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Initiated into Subordination. On Joyce Carol Oates's *I'll Take You There*

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SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Joyce Carol Oates, I'll Take You There, antysemityzm, rasizm, mizoginizm

"Aged eighteen I'd left home, Strykersville, New York, with no idea of who I was or who I might be; knowing only who I was not, and did not wish to be"[1] – so begins the journey of the main character of the novel *I'll Take You There* by Joyce Carol Oates through various social roles, "a girl from a sorority," "Vernor Matheius's girl," "a student of philosophy," "a top student." Like attractive costumes, the heroine will try on these roles and – like costumes that will prove stifling, tight, mismatched – remove them. Attempts to fit into one of them and the accompanying acts of self-sabotage will be an expression of the heroine's frantic search for such a way of life that generates at least a semblance of autonomy from the need for other people's recognition.

I propose a sociological reading of *I'll Take You There*. Not having a literary studies education, I interpret Oates's novel using the tools of social science. Certainly, concepts, categories and notions developed within other disciplines would allow for enriching, nuancing and perhaps even challenging the interpretation of *I'll Take You There* that I propose below. In my opinion, the novel by Oates is a record of a young woman's search for a way out of the masquerade of femininity, away from the mirror of men's eyes, beyond the need for her professors' appreciation and for the unattainable attention from her parents. The context in which Oates's heroine will fight for the status of a subject is provided by the social structure of the early 1960s in the United States, with its inherent misogyny, racism and classism. These three variables will shape the destiny of the heroine in accordance with the logic of social reproduction – a destiny of overwhelming power of allocation, which the main character of *I'll Take You There*

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[1] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take You There*, London 2003, p. 128.

is trying to recognize and oppose. In the context of these areas of stereotyping, it becomes obvious that the novel by Oates also deals with stigma: stigma mechanisms, stigma categories and attempts at stigma neutralization. Finally, as an academic novel, *I'll Take You There* offers a thorough deconstruction of universalism within the Western Academia, and especially the queen of the humanities – philosophy. The severe consequences of the false promise of this universalism are borne, in Oates's opinion, by those who put in it their greatest hopes: those thrown out of the human community but aspiring to it and longing for equality.

Name

A lack of social subjectivity on the part of the novel's main character and the same time narrator finds reflection in the significant fact that throughout the whole novel, her given name and surname never appear. And even "Anellia", the name which becomes associated with the heroine in the mind of the reader, does not appears until the middle of the novel – and when it does so, it is only to prove false. Admittedly, some people were told her real name, but none of them paid any attention. The heroine would introduce herself to her beloved: "I'd told Vernor my true name one evening. Still he called me 'Anellia' – I supposed he couldn't be troubled to learn another name"[2]. She would introduce herself to Hildie Pomeroy – her dying father's partner and caretaker: "I'd told her my name more than once but she chose not to hear it"[3]. She would introduce herself to her admired professor: "One of his most brilliant, vexing undergraduates, whose papers were three times as long as papers written by her classmates, invariably A's, and – he'd forgotten her name?"[4]. Indeed, one of these people remember the heroine's real name. Each will call her by a name that he or she chooses for her, seeing in her only someone he or she wants to see.

In my reading, that the main character is given names according to the will of the ones who name her, and who do not remember her real name, is one of the ways, and at the same time a symbol, of subordinating the woman described by Oates to her successive roles. It is a compelling expression of attempts at forcing her into one of the life scenarios envisioned for a woman. People who surround Anellia (I will call the heroine by this name, bearing in mind, however, that it is more conventional than real), her „significant others," do not know her and do not seem interested in getting to know her. They treat her more like a handy screen, on which to project their needs, visions, fantasies, and ideas. Therefore, they are disappointed or furious when Anellia disturbs

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 189.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 270.
[4] *Ibidem*, p. 74.

the „purity" of the screen with words, attitude, and behaviour, thus limiting the freedom of other people's projections.

Functioning as a field for other people's fantasies and for desperate attempts to implement these fantasies results in, first of all, alienation. Oates's heroine is devoid of a sense of subjectivity to the point where she even attributes her own thoughts to others, because she believes – not without reason – that if she confessed she was their author, they would immediately lose recognition. „In an ecstasy of sudden clarity I wrote *Spinoza made of his madness, art.* I did not believe that my professor would admire this insight so I attributed it to an invented scholar"[5]. The second result, which also finds reflection in the last quotation, is an acute lack of self-esteem. The third – a sense of guilt, because the successive self-presentations that the need for recognition dictates her are viewed by Anellia as cheating: „In secret, I could not comprehend why anyone, (…), would want me to join them. I knew that, if they knew me as I truly was, they wouldn't like me at all"[6]. Finally, the heroine is accompanied by constant fear of being unmasked. „I couldn't explain that the sunny-seeming good-girl citizen my classmates had elected to office wasn't me, but an experiment I had not expected to succeed"[7] – says Anellia about herself in the role of a member of sorority. In the eyes of friends, she tries to „emerge as open, uncomplicated, easygoing, warm, with a dimpled smile and high ringing girlish laughter. My Kappa self did not brood, was never melancholy. If she wrote parable-like prose poems in the style of Franz Kafka, she showed no one among the Kappas. She had clear skin, shining eyes, a glossy pageboy, and lipsticked lips. She was no one I knew personally but an inspired composite of a dozen Kappa girls (…)"[8].

The fact that we do not know the name of the novel's narrator makes her serve as a kind of *everywoman*. Oates does not make the heroine of *I'll Take You There* unique: either very strange or very unlucky. Describing Anellia's struggles for subjectivity – barely aware, intuitive, full of defeats and humiliations as they were – the author seems to tell a story as much about Anellia as about the social world in which women are not predestined for the role of, and are never perceived as, individuals that are exceptional – worth knowing, fascinating, enchanting – but rather serve as projection screens for other people's ideas and needs. Their fate is thus decided not by their psychological traits, which result from individual biographies. Conversely, the mental health problems of the main character are – merely but crucially – the effect of *the women's room*[9], to which she has been assigned by the power of her social destiny. Assuming successive

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 57.
[6] *Ibidem*, p. 43.
[7] *Ibidem*, p. 129.
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 44.
[9] See: M. French, *The Women's Room*, New York 1977.

roles, experiencing their limits or not having the conditions which would make possible their perfect execution, the heroine will try to escape this *room*.

Dormition

The force that pushes her into this is ambivalent: on the one hand, it poses problems to Anellia, on the other hand, it allows her to break away from her situationally generated besetment. First of all, this force seems to be out of control and thereby grows into a symbol: if the heroine controls it and begins to use it consciously, she will finally control her life, a life which, in the meantime, is dormant: ruled by inertia, driven by desires and expectations of others, abounding in situations that "happen" to the heroine almost like in a dream vision, where the will and agency of the dreamer do not have effect. The story Oates tells is rich in episodes during which Anellia does not so much speak as has the feeling that something speaks through her; she does not so much act as has the feeling that something pushes her into action. "I heard myself murmur that I wasn't certain that I belonged in Kappa Gamma Pi"[10] – she narrates her confession, made in the presence of fellow sorority members, that she is Jewish. „[A]nd somehow I heard myself say that with my background I could not believe in superstition, I was biting my thumbnail confessing that I did not believe I belonged in Kappa Gamma Pi, a Christian sorority, I was an imposter in this gathering"[11]. Another time, she says: „I could not escape upstairs, (…) I found myself in the parlor blindly pushing open the door to Mrs. Thayer's private quarters as if, in the midst of this confusion, our Brit housemother was there beckoning me inside"[12]. The heroine does not seem to control herself. She performs acts which she does not consciously choose. And yet, because of this force, the force of an outsider's destiny, the destiny of a stigmatized person who does everything to keep her stigma a secret, and whose desperate efforts at hiding the stigma are precisely what draws attention to her and, consequently, leads to its disclosure – like a sleepwalker or a kleptomaniac, she finds herself in situations in which she never wanted to be.

Stigmata

What kind of stigma is it? And to what extent can it be objectified? In her half-conscious confessions, made as if in a dream, Oates's heroine takes on subsequent stigmata. The first one is her Jewishness. "It was believed by some of my relatives that the family was

[10] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 80.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 85.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 87.

partly Jewish: that my father's grandparents were German Jews who'd changed their name to a German-sounding name (…) I unhesitatingly indicated *Episcopalian.* My father's employment?— *independent contractor.* (…) I told myself that this was not lying; it was my Kappa self speaking"[13]. Guided by family experience, the author hides her Jewishness. She erases it from her official biography, and removes its traces from official circulation. However, Jewishness is not her chosen identity, just as it was not the identity of her parents, nor is it part of the cultural or religious practices of the family in which Anellia grew up. Instead, it has a character of a family secret and a social taboo. Equipped with a stigmatizing potential and rejected, her Jewishness is located exactly at the intersection of a forced identity and a chosen one. It is the „J-word," carrying a dangerous load which the heroine, for reasons unclear to herself, decides to detonate: „I heard myself murmur that I wasn't certain that I belonged in Kappa Gamma Pi, I thought it was 'maybe morally wrong of me.' (...) 'Because I'm—I have—I think I have—Jewish blood.' There. It was said. (...) and I said, louder than I meant, '—Jew, I think. I am Jewish. I think.' (...) and—'Kappa Gamma Pi blackballs Jews on the first ballot, don't we?' "[14].

The heroine's declaration is not an act constituting her Jewish identity. Neither does it serve to inform the reader that Anellia is Jewish. Rather, it is a research undertaking and a social experiment. Evidence of this includes the fact that before Anellia mentions her Jewishness, she causes panic with another confession: „*Maybe I have leprosy* I joked. *There's leprosy in my family*. Deedee's [a girl from the sorority] look of alarm was a warning yet my mouth continued. *My mother died of it*"[15]. Since the Middle Ages, leprosy has had strong historical connotations with anti-Semitic stereotypes. And even though, in the nineteenth century, the discourse concerning Jews and Jewishness shifted its focus from theological to scientific, the anti-Semitic beliefs which originated in the period, supported as they have been by the authority of medicine, have had their roots in the medieval identification of the Jews with disease and pestilence. In the Middle Ages, the Jews had the status of lepers: like lepers, they were walled off in separate quarters because they were considered the source of the plague. They polluted not only the world of the Christian ideas but that of the Christian body as well[16].

Making herself a „leper" in the eyes of others, Anellia checks to see what is permissible, normal, uncontroversial in the academic world, which she entered somewhat in spite of her class background. Jewishness turns out not to be within the norm. It is a litmus test revealing the anti-Semitism of academic structures that the heroine senses all

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 44.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 80.
[15] *Ibidem*, p. 65.
[16] S. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology. Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race and Madness*, New York 1990, pp. 150–163.

along. She suspects that the bizarre status of Mrs. Thayer – a somewhat elderly British „lady" ridiculed by the students, who serves as a teacher and counselor of the members of the Kappa Gamma Pi sorority, and who, like Anellia, seems to hide a secret – is also associated with anti-Semitism. Secretly browsing through Mrs. Thayer's family photos, the heroine notes, „Most were fair-skinned, ordinary-looking; two or three specimens were dark-haired, dark-complected, reminding me uneasily of myself. ('Jewish blood'?)"[17]. Announcing her Jewishness, she thus challenges the academic environment. She calls the bluff and thereby she exposes their anti-Semitism. After revealing her Jewishness turns out to be a self-denunciation, which results in her being expelled from the Kappa Gamma Pi, Anellia comments, „I would be happy; if not happy, I would be free of deceit, which is perhaps the same thing"[18]. The deceit she mentions does not lie in the fact that she hid her Jewish identity and could not practice this aspect of her self-identification, but in that she was part of a community whose rules she did not recognize, and whose boundaries she would not tolerate.

