

Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies

Volume 3

Article 4

2016

Witness: Reflections on Detention in Joyce Carol Oates's Work

Tanya L. Tromble
CRILA, Université d'Angers

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies>

 Part of the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Citation Information

Tromble, Tanya L. (2016) "Witness: Reflections on Detention in Joyce Carol Oates's Work," *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: Vol. 3 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.15867/331917.3.4

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/vol3/iss1/4>

For more information, please contact southern@usfca.edu.

[Creative Commons 4.0](#)



UNIVERSITY OF
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center

Witness: Reflections on Detention in Joyce Carol Oates's Work

Cover Page Footnote

My thanks to Michelle Ryan-Sautour, Catherine Bernard and John Engle for inviting me to present a paper on this subject at their workshop for the French SAES convention in Toulon in June 2015.

Witness: Reflections on Detention in Joyce Carol Oates's Work



Tanya L. Tromble
CRILA, Université d'Angers

Throughout her career, Joyce Carol Oates has resisted the urge of others to label her a feminist writer, insisting that she be considered a writer, independent of biological gender. She *has* given voice to countless socially-invisible female character types, but this is only one concern among many. Oates is an incredibly active writer, producing pieces of many different types and interests. Rather than to actively incite through militant action, she uses her prolific pen to create testimonies to contemporary American life. One does not think of Oates as an activist. In 1972, Alfred Kazin described her as a reserved writer whose “life is in her head; her life is all the stories she carries in her head” (6). Yet, her career-long engagement with creating a multi-faceted portrait of society seeking particularly to give voice to the voiceless among us might be equated with a passive form of activism. Kazin expresses Oates’s writerly

preoccupation in the following way: “The sheer rich chaos of American life, to say nothing of its staggering armies of poor, desperate, outraged, and by no means peaceful people, presses upon her” (9-10). A unique ability to feel “the pressure, mass, density of violent American experience not known to the professional middle class” is what Kazin sees as setting Oates apart (10). More than forty years later, Kazin’s portrait of a reserved, yet socially engaged author is still largely relevant.

Though notions of crime and justice have been central to her fiction since her first published story in 1959, “In the Old World,”¹ any focus on incarceration experience in her writing has tended towards the metaphorical as Oates has often chosen to focus on the detrimental effects of crime on victims. Her first story, for example, relates the struggle with guilt on the part of a Caucasian boy who has wounded an African American boy’s eye in a knife fight. He attempts to turn himself in for the crime, but the sheriff will hear nothing of it.

Oates has occasionally depicted actual incarceration experiences. One thinks of the much-anthologized experimental story “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again”; “Tetanus,” which deals with juvenile detention; and the epistolary “Dear Joyce Carol,” consisting of nine letters from an inmate to the author. Part three of the 1993 novel *Foxfire* deals with the detention experience of a teenage girl. Oates’s interest seems to have intensified since teaching

¹ The story was selected as co-winner of the *Mademoiselle* College Fiction Competition and printed in the August 1959 issue. It was reprinted in Oates’s first collection, *By the North Gate*.

writing workshops at San Quentin Maximum Security Facility for Men in California in the Spring of 2011. During the same period, Oates toured the facility, publishing an essay about the experience entitled “A Visit to San Quentin.”² Many details from this essay are reproduced in Oates’s subsequent prison-themed fiction. Three stories published since—“San Quentin,” “Anniversary,” and “High”—deal in various ways with prison education programs. This foray into prison-themed fiction has culminated, for the time being, in two works published in 2014: a novel, *Carthage*, which includes a wrongly imprisoned character and another working on an exposé on prison executions, and an edited story collection of fiction by inmates, *Prison Noir*. These works combine to create testimonies to prison life in the United States and raise questions about the nature of the system that puts people there. In her introduction to the collection, Oates writes: “hardly to our credit, the United States locks up nearly 25 percent of the world’s prison population, while having only 5 percent of the world’s overall population. Or, in other terms, the United States incarcerates more than 2.2 million individuals, a far higher rate per capita than any other nation” (14). This is at once a statement of fact and a critique seeking to combat feelings of indifference on the part of the general public from a writer who has consistently engaged in telling stories of the socially marginal.

This article will discuss the depiction of incarceration experiences and prison visits by outsiders in the above-mentioned short stories. The shared vision they evoke of a problematic system

² First published in *Better Than Fiction: True Travel Tales From Great Fiction Writers*, ed. Don George (Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, 2012). Reprinted in *Soul at the White Heat*.

which breeds circular violence through its attempts to dehumanize will shed light on the way in which Oates's engagement with America's imperfect prison system has culminated in her work editing a volume of inmates' fiction.

