3). They furthermore insist that "male power is at the root of the social construction of gender" (Tong,1989,p.4), and ultimately men control women's sexuality for their own pleasure through, for instance, pornography, prostitution, sexual harassment, rape, and gynaecology. Radical feminists thus believe that sexual liberation can be found by experimenting sexually, "with herself, with other women, and even with men" (Tong,1989,p.5). In essence, then, every woman must "feel free to follow her own desires" (Tong,1989,p.5).

Liberal feminists believe that "female subordination is rooted in ... customary and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance and/or success in the so-called public world" (Tong,1989,p.2), and that this can be overcome through equal "educational opportunities and civil rights" (Tong,1989,p.2). Liberal feminism's main focus is essentially on educational and legal reform.

Marxist feminism argues that women and men will "remain oppressed until the capitalist economic system is replaced by communism" (Bryson,1992,p.3).

Thus:

(f)rom this perspective, the key to women's liberation is their entry into the paid labour market and their participation in the class struggle; it is only in communist society that the economic dependency that is the basis of women's oppression will disappear ...

(Bryson,1992,p.3)

Ultimately, then, the "Marxist feminists hold out the hope that if women's status and function(s) truly change in the workplace, her status and function(s) in the household will also change" (Tong,1989,p.69).

Socialist feminism essentially combines the 'best' aspects of both Marxist and radical feminism, such as the latter's "insistence on the ubiquity of male power (and) all areas of life be seen as political" (Bryson,1992,p.4); and the former's exploring "the ways in which class and sex oppression interact in capitalist society" (Bryson,1992,p.4). They "advocate struggle at all levels ... (which) will sometimes involve autonomous women's organisations, but will also involve working with

men" (Bryson,1992,p.4). Ultimately, socialist feminism advocates 'standpoint' feminism, where different women work and 'think' together, the 'challenge' being "to draw on the experiences of all women, never falling prey to the temptation to valorize the experiences of one group of women ... as somehow the paradigm for what it means to be a woman" (Tong,1989,p.193).

From this brief introduction to both postmodernism and feminism, a positive alliance for *feminism* between the two *may be* hindered by the fact that postmodernism is seemingly comprised of various strands with no real sense of unity, thus forming no cohesive 'theory'. Ironically, though, this is an aspect that postmodernism itself advocates: in critiquing totalising, so-called "universal" Truths and knowledge, it simultaneously resists forming any totalising Truths of its own.

Thus I intent to pose the question: *can* there be a *positive* alliance for feminism?

POSTMODERNISM/FEMINISM

THE arguments, opinions and views surrounding the possibilities and ramifications of an alliance between postmodernism and feminism are varied, extensive, important, and ultimately when considering its consequences for feminism, problematic. However, if there is/can be a 'positive' outcome beneficial for feminism from postmodern feminism - and I think there can be - then this discussion needs to be examined. In order to reveal this, I will draw upon several affirming, cautionary and opposing feminist viewpoints.

THE POSITIVE

Susan J. Hekman in Gender and Knowledge, Elements of a Postmodern Feminism (1990) believes that although coming from different "theoretical and political sources" (p.189), postmodernism and feminism's regimes of challenging Western Enlightenment thought, phallocentrism, and masculinist meaning-making et. al., are what should be seen as a positive postmodern feminism. However, Hekman (1990) bases her thesis on the writings of

Derrida, Foucault, Nietzsche, Habermas, and thus the obvious criticism would be one of irony as ultimately she relies on the Eurocentric, Western male models she is supposed to be refuting. Thus feminist theory and practice is subsumed by several so-called antecedents to postmodernism/poststructuralism, which is open to alliance as, by extension, it privileges postmodernism over feminism.

Rosemary Tong in Feminist Thought (1989) points out that postmodern feminists insist upon legitimising the various diverse women's views and thought across lines of race, class and culture in order to "resist patriarchal dogma" (p.7). However, as this means that any feminist standpoint is unstable and continually changing, "it becomes difficult to ground claims about what is good for women" (Tong, 1989, p.7). Tong (1989), though, does not specify *which* women she is referring to, *what* would be 'good' for them, and *who* ultimately has the power to legitimate any view.

This is further problematic when Tong (1989)

states that the views cut across racial, class and cultural lines as she ultimately focuses on the Eurocentric postmodern feminist voices of Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. Tong (1989) believes these women in their different postmodern feminists voices provide women who read them with "freedom from oppressive thought" (p.233). Ultimately, Tong (1989), following Lacan and Derrida, takes the view that women can speak and write from the 'outside' as a positive Other - from "nothingness, absence, the marginal, the repressed" (Tong,1989,p.233) - and *maybe* overcome binary opposition, logocentrism and phallogentrism. Thus although Tong (1989) does admit that postmodernism and feminism have an "uneasy relationship" (p.217) with feminism itself, she does not state any definitive position and simply remains optimistic that the "multiplicity" of postmodern feminist voices from the positive Other can help in ways not yet realised: "For even if we cannot all be One, we can be Many. There may yet be a way to achieve unity in diversity" (Tong,1989,p.233).

In Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott's anthology Feminists Theorise the Political (1992) Judith Butler and Jane Flax offer their opinions. Judith Butler firstly argues that there are "no political consequences" (p.8) for postmodernist questioning of the "foundationalist moves" (p.8), but a possible "political deployment" (p.8; my emphasis), then asserts that the critique of the subject as a single, unitary "I" is not a 'negation' of subjectivity but "a way of interrogating its construction as a pregiven or foundationalist premise" (p.9). Ultimately, Butler (1992) on identity as subject-positions in feminist theory, believes that conflict within and between feminist sites leads to openness of thought and is good for feminism:

To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorise or safeguard the category of woman as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman and in this sense to condition and enable an enhanced sense of agency.

(Butler, 1992, p.16)

Where there is a "foundation", then, there is a "contestatation", and the ensuing risk that feminist

politics may be criticised and/or used for anti-feminist purposes, leads only to "openness". This should be regarded positively as it "provides the conditions to *mobilise* the signifier in the service of an alternative production" (p.17).

While the postmodern critique of the subject 'overshadows', so to speak, Butler's (1992) above argument, postmodernist challenges to "gender-based relations of power that generate the content and legitimacy of many forms of knowledge" (Flax, 1992, p.456) is explicitly discussed in Jane Flax's essay. Here Flax (1992) states that those feminists who believe in a feminist epistemology that is 'pure', free from "dominating relations of power" (p.456), and effectively "better", are wrong, as they, too are maintaining Enlightenment hope of an ideal Truth or knowledge. Flax (1992) asserts with a more openly postmodernist approach, 'free-thinking' within feminism should be encouraged, accepted, and/or critiqued, revelling in the differences that occur. In short, "postmodernism invites us to engage in a continual process of disillusionment with the

grandiose fantasies that have brought us to the brink of annihilation" (Flax,1992,p.460).

THE CAUTIOUS/NEGATIVE

Valerie Bryson's Feminist Theory - An Introduction (1992) offers an overtly cautious stance on the benefits for feminism with an alliance with postmodernism. Bryson (1992) views positively the following: postmodernism's insistence on language and subjectivity as socially constructed, thus opening social constructs and (male-dominated) institutions up for change; "its stressing the ... partiality of all experience (and guarding) feminists against generalising about all women on the basis of white middle-class western experience" (p.279); and its challenging of male perspectives in revealing "how power is constructed through discourse, how oppression works, and where resistance is possible" (p.229). However, she sees its refusal to submit to so-called political action - rejecting totalising terms such as 'right', 'justice', and 'reason' - as denying women the ability to make social change, thus

she counsels women to treat postmodernism with "extreme caution" (p.229), as women should be the "essential starting point" (pp.229-30) in feminist theory, and she ultimately doubts whether postmodernism will ultimately allow this.

However, while conceding by implication that Jane Flax and Judith Butler's insistence on accepting the danger of multiple, conflicting views/experiences is positive for feminism in its guarding against generalising (p.229), Bryson points out that only concentrating on the 'differences', which Butler (1992) insinuates, denies the possibility of 'collective' action. Bryson (1992) believes instead that all the positive not negative similarities between the multiple feminist positions (radical, liberal, socialist and so on) form a beneficial basis for 'political action'. Yet is this position another instance of deciding what is 'good' or 'bad'? Is Bryson (1992) thus allowing positive interaction within the various feminist positions and treating with suspicion all the negative aspects? If she does, 'openness' in a postmodern feminism is

ultimately curtailed.

A more forthright rejection of postmodernism from feminism is asserted by Somer Brodribb in Nothing Mat(t)ers: a Feminist Critique of Postmodernism (1992). Brodribb (1992) sees feminists as Susan Hekman (1990) as mistaken in basing their critiques on men's thought, and condemns postmodernism as *entirely* patriarchal: "Postmodernism is the cultural capital of late patriarchy. It is the art of self-display, the conceit of masculine self and the science of reproduction and genetic engineering in an ecstatic Nietzschean cycle of stasis" (p.21). Ultimately Brodribb (1992) denounces Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and women who work with their thought to develop and modify their own feminist postmodern theory (Luce Irigaray with Lacan; p.110). Brodribb (1992) ultimately believes in a feminist "unflinching autonomy" (p.146) to challenge the patriarchal tradition of which women are a constituent, and to break out by relying *not* on postmodernism (a patriarchal discourse) but by basing their "coming of rage" on women's bodies and

experience.