This is but one of Anellia's confessions which make her a scapegoat. Oates's heroine takes the blame for things she did not do and suffers the consequences. She admits, for example, to malicious pranks against Mrs. Thayer, although in reality – fascinated by the counselor and sympathizing with her in an act of opposition to the cruelty of the „sisters" – Anellia was not the one to blame for them. Often when Mrs. Thayer scolds her subordinates looking for the culprit, and the girls are silent, Anellia, as if unable to withstand the rising tension, admits to acts committed by someone else. Similarly, later, when the partner of her dying father accuses the girl that neither she nor her brothers have visited him so far, Anellia does not explain or defend herself. She did not even know that her father, who had left her, was alive, because for many years her family thought him dead and he did nothing to change that. But hearing Hildie Pomeroy's allegations, Anellia only nods.

Embodiment

The self-destructive behaviour of the heroine of *I'll Take You There* can be interpreted in several ways. The oneiric aura that surrounds her makes her resemble the proverbial moth flying into the fire, someone deprived of elementary life competencies of staying away from trouble, taking care of one's safety, sensing and evading danger. A social orphan – her mother died at her birth, her father harboured a grudge against his daughter and did not involve himself in her upbringing, and then ran away from the family

[17] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 88.
[18] *Ibidem*, p. 87.

– Anellia was indeed not equipped with such competencies. Perhaps this is why she cannot take care of herself – because nobody has ever taken care of her.

The effects of the absence of mothers in the educational process of daughters can nevertheless also receive a contrary interpretation. Ellen G. Friedman analyzed Joyce Carol Oates's novel *Faithless*[19]. In her opinion, the absence of the mother of the protagonists enables the two daughters who were brought up by their father to oppose him. They shape their lives more freely than girls taught femininity by observing the maternal role and maternal socialization of their mothers. Both protagonists are opposed to their father when he wants them to abandon school and get married[20]. In Friedman's reading, lack of a mother in novels and stories by Oates offers a snippet of freedom from the gender role, repeals social allocation, allows one to avoid slipping into the rut of the woman's fate. So perhaps it is due the lack of maternal role model that Anellia, rather than surrender her life to one of the women's trajectories, deconstructs them one after another as oppressive masquerades.

Anellia's taking the blame for the faults she did not commit, which heightens the impression of her submissiveness, can also be seen as a desperate attempt to gain sympathy. Attempts motivated by the hope that thanks to her selflessness and self-sacrifice towards her sorority mates, they will like her, they will secretly admire her courage or at least bestow on her the privilege of invisibility instead of pointing her out as a freak, laughing at her and humiliating her. After all, it is thanks to the fact that the heroine admits to other girls' actions that the real culprits go unpunished, and all the sorority members are relieved that "it is over". Anellia herself explains her inner compulsion to assume the position of the victim by saying, „It has never been my nature to defend myself against another's moral indignation; in the presence of individuals who assume moral superiority, I lapse into silence"[21]. It is this silence, and even consent to accusation, and this self-denunciation that are one of the most puzzling and at the same time constantly recurring aspects of the heroine's behaviour.

In unraveling this puzzle, Bourdieu's category of *the embodiment of domination* seems to be helpful. In his book *Pascalian Meditations*, Pierre Bourdieu explains that kind of embodiment using an example similar to Anellia's behaviour: that of the wife who returns to her husband in spite of being abused by him. Contrary to the

[19] E. G. Friedman, *Feminism, Masculinity, and Nation in Joyce Carol Oates's Fiction*, "Studies in the Novel," vol. 38, no. 4, winter 2006, pp. 478–493.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 479. Simone de Beauvoir and Adrienne Rich, among others, wrote about the ambivalence of motherhood, and particularly of the relationship between the daughter and the mother, as one providing an adolescent girl protection but on the other hand also education in subordination. See: S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, New York 2009 and A. Rich, *Of Woman Born. Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York 1995.

[21] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 266.

commonplaces in the contemporary media discourse, the argument that it was a free choice of the woman, and thus proof of her stupidity, is false. For, writes Bourdieu, while the wife does in fact choose to go back to her husband who beats her, she does not choose *the principle of her choices*, or her *habitus*[22]. The patterns of perception and evaluation that we apply to the world in which we live, Bourdieu argues, have been produced by this world (the social world), and not by each individual at his or her sole discretion. In this particular situation, we can surmise schemes rooted in the husband and wife's thinking by the dominant culture, such as: femininity means sacrifice, marriage requires extraordinary sacrifices from a woman, a woman without a husband is less valuable than one that is married etc. All such beliefs – often resulting in acts of self-exclusion, self-marginalization and self-destruction – and with those beliefs, the social relations of domination, are subject to somatization. Arbitrarily imposed, social distinctions become embodied.

In the book *Masculine Domination*, Bourdieu focuses on specifically feminine self-exclusion behaviours. The process of acquiring these, he claims, consists in encouraging behaviours associated with the given sex and discouraging from behaviours associated with the opposite sex. This applies primarily about bodily behaviour: the posture of the body, ways of looking into the eyes, gaiting, sitting etc. By analyzing daily, seemingly insignificant practices prescribed for each sex, Bourdieu concludes that femininity is mainly "the art of 'shrinking'": a process of continuous self-limitation that is also shown by clothing[23]. For example, the miniskirt and high heels or a handbag engaging both hands completely prevent certain behaviors – e.g., running, free gestures, sitting astride, occupying a lot of space on the bus, in the street, in the classroom. A similarly "shrinking" or diminishing function is performed by the requirements which, according to the prevailing patterns of the heterosexual quadrille, make women attractive: speaking quietly, and little. These, in turn, are related to the expectations that have women, but not necessarily men, practice the virtues of modesty and care for a good atmosphere. Women learn to fulfill this latter role through nodding along, even if they have a different opinion – in order to avoid coming across as a person who is confrontational, too confident and defiant.

Examples of women's self-censoring acquired in the process of socialization could be multiplied. Bourdieu's conclusion that is important in solving the puzzle of Anellia's behaviour is that women's participation in their own oppression through implemented patterns of actions and renunciations is not easily overcome because their repetition is not determined by consciousness and will but by bodily reflexes. It is through the

[22] P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, translated by Richard Nice, Stanford CA 2000, p. 149.
[23] P. Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, translated by Richard Nice, Stanford CA 2001, pp. 22–30.

body that the emotions of shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt, but also love, admiration and respect find their expression[24]. More specifically, by blushing, being unable to produce voice, the trembling of hands or sweating, the body betrays involuntary subordination to the judgments of the dominant group against which the individual is trying to defend. Anellia's compulsive assuming of blame and revealing of stigma resembles such behaviors – involuntary, uncontrollable, and even „dybbukish." Following Bourdieu, we should say that what speaks through Anellia and pushes her into action are the characteristics of her habitus which result from her social placement and especially its two dimensions: those of gender and class.

Pointing to bodily imprints of domination is not meant to imply that it is innate or is necessarily accepted. It is to stress, however, that according to Bourdieu, the social subject is not sovereign. His or her choices, identity, behaviour, attitudes are the result of power: implanted first in the process of socialization and then constantly by repeating of seemingly innocent practices, and thus a power that is more and more present in the body, and in the ways of perceiving and evaluating the world. Inscribing arbitrary social hierarchies in the body causes us not to control our reflexes of humility or reflexes of power. Anellia's behaviour can be interpreted in just this light: as involuntary gestures of humility towards her own biography. Defined by her gender, class origin, her parents' biography and social stigmata, her own biography emerges as a *force majeure*, an inevitability, an insurmountable law of nature.

A girl with class

Habitus mistakes accompany the heroine's self-destructive behaviour: misplaced admiration and aspirations, and therefore bad investments. "I'd grown up with my grandparents who were farm people, German immigrants, with no time for music, still less classical music"[25] – she says about herself. This snappy remark does not pertain, of course, only to the development of her musical taste. Classical music indicates here high culture, a familiarity with which belongs to the elements of education in the classes from which Anellia's family is light years away. Oates's heroine does not have the cultural competence through which to read accurately the signs of prestige. As a result of their incorrect reading, she joins the Kappa Gamma Pi sorority. „There were more than twenty Greek houses on or near University Place, and Kappa Gamma Pi was neither the largest nor the most attractive. You could argue that it was the most dour, possibly even the ugliest of the houses, but, to me, such qualities suggested aristocratic hauteur,

[24] *Ibidem*, pp. 38–40.
[25] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 8.

authority"[26] – as the heroine describes her fascination with the Kappa Gamma Pi. The building of this particular sorority and therefore its members, and membership in it, will seem to Anellia something unattainable, attractive and honourable, just like the lifestyle of sorority members, for that matter. It will take her many months to realize that the activities, interests and aspirations of the „sisters" are of no concern to her: „That these were things in which I had no interest seemed not to occur to me[27].

Anellia only starts to build her identity, and the dominant patterns of culture blatantly offer her boilerplates. The mere discovery that she does not necessarily share the interests and plans of other women her age requires effort and courage. „For who would remain in the dreary undergraduate dorms for 'independents' as we were flatteringly called?—the leftbehind, the losers. Outcasts at life's feast, in a memorable Joycean phrase. In my pride I was hurt; I understood that I would be banished from a glamorous world in which in fact I took no interest"[28] – says Anellia, when her removal from the sorority becomes inevitable. A lack of habitus corresponding to her current social situation – a student at a prestigious university and a member of a sorority – is manifested in the fact that successive life thresholds cause in Oates's heroine a reflex of adaptation, mimicry, assimilation. Only with time, following a more or less successful attempt to conform to the pattern, after checking whether what seems most attractive is in fact most attractive for her, does Anellia allow herself to resign, move away and seek other identity options on her own.