Abuse

"How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again," first published in 1969,³ is an experimental story relating a fifteen-year-old girl's search for selfhood that involves rebelling against her carefully manicured affluent suburban life. The reader is presented with notes for an essay, thematically arranged, rather than a finished product. In spite of the title, only three paragraphs of this sixteen-page "story" are devoted to the unnamed protagonist's time in the correctional facility. The first describes an older African American girl, one of the girls who will beat her up (HIC 160). The second describes her state of mind in the facility: she had been content and desired to stay there, a stubborn adolescent refusing to go home, "up until that night in the lavatory when everything was changed" (HIC 160), "up until that night her mind is changed for her" (HIC 161). The third relates the events of "that night" when Princess and Dolly "corner her in the lavatory at the farthest sink" and "God, how she is beaten up!" She attributes the reasons for this beating to the hatred and desire for revenge of the oppressed (HIC 161).

Though this story is more about a young girl's search for "love and understanding" (Johnson 113) than about crime and

³ First published in *Triquarterly* (Spring 1969). Citations are taken from the Fawcett edition of *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories* and abbreviated HIC for in-text references.

punishment, or even the satiric social commentary it employs, it presents two reflections on detention and abuse that will become common elements of most of Oates's prison stories. First, the narrator is abused in the House of Correction, beaten up by two other female teenage inmates (HIC 161). Second, the possibility of incorrect behavior by the police is hinted at: "It took three of them to get me in the police cruiser, so they said, and they put more than their hands on my arm" (HIC 157). This early story offers a glimpse of Oates's humanist concern with detention that will be expanded twenty-four years later with the depiction of Legs Sadovsky's detention experience in *Foxfire*⁴ and picked up again in more regular prison stories beginning in 2008. Similarly to her precursor protagonist, Legs, also fifteen, experiences verbal and physical abuse at the hands of police, corrections officers and trusty inmates. Oates provides a more detailed account in this novel, devoting a fifty-page part to Legs' time at the Red Bank State Correctional Facility for Girls where she has an eye gouged by a guard's thumb on more than one occasion and undergoes frequent stints in isolation to which she is dragged "with both arms twisted up behind her back, such pain Legs is starting to vomit starting to faint" (F 142). Such responses are not always unprovoked, as when Legs loses control, "ramming an elbow into the trustie's [sic] meaty side"⁵ (F 141).

This circle of violence performed on and by detainees is found at the core of all of Oates's prison stories which convey an image of a correctional system that breeds violent behavior and abusive attitudes, both on the part of detainees and corrections staff. These

⁴ Abbreviated F for in-text references.

⁵ Two spellings of the word can be found in the novel: "trusty" and "trustie."

stories, along with “Tetanus” and “Dear Joyce Carol,” highlight another aspect of this: a capacity for violence and abuse also lurks behind unexpected faces including female inmates, friendly counsellors and frightened children, as well as inmates who have served their time and are to be released.

“Tetanus”⁶ tells the story of an interview between a young boy and a family services officer. The first paragraph begins with the boy’s name in italics: “*Diaz, César*” (T 187). This ordering—last name, comma, first name—depicts him from the start as an institutionalized entity. This impression is accentuated when the family services officer enters the room. His name, “Zwilich,” also begins a paragraph, but he is not in custody, his name does not need italics and he does not have to be identified by his full name. Following the boy’s name, the first paragraph presents a description of the boy meant to encourage sympathy. He is frightened, withdrawn, and has been injured by the police. However, this image of a fragile eleven-year-old is contradicted at the close of the paragraph when it is revealed “he’d been taken into Trenton police custody on a complaint by his mother for threatening her and his younger brother with a fork” (T 187).

The harsh reality of the family services interview situation between counsellor and detainee is paralleled by personal problems in Zwilich’s life. The story’s closing image reflects a self-destructive tendency in Zwilich who is separated from his wife: “His heart beats with a forlorn eager hope: sun spilling its light onto the bridge, onto

⁶ First published in *Triquarterly* in 2008 and collected in *Give Me Your Heart* in 2011. Citations are taken from the magazine publication and are abbreviated T for in-text references.

the river like a slow-motion detonation in which, though many thousands are destroyed in a fiery holocaust, no one feels any pain” (T 200). The desire for an easy way out characterizes the mindset of this man whose job it is to determine the fate of the boy and encourages the rereading of the interview situation as deliberate provocation on Zwilich’s part. Once the boy bit Zwilich’s finger to the bone, there was no more wondering about the proper recommendation from Family Services. Zwilich thinks: “*Now you’re fucked, little cocksucker for life*” (T 198). This aggressive reaction that pops into Zwilich’s mind clearly implies that the boy has acted to seal his own fate. Yet, descriptions of César throughout the story indicate that he is not capable of such a conscious act of mature thinking, but rather merely copies the language and actions of older boys in his neighborhood.