However, I find her somewhat simplistic in her denunciation of the forefathers, so to speak, of postmodernism as casting a shadow over the entire field. Their work is important but surely there can be postmodern feminists producing new, diverse variations of early theory that benefit feminism. Here Brodribb (1992) is merely isolating another avenue for feminism to develop, assimilate and critique, and feminism itself is stifled where it should be allowed to breathe.

Another point of contention is Brodribb's assertion that the "postmodern male author is dying, imploding as subject, while women are claiming a voice, giving birth to a feminist movement and vision and remembering against dismemberment" (1992,p.146). She may be right, but what about postmodern feminist textual agendas? Should these writers if they use postmodern theories to reveal and develop a feminist agenda, be spurned because they dare to associate themselves with postmodernism? Surely these textual

alliances can be valuable and not completely discarded as harmful. In fact, Brodribb (1992) appears to negate the existence of postmodern female authors from feminism in this statement: the apparent choice being between wholly feminist (based upon the body and experience) or nothing. Again the possibilities for feminism are limited.

Geraldine Finn's essay "Why No Great Women Postmodernists?" in Valda Blundell, John Shepard and Ian Taylor's anthology Relocating Cultural Studies: Developments in Theory and Research (1993) sees postmodernism's subsuming and saturating everything under its moniker, privileging nothing, as bad social theory due to its 'totalising tendency' merely continuing "the modernist practice of universalising the particular" (p.132). Thus it is not critical and the "experiences" and "realities" of the "many" disappear. More pointedly for feminist theory, women are practically silenced as an 'absence' in totalising theory and thus "does not take gender into account, ie. sexual difference *and the difference it makes*" (Finn, 1993, p.133). Thus this generalisation

is "neither critical nor transformative in its effects but complicit with and reproductive of the political status quo ante" (p.137). Furthermore, the seeming promise of postmodernism's opening of subjectivities and speaking voices for women is ultimately forfeited and ignored, spoken *for* and incorporated *within* "its own seamless and would-be anonymous voice" (Finn,1993,p.134).

To resist this 'disappearing' Finn (1993) posits producing "counter-cultural theory and practice focussed on events (ideology made concrete and practical) rather than texts (ideology made abstract and ideal)"(p.137). Thus 'good' critical social theory concentrates on specific, concrete and particular "political and practical urgencies of the moment" (Finn,1993,p.137). Ultimately, speaking from the margins is better and more productive than speaking from the "dead" (post)modernist centre, which opens the "world" and its possible truths *by speaking always from the contingencies, borders and boundaries* and creates space for the "voices, knowledges and realities of previously subordinated

and silenced subjects" (Finn,1993,p.141).

Geraldine Finn's (1993) premise, as that of Somer Brodribb's (1992) may be sound, but does her statement that there are no "great" women postmodernists because they are amongst other subsumed, dissolved groups from the collective consciousness, mean that they can not be recognised, or even exist? Essentially, this is the problem I have with Finn's argument: her spurning of texts, privileging "social" theory, and consequently establishing another binary opposition between the two, which I presume feminist theory wanted to resist. Also Finn's chiefly drawing upon male writings to develop her argument [several essays in Tom Darby's collection Sojourns in the New World (1986)] and not women's texts reveals to me she is favouring male texts thereby possibly limiting the arguments she makes. I believe that postmodern feminist texts and writers *do* exist, *for good or ill*. This allows feminists (male and female alike) to agree and/or criticise these texts and thus further develop and extend the feminist field. Postmodern feminist texts are not 'dead' but 'charge' feminism.

CONCLUSION

In essence, I believe that postmodern feminist texts and theories are important, viable, and can benefit feminism. If to some feminists a certain postmodern feminist text may not appear advantageous, it should not be ignored but critiqued and placed, and similarly, contrary to what Somer Brodribb (1992) and Geraldine Finn (1993) assert, so should feminist postmodernism allied with feminism. Postmodern textual strategies in feminist texts should be an *essential* part of feminist discussion and not rejected, and if some texts are determined by feminists as negative, then that is the risk that must be taken. These texts should be considered in a feminist 'light'. This seems to me the only way to keep feminism in the postmodern/feminism debate alive, motivated, receptive and 'open', contrary to those who maintain that this alliance is 'lifeless'. Ultimately, in this regard postmodern feminist texts should all be seen as beneficial to and for feminism.

I aim to prove and substantiate this in the Joyce Carol Oates's postmodern feminist novels A

Bloodmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of
a Girl-Gang (1993).

CHAPTER THREE

JOYCE CAROL OATES'S
A BLOODSMOOR ROMANCE
AND
FOXFIRE
AS
HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

INTRODUCTION

In A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) the narrators are highly important to Joyce Carol Oates's postmodern "romantic" feminist position in their playing with History and Truth, problematising of female subjectivity, intertextual parody, and self-reflexivity, to form complex female selfhoods. It is essentially the ways the narrators write their respective histories and relate to the various female liberations occurring in them that we find Oates employing these postmodern characteristics. In effect, then, both novels can be termed what Linda Hutcheon in A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction (1988) entitles "Historiographic Metafiction" (p.105) in their respective reimagining of historical periods in this way.

These narratives are "both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (Hutcheon, 1988, p.5). Therefore, in historiographic meta-

fictions, "its theoretical self-awareness of fiction as human constructs ... is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (Hutcheon,1988,p.5). Since postmodernism in its borrowing and copying of the past shows we can only know this past through texts, the narrators in A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) ironically pose questions concerning the validity of their own histories and thus their own female subjectivities. This is not mere 'nostalgia', however, as "to re-write or to represent the past ... is to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon,1988,p.110). Thus the questions "how do we know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now?" (Hutcheon,1988,p.115) allow a feminist critique of the historical periods narrated. In adopting or re-writing past literary texts and ideas, then, "(h)istoriographic metafiction (ultimately) ... (draws) upon any signifying practices it can find operative in a society, ... (paradoxically) to challenge those discourse and yet to use them" (Hutcheon,1988,p.133). Historiographic metafiction

thus allows Oates to 'borrow' from the past in regards to 1950s and nineteenth-century ideas and portrayals of women, using them to formulate a (postmodern) feminist critique.

In A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) Oates parodies various conventional nineteenth-century female stereotypes, borrowing from several well-known romance novels of this period to critique the genre, and employs postmodern feminisms notion of a 'positive' Other, where women as a collective fight against the male-dominated society of the 1950s, in Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993). Thus both use aspects of historical periods to show women breaking out of male oppression. However, the narrators reveal Oates's historiographic problematising of History. Truth and narrative, and thus their own place within the histories they are narrating.

The female narrators in A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) take two respective forms: "... (the) overt,

deliberately manipulative. ... (and) no one single perspective but myriad voices" (Hutcheon,1988,p.117). The narrator of Foxfire is not confident in her "ability to know (the) past with any certainty" (Hutcheon,1988,p.117), and A Bloodsmoor Romance's virtuous elderly 'maiden', despite maintaining strict control over her narrative, ultimately finds herself struggling for a 'voice' in a fast-changing America.

PARODY/INTERTEXTUALITY
IN
A BLOODSMOOR ROMANCE

Joyce Carol Oates's interest in the nineteenth-century romance novel is well documented in her collection of essays (Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities (1988), in which critiques of Jane Eyre, Susan Warner's Diana, and Emily Dickinson's poetry are offered. Against contemporary feminism's rejection of the popular romance novel due to the "misguided, or self-deluded" (p.191) author portraying "the sacrifice of the self, (as) an elevation of duty over all human activities" (pp.191-2), Oates believes our twentieth-century assumptions have changed and thus we cannot really "read" and "understand" the genre:

We can analyse our narrators'
beliefs, and the philosophical,
sociological, political, and
psychological foundations of those
beliefs, but it is virtually
impossible for us to *believe*:
we read their musical notations but
we can't hear them.
(Oates, 1988, p.192)

In A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982), Oates's fear that novels like Susan Warner's Diana (1888) will fall "off the map ... (and) sink in the uncharted waters" (1988,p.196) is assuaged as she 'updates' the genre, so to speak:

As a novelist of the 1980s my vision is postmodernist, and therefore predisposed to irony; as a woman, however, an inhabitant of the 1980s, I don't feel at all superior to these puzzling heroines of a bygone world. I simply feel different. Very different.

(Oates, 1988, p.197)

In this postmodern context, then, A Bloodsmoor Romance is a parody of the romance novel popular in the nineteenth-century, appropriating from this period characters and characteristics from novels such as George Eliot's Middlemarch (1873) and Louisa May Alcott's Little Women (1868), and thus aspects of the genre. Joyce Carol Oates revels in this postmodernist intertextuality, burlesquing and parodying the genre to form her twentieth-century reimagining.

Oates's use of intertexts and parody offers not

only "a sense of the presence of the past, but a past that can be known only from its texts, its traces - be they literary or historical" (Hutcheon, 1988, p.125). The advantage here is that by parodying and burlesquing the nineteenth-century romance 'norms' or characteristics/features, Oates does not destroy the past but rather "enshrines" and "questions" it (Hutcheon, 1988, p.126):

Parodic self-reflexiveness
paradoxically leads ... to the
possibility of a literature
which, while asserting its
modernist autonomy as art, also
manages simultaneously to
investigate its intricate and
intimate relations with the
social world in which it is
written and read.

(Hutcheon, 1988, p.45)

In fact, the use of parody in A Bloodsmoor Romance "opens" the genre up, allowing a twentieth-century perspective and critique, and Oates uses this postmodernist license for her feminist approach by burlesquing traditional nineteenth-century women's roles to the extreme, revealing her feminist revisioning. This is accomplished through the five daughters of John and Prudence Zinn: Malvinia, Samantha, Constance Philippa, Octavia, and Deirdre.