„*I'm a KAPPA GAMMA PI sometimes I have to pinch myself or give myself a little stab with my pin.* There was no one to whom I might tell an obvious fact: Kappa Gamma Pi was too expensive for me"[29]. The fact that the heroine cannot afford the membership in the sorority is another denunciation of inequality. Oates accuses the university of being for the rich only, and of transferring the societal – including social and moral – costs of this fact to those who cannot afford to study. Everyone is trying to reach the standard that is a rich sorority member instead of revealing that despite boasting its democratic values, the higher education system in fact remains extremely elitist. So much so that Oates's heroine describes her student existence as lonely, full of anguish and condemning her to „fighting for her life." „Often in my freshman year, before pledging the sorority, I had to work ten hours a week to supplement my scholarship"[30] – she says. After joining the Kappa Gamma Pi, Anellia pays fines for skipping sorority socializing meetings. She skips them because she is at work, and she must work because, unlike most of her sorority mates, she does not come from a wealthy family and is

[26] *Ibidem*, p. 5.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 42–43.
[28] *Ibidem*, p. 40.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 36.
[30] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

not supported by her parents. The costs associated with her stay at the university are so overwhelming that trying to make her ends meet, be an exemplary student to get a scholarship, and seeking acceptance of sorority mates by helping them to write their term papers, all at the same – the heroine starts to eat, sleep and rest less and less. At times, she has to search for food in garbage dumps, which becomes another shameful secret she is forced to hide. Therefore, she sees her removal from the sorority as a gesture of not only racism, but also classism: „I foresaw that I would be de-activated not because I was part Jewish (if in fact I was 'part Jewish') but because the Kappas, masters of deceit, would not want a clumsily deceitful girl in their sorority. They would not want a girl whose mother was not only deceased but disfigured. They would not want a farm girl from Strykersville, New York, a girl who had somehow managed to receive a scholarship and whose grade-point average was A and yet who had failed to help as many of her Kappa sisters academically as she might have done if she hadn't had a breakdown. They would not want so selfish a girl. They would not want a girl with a leper's rash. A girl $322 in debt to the sorority (dues, fees, fines) and only barely able to pay the monthly bill for room and board. A girl with clothing from Sears, and an A-cup bosom"[31].

Sisterhood

One of the areas in which class differences between the heroine of *I'll Take You There* and her fellow sorority members are revealed is the way they express their femininity. In Anellia's eyes, the other girls "emanated the Kappa look—glamorous, sexy, determined"[32]. Their way of life was marked by confidence and conviction about their own attractiveness. Attractiveness which was amplified by the exclusive character of the sorority: „You did not simply walk into the meeting room: you had to be, following the bylaws, 'granted entrance.' This meant lining up in silence on the basement stairs outside the room, seniors first, then juniors, and underclasswomen; at the shut door you gave the ritual Kappa knock (rap, pause, two quick raps and a pause, a final rap); when the doorkeeper opened the door you gave her the ritual handshake (crossed hands, twined fingers squeezed in a code replicating the knock) which I would invariably fumble out of nervousness and embarrassment at such intimacy with a girl I scarcely knew; you then whispered in the doorkeeper's ear the password (a Greek phrase of which I was never certain and always murmured softly: it sounded like *Hieros minosa* or *minoosa*); the doorkeeper then granted you entrance, quietly you slipped

[31] *Ibidem*, pp. 86–87.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 63.

into the room and took your place amid the rows of seated girls"[33]. Artificially devised, and then painstakingly observed thresholds of entry and rites of passage create an atmosphere of intimacy. They give a sense of belonging to a special group. In Oates's description, this is what a sorority is reduced to: playing the elite, a grotesque theater of distinction, a social game which takes on dangerous effects and can end up tragically. A masquerade which carries the implication of a dangerous paradox. Due to the power of admiration in the eyes of students, by virtue of being the object of aspiration and owing to a consistently built legend whose intrinsic factor is mystery and the possibility of coming into its possession, the sorority becomes a tool for determining the status of students in the university environment. As a result, the procedures of selection, acceptance and exclusion determine the candidates' self-worth, the consequence of which is the fact that, „Every year after fall rush there were incidents of attempted suicide among the rejects"[34].

The sorority members share in the sorority's claims to judging the value of the studying women and determining their place in the university hierarchy. By the very fact of belonging to the sorority and, therefore, having passed through the sieve of selection, they obtain an unwritten right to become such a „sieve" to the other girls. They will reproduce the gesture of assessment in the cruelest way, exercise strictly, and without mincing words, the privilege of sending and receiving of others. „My Kappa sisters were fascinating to me as giant, brightly feathered predator birds would be fascinating to a small songbird hiding in the brush. Or trying to hide in the brush"[35]– Anellia says about her sorority mates.

It is no coincidence she calls them „sisters." When Anellia offers a completely drunk girl help in hiding her violations of Kappa's code of conduct, and she rejects her, saying in a tone full of disgust and contempt, „*You?*—who in hell're *you?* Takey'r goddam handsoff *me!*" – the heroine comments wryly: "Sisters! Always I'd yearned for sisters of my own"[36]. With equal wry Oates conducts in this novel a vivisection of sisterhood. For the sorority in *I'll Take You There* is a peculiar laboratory of sisterhood. Thanks to Anellia, we can observe how, despite idyllic visions of female community, relationships between women look in practice. They are governed, just like the sorority in its most formal dimension, by the mechanism of exclusion. In the relationships among the girls, this reveals itself in slandering, humiliation, blackmail, threats, alliances that are always formed against someone. A house full of young women that is the building of Kappa Gamma Pi looks a bit like barracks, except that here, the abuse – violence of

[33] *Ibidem*, pp. 33–34.
[34] *Ibidem*, p. 41.
[35] *Ibidem*, pp. 52–53.
[36] *Ibidem*, p. 16.

some against others – takes place in pretty interiors, and instead of shouting and beating, you are more likely to hear whisper and sneer. The effect remains the same: "my scandalized sisters would call an emergency meeting in the ritual room downstairs, one by one they would stand and denounce me in tremulous, valiant voices, they would cast their ballots, unprecedented in the chapter's rocky history a sophomore Kappa would be *de-activated*"[37].

A conspiracy of silence hides these rites of passage, which turn out to be an arena of girl-on-girl violence. The same mechanism that enforces subordination to this violence makes joining the sorority appear to girls as the beginning of a new, more attractive life. A life better than those lived outside the sorority. This mechanism is the creation of mystery. „*I HEREBY CONSECRATE MYSELF heart, soul, and intellect to the ideals of Kappa Gamma Pi and the promise of sacred sisterhood. United in our bond, so long as I shall live. None of the aforesaid secrets will I reveal. This bond I shall never forsake. I pledge my heart*"[38] – is the sorority oath that each of the new „Kappas" has to take. This conspiracy of silence is interrupted by the story of Oates's narrator. The very fact that she cites the oath is in defiance to the pressure that the oath exerts. It is an act of overcoming the loyalty to oppressive group, of breaking off commitments to women who were cruel to her. Because Anellia quotes the vow of silence she had to take, we know that her story is an act of insubordination. An act performed much later, because the heroine's narration is in the past tense, and at the end of the book, we learn that she tells the story of her student life to a particular person. We do not know to whom but we can assume that it is a close person – perhaps a partner, maybe a daughter or son – because the book ends with the eponymous promise, „I'll take you there".

As the book's framing device and title, „there" suggests a distance between the contemporary time of the narrator and the times about which she speaks. The two women – the student and the narrator – seem to be separated by an abyss, even though at the same time they are one person. The thing that fundamentally differentiates them is their awareness of circumstances. While *the narrated Anellia* is immersed in the world, entirely subordinate to its mechanisms and no buffer zone protects her against it, *the narrating Anellia* – equipped with distance and tools of objectification, primary of which are language and the narrative – seems to recognize the multiple contexts of her past experiences. She has sympathy and compassion for her past self because of her bewilderment, frustrated need for recognition and the dangers that lay in wait for her then, of which the heroine was not aware. The narrator is someone who sees herself from a bird's eye view. The act of talking about the past is an act of control over one's life, that is to say – the stake for which *the narrated Anellia* fights: casting one's life in

[37] *Ibidem*, p. 86.
[38] *Ibidem*, p. 36.

a narrative frame and giving it continuity, but also achieving distance from one's own self as it used to be. Being able to speak about the social reality which once overwhelmed and destroyed is the proof that Anellia came out victorious from this confrontation so as to turn from one that *is narrated* into *the one who narrates*.

Initiation

This transition from one status to another – from an unbridled life, which, like a flood, washes over and ducks Anellia, to a life which becomes obedient to her – makes *I'll Take You There* an initiatory novel. It recounts the process of the heroine's awakening from the dormition discussed above. A process that leads her through episodes of gaining skills of self-defense, self-knowledge and, finally, self-acceptance. One of the arenas of this process will be Anellia's love life. "I could not exert any will contrary to Vernor Matheius's will, the playful grip of his fingers at my knee; as in a dream we are unable to exert any will contrary to the inscrutable will of the dream"[39] – says the heroine describing her relationship with her beloved. A force of inertia seems to rule over Anellia. It subjects her to someone else's will, deprives her not only of control over her experience but also of the ability to identify her own needs and boundaries, and with them – dangers and abuse. Her *self-non-knowledge* makes an assessment of many situations impossible. For example, when, despite the heroine's expectations, no sex takes place between her and her partner, she says: "Not knowing where I was, or why; not knowing if I was deeply wounded or whether in fact I was relieved, I'd been saved (...)"[40]. During her defloration, the heroine focuses on not showing what she feels: „I was proud that I hadn't resisted; that I hadn't flinched in pain; the pain was a brightly flaring flame into which I thrust myself willingly; I was hammered, pounded, driven into the earth"[41]. She describes sex as a struggle – only both she and her partner are fighting the same enemy: while he fights her, she fights herself to overcome the pain and offer herself to her partner. Even in the bodily dimension, Anellia is not on her own side; on the contrary: she forms an alliance with the one who causes her pain. Her alienation reaches its extreme in the scene in which right after her first sex, Anellia does not recognize herself in the mirror. „I went into Vernor Matheius's cubbyhole of a bathroom. I groped for a light switch: above the sink, an unshaded forty-watt bulb came on. Out leapt a startled white face in the cabinet mirror; a face I didn't recognize at first; a face both wan and radiant in a kind of triumph"[42]. A similar scene – of a girl

[39] *Ibidem*, p. 135.
[40] *Ibidem*, p. 142.
[41] *Ibidem*, p. 195.
[42] *Ibidem*, p. 177.

who after losing her virginity is surprised by her mirror image – is presented by Oates in the novel *Gravedigger's Daughter*. Its heroine, Rebecca, after her "first time," having waited until her lover, Niles Tignor falls asleep, goes to the bathroom to stop the bleeding from her torn hymen. "In the mirror above the sink she was surprised to see: her flushed face, her wild disheveled hair. No lipstick remained on her mouth that looked raw, swollen. Her eyes appeared cracked, with tiny red threads. Her nose shone, oily. How ugly she, how could any man love her! Still, she smiled. She was Niles Tignor's girl, this blood was proof"[43]. One of the facts that links these two stories is that both heroines lost their virginity in conditions fully defined by their partners, so that they experienced their defloration like a terrifying hurricane, which they struggled to survive. „*He is herding me the way a dog herds sheep*"[44] – thinks Anellia when Vernor invites her over to his house. And it is like sacrificial animals, forced to obey the will of the stronger, that the heroines of *I'll Take You There* and *Gravedigger's Daughter* live – one is tempted to say, live through – the experience of their first sex, and the ambiguity of the situation perfectly reflects the status of the event in their lives.