Zwilich seems at first to struggle with the idea of the proper response: “Zwilich disapproved of keeping kids as young as César Diaz even overnight in detention where the oldest boys were sixteen. Inmates were segregated according to age and size but still, a boy like César would be abused” (T 191). However, as the interview continues, the child’s hostility begins to wear on him and he succumbs to “the impulse [...] to create something—even misery, even self-disgust” (T 196-197) and inappropriately tells the boy “that his Mama didn’t want him” (T 196), a decision that leads to César’s attack on Zwilich. This moment of weakness, a glimpse of the “evil in him,” a succumbing to “terrible temptations” alluded to at the beginning of the story (T 188), leads to a reaction that will cause the boy to be “remanded to juvenile detention for thirty days” (T 198), a situation from which it remains unsure whether any good can

result. In *Foxfire*, Legs' incarceration had only served to harden her and introduce her to her future victim. Though she cleaned up her act, it was only to play the system to procure early release. Italicized passages reflect her true feelings: "*No one and nothing will touch me, ever again. If anybody is to kill it will be me*" (F 174).

While focusing on how the system can be manipulated by its administrators into an authoritative *mise-en-abyme* of repression in which one can only spiral downwards, "Tetanus" offers several reflections on detention. As in "How I Contemplated," Oates raises the subject of abuse of power through a reference to the violence and brutality of "arresting officers" (T 187), but also through the petty manipulations of the family services counsellor who thinks "luckily the interview wasn't being taped" and is conscious of the fact that the guards are uninterested in the fates of their charges (T 197). His manipulation is all the more insidious as he knows that "adolescents were the most desperate of all offenders" (T 190) and thus easily provoked. In his defense, the world view of the facility staff is seemingly warped due to a daily proximity with "young offenders": "an unnatural and obscene vision that passed over by degrees into being a familiar vision" (T 190). The New Jersey juvenile detention facilities are breeding grounds for abuse, and budget cuts are singled out as partly responsible for this misery: "the youth facilities were overcrowded, understaffed. [...] these places were, in effect, urban slum streets with walls around them" (T 193). Indeed, the Mercer County Youth Detention Center where the interview takes place, "an aggressively ugly three-story building" (T 187), seems to be metonymous for the system as a whole.

Tetanus is clearly a metaphor for a disease that infects both the juvenile detention system and society as a whole. This is reflected in Zwilich's sneering reaction: "who respects the law? whose behavior has consequences? Politicians, mega-corporations?" (T 192). However, tetanus, though a serious infection with a long recovery period, is not usually deadly and is also vaccinatable. Through this image, Oates allows a glimmer of hope to radiate from the tern atmosphere of the story.

Dehumanization

In addition to depicting various forms of incarceration related abuse, Oates uses characterization to textually reflect processes of dehumanization at work on inmates. For the young César Diaz in "Tetanus," the process is conveyed through the use of grotesque animal metaphors. They are frequent in passages describing him and are not applied to any other character in the story. These include: "like an upright bat" (T 187), "like a snake baring its fangs" (T 192), "rat-eyes" (T 193), "a deranged animal," "pit-bull jaws," "crab-like" (T 197), and "the demon-child's look of feral hatred" (T 199). These descriptions are yet another indication of Zwilich's lack of impartiality concerning his charge for though narrated in the third-person by an omniscient voice, Zwilich is the focalizer of the narrative.

Like César Diaz in "Tetanus," Esdra of "Dear Joyce Carol,"⁷ is also a dehumanized figure, but in a different way. The abasement of

⁷ First published in *Boulevard* 23.2/3 (Spring 2008) and collected in *Dear Husband*. Citations are taken from the collected edition which is abbreviated DJC for in-text references.

Esdra occurs through a focus on his poor language skills. He writes access as “akcess,” coarse as “corse,” prevalent as “prevvalent,” between as “beteen,” frivolous as “friviliss,” *habeas corpus* as “Habas corpis,” puss as “pus,” you’re as “your,” alcohol as “alkohol” (DJC 229, 230, 233, 234, 235, 236). He consistently leaves the apostrophes out of contracted forms (“dont,” “cant,” “youd,” “youll,” “its”) (DJC 228, 230, 235). He uses the term “offenseful” rather than offensive (DJC 228, 231). He shows poor mastery of past participles with his use of “brokehearted” and “proved” (DJC 230, 234), and poor mastery of preterite forms with “ript,” “requird,” “lookt,” “fuckt,” “lockt” (DJC 231, 232, 234, 235).

This depiction of dehumanization through insistence on poor language skills as a result of the poor education of inmate characters continues throughout Oates’s second group of prison stories following her 2011 teaching experience. The process in these stories, as may be expected with a thematic focus on education, continues along the lines of Esdra’s language difficulties, focusing on the limited language abilities and education levels of inmate students.

“San Quentin”⁸ is the story of a mentally challenged and physically deformed inmate named Quogn doing sixty years to life for seemingly killing his mother and/or sister. Told from the character’s viewpoint, the nature of his crimes remains unclear to the reader because ungraspable to the man himself: “they say *What did you do! What did you do!* & it was never explained to me either, all those years ago” (SQ 240). He repeatedly enrolls in and assiduously

⁸ First published in *Playboy* 58.10 (October 2011) and collected in *Black Dahlia & White Rose*. Citations are taken from the collected edition which is abbreviated SQ for in-text references.

attends prison *Introduction to Biology* classes seeking to understand the nature of life and death and the relationship between them in order to make sense of the events that landed him in prison.