I

MALVINIA

Impetuous, beautiful Malvinia - Margaret, the eldest of the March girls in Little Women - is dispirited about her life with the family, believing that "*melancholy* and *happiness* are inextricably joined" (p.20). Following societal tradition that "Beauty - whether of face, or form, or manner, or attire - was ... a requisite for the female sex" (p.8), leading to attaining the best suitor possible for marriage, Malvinia is "The Rose of the Kikddemaster Garden"; vain, self-centred, the self-proclaimed 'favourite' and 'beauty' of all the daughters. Seemingly content to endure anything to maintain her beauty, the encouragement, praise, and prestige bestowed upon her by her doting father, John Zinn, results in her developing into a spoilt, egotistical girl, disdainful towards her sisters, charming to the opposite sex, and continually looking at herself in mirrors (pp.52-3). In short, Malvinia is a "consummate actress ... most happily herself, and consequently possessed of a radiant beauty, when she had the occasion to perform for others" (p.52).

However, Joyce Carol Oates exaggerates Malvinia's narcissistic Beauty/'innocent' sexuality trait when she betrays her family and leaves for a career on the stage in the "great great World beyond!" (p.177), where a successful, rich, hedonistic life and career results, "all the dazzling spoils of the material world ... at her sliupper'd feet" (p.232). Losing her virginity without the slightest resistance, Malvinia "Morloch" enjoys sexual power over men, yet is soon afflicted by the *Mark of the Beast*, and uncontrollable tendency during sex to be overcome by bestial, often violent, behaviour, expelling "the occasional release of unspeakable odors ... from the nether regions, ... (and) an unnatural lubricity, of the female organs" (p.44). The *Mark of the Beast* can be viewed as a 'mark' of her liberated sexuality; free from constraint in a world where female 'saintly passivity' is demanded. As such, Malvinia's attempts to thwart these desires result in her acquiring "the discipline of lying immobile, as if paralysed, or a veritable corpse" (p.446), in effect suppressing sexual pleasure.

Joyce Carol Oates uses her postmodern license in borrowing a famous real-life figure, referred to as a "trasnworld identity" by Brian McHale in Constructing Postmodernism (1992, p.152), in Mark Twain as Malvinia's lover, to show the *Mark of the Beast's* last appearance. In this episode, the Beast emerges and with its violence threatens to kill Mark Twain (p.464). Twain flees, however, leaving Malvinia "grunting, cursing, pulsing, palpitating, ... on hands and knees ... dazed and ferocious as a tigress - her prey having escaped" (p.465). Oates here parodies Malvinia's breaking out of the passive sexual 'vessel' stereotype to reveal a woman struggling to liberate herself.

II

SAMANTHA

Kind-hearted Samantha, youngest of the sisters, is the 'brainy' ugly duckling, content simply to assist her inventor-father. Her intelligence is questioned as a requisite for a "lady" by the sisters and the narrator: Octavia asserts that Beauty is not equated with intelligence (p.65); and, the latter

points out that "gentlemen are naturally discomfited by an *excess of ratiocination*, in the weaker sex, might have benefited this awkward young miss" (p.65). Samantha's eagerness to discuss John Zinn's inventions sabotages any social prowess when dealing with supposed male suitors, leading the narrator to denounce her as "unworldly" and "foolish" (p.67):

"It is your brain that is at fault, and must be brought under control," Malvinia told Samantha. ... "for, in its present condition, it is a *perpetual-motion machine* in itself; and most repugnant."
(p.67)

Samantha would rather be a spinster "'and answer only to myself, than be an apprentice to another person - one whom, no doubt, I would hardly know'" (p.281).

However, it is revealed that as a baby Samantha had a conspicuous birthmark removed by her father, and she "perversely" feels resentment towards this: "For, any normal young woman would have been not simply grateful for her father's concern, that she enter life *unblemish'd*, she would have been profuse with daughterly thanks - ... and declarations of

lifelong devotion" (p.405). Samantha is also indignant towards an article written about John Zinn's inventions in which she is merely considered his 'daughter-assistant'; "as if, being of the female gender she *had* no name" (p.404). Furthermore, she eventually loses her plainness and is praised for becoming a normal "feminine" lady, eventually falls in love with her fellow-assistant, Nahum Hareton, a transworld character 'borrowed' from Charlotte Bronte's Wuthering Heights (1848). What is important about this relationship is that Hareton is not repulsed by Samantha's seeming superior intelligence but *attracted* to it (p.404), and, viewing her father's birthmark eradication as an experiment on *her*, they betray her parents and elope. Thus, Samantha escapes her 'selfless' subordinate position under her father and his inhumane manipulations.

III

CONSTANCE PHILIPPA

Witty Constance Philippa is Alcott's tom-boy Jo, censorious of "*female chatter, ... female quarrelling and female nonsense*" (p.64), yet engaged to the

virile Baron Von Mainz. This relationship is not governed by love, and contingent with the heroines of novels such as Madame Bovary, Anne Karenina, Middlemarch, and The Awakening. Constance Philippa relies on romantic novels and poetry, in their promises, "springing from the marital state" (p.35), of eventual love towards her soon-to-be-husband. Her mother, Prudence, also guides her on "the phenomenon of *conjugal love*, and *woman's ministration*, and *wifely duty*" (p.36), yet as the imminent wedding approaches, she becomes flustered. To maintain equilibrium she gorges herself on advice books such as Alice C. Dodd's A Letter of Advice to a Young Bride and Mary Manderly Ogden's The Christian Mother, yet is not placated. She reads but does not understand these intertexts, and especially those concerning the marriage bed and babies, both 'phenomenon' "a *mystery*, a *blessing*, a *sacred duty*, and at the same time a *cross* all women must bear, as part of God's commandment" (p.145). None of the manuals divulge the mystery of these, and Constance Philippa enters blindly into the "sacred dut(y) of wifehood" (p.142). Having like all ladies of wholesome upbringing never seen or explored her

body - "the exigencies of her own flesh ... would certainly have surprised and disgusted her" (p.153) - she views the dressmaker's dummy for her wedding, "headless, armless, ending abruptly at the hips" (p.152), as *her*. In likening her body to the lifeless dummy, Constance Philippa has no sense of self, her identity confused and incomplete in that "the figure molded by her corsets was not her own" (p.153). Ultimately, as the Baron's past wives had died either in pregnancy, their fetuses "turned to stone", or of "undetermined" causes (pp.160-1), it is no wonder that on the wedding night Constance Philippa disappears, leaving the Baron to quickly and violently mount the dummy (p.175). Joyce Carol Oates's burlesque of Alcott's tom-boy Jo is thus upon the naivety of women and the marriage bed in sexual relations.

IV

OCTAVIA

Octavia epitomises what could be termed the perfect prospective wife - virtuous, selfless, pious, gentle, chaste, compliant - exhibiting "all those traits and virtues the world is want to term

gracious, and genteel, and those of a born lady". Similar to Eliot's Dorothea of Middlemarch Octavia marries a retired minister, Mr. Lucious Rumford of Rumford Hall; "one of the most distinguished gentlemen in all of Bloodsmoor, albeit a widower of indeterminate age, ... with a long narrow ponderous horse's face, and a perpetual dry cough" (p.257). Instead of offering solace, the advice manuals fill her with dread in regards to conjugal matters:

*It is strongly advis'd that
the bride shall not succumb to
unseemly or ill-timed emotion, in
the bridal bed: neither to an
outburst of tears, nor to an
abrupt expression of fright. So
Octavia read, and was duly
perplexed by, ... Unseemly or-
ill-timed emotion! Tears, nor-
fright!*

(p.377)

Her mother's advice that "'it is always best to think not at all" (p.260) is also understandably useless, and Octavia knows only that "something hideous lay ahead" (p.379).

Sure enough, Octavia suffers virtuously in the first 'unitary act', stuffing her pillow in her mouth, gnawing on her shoulder, and so on; "(t)he

bride's most treasured regard being, upon the cessation of Mr. Rumford's prolonged wheezing and plunging and pumping, a scarce-audible blessing: '...wife'" (p.382). Mr Rumford savagely subjects Octavia to increasingly violent sexual acts, ripping her undergarments, beating her "bosom" and "nether regions" with a fan (p.387), all of which she endures with "saintly diligence, and sweet acquiescence" (p.388). Octavia furthermore suffers miscarriages, the deaths of her two children, Sarah and Godfrey, and finally the the death of Mr. Rumford in a violent sexual act in which, blindfolded, she is told to pull on a noose around his neck, strangling him (pp.509-11). In Middlemarch Dorothea ultimately finds shattered her idealism in having a rich, satisfying life with the studious Casaubon, and Oates grossly parodies this situation through Octavia and Rumford, also censuring the intertextual Christian advice manuals. Oates thus criticises the nineteenth-century romance genre and the society it reflects in regards to the 'requisites' of a "lady" being ultimately damaging.

DEIRDRE

Deirdre, the adopted daughter, is the central Gothic link in A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982): inexplicably 'kidnapped' by a mysterious black hot-air-balloon; to return later as the medium "Deirdre of the Shadows'. As a child she is disdainful towards vanity, as when 'made-up' by Malvinia she asserts:

"What do I see? I see a clown;
a fool; a bewigged doll; a
poppet; ... a most garishly
prepared *young lady*; not at
all different from the rest.
I see, in short, no one I
recognise, or care to know."
(p.62)

Withdrawn, morbid, treated alternately with disapproval, fear and hatred; ghost phenomena, "floating dreams" (p.69) and supernatural events occurring in her presence, Deirdre is also possessed by various spirits, all of which plague her in dreams and waking life.