The category of initiatory novel as applied to *I'll Take You There* has a double meaning. It is equally a novel about the initiation of the main character and the about cultural initiation scenarios provided for young women. Despite the social commonplaces, Anellia's initiation into adulthood will be neither her joining the sorority, nor her first boyfriend, nor the loss of virginity, but the meeting with her father. A meeting which will cause that which scared the heroine so far and from which she kept trying to run away to reveal itself as a scarecrow, an illusion, a sham. Oates takes Anellia through the successive standard rites of passage as if in order to deconstruct them as illusory transitions. Only when Anellia faces a figure symbolizing the law, a character embodying the social order – and therefore also the one who dictates to women their initiatory scenarios – will she gain control over her life. This figure is her father.

The father

In the last chapter, entitled "The way out," the narrator goes on a long journey to meet her parent, whom she has not seen for many years. First, like in the liminal phase of a rite of passage[45], without resistance she immerses in a dream, giving in to what she has been trying to fight for so many years: „Midway through the endless state of Kansas I began to hallucinate flatland even in my sleep; my hallucinations and the landscape

[43] J. C. Oates, *Gravedigger's Daughter*, Toronto 2007, p. 199.
[44] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take...*, p. 135.
[45] See: V. Turner, *The Ritual Process. Structure and Anti-Structure*, New Brunswick–London 1966, especially chapter 3, "*Liminality and communitas*," pp. 94–131.

were identical; I could not escape the one without being swallowed up into the other; I would sink, I would drown, I would die"[46]. Once there, she will be instructed that she must not look at her father. The disease has allegedly disfigured and marred his body, so in accordance with her father's will, enforced by his caretaker, Anellia has to come into his room covering her eyes and sit with her back turned to him.

As a result, neither the heroine nor the reader are sure whether the man whom Anellia came to visit is actually her father. In this way, he is elevated in symbolic rank: the father blends with the social *figure of the father*, whom the specific, real man merely represents. In the article "*What Does It Mean to Be a Woman?" A Daughter's Story in Oates's Novels*, Joanne V. Creighton and Kori A. Binette analyze six novels by Joyce Carol Oates. *I'll Take You There* is not one of them, but the motifs present in them are repeated in the book which I discuss here. One of these motifs is namely the figure of the father. The ambivalence of the relationship between Oates's protagonists and their mothers (training to subordination, passive aggression, trying to escape the woman's fate epitomized by the maternal example etc.) leads them, according to Creighton and Binette, to a "turn to the father". However, as the real father is often absent, drunk, aggressive or dead, a symbolic father figure often replaces him. The father figure is an authority, mentor and lover. The man who introduces the heroines into the world of language, culture, money, maturity, intellect and sex. Frequently someone older and equipped with symbolic power, which allows him to manipulate his debutante. The men, in their turn, find attractive the childishness, naïveté, virginity of the women who look up to them, and most of all – the fact that they will be the ones to "break," "taint," and "defile" them[47].

Initially obedient to instructions of her father's caretaker, during the last visit the heroine resorts to a ploy and using a piece of broken mirror she does what is forbidden: looks at him. The figure from her past, whom she loved, of whom she was afraid, whose approval she has been seeking by fulfilling her father's ambitions, or what Anellia thought his vision of an ideal daughter might be, the figure who has gained a mythical rank – turns out to be an old, dying, devastated man. A man who is literally falling apart. Anellia's ploy is a heroic gesture of confrontation with the ghosts of the past: of stopping and looking back instead of continuously running away from them; a gesture of embodying the symbolic, of making real the mythical; a gesture of verification of a child's memory by an already adult individual. Seeing the nightmare is also waking up from it – at the end of the book we have before us a heroine-narrator who reigns over her life and shapes it regardless of the real or presumed will of others. For Anellia,

[46] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 253.

[47] J. V. Creighton, K. A. Binette, "*What Does It Mean to Be a Woman?" A Daughter's Story in Oates's Novels*, „Studies in the Novel," vol. 38, No 4, winter 2006, pp. 446–447.

the most significant „other" was namely her father. Her confrontation with the one who dominated her imagination, determined the way she thought about herself and defined her self-worth deprived him of his power. Breaking the mirror, traditionally associated with misfortune, in Oates's novel can be interpreted as a symbol of liberation from the need of other people's recognition, the urge find approval in someone else's eyes. Instead of constantly checking if her appearance, behaviour, attitude and words fit social expectations, without the mirror, Anellia will be able to go beyond the neurotic, compulsively repeated acts of self-correction. Breaking the mirror, she gains access to the reality outside mirror frames, a world not reflected but real.

The presence of the absent father, and then his unmasking and downfall that lead to the successful resolution of the heroine's fate are, according to Ellen Friedman, a frequent theme in the novels by female authors from the United States. In the work of Joyce Carol Oates this theme appears very often. Referring to the diagnoses of Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Roland Barthes, Patricia Yaeger and Donald Barhelme, Friedman argues that this literarily created unattainability of the father intensifies his oedipal authority. His absence transforms him into a mythical figure whom nobody can face or defeat. Meanwhile, rejection of his authority is a necessary act on the way of freeing oneself from one's current beliefs, even about oneself[48]. In the language of Bourdieu, it is an act directed against the embodiment of domination; the domination which is *the father's law*, understood here as the social order, the Turnerian *communitas*. Both in the novel *Faithless*, which Friedman analyzes, and in *I'll Take You There*, the act involves seeing the parent as he really is: weak, wasted, ugly, smelly. A wreck, "reduced fully to the somatic"[49]. The granddaughter of the heroine of *Faithless* sees him this way when she visits his grandfather in a nursing home. The granddaughter discovers that his grandfather murdered his wife, even though his daughters believed their entire lives that their mother had left for another man, because this was how he had explained her disappearance. Similarly, in the novel *I'll Take You There*, the heroine exposes the fact that the father did not die but ran away from the family and has been hiding from them. With the rejection of the paternal narrative, the authority of the fathers collapses. A retelling of the family story proves to be an emancipatory act of self-determination. The symbolic overthrowing of the father's authority consists also in the fact that in both novels, as elderly people requiring care, the fathers appear to be dependent on women, subordinate to the female space, at the women's mercy. Finally, both novels feature a *sui generis* "embodiment" of the father, which at the same time reduces him to particularity, takes away from him the power of making *the law*: of determining what is transcendent and universal.

48 El. G. Friedman, *op. cit*., pp. 480-481.
49 *Ibidem*.

Universalism

The tension between particularism and universalism, which Oates makes the subject of her novel, is a theme in Pierre Bourdieu's considerations. I will recapitulate briefly the sociologist's argument, in order to try to prove that the novel *I'll Take You There* is its excellent illustration.

Studying the opinions, judgments and choices of a political, aesthetic and economic character, Bourdieu analyzed not only their content, but also a more rudimentary variable: the conditions of the possibility of having and expressing such opinions and judgments, of pondering and making such choices. The French sociologist's considerations defied the belief, dominant in the scientific field, that people make their choices and undertake their actions equally endowed with certain powers of supposedly universal character, the basic one of which is rationality. He put this belief into question by analysing its sociogenesis. He described it as a scholastic worldview stemming from modern European philosophy, a worldview according to which people act "in complete freedom, without having to take into account reality and its exigencies"[50]. A worldview not without an ideological element, because within it, firstly, the life of individuals appears as devoid of necessity and adversity, and their actions – of practical utility and, secondly, in accordance with this worldview only such life and such actions are fully valuable. This worldview is reproduced by what Bourdieu calls *the scholastic view*, which enjoys the status of being neutral, ever existing, always acceptable and universally available[51]. In reality, however, remote, cold, aloof and abstracting from necessity, *the scholastic view* – like purely aesthetic experience, abstracting from any practice – is a truly historical invention.

Bourdieu's point is that certain qualities, attitudes and skills are presented by the dominant channels of cultural and social reproduction as universal in a double sense: as universally accessible and being universal values. In fact, they remain subject to distinction, since access to them – the ability to observe, recognize, appreciate, acquire, perfect, implement, embody and experience them, and to pass them forward – depends on the capitals one possesses, of which the economic one is not necessarily the most important. If we consider a quality universal but do not universalize the conditions which make it possible to have this quality, we exclude beyond the universalistic bracket all those who are deprived of access to it. What I mean by quality here are not material but intellectual and spiritual goods, ones related to a particular lifestyle, system of values and the availability of certain experiences. If we proclaim equality

[50] É. Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought*, translated by Peter Collins, London 1977, p. 218, quoted in: P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian…*, p. 21.

[51] P. Bourdieu, *Pascalian…*, pp. 16–24.

without recognizing the conditions that defy it and make it impossible, then not only do we not foster equality but we also contribute to the exclusion of all those whom the principle of equality failed to encompass. "To grant 'humanity' to all, but in a purely formal way, is to exclude from it, under an appearance of humanism, all those who are deprived of the means of realizing it"[52] – writes Bourdieu.

The stake of the *egoistic universalism* that Bourdieu deconstruct is the belonging to the human community and all the benefits that this brings. The universalization of the characteristics and experiences of a particular subject – for example, a white, male, heterosexual, relatively rich one, coming from a country of the so-called First World – puts into question the value of all individuals who can never have these features and experiences because they lack access to them either through birth, or through upbringing, or through education, or through participation in a particular (class, local, state etc.) culture. Such mystifying universalism proclaims all these qualities, which remain particular due to their limited accessibility, as the norm in a double sense: of universality and propriety.

Despite this, Bourdieu does not give up universalism. Rather, he takes it to mean "fighting (…) for universal access to the conditions of access to the universal"[53]. This is not at all in contradiction to combating the mystifying hypocrisy of the universalism which ignores its own conditions of establishment and operation. On the contrary, *the universal strategy of universalization* which Bourdieu suggests, should start, in his opinion, with the disclosure of the particularity of that which has been hiding its excluding potential under the slogan of universality. This is why Bourdieu considers the protest movements directed against glaring deficiencies in access to what is allegedly universal (e.g. feminism, the LGBT movement, the anti-racist movement) as pioneering in the field of deconstruction of spurious universalism. Protests of this kind show, firstly, that a monopoly of universality is in place, and secondly, that the monopoly involves overlooking the social conditions of access to what we consider to be universal. Pointing out democracy's inconsistencies and violence by creating protest movements against what in nominal democracy is actually undemocratic, is paradoxically based on a belief in the value of democracy, because it in fact strengthens the mechanisms that do not allow breaching its principles. This is the way Bourdieu defines his "moral philosophy": we must "work towards favouring access everywhere and by all means to all the instruments of production and consumption of the historical achievements that the logic of the internal struggles of the scholastic fields institutes as universal at a given moment in time"[54]. In other words, acknowledging the historicity of a given

[52] *Ibidem*, p. 65.
[53] *Ibidem*, p. 71.
[54] *Ibidem*, p. 80.

field and examining it in fact contributes to the strengthening of what is most important in this field; also when what is most important is namely, this time non-mystifying, universalism.