Quogn is dehumanized both through his physical features and mental functions. His name is “unpronounceable” (SQ 235). He has a physical deformity described as “a curved back” (SQ 235) or a “broke-back” (SQ 238). His grammar and syntax are faulty: “How you kill a person, he is asking. How a person *die*, he is asking” (SQ 235). His spelling is problematic: “stil,” “dibetees,” “spil,” “finly” (SQ 239-240). Oates uses the grotesque mode to describe him: “minnow-eyes” (SQ 235, 236, 238), “like a small frog” (SQ 236), “like an upright snake” (SQ 238), “a little mangy sick dog” (SQ 238). He is hard to understand “for he speaks slowly and with difficulty and with a look of wonderment” (SQ 237) and his written work “is incomprehensible like a child’s scribbling” (SQ 238). With these shortcomings, he is surely destined to perpetually and ineffectually repeat his quest for meaning through the attempted understanding of biology.

“Anniversary”⁹ deals with a different prison across the country, “the Hudson Fork Maximum Security Correctional Facility for Men” in Hudson Fork, New York (A 242) but picks up several elements introduced in the much shorter “San Quentin” and reproduces them. For example, the vertical typographical reproduction of the white lettering on the inmates’ pants (A 259). The story also alludes to aspects of prisons picked up again in the

⁹ First published in *Boulevard 28.1&2* (Fall 2012). Collected in *Black Dahlia & White Rose*. Citations are taken from the collected edition which is abbreviated A for in-text references.

later novel *Carthage* such as the colors of clothing visitors are allowed to wear, outdoor urinals for inmates and prison no-hostage policies.¹⁰

“Anniversary” is the story of an experienced university professor teaching her first volunteer English class in an upstate New York prison on her wedding anniversary two years after her husband’s death. This story of a recently widowed woman resembles certain stories with similar protagonists in *Sourland*.¹¹ Vivianne Greary is an educated woman, recently widowed, suffering from feelings of guilt from which an urge to put herself in harm’s way develops. The prison functions as a metaphor for her mental state of entrapment in survivor’s guilt though she masks this by claiming a desire to be of help. Some details of Vivianne’s life coincide with Oates’s (“as a graduate student Vivianne had taught night school”), others do not (“Her Ph.D. studies were in political science and philosophy”) (A 252). Vivianne appears to have volunteered at the prison because “her husband had often spoken of volunteering for such work” (A 258). Vivianne’s volunteering is thus a way to remain close to her departed partner. She also engages in the classic punishment-seeking behavior of other Oates widows. Her response, for example, upon discovering the classroom pencil sharpener has gone missing, is to decide “She would take responsibility for it herself” (A 270). Her idea of responsibility, however, is extreme. Finding herself alone in the facility at the end of class, Vivianne fantasizes or hallucinates

¹⁰ Both story and novel draw on elements from Oates’s essay “A Visit to San Quentin” based on her visit of the California incarceration facility in April 2011.

¹¹ For more on this, see Tanya Tromble, “Fiction in Fact and Fact in Fiction in the Writing of Joyce Carol Oates,” *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*: 2 (2015), DOI: 10.15867/331917.2.2

that she is murdered with the razor from the missing pencil sharpener (A 273). In addition to the story of Vivianne working through her guilt, this complex thirty-page story which is set almost exclusively inside the prison (except for the scenes concerning the arrival and departure by car of the two teachers) also presents the reader with numerous reflections on detention and the uncanny experience of visiting a prison.

Though it is less explicitly a focus than in the shorter stories discussed above, dehumanization of inmates is once again an ever-present element of the narrative. Here, rather than a focus on grotesque descriptions of inmates or an insistence on their poor language mastery, dehumanization is made evident through the living conditions in the facility which seem to indicate prisoners are treated more like captive animals than as respected human beings. There are urinals in the yard for all to see and “a lone, terribly exposed lidless toilet” (A 241). The effect of overcrowding—“There were forty-three hundred prisoners in this facility designed to hold approximately two thousand men” (A 243)—and cramped cells is felt by the instructors in the way the men arrange themselves in the classroom: “the men didn’t segregate themselves in the classroom according to race but it was clear that they were sitting as far from one another as they could”; “Meaning, their cells were so small, and these were double cells—naturally the men wanted as much space around them as they could get, when they were out of their cells” (A 256). Vivianne considers the prisoner uniform to be deliberately dehumanizing: “Prison attire as a form of correction, punishment. A way of taking from the prisoner his identity, and making him ridiculous” (A 259). She also senses alienation caused by the

conditions of detention as communicated by her thoughts about one student: “He has shrunk. This is not the self he remembers and so he is baffled, he may be angry” (A 262).