The seance Deirdre performs are ridiculed by the Society for Psychical Research, and in the public

investigation that follows, several male examiners are tormented to death by her spirits (pp.347-65). Also, rejecting "(t)he joyous fulfilment of (her) sex: the sacred duties of belov'd wife, and helpmeet, and mother" (p.474), the restrictive role impressed upon women, Deirdre prefers "intercourse with the Spirits" (p.475). Ultimately, then, alien to the Zinn family; alien and threatening to the male-dominated society; transgressing the boundaries between consciousness/unconsciousness and the everyday/Gothic, Oates's Deirdre is the dark, dangerous Other, breaking out of the rigid restrictions of the period and genre.

VI

SUMMARY

Employing postmodernist parody and intertextuality to depict the Zinn daughters' lives, Joyce Carol Oates reveals and critiques the romance genre and the times it portrays in regards to the restraints governing women's lives. Each daughter either escapes the elder Zinn's authority and in doing so resists convention - Malvinia and passive sexuality; Constance Philippa and marriage; Samantha

and parental domination; Deirdre and male-dominated society - or, as in Octavia's case, the wife as mere vessels for children. Thus postmodern 'parody' theory is positively employed by Oates to reveal her feminist subtexts, and, we as the twentieth-century reader can, through Oates's postmodernist license, now 'read' and 'understand' the genre in a feminist manner.

3

THE NARRATOR

AND

A BLOODSMOOR ROMANCE

The narrator's response to each Zinn daughter's respective liberation extends the force of intertextual parody by the elderly maiden's explicit "generic ironic play on nineteenth-century authoritative narrative voices, reader address, and narrative closure" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 45). Thus as the "past is always placed critically ... in relation to the present" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 45), Oates critiques the genre as a whole, using the narrator in her historical and literary context to "interrogate the present (as well as the past) through ... critical irony" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 45). Essentially, Oates raises nineteenth-century social and literary conventions and critiques them via the self-reflexive, overbearing narrator's moral and critical intrusions and questioning of history and historical writing as 'authentic' and coherent, to formulate her feminist critique: challenging accepted women's subjectivities of the nineteenth-century romance

genre.

An overtly intertextual exaggeration of the "Dear Reader" narrators of, for example, George Eliot (Middlemarch) and Charlotte Bronte (Jane Eyre), the elderly maiden of A Bloodsmoor Romance immediately establishes her control of the history she is narrating, commencing in her breathless, grandiose manner:

Our history of the remarkable
Zinn family, to end upon the
final bold stroke of midnight,
December 31, 1899, begins some
twenty years earlier, on that
beauteous September afternoon,
in the golden haze of autumn,
1879 - ah, now so long past! -
when ... Miss Deirdre Louisa
Zinn ... was, by daylight,
*abducted from the grounds
belonging to the stately home
of her grandparents, historic
old Kiddemaster Hall.*

(p.3)

Yet it is soon obvious that she is not entirely in control of the events she is narrating. Being the complete nineteenth-century "Dear Reader" narrator - demure, ladylike, virtuous - her confiding nature dominates, especially when Deirdre's abduction is

continually interrupted with gossip and comment on the girls' personalities and attributes. Furthermore, she self-reflexively reveals the limits of her narratorial powers of history-writing, firstly stating "(d)oubtless there is some error, in ascribing to past events, certain logical interpretations that come to mind only after time's ineluctable passage" (p.26), then:

Alas, to be gifted with the
semblance of *omniscience*, in
thus recording the history of
the Zinn family ... - for ...
I cannot guide (the daughters')
destinies: this chronicle being
a faithful recording of events
long past, and not a mere fictional
fancy, in which, at will, the
author directs the fate of this
personage, and now that, in
accordance with some whimsical
scheme.

(p.39)

And when the abduction is described, her sources all have differing impressions thus she must concede Deirdre has simply disappeared: "to what region of *Earth or Hell*, I know not" (p.74).

As well as self-reflexively acknowledging history-writing's restrictions which the novel as historiographic metafiction imposes on her, when

outlining the family's (mis)fortunes the narrator continually commences with a climactic summation then flits between past and present events, sometimes digressing with gossip, speculation, and other such narratorial intrusion. For instance, before describing Constance Philippa's desertion she asserts, "(t)he grief of losing *one* (Deirdre) was soon deepened by the all but incomprehensible grief of losing *three!*", returning then to Malvinia's earlier elopement, and ultimately back to Philippa's engagement and subsequent wedding-night. Examples like this further highlight Oates's problematizing of the narrator with repeatedly confusing changes of perspective, stressing the latter's overbearing, breathless nature: she cannot help but digress into flighty overblown gossip.

However, as if to combat her limited powers, the maiden-narrator continually inserts personal opinions and views - moral/religious platitudes, condemnations of "indecent" behaviour, and so forth - on the characters and events. For instance, Octavia is praised for her "*feminine attributes* of unfailingly mature, and wondrously magnanimous" (p.41), yet the

"displays of ill-temper by Constance Philippa, ... wanton capriciousness by Malvinia, and, at times, a most unnatural ratiocinative preoccupation, on the part of little Samantha" (p.41) are criticised.

The narrator censures in turn the daughters' betrayal of their 'virtuous' parents and Bloodsmoor society, the outside world seen as indecent and injurious to the girls' character. What this reveals is the narrator's complicity in condemning the girls' respective freedom, never once disapproving of the Zinn's and society's suppression. Furthermore, it illuminates her ignorance of sexual relations and thus her own sexuality. For instance, it is "to her credit be it said!" that Constance Philippa never explores the "*morbid nether regions* of her body" (p.153, my emphasis), and romantic poetry/advice books are considered endless sources of helpful information despite their perplexing and worrying effects upon both Octavia and Constance Philippa.

Before Constance Philippa disappears the narrator never once disapproves of the Baron as a suitable husband when she reveals that his past wives

mysteriously died (pp.160-1), or that he is sexually violent. Constance Philippa does not disturb "the sanctity of the (sexual) rite by moaning and sobbing as others had done in the past" (p.175), and when he mounts her dummy, "was never a Christian husband so ill-treated?" (p.175). Furthermore, immediately after Malvinia elopes with the actor Orlando Vandenhoffen, the narrator refers to them as "vicious creatures" (p.177) and must content herself with "meditation upon the nature of God's paradoxical plan, and ... the wisdom ... of the great Mr. Emerson" (p.177).

On Malvinia's relationship with Vandenhoffen and the corrupting, hedonistic Wide World itself, the narrator specifically condemns her overt sexuality:

... I am not ashamed to confess
myself so agitated of the moment,
so sickened with the outrage of
impurity of Malvinia Zinn's act,
that I can barely force myself to
continue. ... this chronicler
is sick at heart, and cannot
rouse herself even by a brave
gesture of amused cynicism.
(p.271)

Upholding the view that the proper woman knows that
"The *physical* ... is *gross*, and ... the flesh of the

female sex .. is angelic in aspiration, and partakes not at all of the lusty carnal appetites of the male" (p.443), the narrator is disgusted by the *Mark of the Beast*, and thus Malvinia's sexual liberation. This is fully revealed in the transworld Mark Twain incident where she warns the reader that as no love between the two is evident they warrant no Christian sympathy, stating that "this 'love embrace' was ... not simply unblessed by any churchly vows, but in positive defiance of Holy Wedlock!" (p.463), then announces her naivety in sexual matters:

These profanities and obscenities and primitive "names" for body parts are not only so evil in themselves, as to bear no consideration whatsoever, in this chronicle, but they are, I am proud to say, so foreign to my experience, in even the verbal sense, that I could not begin to guess how they might be spelled; and will make no attempt herein.

(p.463)

Nevertheless, she describes the Beast's violent attack on Twain and then justifies her writing of the incident to the chaste Christian reader: "I am obliged to continue, in accordance with my authorial responsibilities, confident that God will absolve me

of any inadvertent sin, in the process of transcription" (p.464). Thus, the narrator being the complete nineteenth-century virtuous reader and writer of romantic fiction - moralistic, pious - Malvinia's sexual freedom is censured.

In the narrator's opinion of Octavia and the marriage she enters into, we find again no denunciation of Mr. Rumford's degrading actions. Instead, Octavia is merely praised for enduring the hardships of miscarriages, deaths, and sexual humiliation, cheerfully submitting to her Husband as her "God-chosen bridegroom" (p.370). The religious advice books are also regarded favourably despite the confusion they produce, yet the narrator merely concurs that the "trials of Octavia Zinn in her alter'd state as ... wife, mother, and mistress ... are of so dark-visaged a character, and ... redolent of despair" (p.375) but subsequently dismisses the hardships as necessary in strengthening and universalising the Christian religion. The increasing violence and degradation in the Rumfords' marital bed is thus recompensed by the belief that "all their progeny, *increase and multiply*, that the

earth may be ... Christianized" (p.385). Thus, too, Rumford is excused even in death:

Know, O reader, ... it would be a most erroneous judgment, to see Mr. Lucius Rumford as anything less than an up-standing Christian husband, possessing qualities of modesty, sanctity, and Truthfulness, as to make him a model for all of the neighbourhood, as well as for his wife and heir.