The Oates's book discussed here seems a perfect exemplification of Bourdieu's argument. The main character and her lover Vernor Matheius are subjected to multiple forms of violence: Anellia – to misogynist, anti-Semitic and class violence, Vernor – to racist one. The more discrimination they experience based on their individual characteristics, the harder they seek admittance to universalism, seeing in it a hope of neutralizing the characteristics which mark them and due to which before the law and in the eyes of privileged citizens Oates's heroes remain outside the bounds of humanity, as it was defined in the United States of the 1960s. They both seek access to universality within the Academia, especially in philosophy. With time, however, it turns out that the Academia as well as philosophy not only do not provide this access but, moreover, through demonstrative blindness to the defectiveness of universalism which they proclaim, they lay foundation for and validate the exclusion of Anellia and Vernor. For this reason, contrary to initial choices, their path of emancipation will lead through disclosure of the particularism of that which tantalized with the promise of universalism.

"Whites only"

For both characters, philosophy as the domain of pure thought, in the face of which the colour of skin, gender and other characteristics that generate prejudices should not be of import, is a strategy of escaping their socially imposed destiny, that is, from the iron determinism of racism and misogyny. In Vernor's apartment, portraits of Socrates and Descartes hung above his desk, and over the toilet flush – a portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein. "I understood why the philosopher was a hero to Vernor Matheius: he'd negated the very premises of his apparent destiny, to re-invent himself as pure, disembodied intellect"[55] – Anellia says about Wittgenstein, meaning probably the philosopher's Jewishness and non-heterosexuality[56], which made him likewise the bearer of a stigma.

Vernor's way of liberating himself from the stigma defined by racism is by distancing himself demonstratively from everything that concerns racism, including the movement against racial segregation, which was gaining momentum at that time. When anti-segregation protests break out in the city, Vernor not only does not participate in

[55] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 178.

[56] I thank Agata Flak for the remark about the stigma of Wittgenstein's homosexuality which extends the interpretative scope of *I'll Take You There*.

them, but also expresses contemptuous detachment from their participants[57]. When the protests concern attacks on black activists, Vernor has no „time to spare for politics, activism, even the contemplation of such activism"[58]. After all, he harbours „dismissal for politics, activities, history"[59]. „The universal laws of structure and operation'—that was the only really worthwhile concern of mankind, in Vernor's opinion"[60] – is how Anellia summarizes his views. In a voice allowing no objection, her lover instructs her that, „The only truths that can possibly matter, that can *really* matter, are truths that transcend time"[61].

Attempting to evade stigmatization by ostentatious distancing oneself from actions directed against stigmatization is a strategy that has been applied for years in Poland by women occupying positions of high prestige when they dissociate themselves from feminism. For example, in an interview for „Gazeta Wyborcza," Józefa Hennelowa, an editor of „Tygodnik Powszechny," said: „When in the Sejm some female MPs invited me to participate in the work of the Parliamentary Women's Group, I refused. Such distinction seemed to me something bizarre"[62]. The sociologist Hanna Świda-Ziemba, reacting to a journalist's words „Apparently you are an antifeminist…," said: „In a sense I am. I am annoyed by emphasizing the importance of women as such"[63]. In the same interview, she made a declaration worthy of Vernor Matheius: „I have always been interested in the human being"[64]. Philosopher Barbara Skarga, in an interview given to Katarzyna Janowska and Piotr Mucharski, used the same universalistic formulas speaking of „human existence" and „people [who] are afraid because they are very weak"[65]. The questions that arise after reading the novel by Joyce Carol Oates are: who is this „human being" and who are those „people"; what characteristics do they and what characteristics do not they have; who is included in and represented by the subject of thus defined humanities? Responding to these questions, we should perhaps take into account that in the biographical notes to the interviews the women cited above were careful to avoid using feminine suffixes. Using the masculine forms, Józefa Hennelowa was presented as „poseł na sejm i redaktor" ("Member of Parliament and editor"), Hanna-Ziemba Świda – as „socjolog i profesor" ("sociologist and profes-

[57] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, pp. 167–168.
[58] *Ibidem*, p. 198.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 209.
[60] *Ibidem*, p. 133.
[61] *Ibidem*, p. 134.
[62] *Kiedy Święty Franciszek zaczyna tańczyć ze szczęścia. Z Józefą Hennelową rozmawia Roman Graczyk*, „Gazeta Wyborcza," 15/7/2000.
[63] *Świat kobiet mnie przeraża. Z Hanną Świdą-Ziembą rozmawia Jarosław Kurski*, „Gazeta Wyborcza," 10/4/2004.
[64] *Ibidem*.
[65] K. Janowska, P. Mucharski, *Innego końca świata nie będzie. Wywiad rzeka z Barbarą Skargą*, „Gazeta Wyborcza," 27/10/2007.

sor"), and Barbara Skarga – as „filozof i historyk filozofii" ("philosopher and historian of philosophy")[66].

My point is not about forcing the above-mentioned persons back to femininity, impute to them the social role which they do not want and which they quite aptly recognize as degrading. However, it is important to keep in mind that, in contrast to women – regardless of their attitude towards traditional female roles and emancipation – men appearing in public are never required to take a position regarding their attitude to their gender, or expected to distance themselves from their manhood, and this is so because their gender is not seen as a limiting property which they should overcome in order to be able to assume a position of authority. Meanwhile, women – like Vernor in relation to his non-white skin colour – face the necessity to choose a particular strategy in relation to their own femininity. No matter which strategy is chosen, each will bring them some costs and losses.

Oates's story seems to confirm that in the face of the universalizing subject of the humanities, femininity, Jewishness and blackness appear to be a surfeit which should be hidden, concealed, annihilated. This is the reason that those who put these features back in the limelight – this time in the context of emancipatory demands – are often most hated by the people who bear the features. Or more precisely, by those of these people who have put a lot of effort and work into creating their self-image as a person who **in spite of** being e.g. a woman, a Jew or a Black is worthy of recognition and respect. From their personal perspective, the activities of emancipatory movements derail these efforts because their "excess baggage" is once again made visible. That's the way Vernor Matheius behaves in the face of the Black Liberation Movement – racially persecuted, but demonstratively oblivious to persecutory situations; a philosophy student who, in order to prove to the white professors that he is worth appreciating, must try a great deal harder than his white classmates. Vernor stubbornly ignores racism. Until a black activist[67] is murdered.

[66] Unlike English, Polish is a strongly gendered language. Both nouns and adjectives have masculine and feminine versions (among others), traditionally, however, especially when it came to names of prestigious occupations and positions, the masculine inflection form was considered gender-neutral. This false universalism had spread to the extent that many feminine forms went out of use, were never adopted or were adopted with other, non-human meanings, so that as recently as a few years ago, attempts at (re-)introducing them were often seen as an oddity. Persons using the feminine suffixes and inflection forms were ridiculed or accused of incorrect language usage.

[67] Oates introduces a realistic element into the novel. Living in Mississippi and affiliated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Medgar Evers was an activist for the abolition of racial segregation. His activities were focused mainly on the sphere of education and higher education. He was killed on 12 June 1963 by a prominent member of the local community, an outspoken racist Byron de la Beckwith. In the first trial, as a result of racism in police and the judiciary, the murderer was acquitted. In 1994, at the initiative of, among others,

The news of Medgar Evers's assassination is a waking call for Vernor. He realizes that philosophy and the universalism it proposes have proven a misguided investment, a false promise, even a fraud. Having trusted the philosophical considerations of his masters, it was upon the axiological system legitimized by the authority of philosophy that Vernor pinned his hopes to elevate beyond the particular; to find the ground of perfect equality, where his skin colour will cease to matter because everything will be decided by the only criterion considered appropriate by all: that of rationality. Meanwhile, philosophy turned out to be not so much powerless as disinterested in the fact that people are dying because of the colour of their skin. People also like him – those who have decided to answer the challenge raised by philosophy.

This realization will cost Vernor dearly. His personal investment in universalism was so fervent that he almost pays for this disappointment with his life. „Even Vernor Matheius who avoided the news like a bad smell could not avoid learning of this. *Fuck. Fuckers.* It was a sign of Vernor's debasement, that so common, you could say so clichéd a vulgarity sprang to his lips"[68] – notices Anellia. Vernor develops a fever. In the frenzy caused by the disease, in the disease caused by despair he tears the portraits of his beloved (white) philosophers: Socrates and Descartes and pisses on the portrait of Wittgenstein. He throws down from the pedestal his former saints because what they proposed turned out – once again, and merely – „for whites only".

The body

Like Vernor, Anellia would want nothing more than to reduce herself to pure reason. "I came to think of my body as invisible; a body to hide inside clothing; a body that was a continuous shrinking from being *seen, defined*; a body my brothers and other men could not jeer at, for they could not see it; a body from which, I believed, the great dead male philosophers whom I revered would not turn in disgust. A body in the service of Mind"[69] – the heroine recollects. Because Vernor and Anellia's social stigmata manifest themselves through the body, both characters try all the harder to oust carnality from their lives as an element unworthy of philosophical subject and philosophical considerations, too vulgar, at odds with all that is rational, disturbing the work of the intellect. „The lecture room was a place of abstract thought and bodiless speculation; it was not an appropriate place to bring a body, still less a body quivering with emotion"[70] – says

Ever's widow, Myrlie Evers-Williams, de la Beckwith was re-tried, proven guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

[68] J. C. Oates, *I'll* ..., p. 225.

[69] *Ibidem*, p. 110.

[70] *Ibidem*, p. 73.

Anellia. Seeking admittance to universalism through the study of philosophy is the expression of the struggle that they both wage for the neutralization of their social allocation and thereby gaining control over their own lives. Consequently, control over the body, sexuality and emotions will become their principal challenge, and even obsession. It is the proof that they must give to the entire world that they control themselves, and thus meet the criterion of public trust[71].

Bodily aspects, such as „not-entirely-clean fingernails"[72], „reddened fingers, a scaly rash across the backs of [Anellia's] hand"[73] as a result of their frequent washing with soap from public toilets, clothes that are torn and unfashionable because Anellia cannot afford new ones[74] assume the proportions of another stigma: this time a class one. They are the manifestation of an inability to maintain one's appearance to an extent which the academic world expects of its participants, and of a failure to keep up a certain lifestyle, in which a primary role is played by emphasizing the gender difference and by efforts of women to appeal to others. „My legs were sickly pale yet bristled with fine curly brown hairs. The Kappas were indignant, legs require shaving, like underarms, but this was a girl who feared razors and would have to borrow (yet how could you *borrow?*) a razor blade. Upstairs, two floors of more than forty girls. Their sinewy muscular legs shaved smooth, skin glaring. Their armored breasts. Deodorant, hair spray, mascara, silver eye shadow. Radios, phonographs, the calypso, Ricky Nelson's 'Travelin' Man,' the slamming of doors and the flushing of toilets"[75] – is Anellia's description of exemplary students, offered with a realization of how little she herself fits in this image.