The length of “Anniversary” permits a more involved exploration into the dehumanizing process of the prison than is possible in the shorter stories. In this story, dehumanization also begins to affect the two instructors who seem to lose their ability to think clearly and become more and more reactive and instinctive the longer they remain inside the facility. The disconcerting nature of the place takes a toll. Vivianne forgets or mislays “her composure” (A 245); her co-instructor, Cal, becomes “increasingly excitable” (A 249) “and the prison-situation seemed to have made him anxious” (A 263). Vivianne responds inappropriately to the students’ question about why she had volunteered to teach (A 264) and hears the characteristic “roaring in her ears” (A 265) common to Oates protagonists in weakened mental states. Both instructors become forgetful, failing to have the men sign out and to keep track of the pencil sharpener (A 269). Vivianne is at least lucid enough to realize she has been strangely affected inside the facility. In the final pages of the text, she reflects: “Yet neither Cal nor Vivianne seemed to have been thinking clearly for the past two hours. Entering Hudson Fork Correctional Facility for Men had seemed to affect a kind of shift in Vivianne’s brain as if a tiny knob had turned, and she’d lost her power of concentration” (A 272). It is interesting that these benevolent visitors are described as equally affected by the confining conditions of the prison. However, such equalizing reflections are certainly not surprising in the work of an author who

consistently emphasizes the humanity of all people. In comments following a reading of “San Quentin” in 2012, Oates remarked:

My concept of other worlds is not the future, which of course doesn't exist, or other planets and stars and galaxies, but other people, other personalities. As a child I saw mysteries close at hand, and what we might call the phantasmagoria of personality was always very vivid to me. I looked at other people, and I felt that the world was very mysterious, and that the subjectivity of others is endlessly fascinating. (Haskell)

Though the details of each of these stories may convey dehumanization in various ways, the fact that all characters are adversely affected by detention facilities conveys a universal human reaction that ultimately serves to emphasize the humanity of Oates's inmate characters. Reflecting upon her experience of touring a prison facility in “After Amnesia,”¹² Oates writes that the inmate cycle of “waiting, eating, settling scores [...] in its starkest, least sentimental essence, was humanity. If we could observe ourselves through wire-enforced plate glass windows twenty-four hours a day” (AA 196).

“High,”¹³ like “Anniversary,” combines two recent Oates story concerns: the newly widowed woman suffering from survivor's guilt who deliberately puts herself in harm's way, and the experience of teaching inmate-students. The protagonist is once again an older

¹² First published in *Granta* 63: Beasts (Autumn 1998) and collected in *The Best American Essays 1999*. Citations are taken from the collected edition which is abbreviated AA for in-text references.

¹³ First published in *The Marijuana Chronicles*, ed. Jonathan Santlofer, New York: Akashic Books, 2013. Collected in *High Crime Area*. Citations are taken from the latter edition which is abbreviated H for in-text references.

widowed professor. Agnes Krauss begins to use marijuana to cope with her feelings of loss following her husband's passing. She does nothing when her first drug providers ransack her house. She lets another dealer charge her excessive amounts. She withdraws from friends and family. She seeks out a former inmate-student and the story closes on the image of this "predator" staring at her with "an indecipherable light" in his eye. He has changed since she knew him, as indicated by "something new—through his left eyebrow, a wicked little zipperlike scar" (H 68).

Oates introduces the prison teaching experience more than ten pages into the story. Agnes's illegal purchase and use of a controlled substance with which the story begins creates a proximity to criminality that eventually leads her to reflect on past proximity to criminality, notably her prison teaching experience and a favorite inmate-student, as she has just been price-gouged and disrespected by a drug-dealing former university student (this story also points out the deferential behavior of inmate-students as compared to private university students). Though she feels that "getting high gave her clarity" (H 61), the implication at the story's close is that her reckless behavior has put her in harm's way. This final scene is gradually set-up throughout the story as there are other indications that her smoking has led to mental confusion. For example, under the influence, she forgets that her husband has passed away, a confusion that is confirmed by the statement: "In the marijuana haze, she'd half-believed—she'd been virtually certain—that her husband was still in the hospital, and wondering why she hadn't come to visit" (H 47).

Once again, Oates emphasizes the limited education of inmate-students: “Most of the students were barely literate. [...] in the classroom they were disadvantaged as overgrown children. [...] The inmate-students had ideas, to a degree—but their ability to express themselves in anything other than simple childish expletives was primitive” (H 55). Even Joseph Mattia, remembered as her most promising student, whom she seeks out at the story’s close, is not spared: “Mattia was the most literate writer in the class, [...]. His compositions were childlike, earnest. Yet, his thoughts seemed overlarge for his brain” (H 53-54).

When these stories are taken together, it becomes clear that the dehumanization of each inmate character is made possible both through lexical strategies and by the establishment of a referent by which to compare them, whether it be an instructor, a counsellor, or the author herself. The accumulated effect thus invites reader reflection upon distancing descriptions of the Other.