(p.507)

This may be so, but the narrator's accolades are misguided and ultimately damaging, when after the death of Octavia's son, Godfrey, the narrator is distressed at having to transcribe Octavia's suffering:

In transcribing my *Romance*, I had certainly known that *Pathos* and *Heartbreak* could not be skirted: but, O Reader, I had not known that the chronicle would swerve so piteously toward the *Tragic*, and tax my heart so enormously. ... my feeble energies being so drained, and my aging eyes so brimmed with tears, I can scarce see this page...

(pp.512-3)

This self-reflexive speech is appropriate for the circumstances, yet in her refusal to denounce in any

way the violence against Octavia, it is obvious that the narrator will never concede the marriage state for Octavia is inhumane and *not* to be endured by any woman.

Another Zinn daughter, Deirdre, is chastised for her rejection of traditional marriage and acceptance of her dark 'other' the Spirit World. The narrator even attempts to deny that 'otherworld' Gothic entities and occurrences exist, even as she describes them: "the *fluidity* of the barrier betwixt the two worlds! ... (is a) blasphemous claim I can scarce record" (p.468). Deirdre's power as a medium is likened to the loss of her maidenhood, "by which I mean *the loss of sanity*" (p.477). The Spirits' overpowering Deirdre is regarded as proper punishment for one who transgresses both 'Bloodsmoor life/ Wide World life' and the 'conscious/unconscious Other' boundaries. To the narrator, then, "Malvinia Morloch" and "Deirdre of the Shadows" are ultimately "*selfish, vain and deluded* creatures" (p.500). And lastly, Samantha and Nahum in their elopement receive damnation in betraying Samantha's parents: "Ungrateful children! Shameless sinners! But my words

cannot touch them for they have escaped utterly; and none but the lowliest fiends of Hell might guess where they have gone" (p.420). Her narrative 'control' is thus again undermined: the narrator cannot interfere no matter how laboriously she tries.

In A Bloodsmoor Romance, then, Joyce Carol Oates's historiographic problematizing of the narrator both reveals the elderly maiden's struggle to cope with the liberations of the Zinn daughters and, as she is the ultimate purveyor of nineteenth-century ideals and conventions, shows the oppressions women of this period may have endured. Oates's feminist subtexts evolve from this in that the Zinn women in their various ways escape and undermine these generic and societal restrictions. Here, then, the romance genre and society is critiqued through the narrator's self-reflexive struggle with narrative, Truth-telling and thus her problematic subjectivity in accepting each girls' rebellion, revealing the repressive moralistic society each daughter must fight to gain freedom.

However, it is in A Bloodsmoor Romance's

conclusion that the full impact of Oates's "Dear Reader" intertext is realised. Here, the narrator's control of her narrative is overtaken by her struggle to come to terms with the women's respective liberated selfhoods, and it is through this that Oates ultimately critiques the romance genre: through one of its most significant characteristics, the "Dear Reader" narrator. This narrator reflects and imposes appropriate, conforming ideals of the period upon the reader, and it is this aspect that Oates 'borrows' and critiques in regards to female repression in the novel's conclusion.

4

CONCLUSION TO A BLOODSMOOR ROMANCE

The elderly maiden narrators subjectivity is rendered problematic by historiographic metafiction and postmodernism's questioning of History and history-writing, yet the ultimate struggle for the narrator in A Bloodsmoor Romance's conclusion is her acceptance of each girl's liberation. However, being the "Dear Reader" aspect Oates uses to critique the genre and society, it is soon evident that she is doomed to failure, and this commences when the daughters return to Bloodsmoor for the reading of their recently deceased great-aunt, Edwina Kiddemaster's, will.

Of the Zinn daughters it is Oates's Little Women parody, the "tom-boy" Constance Philippa, that brings the most consternation to the narrator. The elderly maiden fearfully dreads having to introduce Constance as she is now a man, "Phillipe Foxx", begging "the

reader's indulgence ... for ... a timidity that has its unapologetic basis in natural *ignorance*, and *innocence*, of the cruder aspects of life" (p.522) - that is, of sexual matters. Constance Philippa as "Phillipe Foxx" is a wordly, experienced woman/man, "corrupted" by the outside world to the ire of the narrator: "all normal sentiments of love, Christian charity, and moral lucidity ... (gone due to) ... long residence in the lawless West" (p.525). The narrator's morals are tested by Constance Philippa's 'change' - "For is not the artist ... obliged to serve the higher moral truths, in his or her craft? Is he not obliged to *better* the world, and not merely *transcribe* it?" (p.582) - yet constrained by the strictures of history-writing she must write the Truth of the Zinn family, no matter how distressing:

... I am wildly agitated, and have been so for many hours: indeed, when my thoughts veer to *this subject*, I am half tempted to abandon my chronicle even as it nears its consummation, after so many meticulously wrought pages, and so many "serene sweetnesses alternating with the Tempest's pranks" to quote Mrs Martyn. On the one hand, I have determined to record the truth, and naught but the truth; on the other, I shrink from appearing to offer, to the reader

of refined sensibility, an
obscene document.

(p.582)

What Oates's tom-boy parody reveals is freedom outside Bloodsmoor *not* as a woman but as a man, and the narrator condemns Constance Philippa for escaping the Baron's clutches and her restricting past life. The narrator views this as her "*fall from grace*" (p.590), yet as Phillipe Foxx, Constance Philippa learns shopkeeping, accounting, law, horseback riding, sharpshooting, "and, in general, the agile exercise of his wits" (p.591), becoming a travelling jack-of-all-trades. Journeying throughout the West, chased by the law thus continually in disguise, by turns freelance journalist, gambler, attorney, and so on, Phillipe Foxx experiences everything the Wide World has to offer, ultimately becoming an infamous outlaw. Throughout his travels he becomes in all "physiological requirements" (p.595), a man; however, being the elderly maiden, ignorant of sexual matters, the narrator prefers to believe that Phillipe Foxx never once examines his genitalia, despite the length of his penis being "five or six inches, in repose ... (and), when flushed with blood, and heat - some nine or ten inches" (p.596)!

Further adding to this burlesque, Joyce Carol Oates confuses sexual identities completely when Phillipe Foxx courts then rescues a woman, Delphine Martineau, from her brutal husband. In fact, Oates 'borrows' from Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre (1848) in that Delphine is the "Madwoman in the Attic", locked away by her husband for having hysterically accused him of gambling and adultery. The narrator reveals that these accusations *may be* correct, but believes that "the hysterical woman exaggerated - an inclination, I am sorry to say, rampant in our sex" (p.585):

In any case, given the sanctity of the marriage vows, and the promise made by the bride, to *love, honour, and obey*, as well as the law ... regarding property, the rights of married women, and of women in general; I cannot see but that it was an act of grievous error, on Mrs Ormond's part, to so noisily protest against her husband's real or imagin'd vices...

(p.585)

Thus, by eloping with and rescuing Delphine from oppression, Phillipe completely undermines the narrator's authority in disrupting unjust "sanctified marriage" (p.585). Oates's use of

Bronte's "Madwoman in the Attic" intertext can thus be seen as a critique of both A Bloodsmoor Romance and Jane Eyre in regards to any imprisonment of women, specifically raising questions of the latter.

Of the other Zinn daughters, Malvinia is praised for overcoming the "bestial" vice of her nature, marrying a poet, Kennicott, "on the condition that they dwell together as *sister* and *brother*" (p.538); Octavia is rewarded with a sexually attractive young man; yet Samantha and Nahum are considered as a "renegade couple" (p.540), having not baptised their children in Bloodsmoor's Episcopal Church. The latter are also criticised for inventing "domestic" items such as the baby-stroller, and disposable nappies, napkins and bandages, all of which the narrator is "reluctant to dignify ... with the title *inventions*" (p.612). Yet although Malvinia, Samantha, Octavia, and Constance Philippa are gone from Bloodsmoor and involved in their own lives, it is Deirdre who tends the now dying patriarch, John Zinn, rejecting suitors vying for her hand in marriage to do so. However, Deirdre is seemingly overcome by "a sudden intrusion from (the) Spirit

World" (p.613) in John's laboratory, burning it down and destroying plans for his final solution, the atomic bomb. Thus, in effect, Deirdre saves the world from "the madman's dream ..." (p.614).

It is not only one of the Zinn daughters that betrays the maiden narrator's strict nineteenth-century Christian ethics, however, as the girls' Great Aunt Edwina Kiddemaster and mother Prudence Zinn also undermine her. When the narrator recounts Prudence and John Zinn's courtship and marriage, Prudence is dutiful, docile, and demure; possessing all the attributes of the 'proper' Christian wife and mother. Yet because of the birth of her third daughter, Malvinia, involving "a forty-two-hour labor of excruciating difficulty" (p.166), in addition to her numerous miscarriages and "occasional deaths" (p.167), "(i)t might be said that her spirit was broken" (p.167). Thus, from the "forthright, outspoken, boldly assertive young woman" (pp.166-7), Prudence in marriage is mostly sullen and submissive. In their later years, too, John Zinn is completely immersed in his inventions, thus she suffers the heartbreak of her daughter's "betrayals" alone.

However, Prudence ultimately wreaks vengeance on the narrator's and John Zinn's complacency, eventually joining the Ladies' Dress Reform and Suffragette Movements (p.580). Prudence also earns the narrator's ire in changing her maiden name to Kiddemaster, thus severing her marriage ties. She ultimately pickets for the right to vote - "was there ever a more foolish, and a more vainglorious, occupation?" (p.580) - eventually getting arrested and proclaiming that the "movement" is now her true home. Great Aunt Edwina Kiddemaster is the narrator's "double", being a prolific writer of Christian advice manuals for young women. The narrator initially praises Edwina and her books such as "A Compenium of Correct Forms, and ... the best-selling The Christian House & Home" (p.144) for providing "priceless advice" (p.144) pertaining to Christian marriage and etiquette, and being the perfect role-model for the girls and herself. The narrator sees her own moral platitudes reflected in Edwina's books, and thus she views Edwina as her literary 'familiar', sharing the belief that their works successfully proliferate Christian ideals into the steadily 'decaying' world.