Another danger over which one should control in the face of the ideal of pure reason was sexual passion. Vernor saw it as a sign of lack of the self-control which he wanted to bring to perfection. Therefore, „he despised himself for being adored; for how like any addiction was a man's sexual desire"[76]. He treated impulses, desires, bodily reactions as challenges with which he could practice asceticism, train curbing everything that threatened his identity as a philosopher. His aversion to sensations, emotions and feelings related not only to the sexual sphere. Standing on a bridge and looking down at the river, he said to Anellia, „I like being alone here knowing there's an instinct in us to push ourselves over a railing like this; an instinct to die to which I'm never going

[71] About the ethos of self-mastery, the proper manifestation of which entitles to dominate others, see: M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, translated by R. Hurley, New York 1990, pp. 82–83.
[72] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 81.
[73] *Ibidem*, p. 65.
[74] J. C. Oates, *I'll ...*, p. 131.
[75] *Ibidem*, p. 61.
[76] *Ibidem*, p. 199.

to succumb"[77]. When Anellia congratulated him on receiving a scholarship, Vernor „frowned and looked away evasively; of course he was pleased, yet he didn't seem to approve of his pleasure; he had to examine the roots of such a small, craven pleasure; taking delight in mere professional, public 'success'—something that had to do solely with 'career' and not the pursuit of truth"[78]. Vernor not only rejected the satisfactions flowing from pleasure but would also not acknowledge the information that could be derived from emotions – whether good or bad. He rejected and despised emotions, calling them „moods". „On principle Vernor Matheius disapproved of moods. Was there acknowledgement of *mood* in Descartes, Spinoza, Kant? *Mood* as a category of human mental experience didn't exist in serious philosophical inquiry. Succumb to a *mood* and you're no longer a philosopher but something wounded, diminished"[79]. He accused Anellia of „moods" and this allowed him to feel better than her as one who was more skillful in pursuing the truth, which he defined as theses carefully cleaned of all traces of experience.

Contempt for everything defined as extra-mental is another feature of philosophical universalism which Oates deconstructs. The author uses Vernor and Anellia to show that what enjoys the status of rational and what is discredited as non-rational is determined by the *scholastic view* defined by Bourdieu. The definition of rationality that Vernor adopts from his philosophical authorities is based on the assumption that rationality is the opposite of emotions, which, in turn, are a specifically feminine "malady". Meanwhile, as we learn from Anellia, Vernor "believed himself stable, unvarying, a personality like Kant's you could set a watch by, in his temperament if not in his behavior; he believed he was a man devoted sheerly to the intellect, like Wittgenstein. Yet he was volatile, mercurial as the most capricious of the Kappa girls"[80].

This explains why, as in the case of aversion to feminism on the part of women who dedicated their lives to meeting masculine standards rather than undermining these models' claims to universality, women holding the position of intellectual authority often make spectacular gestures of contempt towards the emotional. In this way they prove, firstly, their freedom from that from which in the common perception an intellectual should be free, and secondly, their knowledge of the rule according to which „in pursuit of the truth", the emotional must be eliminated – like noise interfering with the access to information rather than an aspect of information in its own right. One example can be a passage from philosopher Agata Bielik-Robson's text *O uwewnętrznieniu*[81] (On internalization), in which she says that „writing about affects"

[77] *Ibidem*, p. 170.
[78] *Ibidem*, p. 186.
[79] *Ibidem*, pp. 197–198.
[80] *Ibidem*, p. 187.
[81] A. Bielik-Robson, *O uwewnętrznieniu*, „Dziennik Opinii," 20/5/2013.

is „beating the emotional drum until it eventually bursts in an ecstasy of hysteria and at the same time orgasm". Moments later, the author calls for carrying out analysis of emotions „calmly and tactfully". None of these categories (orgasm, hysteria, calm and tactfulness) are defined and thus they remain at the discretion of the readers' associations. The commonplace associations with orgasm and hysteria, in contrast to tactfulness and calm, will hardly be truth, reflection, knowledge, and understanding. The passage can thus be interpreted as a self-presentation measure of a philosopher who, writing a text about a truly „non-philosophical" topic – the *SlutWalk* (*Marsz Szmat*), a venture of feminist activism – felt a need to emphasize that her analysis would be rational. One should ask at this point why men who take on similar topics do not feel compelled to prove their rationality **in spite of** being men, and how many sacrifices in professional and private life the privileged do not have to make, because they do not risk accusations of succumbing to emotions, with all the consequences thereof.

Visibility

For Vernor Matheius racism, for Anellia misogyny and class distinctions are experiences that reveal the falsity of the philosophical promise of the universal subject. The promise of belonging to a community of people, the fulfillment of which would be tantamount to the attaining the privilege of invisibility. These three factors – hope put in philosophy and the painful experience of its failure, which manifests itself in the curse of visibility – will bring together the characters and determine the shape of their relationship.

Being seen, observed, conspicuous, attracting attention are a ghastly experience for both the characters. Anellia's visibility is due to the fact that she is a woman. Her femininity leaves her prey to constant gazes, an object of continuous oversight and assessment, which she experiences as a deeply humiliating form of control and subordination to the role of someone whose role it is to pleasure others. "I most keenly remembered my brothers when they were growing up: their crude, derisive talk of girls and women, which invariably involved jokes; as if girls and women were jokes; from my brothers I learned that *the male* is all eyes; his sexuality is fueled through the eyes; he assesses through the eyes; judges swiftly and without mercy through the eyes. (...) His swift, unerring judgments are forged in boyhood and are a collective judgment. He has the power to see with others' eyes, not just his own"[82] – recalls the heroine. As for Vernor,

[82] J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 109.

what attracts looks is his skin colour. „He was accustomed to being *visible*"[83] and his strategy was to give „no sign of noticing how we were being watched"[84]: although „there were invariably people observing us, curious and hostile eyes"[85].

When Anellia and Vernor are in public space together, their visibility dramatically increases. Not only because each of them – a woman and a Black – has the status of an intruder in this space, and not only because the rules of civility of the majority group, according to which it is "rude" to „stare", do not apply to both of them. By being together, Vernor and Anellia above all violate the *status quo*, which is the principle of segregation. The sight of a white woman and a black man activates the reserves of racist and misogynistic imagery, making her "a nigger lover", and him – "a nigger who possessed a white woman". In this imagery, they both have the status of someone who defiled a sanctity, crossed a border, breached the norms. "[S]till I felt strangers' eyes upon us, cold and infuriated" – notes Anellia while sitting with his beloved in a restaurant where Vernor is the only Black. "I hadn't the strength to confront them, and drew back from Vernor's casual touch"[86].

Sally Robinson in her book *Marked Man. White Masculinity in Crisis* distinguishes between two types of invisibility. The first is a lack of representation of dominated and persecuted groups in the historical, cultural and political narratives. The other invisibility turns out to be the privilege not accessible to individuals and groups experiencing continuous subordination and disciplining, since they are at the center of the symbolic power as its subordinates. "Whereas the former are invisible in the sense of being underrepresented, the latter are invisible behind a mask of universality"[87] – writes Robinson. Richard Dyer supports her, arguing that „the position of ordinariness (…) is the white man's prerogative"[88]. Julie Sheridan appeals to the considerations of both these authors in her analysis of another novel by Joyce Carol Oates, *What I Lived For*[89]. The novel's main character, Corky, trapped in the identity of an Irish immigrant, does all in his power to be „just like everyone else", but to achieve that, he has to give up the foundation of his male identity, his Irishness. Experiencing domination as an immigrant, and at the same time enjoying the privileges of the dominant group

83 *Ibidem*, p. 152.
84 *Ibidem*, p.219.
85 *Ibidem*, p.173.
86 *Ibidem*, p. 223.
87 S. Robinson, *Marked Man. White Masculinity in Crisis*, New York 2000, p. 194; quoted in: J. Sheridan, "*Why such discontent?" Race, Ethinicity, and Masculinity in* What I Lived For, „Studies in the Novel," vol. 38, no. 4, winter 2006, p. 512.
88 See: R. Dyer, *White*, London, 1997, p. 221, quoted in J. Sheridan, *op. cit.*, p. 510.
89 J. C. Oates, *What I Lived For*, New York 1994.

as a man, Corky epitomizes, according to Sheridan, the dynamics of clashing cultural patterns. Wishing to enjoy invisibility, trying to hide from the assessing and excluding eye of „the normals", Corky learns to play out successive versions of masculinity that he copies from others – versions which suit his needs at the consecutive stages of social advancement[90].

The masquerade of gender

Continuous imitation is also Anellia's strategy: "From my brother Dietrich (...) I borrowed a way of carrying myself with dignity; from my high school history teacher, a way of questioning others' remarks without being rude (...); from a girl named Lynda who'd been my closest friend in high school, a way of being "good"—"generous"—without seeming silly; from the Lutheran minister's grown daughter, a way of regarding people with flattering widened sincere-seeming eyes, not the narrow, veiled eyes natural to me; from my father I borrowed a habit of skepticism and doubt, the loser's distrust of anyone who has more money than he has, or even the appearance of more; yet from my father, too, a contradictory impulse, for he had a weakness for card playing and gambling, which attests to reckless optimism"[91]. Oates's heroine describes herself like *a patchwork*. She reveals that she created her identity from cuts, scraps, fragments and behaviours copied from others. She is a gatherer of bits and pieces of identity, which she then uses to build her self-portrait. "My so-called personality had always been a costume I put on fumblingly, and removed with vague, perplexed fingers; it shifted depending upon circumstances, like unfastened cargo in the hold of a ship"[92] – Anellia says about herself. She confesses that she borrows, mimics and invents herself, plays successive social roles, puts on identities like masks, creates self-images like costumes that she wears as long as they remain effective.

This imitation strategy requires constant self-control, watching so that nothing that does not fit the image being embodied slips out from under the mask, thereby revealing the masquerade. Thus, for example, Anellia will not tell anyone that in an act of self-defense she threw a book at a man who exposed himself to her in a park and took his glasses, because „my unfeminine behavior had discouraged his sentimental notion of *girl*"[93], as whom the heroine strives to be regarded. For the rudimentary social role which Anellia must play to attain the privilege of invisibility is the role of a woman.

90 J. Sheridan, *op. cit*., p. 503.
91 J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, pp. 128–129.
92 *Ibidem*, p. 129.
93 *Ibidem*, pp. 75–76.

The executors that – consciously or otherwise – subordinate Anellia to femininity are first her sorority sisters, and later her lover. The strength of social expectations determining the behaviour of men and women in countless, even most intimate situations turns out to be so great that it takes full control of Anellia's feelings, making them but an obstacle in the implementation of the social rituals through which femininity must be played out and reproduced. For example, when Anellia supposes that Vernor will expect sex from her, although she is „frightened, and [feels] sick" and is „trembling badly, as if freezing", the heroine disciplines herself by calling forth the image to which she has to face up: „It's the smiling-lipsticked girl in the mirror I was thinking. (…) This is what a pretty girl does (…). This is what a 'desired' girl does, this is what is done to a 'desired' girl"[94]. About the clothes which Anellia wears on dates with Vernor, she says: „These were secondhand clothes, costume clothes"[95]. By observing and imitating fellow sorority girls, Oates's heroine tries to minimize the feeling of being „a freak in the midst of their stunning, stampeding, blazing female normality"[96]. A feeling which to her is an unquestionable fact, an objective given, a reality independent of her will and actions.