Reflections on Detention

During a reading at Seton Hall University in Fall 2011, Oates discussed her prison teaching experience:

“When I went to San Quentin, it was enormously impressive to me. [...] Most of the prisoners who wrote are quite hypnotized and captivated by the fact that they are in prison.” [...] The inmate student who inspired “San Quentin,” [...] was in particular mesmerized by the fact that he had killed someone. “He said that he would wake up at night and sort of see this person standing by his bed. And the question was why? Why did I do that? Why did I throw away my life? What does it mean to kill a person?” Oates admitted

that she likes to write about themes that have to do with the criminal justice system, about people who are unfairly prosecuted and [others who are] never indicted or arrested for a crime. (Kwiatkowski)

The notion of “unfairness” is certainly a common thread throughout these prison stories which focus largely on incarceration experiences of the underprivileged, or that category of people whom Oates referred to in an interview with Michael Silverblatt as the “de-gentrified.” Oates’s fiction both emphasizes a dehumanization undergone by her characters at the hands of society and/or the correctional system and highlights a certain universality in descriptions of their emotional realms, such as the disconnect between past action and present result alluded to in “San Quentin”: “San Quentin: where you never meant to do what you don’t remember you were accused of doing so long ago . . .” (SQ 236). Her comments that “betrayal” is the common thread connecting the stories in *Prison Noir* might be read as a universal human reaction to incarceration: “What seems to link them was this sense of profound shock, almost an ontological, metaphysical shock that these people have undergone, sometimes at a quite young age, and they do feel betrayed either by an individual, or by an institution or maybe by their own idealism, misguided idealism” (Silverblatt).

In focusing in these stories on detainee and inmate experiences rather than on the crimes they have committed, it may seem that Oates is avoiding the subject of crime and punishment, denouncing evils of the system, but not that of criminal action. Oates is far from dismissive of criminality. In a 2015 tweet on the Dannemora prison break, she wrote “Thousands of law enforcement

looking for pitiless killers who'd surely shoot unarmed citizens in the back." Oates is interested in the effects of crime on victims. These inmate stories turn the screw on this central concern to show that perpetrators of crime can also become victims, victims of their own actions. In a 2007 address, Oates tells a story about upsetting a number of people by a passing remark that she does not believe in evil:

Yesterday, [...] I inadvertently aroused the anger of a number of individuals who called in to protest my remark in passing that I did not believe in "evil"—that I thought that "evil" is a theological term, and not adequate to explain, nor even suggest, psychological, social, and political complexities. When we label someone as "evil" we are implicitly identifying ourselves as "good." (Oates, "Humanism": 354)

As these remarks convey, in Oates's work, evil is a relative notion that cannot be separated from a unique viewpoint. As a label, therefore, it is not particularly helpful. However, as a process, as one component of a relationship, it invites reflection into the mystery of how people can impose conditions on others that they would not accept for themselves.

The story "Dear Joyce Carol," complicates the view expressed above of the repentant inmate, treating another of the evils confronting the penal system: resistance to rehabilitation. The epistolary story consists of nine letters from inmate Esdra Abraham Meech to "Joyce Carol" over a period of six weeks from October 1 to November 15, 2006. The first six letters are friendly as the inmate seeks to establish a relationship with the author, giving compliments, sending drawings, asking for photographs, and

speaking of love. However, there is an undercurrent of latent violence that can be felt in Esdra's disrespect for the wholeness of books and newspapers. Upon two occasions, he rips out photos of "Joyce Carol Oates" to send to her for autographs. It is not initially clear that Esdra is an inmate. The first mention of his incarceration comes only at the end of the sixth letter: "when I am released & a FREE MAN which will be soon: 73 days" (DJC 233). Though each of these letters is signed with his full name and address which includes the indication "TFMMSF," the acronym is explained nowhere in the story and it is only with hindsight that we can guess it might stand for "Twin Falls Men's Maximum Security Facility."

The seventh letter indicates that Esdra's attitude towards his addressee has changed drastically. He accuses her of using his life story without permission and threatens revenge for having been "scorned" (DJC 237): "Joyce Carol, you had your chance & fuckt it. That's tough shit for you Joyce Carol, soon youll know how much" (DJC 235). Ironically, in order to identify the plagiarized elements of the story, he virtually admits to murder and boasts of it not having been proven against him. In his final letter, he indicates his plan to make his mark on society by killing again. To close this letter, Esdra boasts of the freedom he will soon acquire when he maxes out on his sentence in a few months' time. However, one must assume that he has set a trap for himself by revealing too much information in letters that are certainly read by prison authorities and that he will, in fact, eventually be eating the "last meal" he writes of having imagined and drawn (DJC 236). This story raises another problematic issue related to justice and incarceration: prison can fail to protect society from evil if an inmate

maxes out, meaning upon release they are not subject to any state surveillance such as that provided by parole (DJC 237).

Conclusion: Is prison all *noir*?