However, after suffering numerous health problems and being practically "bled" to death by a male doctor, Edwina's virtuous Christian persona is completely subverted during the will-reading. It is revealed that when forty years of age she "fell" for the virile Captian Burlingam, marrying him without her family's knowledge during the American Civil War. More shamefully, her husband indulging in alcohol and promiscuous women, Edwina has a baby girl and secretly gives her up for adoption. This long-lost daughter, familiar to romantic convention, is revealed as Deirdre, and thus she becomes the heir to Edwina's inheritance and estate. The narrator, needless to say, is shocked, but constrained by history-writing convention, must narrate the Truth: "That I have, as the historian of this family, suffered ... shocks to my constitution, in the course of transcribing *all the truth*, and *censoring naught a whit*, is a fact that must be borne in silence" (p.558).

Eventually, then, the narrator is overcome by the 'postmodern feminist' liberation subtexts employed by Joyce Carol Oates, and must conclude before the

arrival of the Twentieth Century and doubtless further upheaval to her romantic ideals. The novel ends with Deirdre saving the world from atomic fusion, thus as Joanne V. Creighton asserts in Joyce Carol Oates: Novels of the Middle Years (1992); "(w)omen, and the dark powers to which they are linked, seem to have temporarily ... triumphed" (p.47).

II

SUMMATION

In A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982), then, the narrator's attempt to overcome her early fears of her limited ability to recount the Truth of the Zinn family due to historiographic metafiction's problematizing of 'authentic' history-writing, in her self-reflexive, overt use of moral platitudes, is ultimately undermined by the events of the conclusion. Here we see Oates's parodies finding liberation in various ways, escaping marital oppression and creating their own destinies. However, as the daughters and Mrs Zinn find their 'voices', it is the narrator that ultimately fails to secure and succour hers. Initially shocked at their behaviour, the narrator is inexorably overtaken by these liberated women. She realises life has irrevocably changed for the Zinn women, but constricted by her nineteenth-century sensibilities she refuses to acknowledge this as 'progressive', only negative. Here early worry about her limited narratorial powers thus becomes her struggle to accept the women's liberation, and no matter how she attempts to maintain control through overbearing

platitudes and sentiment, the postmodern feminist subtexts revealed by Oates's use of parody, intertextuality, the problematic narrator/subjectivity showing women breaking out of restrictive stereotypes and roles, ensure she will forever struggle for her 'voice'. As the nineteenth-century narrator, then, through Oates's twentieth-century appropriation and critique, the elderly maiden is betrayed by her own genre, the 'choices' made by the Zinn women against romantic conventions she rigorously upholds: religious piety, obedience to men and male-dominated society, and so on. The conclusion of A Bloodsmoor Romance shows that the Truth of the women's liberated selfhoods to which the narrator is constrained is too much for her nineteenth-century romantic sensibilities, and she cannot continue. Utilising aspects of postmodernism, Oates offers as much a feminist critique of the repressed nineteenth-century narrator and the moralistic, 'so-called' 'virtuous' ideals they advocate, as it is of female repression, both the narrator and women inhibited by romantic ideals and convention in an oppressive patriarchal society.

FOXFIRE AS THE 'OTHER'

I

Similar to A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982), Oates in Foxfire; Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) undermines the power of the female narrator to write the Truth of her history, and links this with a feminist critique of women's oppression through the methods they employ to escape male tyranny. The women of Foxfire fight oppression as an Other, a collective apart from the misogynist society of 1950s New York, and this is directly linked to Rosemary Tong's assertion in Feminist Thought (1989) that postmodern feminists regard women as the 'positive' Other in enabling "women to stand back and criticise the norms, values, and practices that the dominant culture (patriarchy) seeks to impose on everyone" (p.219). Male misogyny is so prevalent in the family, school, and wider community, that FOXFIRE ultimately becomes a 'surrogate' family where the girls are free from oppression and can forge their

own identity.

Signs that 1950s Hammond is practically governed by violence towards women are obvious throughout Foxfire, and this is the legacy that the girl-gang must cope with: for instance, (1) "a nineteen-year-old nursing student ... raped and strangled ... and the guy that did it ... never ... caught"; (2) "a pregnant woman, a young wife ... stabbed to death ... by an intruder ... and her unborn baby killed too, and eventually it was revealed that the "intruder" was her own husband!" (3) "a poor little six-year-old girl slashed by some madman, with a razor, ... her belly and even her little vagina slashed" (p.96). This state of male oppression is frightening enough for women to live in fear, causing them to ignore what is occurring around them: "'cause like I said ... there are things you don't want to think about if you're *female* and that isn't going to change, right?" (p.97). Women's domestic lives are no better than in the wider society, for instance those of the leader, "Legs" Sadosky, and the narrator-heroine, Maddy Wirtz: Legs' mother died in mysterious circumstances, her 'loser' itinerant father neglecting her; Maddy

refuses to recognise the existence of her deserted father, her alcoholic mother beaten by abusive lovers, so that, "(l)ike creatures of different species forced to avoid each other by instinct" (p.56). Other wives are 'kept' at home, abused by dominating, brutal husbands, living in fear of their lives. In effect, "it was a time of violence against girls and women but we didn't have the language to talk about it them (p.196). FOXFIRE, however, creates a 'language' to combat this.

Following the initial FOXFIRE initiation of Maddy Wirtz, Rita O'Hagan, Goldie Siefried, Lana Maguire and Legs Sadovsky, the latter reveals the gang's Otherness: "'FOXFIRE is a code for the other, and the other is a code for us'" (p.40). The FOXFIRE 'other' opposes the prevalent boys' gangs - ("ours was a true sisterhood not a mere mirror of the boys" (p.41) - and the 'outside' world - ("seeing us, people register FOXFIRE when they believed they were seeing just an individual. As if a special glass had been slipped between us and the world so the world was changed to our eyes" (p.43). Familial and societal violence against women continually

threatening, Legs declares war on all men: "'It's a state of undeclared war, them hating us, men hating us no matter what our age or who the hell we are'" (p.97).

FOXFIRE's first triumph as the liberating, powerful female Other, is over Lloyd Buttinger, a teacher who sexually molests one of the girl-gang, Rita O'Hagan. Defacing his car in red paint before he drives home with "I AM NIGGER LIPS BUTTINGER I'M A DIRTY OLD MAN MMMMMM GIRLS!!! I TEACH MATHS & TICKLE TITS I'M BUTTINGER I EAT PUSSY FOXFIRE REVENGE! FOXFIRE REVENGE!" (p.45). Buttinger is shamed and ridiculed, never to return: "'It's weird Maddy, it's almost scary, like Goldie said it's like, y'know we killed Buttinger,' Legs said" (p.46). After several other "victories" and additional gang-members - Violet "Snow White" Kahn, Toni LaFeber and Marsha Laufenberge - Legs is eventually incarcerated in a girls' Correctional Facility at Red Bank for protecting Violet, who gave a Viscounts gang member a "false signal" (p.105) against their leader, Vinnie Roper. Brandishing a knife, Legs's victory is "not even smiling" (p.107), but only exchanges "a cool

erotic look, deeply sexual as only Legs Sadovsky ... can manage in such circumstances" (p.107). Vinnie is publicly humiliated, never "able to expunge this look from his memory" (p.107) and FOXFIRE is victorious. However, chased by the police after stealing a car to celebrate, Legs loses control and the girls crash. All survive without injury, and several are placed on probation, but Legs is questioned by policemen, regarded as 'promiscuous' - "Legs who'd have killed any guy who laid a hand on her *that way*" (p.127) - suffers false testimony by her father, and is ultimately sentenced to a minimum five months.

It is within the violent, degrading reform facility that Legs realises when released *thirteen* months later, that "girls and women are our enemies too sometimes, enough like us to be out sisters but they'd suck our blood if they could" (p.172). However, the ultimate indication of female oppression is revealed in the retarded dwarf-woman, Yetta, kept outside a farmhouse with a dog chain around her neck, and one night Legs witnesses men having sex with her:

... the female body misshapen
and thrashing and utterly open,

wrists and ankles bound, utter
nakedness so not only the patch
of furry pubic hair is revealed
but the spread lips of the vagina,
and the vulva, and the mouth open
too in a wide groaning O ... the
animal-men ..., one by one bare-
assed their genitals swollen,
penises stiffened into rods,
mounting the ... woman-that's-a-
body, one by one pumping
their life into her ...
(pp.192-3)

Shocked and sickened, Legs later avenges Yetta's
imprisonment and burns the farmhouse down.