With time, however, in Anellia's eyes femininity begins to appear not as a natural feature, which she does not possess, or even not as a competence that no one ever taught her, but as a gender-determined fate of questionable appeal. „All the breasts were D-cups jacked up in satin bras, hoisted and (sometimes) padded. Even the pixie-girls' breasts were D-cups. Breasts preceded girls into rooms. Breasts preceded the girls who bore them with shivery female pride and restrained haste, descending the spiral stairs to their staring dates. Their smooth-shaved calves shining like pewter. Underarms doused with deoderant and liberally dabbed with talcum powder. (…) Their lives were worn on the outside of their skin like another item of apparel. Their lives in the presence of *male persons* were fanatically prepared performances, sustained for hours at a stretch"[97].

Joanne V. Creighton and Kori A. Binette argue that Oates's novels are characterized by a "resonant *bildungsroman* core, the daughter's journey to selfhood, as she seeks to answer (…) [the] question (…): '[W]hat does it mean to be a woman?'"[98]. Describing Anellia's sorority mates, Oates seems to be saying it is not her protagonist who tries to play out femininity through inept masquerade, but that femininity itself is a masquerade. A masquerade with fateful causes, and effects. A woman who does not play it is exposed to social alienation, persecution and as a result, the feeling that she is „a creep,

94 *Ibidem*, p. 136.
95 *Ibidem*, p. 166.
96 *Ibidem*, p. 185.
97 *Ibidem*, pp. 63–64.
98 J. V. Creighton, K. A. Binette, *op. cit*., p. 440.

a freak of nature", while the one who puts on the costume of femininity designed for her, will by this very act condemn herself to a woman's fate, a predictable life trajectory. Oates does not paint a happy picture of it: „They were such fierce actresses, they might not have known they were acting at all. They were fighting for their lives. Their goal was to become engaged before graduation. They would be married before the age of twenty-two, they would be mothers before the age of twenty-three. Some of them would be divorced before the age of thirty"[99].

Because even the most brilliantly acted out femininity proves to make a woman prey to incessant gaze and assessments, and Anellia seeks shelter from visibility, and because femininity turns out to be a theater acted out for the sake of men, which results in objectification, and Anellia seeks ways to achieve subjectivity – her life story, despite her attempts to imitate femininity, abounds in episodes of intuitive escapes from it. At 18, the heroine of *I'll Take You There* cuts her hair, because "men on the street [were] looking at my hair, the boys looked at my hair, women and girls were looking at my hair; (…) *click! click!* just missing my ears, and with each greedy *click!* of the shears I felt lighter, freer. (…) I vowed I would never be so burdened again. (…) My female relatives stared at me appalled. *Oh how could you! Your hair.* (…) my brother Hendrick nudged me saying in an undertone, almost admiringly *You!—you are capable of anything. Now you really are ugly, that must make you feel just great, right?*"[100] Hendrick's words are, on the one hand, an expression of his cruelty towards his sister, but on the other hand, they confirm that Anellia has achieved her goal: cutting her hair freed her from the male gaze. Since the experience of womanhood is also an experience of social degradation and violence, the heroine celebrates these aspects of her life – even in its most bodily dimension – that allow her to overcome her feminine identification. „*For I was not truly female in certain crucial ways*"[101] – she comments on the fact that she very rarely menstruates. She says about her genitals: „(…) a part of my body I hadn't cared much to consider; not out of shame so much as indifference, impatience; for what have I to do with my genitals, what identification with my sex?"[102]. Finally, having fallen in love with Vernor, Anellia confesses that perhaps her love was an expression of longing for a different fate, and Vernor was not so much someone *with whom* but *whom* she wanted to be: "a voice I would have wished for myself if I'd been born *male,* and not *female*; a voice I did wish for myself though born not *male* but *female*"[103] – says the heroine when she first hears Vernor Matheius and falls in love with him namely because of his voice.

99 J. C. Oates, *I'll Take…*, p. 64.
100 *Ibidem*, pp. 110–111.
101 *Ibidem*, p. 121.
102 *Ibidem*, p. 179.
103 *Ibidem*, p. 98.

The masquerade of race

Others, however, primarily *see* Vernor, and this sight causes him to become inaudible for them. "I felt a collective wave of dislike directed toward the young man, from my fellow students; (...) "N'ggg shut yo mouth"[104] – the heroine recalls a situation when Vernor spoke in the lecture hall. Anellia, instead of joining the people looking at Vernor, notices first of all his over-visibility, which he experiences because of the colour of his skin and which turns out to be similar to the over-visibility of women which nags Anellia. Where racist schemes are at work, Oates's heroine does not fail to point them out. She notes, for example, that Kappa Gamma Pi members constantly leave an awful mess, because it gives them a malicious satisfaction that the "wordless" black maid Geraldine cleans up after them[105]. She also notices that everybody calls the man working in the garden *lawn boy*, although he is a man in his fifties. He is, however, also black, so he gets reduced to his menial, depersonalized role[106]. The thing that, in spite of the dominant categories of perception, helps Anellia see racism rather than race is the anti-Semitism that she herself experiences: „It hurt me to recall how, in the Kappa house, I'd overheard my Kappa sisters speak of 'niggers.' Not meanly, not with malice, but matter-of-factly. One of our house boys was a Negro, that's to say a 'nigger.' There were categories of girls whom Christian sororities automatically cut: 'niggers,' 'Jews'"[107]. Finally, the study of Wittgenstein, in which the heroine engages out of regard for the adoration that Vernor has for the philosopher, allows Anellia to recognize that racism is encoded in the language which determines the categories of description and thinking of its users. Recalling the situation when she is summoned to the Dean of Women, who scolds her for a relationship with a "person of another background"[108], she says: „'(…) If I am in l-love with a–' and now I too faltered, hardly knowing how to speak of Vernor Matheius, for any words assigned to him that dissolved his individuality in a category, a class, were false; worse than false, traitorous. Even to speak of him neutrally, in such a context, was traitorous. I said, stammering, '– if I am in love with any man of any background you have no right to interfere. You have no right to intimidate me'"[109].

When the heroine is rebuked, embarrassed and judged for her love for a black man, in spite of the patterns of culture of white supremacy, she performs an act of problematization of her, not of Vernor's colour: „I was beginning to feel the oppression of *white;*

104 *Ibidem*, p. 105.
105 *Ibidem*, p. 52.
106 *Ibidem*, p. 159.
107 *Ibidem*, p. 155.
108 *Ibidem*, p. 209.
109 *Ibidem*, p. 211.

the ubiquity of *white;* for everyone in the Brass Rail was *white* except the busboys in white (dazzling white!) uniforms, and these busboys were black"[110]. The experience of racism makes Anellia understand that skin colour is, like gender, a disguise: „(…) my skin was 'white,' a camouflage I might wear through life as I wore my costume-clothes; as I wore my 'femaleness'; (...)"[111]. Whiteness, and with it race, turn out to be merely, but crucially, a social fact, similar in its construction to gender, an imposed identity whose power of persuasion is so poignant that without it, individuals panic, because they do not know who they are. „I don't have a black soul. Because I don't have a black soul, I don't have any soul at all"[112] – says Vernor in a moment of despair. When after the confession of her lover about his ancestors, who were slave traders, Anellia tells him that after all he is not his ancestors, he responds: „Then I'm no one. I don't know who the hell I am"[113]. It is at this point that, once again, the falsity of universalism reveals itself: it turns out that there is no pattern of existence which is not squeezed in a costume of some kind, not bearing multiple meanings, there is no „pure being" independent of evaluation. Due to the social definition and assessment of an individual's characteristics (e.g. race, gender, capitals), he or she must implement some particular subjectivity, and with it – a privileged or dominated social position. Meanwhile, within the universalism proposed by philosophy, this fact is omitted, and along with it all the social baggage of existence. "For hadn't we faith in pure rationality, pure logic and language pruned of all sentiment"[114] – concludes the narrator bitterly.

Thus, life in the social world turns out to be masquerade, the identities assumed within it – a question of performativity, and the costumes – the only available means of functioning among people. „I had decided that life is probably mostly a matter of memorized words in sequence; words, gestures, smiles and handshakes, in a certain sequence"[115] – says the heroine of *I'll Take You There*. A convention, a role to be learnt by heart are key to being „a normal" and thus gaining the privilege of invisibility. This entails the need for a continuous effort of acting, a constant performative work, always keeping up the mask. „(...) [S]ince the age of eighteen I'd become one whose posture is ramrod straight out of a terror of fatally slouching, slumping like a jellyfish, no spine at all"[116] – says Anellia. „Yet I lived in dread of the one day I would fall utterly and irrevocably into pieces and would lack the strength, the will, the purpose, the faith to reassemble myself another time"[117]. This „reassembled self" consists of pieces picked

[110] *Ibidem*, p. 219.
[111] *Ibidem*, p. 212.
[112] *Ibidem*, p. 236.
[113] *Ibidem*, p. 238.
[114] *Ibidem*, p. 239.
[115] *Ibidem*, p. 84.
[116] *Ibidem*, p. 285.
[117] *Ibidem*, p. 130.

up from the significant others, pieces which are objects of observation, imitation and aspiration. The social role reveals itself to be „the backbone" supporting the structure that is the identity of the individual. Without defining their role using a variety of categories – women, men, black, white, from a good family, from social lowlands etc. – the heroes of *I'll Take You There* lose orientation regarding not only others, but also themselves. At the same time, however, because they operate equipped with peculiar anti-capitals (femininity, blackness, low class origin), yet they also have aspirations going significantly beyond the position assigned to them, their habitus is „fractured", their embodiment of the social order incomplete, their social construction damaged. This defect makes both of them unable to identify with the masks which they should put on. The roles, which they are to play, instead of being an object of embodiment, are for them a camouflage that they feel compelled to wear.

Vernor's power

It would seem that because of the similarity of aspirations and oppressions, Vernor and Anellia will be allies. However, Vernor, on a par with the others but in a specific way, also forces Anellia into a masquerade. He needs Anellia to appear in front of him in a female role, because he fixes his self-esteem, undermined by being an object of racism, using the possibilities offered to him by the misogynistic culture. While Anellia deconstructs both her privilege (whiteness) and stigma (femininity), Vernor uses his privilege (masculinity) as a way of compensation for the harm experienced because of his stigma (blackness).