Oates's 1998 essay "After Amnesia" recounts her humiliating experience touring a New Jersey maximum security detention facility in March 1984. The account is informed by Oates's particular gothic-grotesque sensibility which communicates the terror of the perilous journey through the dark, labyrinthine enclosure fraught with "ominous" notes (AA 190) while remarking upon uncanny elements such as the "comically oversized cans of familiar brand names" stocking the kitchen shelves (AA 192). When Oates inadvertently riles up a group of inmates after accidentally making eye contact with two of them, she feels "the female terror" of "males, in a pack" (AA 198) though she is presumably safely ensconced in an elevated guard station. Even prior to this incident, the discomfort and latent violent undercurrents Oates feels while touring the facility are tangible. Elements of this experience have found their way into Oates's fiction. The visit informs much of the prison visit experience in *Carthage* in which a young, desexualized female participates in a similarly led tour. The dehumanizing gaze of authority reflected by the guard's comment that inmates "feed" rather than eat (AA 192), Oates's incoherent thinking after several hours in the facility, and the feeling of release experienced by Oates upon leaving the facility

inspire elements of “Anniversary.” However, the essay account is more terrifying for not being tempered by a mask of fictionality.¹⁴

A similar terrifying realism emanates from the stories by inmate authors in the collection *Prison Noir*, as Oates remarks in her introduction: “So suffused is prison fiction with seemingly autobiographical material, so steeped in the intensity of private anguish, it is tempting to describe most of it as ‘memoirist fiction’” (15). The violent ruthless killings, cunning serial killings, anguished misunderstood imprisonment, mental and sexual abuse, rape, suicide attempts, frustration and despair found in these stories are the building blocks of pure horror. Yet, it is even more horrifying to realize they are probably largely informed by experience: “There is no need for fantasy-horror in a place in which matter-of-fact horror is the norm, and mental illness is epidemic. Vividly rendered realism is the predominant literary strategy, as in a riveting documentary film” (15-16). Though the Oates stories discussed above are informed by a visitor’s experience and present a wealth of detail, one is primarily drawn to Oates’s writing for its stylistic qualities. Oates speculates that reader motivation for this collection may be different: “writerly prose is probably not the primary reason one might be drawn to read stories by prison inmates. More likely it is the wish to see life from a perspective only imagined by most of us, and to speculate how, in the writers’ places, we might manage to survive, or fail to survive” (15).

¹⁴ In “A Visit to San Quentin” about a more recent prison tour (April 2011), Oates makes parallels between her experience at San Quentin and her earlier experience at the Trenton facility. Though she is determined to apply the lessons learned during her first tour, she is still ultimately unsettled by the renewed experience.

“And what pathos, too, to consider that this powerfully understated story is being published posthumously. Its *talented* author, William Van Poyck, was *executed* in June 2013, just as we began editing this volume, in the Florida State Prison at Raiford *on a charge of felony murder*” (21-22, my emphasis). Oates closes her introduction with these words about the author of the collection’s final story. The word choice clearly indicates a bias in the author-inmate’s favor, highlighting a positive characteristic before identifying him not as a murderer, but as someone put to death for murder, which can be two very different things. Indeed, when we read Van Poyck’s biographical information at the volume’s close, we learn he “was sentenced to death for his part in the 1987 botched attempt to free his best friend from a prison transport van, during which a guard was killed by Van Poyck’s accomplice.” Positive notions of friendship and artistic talent commingle in this account with the violence of prison break and accessory murder.

In a review of the collection, Eric Anderson perceptively reflects,

Perhaps this volume of collected stories makes a fitting rebuttal to an old question frequently asked of Oates in interviews: “Why is your writing so violent?” None of the authors included in *Prison Noir* are writing about violence in order to indulge in the lurid detail of it; in using artistically-rendered prose fiction they bear witness to the experience of what happens immediately around them and around all of us—the experiences we choose to see and not see. (4)

The notion of violent thematic content may in fact be directly linked to the question of form. One of the *Prison Noir* stories itself contains a

remark that may be applied to the chosen fictional format: “That’s the myth of institutionalization. After your first day, you’ve pretty much seen all the facility has to offer” (Gutches 68). That is to say, one day, one smallish unit of time repeated to infinity, which is perhaps best treated through the concision of the short story form. The horrifying experiences dealt with in the collection’s stories are perhaps more easily approached through short passages and oblique references. Philip Stevick includes Oates’s story “How I Contemplated” in the 1971 collection *Anti-Story: an anthology of experimental fiction* in the section “Against Mimesis: Fiction about Fiction.” In his introduction, he states that “the works that follow, are, in a sense, a reaction against ‘story-ness’” (xv). In Oates’s story, the experimental note form seems to be a way to deal with violence by dissimulating it in oblique vignettes, removing it from a chronological narrative, thus depriving it of some of its cause and effect related force. Though the other Oates stories discussed are not considered experimental, they do tend to read more as juxtapositions of vignettes than fluid chronological narratives.

