

Specters of Feminism in the Work of Joyce Carol Oates

International Conference at Aix-Marseille Université

Call for Papers

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Place: Aix-Marseille Université, ALLSH, 29 avenue Robert Schuman, 13100 Aix-en-Provence

Organizers:

- Dr. Nicolas Boileau, Aix-Marseille Université
- Dr. Tanya Tromble-Giraud, Aix-Marseille Université

Call for Papers:

Joyce Carol Oates has not generally sought to promote either herself or her work as feminist. In non-fiction essays, such as “(Woman) Writer: Theory and Practice,” she has pointed out the inherent problem of aligning a writer’s work with their gender. In the 1982 article “Stories That Define Me,” Oates states, “I am not a radical feminist.” That is not to say that she disavows any adherence to feminism. Rather, she prefers to qualify herself as a feminist “that does not raise its voice” and has been careful to qualify her feminist literary vision. In this article, she associates her more moderate feminist views with her childhood experience of attending a one-room country schoolhouse, where younger and weaker children of both genders were persecuted by the older and stronger ones: “But my feminism isn’t radical, or cannot at any rate automatically define the masculine as an enemy, since the cruelest persecutions at that rural school house were reserved for an older classmate of mine, a boy who wore glasses.”

Although Oates may not have raised her voice to promote her work as feminist, critics have not had the same qualms. Malcolm Bradbury has remarked that her work contains “strong feminist overtones” (276). Greg Johnson, Oates’s biographer, has written that “the dramatic trajectory of Oates’s career, especially her amazing rise from an economically straitened childhood to her current position as one of the world’s most eminent authors, suggests a feminist, literary version of the mythic pursuit and achievement of the American dream.” The experimental novels of the 1980s have frequently been analyzed as feminist in approach. In a 1987 study, Eileen Teper Bender categorized *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982) as “a rich feminist parody of the nineteenth-century conduct book” (8). Perry Nodelman considers that in *Bellefleur* (1980), Oates revitalizes masculine form by combining it with a more feminine conception of time, something he refers to as Oates’s “sense of unending.” Gavin Cologne-Brookes, in his 2005 study, sees the late 1970s and 1980s as a transitional period for Oates, a phase of blatant parody and experimentation with genre which “also reveals a new consciousness of gender that helps us to align Oates with other feminist revisionists” (15).

In the 1990s and early 2000s, some declared Oates’s work to be entirely feminist in nature. Marilyn C. Wesley considers Oates’s work to be built upon the notions of the “feminist unconscious” and the “transgressive other” character. Brenda Daly claims that Oates’s overall vision is a feminist one (despite the fact that Oates’s fiction does not always present strong, independent female characters) which poses itself in opposition to the patriarchal literary canon - through parody and experiments with literary conventions - and patriarchal conventions of society - by presenting traditional social hierarchies as unjust. For Daly, the final phase of Oates’s feminist evolution is the period of “communal authorship” in the 1980s and early 1990s

in which she began to “create feminist communal narrators” (xxiv). Ellen G. Friedman also chronicles a feminist evolution over the course of Oates’s career, this time with regards to her treatment of masculine characters, especially father figures. Friedman outlines the way in which the relegation of fictional fathers to the periphery of Oates’s narratives parallels the evolution of masculine cultural roles within society.

In recent years, the gap between the author’s self-confessed reluctance to be associated with feminist theory and the critics’ appreciation of her gender politics seems to have narrowed as Oates’s social media posts have often been unequivocally supportive of the feminist cause. Though she may still not be a “radical” feminist, it may no longer be true that she is a feminist who “does not raise their voice.” Her prolific tweets and retweets cover a wide variety of issues, of which feminism is one. In two randomly-selected extremely recent examples, Oates writes “good for feminism to acknowledge that female & male can be “equal” in all ways including shameless self-aggrandizement & hucksterism” (1 January 2023) and facetiously comments “(but we must not say that Marilyn Monroe was abused & exploited, that will be “offensive” to those who wish to remember her dancing in stilettos & smiling forever.)” (30 December 2022). How to account for this social media production is an issue that has not yet been satisfactorily solved amongst scholars.

As can be seen from this general overview of Oates’s work and its critical reception through the lens of feminist studies, Oates’s critics, as well as the author herself, have often been tempted to use the word “feminism,” but they have failed to address its multifarious meanings and its gradual construction within Oates’s work. The conference to be held in Aix-en-Provence will seek to explore this by reconsidering Oates’s long writing career in relation to the various waves of feminisms and her very singular way of responding to feminisms in and through her work. We would like to invite participants in this event to build upon and update this established framework by looking into the notion of specters of feminism. The question is no longer simply whether Oates’s work exhibits feminist characteristics and treats feminist themes, but rather to examine whether or not notions related to feminism are present in perhaps less obvious ways and how her current outspokenness about these issues reflects back upon some, if not all, of her fictional texts. We invite paper proposals on any aspect of specters of feminism in Joyce Carol Oates’s work, including, but not limited to, those listed below:

- How is Joyce Carol Oates’s work haunted by feminist ideas, in which she is well-versed, though she does not want her fiction to be read as militant or serving the cause? (*Wild Nights!*; *The Falls*; *Mudwoman*; *Black Dahlia & White Rose*)
- How are feminist discourses passed on through her work, in intended as well as perhaps unintended ways? (*Rape: A Love Story*; *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*; *Middle Age: A Romance*)
- Are any of her characters constructed on ideas on feminism, or in reaction to ideas on feminism? (*Blonde*; *Black Water*; *My Sister, My Love*; *Faithless: Tales of Transgression*)
- Do her transgressive norm-breaking female characters do any disservice to the advancement of feminism? (*The Female of the Species*, *Mudwoman*, *The Tattooed Girl*)
- Is there something inherently feminine/feminist about Oates’s style? Particularly the elliptical, repetitive style of some of her mature work? (*Beasts*, *I Am No One You Know*, *Little Bird of Heaven*)
- Does Oates’s non-fiction writing shore up a particularly feminist vision of her artistic aesthetic? (essays on fellow woman writers; essays such as “(Woman) Writer: Theory and Practice” and “Pseudonymous Selves”)

- It might also be interesting to discuss whether the feminist qualities of Oates's work mentioned above have remained stable throughout her career, or whether there have been additional evolutions of note.

Short proposals of approximately 300 words should be submitted by June 30, 2023. Please send your proposals to both Nicolas Boileau and Tanya Tromble-Giraud: nicolas.boileau@univ-amu.fr, tanya.giraud@univ-amu.fr

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