When the girls transgress from their Otherness
into the male world they still find sexual
oppression, yet turn it to their advantage.
Throughout Foxfire Legs and the narrator-heroine,
Maddy Wirtz, believe that men's bodies give them
power: "each of us in secret grimly punching
pummelling squeezing those doughy little tits to
discourage their growth for our lean hard boy-bodies
were one sure measure of superiority" (p.55).
Nevertheless, it is Legs's female sexuality that
exudes power:

... there's something aggressive and
sexual in just the way Legs stands,
hip bone and pelvis tilted, stomach

so flat as to be almost
concave thus the mound
between her legs subtly
prominent, and her eyes so
dilated as to be black with
pupil - *They're right, she's
dangerous.*

(pp.182-3)

And it is when dressed in men's clothing to a job interview that Legs finds adopting male power beneficial to her own needs. The interviewer, B.J. Rucke, Ph. D., is more interested in "Mike" Sadoovsky's grecian, ethereal features than any job, however, and attempts to molest her/him (p.220). Attacking him with her knife, Rucke is reduced to pathetic tears, and "Legs"/"Mike" takes the money, diamond ring, and camera that he desperately surrenders. Explaining later that "'something got snagged on my hook" (p.223), this episode leads to FOXFIRE HOOKING.

Having bought a run-down house for themselves and now fully independent, the girls make themselves up as 'bait' to attract and 'trap' men, mugging or ingeniously bribing them, yet never selling themselves sexually. FOXFIRE HOOKING freely provides them with money for house-repairs, rent and so on.

The girls revel in this, finding "true pleasure in deviousness and meanness yes and in giving hurt ... to men who constitute the major enemy" (p.228). They believe that their actions are justified, perceiving themselves to be in a state of UNDECLARED WAR; where "MEN ARE THE ENEMY! (and) FOXFIRE BURNS & BURNS" (p.237).

The FOXFIRE 'Homestead' now a large refuge from male doestic violence, rent and bills to pay, Legs conceives FOXFIRE's "Final Solution" to kidnap and hold for ransom local millionaire, Whitney Kellogg. Befriending his daughter, the virtuous Marianne, Legs adopts a primly girlish eagerness persona to woo the family. Taking advantage of his Christian charity in offering two positions at the Hammond School of Business, Violet is then used to snag Kellogg: "her voluptuous big-breasted wide-hipped body ... partly disguised" (p.269); her manner respectful and wide-eyed. Taking the 'bait' and offering them secretarial jobs - "they'd hooked him, the fucker, how he'd stared at Violet devouring her with his eyes! licking his pulpy lips! even at Legs he'd stared as if already she was one of his hired

'girls'" (p.275) - Kellogg covertly meets them at one of his offices, intending to drive to an inn where "we could maybe get to know one another a little better ...?" (p.281). But FOXFIRE is waiting in the car-park and violently abduct him.

However, the ransom instructions carried out safely and efficiently, FOXFIRE's kidnapping fails due to a small exodus of girls, including Maddy, who claim that the final solution is too risky, and Kellogg's refusal to comply with their wishes in any way. A dead weight and completely withdrawn into himself believing "that Jesus Christ his Saviour would see him through the ordeal that lay ahead" (p.286). Legs and the girls become frustrated, eventually shooting him and fleeing.

Thus the end of FOXFIRE.

As the break-up of FOXFIRE initially appears disastrous, Legs and several others, escape in their car, never to be "sighted again as far as law enforcement authorities can determine" (p.302). Thus, the FOXFIRE maxim MEN ARE THE ENEMY! probably

taken to its unfortunate extreme, FOXFIRE as the postmodern feminist Other can ultimately never be considered a failure. Challenging the male-dominated society's violence against women, FOXFIRE gallantly struggles against oppression, utilising female power to its advantage both within and 'outside' the male domain. FOXFIRE's struggle for a female identity is problematic in merely reversing the violence against them, yet in liberating the girls from this society, it strengthens, succours, and encourages them to experience hardships and triumphs as a female 'collective' outside the wider male-dominated society, and this can only mean a 'positive' Other. Thus again we see Joyce Carol Oates using the postmodern feminist notion of the positive Other to develop her feminist subtext: showing 'woman' as a group that is powerful and all-encompassing.

THE NARRATOR
OF
FOXFIRE

Oates's historiographic narrator, Maddy Wirtz, writing about the past in the present, is "a myriad voices" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 100) in that her first person point of view is intermingled with second and third person perspectives. As the telling of FOXFIRE's history unfolds around Maddy's diary entries, Foxfire essentially focuses on the validity of transcribing events in the present:

Historiographic metafiction ... cannot avoid dealing with the problem of the status of their evidence, their documents. And ... the related issue is that of how those documentary sources are deployed: can they be objectively, neutrally related? ... The epistemological question of how we know the past joins the ontological one of the status of the traces of that past.

(Hutcheon, 1988, p. 122)

Thus Foxfire questions and problematizes how Maddy "knows" the past to formulate the Truth about that past. In other words: can we trust Maddy in writing

the True history of FOXFIRE, if indeed attaining the Truth is possible. However, again, this questioning is closely tied with the girls' search for a subjectivity and identity apart from the misogynist society present.

One method Joyce Carol Oates employs to reveal this problematic subjectivity is through self-reflexive questioning. Maddy Wirtz, the official chronicler of FOXFIRE sets up her narrating as the Truth from the outset: the diary entries are "(a) secret document and yet as it was hoped a "historical" document in which Truth would reside forever" (p.4). Yet almost instantly Maddy self-reflexively questions the narrating process in her finding a 'beginning' to commence the history: "Because there has got to be a beginning logically yet you always ask yourself - O.K. but what came before?" (p.7)- and as if her grip on the authentic Truth is fallible, she lists the founding members of the gang "to establish certain irrefutable facts like the skeleton inside the history, the bones that will last" (p.7). Likewise, History is set up as subject to subversion:

What is memory but the
repository of things doomed
to be forgotten, so you must
have History. Being faithful
to all that happens to you
of significance, recording
days, dates, events, names,
sights not relying merely
upon memory which fades ...

(p.41)

Connected to this self-reflexivity is Oates's other methods of the narrator "looking back" at the past from her present vantage point, and intermingling of second and third person points of view, both of which together deconstruct or render unstable Maddy's subjectivity and history-writing powers as she attempts to record FOXFIRE's 'breaking out'. As Maddy describes the girls' adversities and triumphs, Oates repeatedly makes it clear that Maddy *is* unreliable and fallible and thus cannot truthfully narrate the past. For example, Maddy asks "Can you tell the truth if it isn't the *entire* truth? - and what *is* truth?" (p.95), then concedes that:

Some things, I can't fit into
these CONFESSIONS. Nor can I
calculate how truly I should
explain any incident. Because
one thing rises out of some
thing that came before it, ...
so it's like a big spiderweb
in Time going back forever and

ever, no true beginning nor
any promise of an end ...
(p.95)

Second and third person points of view explicitly challenge Maddy's transcribing the events accurately, intermingling past and present subjectivities to reveal the problematizing of History-writing:

Who is, or was, Maddy Wirtz?—
why should we trust her? /
The closer she comes to adulthood,
bearing witness with an
adult's increased sense of
ambiguity, and irony, and self-
doubt, the less clear are her
memories. ... does it matter
that our old selves are lost to
us as surely as the past is
lost ...?

(p.172)

Maddy answers that the past is accessible by "reinventing" (p.171) their lives, yet this of course is not at all tenable.

This attainable 'authentic' past is soon realised when she recalls the Dwarf-woman incident, initially setting out to relate the attaining of their FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD but forced by 'chronology' to narrate the former (p.186). Disturbed that she has not the power "to invent episodes, people, places,

"plot", etc., but must set everything down as it occurred" (p.186), Maddy believes she must therefore rely on her memory. Yet as other events, including this episode, are hazy and may not be Truthfully recalled, she can only tell the 'truth' by making it up and thus forego any definite aspirations of recording the absolute Truth: "if Truth is not always available, not always recalled accurately, or even known, isn't this *lying* of a special kind?" (p.187). This is further extenuated when Legs's experiences at Red Bank are narrated - "(even now!) I have to invent certain things. I'm obliged to imagine, sink myself deep into Legs Sadovsky" (p.156) - and also the kidnapping of Whitney Kellogg, both events Maddy is absent from.

Throughout the planning of this FINAL SOLUTION, Maddy hides her feelings of alarm at the danger and audacity of the kidnapping, afraid of the violence inherent in the gang during FOXFIRE HOOKING, and thus is expelled. Therefore, when the events of the kidnapping and Kellogg's and the girls' thoughts are unreliable. The narrator acknowledges this when

towards the end of Foxfire there is an obvious split between Maddy Wirtz and any semblance of control of her narrative, as she becomes another character. When Legs announces the 'X' in their plot (Whitney Kellogg) to live autonomously, the narrator states: "(t)hat instant all around the table, all of us *including Maddy Wirtz*" (p.247, my emphasis). This split can be seen as the 'present' Maddy distancing herself from the 'past' Maddy, as the former has the benefit of newspapers and testimonies and is able to add her own adult reasoning years after the tragedy. Therefore the 'present' Maddy can fill in some of the gaps, but can also only 'play' with the chronology as the outcome can never be altered, no matter how distressed she may be:

So I'll list these entries
Maddy Wirtz made in the note-
book, on other unrelated
subjects, right up till the
very night of the kidnapping
(May 29, 1956) as if by being
faithful to the many other
things that were happening to
FOXFIRE, at that time Maddy
could divert Fate.

(p.261)

Here, again even the 'present' Maddy cannot recount

as if she were there, thus the 'retrievable' past can never be known Truthfully.

What these aspects of Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) set out to reveal is stated by Linda Hutcheon in A Poetics of Postmodernism (1988):

Just as nineteenth-century assumptions about narrative history writing have been challenged, so novels themselves ... (question) the assumptions of the past about novel writing. Neither act of inscribing is seen as neutral, and both put the priority of the subject into question.