Oates’s fictional depictions of incarceration may be read as critiques of a system that breeds abuse and dehumanization. This vision is mitigated, however, by the persistent urge to violence of Esdra in “Dear Joyce Carol,” the predator-gaze of Joseph in “High,” and by various comments made by the author in interviews and tweets. She is not radically opposed to the incarceration system though she does seem to see it as her role to denounce injustice and the grotesque implications of certain aspects of “justice.” In an interview with Virginia Rohan, she commented:

No prisoner I ever met claimed to be not guilty. They all accepted the fact that they really made a mistake. Basically, they thought of what they did as a mistake, maybe a stupid mistake. . . . But you know, that's why so many of the prisoners are in prison. They make a really stupid decision to join a gang, get a gun. At 17 years old, you have a very quick temper and you're not mature. And an immature person with a gun is just lethal.

Oates here emphasizes the universal humanity of inmates by equating much crime with a human proclivity to make stupid mistakes. The idea that other crimes do not necessarily fit this analysis is raised in a tweet from May 22, 2015: "While teaching (writing) at San Quentin in 2011 amazed to see (white) inmates with shaved heads covered in swastikas about to be released." This comment conveys the ambiguity that can characterize thoughts on inmates and incarceration, frequently colored by racism and preconceived notions. If these men were to be released, they must have served their time. However, their tattoos bring to mind violent attitudes and make us wonder if the system has functioned appropriately. Ultimately, Oates's prison related fiction and her work in editing *Prison Noir* is simply that of a committed humanist who contributes to giving a voice to yet another largely voiceless population, made all the more necessary by the fact reported in the collection's introduction that in some facilities inmates are not even allowed to write (14).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Eric K. "Review of *Prison Noir*." *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*. 1 (2014). Web. DOI:10.15867/331917.1.4
- Gutches, Scott. "Bardos." *Prison Noir*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Akashic, 2014. 56-68. Print.
- Haskell, Arlo. "Joyce Carol Oates: Close Encounters with the Other." *Key West Literary Seminar Audio Archives*, 18 January 2012. Web. 20 January 2015.
- Johnson, Greg. *Understanding Joyce Carol Oates*. Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 1987. Print.
- Kazin, Alfred. "Oates." 1972. *Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations 1970-2006*. Ed. Greg Johnson. Princeton, New Jersey: Ontario Review, 2006. 5-14. Print.
- Kwiatkowski, Katelyn. "Joyce Carol Oates Reads to Packed Auditorium at Seton Hall University." *TAPinto.net*, 5 October 2011. Web. 4 June 2015.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "A Visit to San Quentin." *Soul at the White Heat: Inspiration, Obsession, and the Writing Life*. New York: Ecco, 2016. 367-387. Print.
- . "After Amnesia." *The Best American Essays 1999*. Ed. Edward Hoagland. Boston: Houghton, 1999. 188-200. Print.
- . "Anniversary." *Black Dahlia & White Rose: Stories*. New York: Ecco, 2012. 241-247. Print.
- . *Carthage*. New York: Ecco, 2014. Print.
- . "Dear Joyce Carol,." *Dear Husband: Stories*. New York: Ecco, 2009. 227-237. Print.
- . *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*. New York: Plume, 1994. Print.

- . “Joyce Carol Oates: Prison Noir.” Interview by Michael Silverblatt. *Bookworm*. KCRW, 2014. Web. 5 June 2015.
- . “In the Old World,” *By the North Gate*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1971. 149-162. Print.
- . “Introduction: Seeds for Next Year.” *Prison Noir*. Ed. Joyce Carol Oates. New York: Akashic, 2014. 13-22. Print.
- . “High.” *High Crime Area: Tales of Darkness and Dread*. New York: Mysterious, 2014. 37-68. Print.
- . “How I Contemplated the World from the Detroit House of Correction and Began My Life Over Again.” *The Wheel of Love and Other Stories*. Greenwich, Connecticut: Fawcett, 1970. 149-165. Print.
- . “San Quentin.” *Black Dahlia & White Rose: Stories*. New York: Ecco, 2012. 235-240. Print.
- . *Sourland: Stories*. New York: Ecco, 2010. Print.
- . “Tetanus.” *TriQuarterly* 131 (2008): 187-200. Print.
- . “Thousands of law enforcement looking for pitiless killers who’d surely shoot unarmed citizens in the back.” 9 Jun 2015, 4:52 p.m. Tweet.
- . “While teaching (writing) at San Quentin in 2011 amazed to see (white) inmates with shaved heads covered in swastikas about to be released.” 22 May 2015, 2:25 p.m. Tweet.
- . “‘Why is Humanism Not the Preeminent Belief of Humankind?’ Address Upon Receiving the 2007 Humanist of the Year Award.” *In Rough Country*. New York: Ecco, 2010. 354-356. Print.

Rohan, Virginia. "Joyce Carol Oates talks about *Prison Noir*, an anthology she edited." *NorthJersey.com*, 18 October 2014. Web. 5 June 2015.

Stevick, Philip. Introduction. *Anti-Story: An Anthology of Experimental Fiction*. New York: Free, 1971. ix-xxiii. Print.