One evening, when Vernor and Anellia were walking together down the street, „a crazed car, a carload of drunken kids, not university students but local young-male whites, provoked by the sight of us and yelling 'Nigger!'—'Nig-ger!'—'Nig-ger's bitch!'—swerved in our direction; a jeering horn, beer cans flung at us spraying beer like urine. I would remember with a thrill of emotion that Vernor didn't release my hand but gripped it tighter. 'Don't look at them. Don't turn around. They don't exist.' Vernor spoke coldly, furiously"[118]. Then Vernor deflowers Anellia, and the scene begins with the sentence: „With that air still of quiet, subdued fury he fumbled to remove his trousers. (...) Vernor Matheius did not want me to take him, he wanted me to be taken by him. (...) the flying skeins of beer like urine had defiled us both, though not touching us; jeering ugly white-man voices *Nig-ger!* in this room with us struggling in the dark so Vernor Matheius grunted what sounded like '*Nig-ger! who's a nig-ger?*'"[119]. The

[118] *Ibidem*, p. 174.
[119] *Ibidem*, pp. 174–176.

racism they experienced on the street follows them into the house, shapes their intimate relationship, bursts into private nooks, dictates what happens between the lovers. Vernor acts out on Anellia humiliation experienced from white people. He takes revenge on her for the violence to which he is subjected because of racial segregation and white supremacy. Once, he urges Anellia to sing for him a bawdy song, „black calypso from the Caribbean in a degraded bastardized form". When she fulfills his request, he tells her: „Faster, girl! Speed up the beat! Move that skinny little white ass of yours"[120]. Another time, he calls her white body disgusting. „Your tight stingy little cunt your skin the color and texture of your skin are repulsive to me don't you know? don't you know? can't you guess? can't you guess? guess? guess?"[121]. During a fight, he shouts to her: „the color of your skin repulse[s] me"[122]. Vernor must constantly hide his rage at the unfair treatment which he is experiencing. When he is humbled by a professor, „I saw him shut up his face as he might've clenched a fist"[123] – notes Anellia. She is the only person with whom Vernor feels safe and can afford to vent emotions. Yet instead of looking for an ally in her and use the emotional care that the girl offers him, the boy turns his anger against her and finds comfort in humiliating Anellia.

One of the ways in which he does so is by depreciating her intellectual capacities. Vernor Matheius quizzes his girlfriend about philosophy, as he does not believe that a woman could be interested in philosophy and know it[124]. He is convinced that to be a good philosopher, you have to devote your entire life to intellectual labour, meanwhile, „he'd never met a 'female' who wasn't maternal—'In her heart, if you could penetrate it. Or another organ'"[125]. By reducing in this bizarrely „obscene" sentence Anellia to femininity, femininity to physicality and physicality to sexuality, he suggests to the heroine that she cannot be a good philosopher, for, after all, her sex limits her.

Anellia seems helpless against Vernor. Embarrassed by his closeness, height, looks, laughter[126], the heroine is afraid of her beloved, not that he would deliberately hurt her but that he could because her will does not matter to him. „A wave of apprehension rose in me, what we might do. (...) Vernor Matheius's thumbs tugging at my eyes, the authority in his superior strength. I understood how a predator might run his prey to earth and that prey would go limp in acquiescence, once the jaws had closed about it; once it was clear there could be no escape"[127] – her account of Vernor resembles a story about the inevitable fate, about a looming disaster. „(…) [T]hat love is a kind

120 *Ibidem*, pp. 196-197.
121 *Ibidem*, p. 200.
122 *Ibidem*, p. 228.
123 *Ibidem*, p. 118.
124 *Ibidem*, p. 133.
125 *Ibidem*, p. 154.
126 *Ibidem*, p. 155.
127 *Ibidem*, p. 189.

of illness; not a radiant idea as I'd imagined but a physical condition, like grief"[128] – she says about her feelings for Vernor. Although socially weak because he is black in a racist society, using the male privilege and at the same time not realizing it, Vernor becomes a *force majeure* to Anellia, one might say – her fate. He has full control over their relationship. To the extent that when Anellia visits him unannounced, worried about a few days of his silence, she herself admits, „That morning I'd violated our unspoken agreement"[129]. Another time, she mentions that Vernor required her to be silent because, „What Vernor liked about silence was that he could break it when he wished"[130]. His attitude to Anellia resembles the relationship of an owner to his property: „I felt his fingers lightly on my shoulder; again, I had the sense that he was herding me; impatient with me; I didn't think at the time *It's a gesture of possession in this public place*"[131]. Even when Vernor shows Anellia affection, it is just an offshoot of his narcissism: „Though sometimes he'd grip my hand, my bare hand, squeezing the fingers so that I winced without his noticing, talking of his work, his ideas"[132].

„I don't behave in any way that others can predict"[133] – Vernor claims proudly. Another time, he asks: „Why the hell then should I spend my life being 'Negro' for anyone's sake? I have a higher calling"[134]. Anellia and Vernor – each separately and independently – try at all costs to escape from the trap of the destination set forth for them by the social structure. To overcome the constraints that their social stigmata impose on them, in order to make their lives as self-directed as possible. However, gender dynamics makes their alliance in this struggle impossible. Instead of partnership, Vernor gains authority over Anellia by entering the role his tormentors usually assume against him: the role of one that looks at and evaluates. In this way, he interpellates her femininity and with it – inferiority and subordination[135]. By becoming her keen observer and commentator, he reduces Anellia to the role of a sexual object and a source of sensations. Subjected to power of the gaze of others, he gains power of gaze over Anellia: „*Don't imagine I can't see through you, girl: your skin is transparent.* It would be a matter for me to contemplate afterward: how rapidly, how irrevocably I'd stepped out of

[128] *Ibidem*, p. 105.
[129] *Ibidem*, p. 208.
[130] *Ibidem*, p. 151.
[131] *Ibidem*, p. 156.
[132] *Ibidem*, p. 172.
[133] *Ibidem*, p. 170.
[134] *Ibidem*, p. 221.
[135] About interpellating entities to the identities desirable within the dominant culture, see: L. Althusser, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, translated by B.Brewster, [in:] *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, New York 1971, pp. 127–186, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm (access on 11/11/2016) and J. Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative*, New York–London 1997, pp. 5–6.

invisibility into visibility once Vernor Matheius had sighted me. (...) As if a blinding spotlight were suddenly shining on me, and I had no choice but to perform"[136].

As a result, in order to gain Vernor's acceptance, Anellia is forced to give up the dream of a partner who sees what the heroine hides under various burdening masks. Instead of the lifting of the veil which she imagined to be the result of love, she is forced to don a new costume. She puts on another mask, this time for him: „To win Vernor Matheius's attention, I understood that I would have to make myself visible to him, and 'attractive'; I would have to reinvent myself; I shopped for secondhand clothing in the city, choosing things I myself would never have wished to wear, or dared"[137].

In her depiction of the subordination to femininity which Anellia experiences from Vernor, Oates once again points to the paradox of universality and particularity. When a friend asks Anellia whether the cause of her grief is „some guy", Anellia is shocked. „The word so slangy, vulgar, commonplace — *guy!* Was Vernor Matheius for all his arrogance, brilliance, power over me in essence merely a *guy?* I had not time to absorb such a revolutionary thought, though such a thought might have saved me"[138]. This thought „might have saved her" because it did to Vernor the same thing he did to her: interpellated him to a specific subjectivity, and thus offered a chance to tear off his mask of a universal subject which hides from Anellia's sight his particularistic privileges, conditions and interests. This thought was „revolutionary" because it would allow Anellia to deprive Vernor of his power over her by seeing him as a human equal to her.

Distance

Researchers of Oates's literature write that her characters, shaped as they are by certain social, cultural and political conditions, on the one hand, experience sexist oppression, but on the other – in contrast to their mothers – see it namely as sexism and this allows them to achieve agency. No less important in the novel *I'll Take You There* (just like in the novel *Gravedigger's Daughter*) is the aspect of shaping the experiences and identity of the protagonists that is the stigma of Jewishness. Not Jewishness itself, because neither Anellia nor Rebecca from *Gravedigger's Daughter* have a Jewish self-identification. They do, however, bear an unspoken stigma, tabooed within the family and the community in which they live.

This stigma introduces a feeling of disorientation. It causes the heroine of *I'll Take You There* to be haunted by a disturbing feeling that she does not know "something" which everyone else knows. It forces her into continuous self-control and at the same

136 *Ibidem*, p. 125.
137 *Ibidem*, p. 130.
138 *Ibidem*, p. 138.

time, despite her efforts to be „like everyone", makes the woman from Oates's novel feel constantly in the spotlight, under observation, with accursing fingers pointing at her, different. „*And did it begin then, the unraveling.* (…) *waking to discover yourself in this place among strangers indifferent and impervious to you*"[139] – Anellia says about her time in the sorority. The stigma is the reason for her low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence, which in turn condemns her to a constant search of acceptance and recognition in the eyes of others. „This [malicious] remark I would pretend not to hear. Children are so resourcefully deaf, blind. We smile in the face of hostility, that hostility will turn into love"[140] – the heroine says about her childhood. Her stigma makes her perceive reality as destabilized, unstable, and flickering.

I'll Take You There by Joyce Carol Oates is a novel not about Jewishness as an identity, but about anti-Semitism as an element of social structure, embodied also in those individuals who are themselves subjected to anti-Semitic violence. However, once deconstructed as a stigma, Jewishness also turns out to be for Oates's heroines the way of emancipation from social pressures and regulations, including those associated with femininity. Thanks to the experience of anti-Semitism, instead of *giving in to the norm*, they can *see the norm* as an oppressive tool of social reproduction. In this way, Jewishness becomes a tool similar to a lens, looking through which one can see other types of oppression, including the oppression of gender patterns. Experienced but also diagnosed and worked through as a stigma produced by anti-Semitic violence, Jewishness in Oates's novel provides a sense of distance from successive social roles. Yet the path of achieving this distance is a thorny one.

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139 *Ibidem*, p. 16.
140 *Ibidem*, p. 21.

Initiated into Subordination. On Joyce Carol Oates's *I'll Take You There*

ABSTRACT

The article proposes a sociological reading of the novel *I'll Take You There* by Joyce Carol Oates. Though the book can be classified as an initiation novel, it also constitutes an accusation of the very procedure of initiation as forcing individuals to agree and adapt to unfair social mechanisms. The context of the protagonist's struggles is provided by the social structure of the early-1960s United States, with its inherent misogyny, anti-Semitism, racism and classism. All these factors shape her destiny in accordance with the logic of social reproduction. A destiny of overwhelming power of allocation, which the heroine is trying to resist. As an academic novel, *I'll Take You There* is also an insightful deconstruction of the universalism preached within the Western academic world, and especially philosophy.

Inicjacja do podległości. O „Zabiorę cię tam" Joyce Carol Oates

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy tekst jest propozycją socjologicznej lektury powieści *Zabiorę cię tam* Joyce Carol Oates. Można tę książkę zaklasyfikować w poczet powieści inicjacyjnej, jednak już sama procedura inicjacji zostaje w niej postawiona w stan oskarżenia jako wymuszająca na jednostkach zgodę na krzywdzące mechanizmy społeczne i przystosowanie do nich. Kontekstu do zmagań bohaterki powieści dostarcza społeczna struktura początku lat 60. w Stanach Zjednoczonych z wpisaną weń mizoginią, antysemityzmem, rasizmem i klasizmem. Wszystkie te zmienne będą kształtować przeznaczenie bohaterki zgodne z logiką społecznej reprodukcji. Przeznaczenie o przemożnej sile alokacji, której bohaterka próbuje się przeciwstawić. Jako powieść akademicka, *Zabiorę cię tam* jest także wnikliwą dekonstrukcją uniwersalizmu oferowanego w obrębie zachodniej Akademii, a zwłaszcza filozofii.