(p.174)

Thus they also reveal a woman struggling to come to terms with her tumultuous teenage years. As well as overwhelming the misogynist society, Maddy Wirtz's quest is to find her place within FOXFIRE. Rejecting violence she also escapes the ultimate tragedy, yet her obviously futile pleas for Legs to escape her fate - "*We got him, the rest of it is gonna be easy. Oh Legs! if you'd known*" (p.286) - reveal that she is still struggling in the 'present'. In fact, the use of third person narration can be viewed as the 'present' Maddy's attempt to distance herself from

the heart-rending events preceding the inevitable climax, using her powers of 'looking back' to work out both her past and present. But of course both Maddy Wirtz of the past and present is hindered by historiographic metafiction's questioning of Truth and History-writing, thus possessing a problematic feminine subjectivity: how can her history be regarded as 'authentic' when her ability to record the past is undermined?; and what is the effect of this on her female subjectivity *during* and *following* FOXFIRE's liberating exploits? To discover this we must turn to Foxfire's conclusion.

THE CONCLUSION

TO

FOXFIRE

As in A Bloodsmoor Romance, the narrator-heroine Maddy Wirtz is in danger of being 'overtaken' by the other female characters in the novel, namely Legs and Rita O'Hagan, in their respective liberations. Yet far from being pessimistic, Maddy ultimately transcends the maiden narrator and does find her liberation. Maddy's earlier problematic subjectivity is thus resolved by the novel's conclusion.

The epilogue of Foxfire (1993), then, sees Maddy Wirtz struggling for voice in a period of domestic and societal violence and oppression. Narrating as a fifty-year-old adult, Maddy has the ability of 'hindsight' yet still seemingly labours to make sense of the significance of FOXFIRE on her past and present. An obvious sign of Maddy's struggle is revealed when, having narrated to the best of her ability FOXFIRE's history, she finds herself still no

closer to liberation from this past and burns FOXFIRE CONFESSIONS "page by page, entry by entry" (p.305). But of course she is never free from the events of FOXFIRE and its demise, and is thus apparently overtaken by the other women finding individual selfhood; Rita and Legs.

Abused sexually as a child, Rita before FOXFIRE's demise is romantically involved with a boy, Collis Conner, and promptly expelled. When in the epilogue Maddy years later visits Hammond, Rita is married to Collis, with a young child, ironically regarding her husband as her salvation *from* FOXFIRE. Rita is now completely domesticated, yet happy in her role as wife and mother. Legs, however, is another proposition altogether, as with another girl, V.V., she is completely free, disappearing forever: "(t)here were hundreds of false leads and sightings but the girls were never found and for all I know (kidnapping is a capital offence) they remain fugitives to this day" (p.307).

However, it is during Maddy's brief reunion with Rita that the real significance of Legs's disap-

pearance is realised. The latter produces a newspaper photograph of Fidel Castro before the failed invasion of the Bay of Pigs in April 22, 1961, and "there ... nearly out of the frame was a figure distinctly American, tall, slender, blond, male? female? ..., swept up in the mood of the crowd of raptly listening angry spectators: Legs Sadovsky" (p.310). Yet even the 'present' Maddy cannot be absolutely sure it was her, tentatively conceding: "I think probably yes it was Legs Sadovsky ... unless I am imagining it, inventing it" (p.311). Legs's identity is apparently left ambiguous as Maddy inquires: "And if that had been Legs, in Havana, Cuba, on April 22, 1961, where is she *now*?" (p.311), and thus Legs is paradoxically *everywhere* but *nowhere*, lost in the vortices of Time.

The middle-aged Maddy Wirtz, however, is neither liberated into normal domesticity or complete freedom, being briefly married yet still struggling to find her own selfhood. Nevertheless, unlike the narrator of A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982), Maddy's struggle is ultimately optimistic. Her current occupation as an astronomer's assistant is likened to

her 'looking-back' at Time, thus the narration of FOXFIRE's confessions. As a teenager Maddy had been fascinated with stars, believing them to be permanent, but now with the benefit of her present vocation she knows the stars are *not* permanent or even *there*: "(t)he heavenly light you admire is fossil-light, it's the unfathomably distant past you gaze into, stars long extinct" (p.312). Her profession also forces her to realise that "(h)uman motives ... interest me less, through the years, than human actions, *being*" (p.313). Thus, her claim that even "our own sun, our domestic star, is eight minutes into the past ... (;) Look-back time it's called" (p.313) is best not thought of "with any emotion" (p.313), ultimately prepares her to deal with the painful recollections of FOXFIRE's past: "All I haven't felt or wanted to feel, for years. Undertaken now because I have the proper telescopic instrument for examining *look-back time*, that I hadn't had before" (p.313). The conclusion to Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) through Oates's use of historiographic metafiction's questioning of Truth and history-writing forcing Maddy to 'look-back', narrate, and thus confront her

violent FOXFIRE past, therefore reveals her acceptance of her past and its impact on her present life. The past and present thus resolved together, Maddy finds her freedom in this acceptance and can contentedly assert, "(n)ow the CONFESSIONS are finished, Maddy's old notebook destroyed, I guess I'm in no time at all" (p.313). Maddy can now liken her freedom in the unfathomable vortices of Time to Legs's: "And Legs Sadovsky - what kind of time is she in? ... *Is* she - are you, Legs - in any Time at all?" (p.313). The closing recollection to Foxfire (1993) explicitly displays Maddy's reconciliation with her past, showing that FOXFIRE is a flame that will never be forgotten despite, and on account of, historiographic metafiction's problematic and ultimately resolved subjectivity:

"-So you don't believe we have souls I guess?" and Legs laughed and said, "Yeah probably we do but why's that mean we're gonna last forever? Like a flame is real enough isn't it, while it's burning? - even if there's a time it goes out?"

(p.313)

CONCLUSION

Throughout both A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) Joyce Carol Oates employs postmodern historiographic metafiction's various characteristics in the periods of American history portrayed to show women breaking out of and undermining constricting conventional stereotypes and roles. The majority of the Zinn daughters and girl-gang make their own decisions and forge their own destinies, yet we also for the most part find the narrators struggling tirelessly for their 'voices' too, and the conclusions reveal the elderly maiden and Maddy Wirtz respectively failing and succeeding to preserve them. The female characters of each history do appear to 'overtake' the narrators in regards to liberation from convention and male oppression, yet Oates in the conclusions ultimately shows the latter's struggles as positive, ironically using the self-reflexive "Dear Reader" maiden narrator to critique the nineteenth-century romance genre in A Bloodsmoor

Romance (1982), and Maddy Wirtz's freedom from her past in FOXFIRE's violent reaction to male oppression. It is Joyce Carol Oates's use of postmodernism - parody, problematizing subjectivity, Truth, narrative and history-writing - that creates these autonomous selfhood and freedom feminist subtexts. Essentially, postmodern and feminist strategies employed by Oates reveal "a tenacious degree of female self-determination to transcend limitations despite the most formidable of obstacles to female selfhood" (Creighton, 1992, p. 114); namely, the overtly misogynist society's they must endure.

CHAPTER FOUR

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis to demonstrate the benefit of postmodern theory for feminism and feminist agendas through Joyce Carol Oates's postmodern feminist novels A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993), I hope has been met. Oates's twentieth-century postmodern feminist Romantic position is revealed through postmodern revisioning, as she adopts and critiques through the nineteenth-century romance genre narrator and 1950s/1990s narrator-heroine Maddy Wirtz, the rampant repression of women due to strict societal convention and the ways the women find liberated selfhood. Thus:

...(i)n this they are embodiments
of the American spirit of
individualism. Even the most
repressed, the most victimized ...
do not readily accept imposed
barriers. In their tenacious will
to be, in their attempt to transcend
limitations, they are
fundamentally American romantics.
(Creighton, 1992, p.116)

More specifically, Oates uses parody to show women breaking out of convention via George Eliot, Louisa May Alcott intertexts; adopts the postmodern feminist notion of the 'positive' Other to show FOXFIRE as a powerful if problematic gang, offering (temporary) solace from male oppression; and historiographic metafiction's problematizing of the narrator, history

writing, female subjectivity and Truth, to "show women struggling with the limitations of authorships, creativity, and selfhood imposed upon them by stereotypes" (Creighton, 1992, p. 56), as well as revealing the misogynist underpinnings of both 1800s and 1950s society. Most of the women find their liberation in marriages chosen by them and determined by love, not social convention; while others such as Legs, Maddy and Deirdre enjoy a freedom as yet unfathomable but 'free' in most respects. However, all destinies challenge male oppression of women and are ultimately formed by Oates's late twentieth-century postmodern feminist subtexts.

To return to my "postmodern/feminism" conclusion, then, I believe that without Joyce Carol Oates employing postmodern theory and characteristics in the novels, her feminist subtexts would not be as effectively or powerfully realised. Thus, in Oates's utilising postmodern characteristics and theory to reveal her feminist escapist strategies, she *affirms* a postmodern/feminism alliance. Similar to Oates's aim outlined in (Woman) Writer: Occasions and Opportunities (1988) that she 'enlighten' the nine-

teenth-century romance novel by successfully 'updating' the genre, so she adopts postmodern theory to fully formulate her feminist subtexts.

What Joyce Carol Oates's 'postmodern Romantic' novels A Bloodsmoor Romance (1982) and Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl-Gang (1993) prove is that a postmodern/feminist alliance can be beneficial to and for feminism, and critics such as Somer Brodribb (1992) and Geraldine Finn (1993) inhibit feminism, effectively rendering postmodern feminist theory, debate, and therefore feminism, 'lifeless' instead of what it should be: "open".

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