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9 Charting the Liminal Geographies of Eastern Europe in Joyce Carol Oates's Short Stories

ABSTRACT

Framed by imagology and geocriticism, this chapter analyses American imaginative geographies of the European East in Joyce Carol Oates's short stories (1984).¹ I argue that Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest turn into liminal sites of danger and possibility for Oates's American characters, incarnating both the escapist quality of travel beyond the ordinary and the darker side which the removal from one's 'comfort zone' may entail. Thus, the experience of crossing the Iron Curtain and getting to know the Eastern other triggers self-discovery, confirming imagology's premise that the way we map alterity tends to tell us more about ourselves than about others. In addition to unveiling the complex dynamics between selfhood and otherness, these stories also attest to the position which Eastern Europe occupied in the American Cold-War imaginary. Simultaneously, despite being embedded in a specific socio-historical moment, Eastern Europe mapped by Oates functions as a symbol which goes beyond the Cold-War context.

In 1980, the American writer Joyce Carol Oates visited Eastern Europe as part of her official six-week tour of the old continent.² Oates's journey to Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest was sponsored by the United States Information Agency (USIA): the public diplomacy body aimed at promoting American interests and values abroad. Speaking about USIA's strategic goals, the historian Richard H. Pells termed the organization's role *schizophrenic* (1997: 84). On the one hand, the agency's function was to

- 1 Research for this chapter has been funded by Campus de Excelencia Internacional Andalucía TECH.
- 2 The complete itinerary of the novelist's journey to Europe covered Frankfurt, Warsaw, Budapest, Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, Brussels, Antwerp and Berlin.

convey accurate information about life in the United States. On the other, it was supposed to accentuate, even aggrandize those aspects of American culture that could further foreign policy aims. In other words, the uneasy relationship between culture and politics underlay USIA's actions since its inception in 1953. It also, as I wish to argue, fuelled the short stories inspired by Oates's travels behind the Iron Curtain.

This chapter focuses on three tales: 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner', concerned with the representation of (West) Berlin, 'My Warszawa: 1980', which dramatizes the protagonist's journey to the Polish capital, and 'Old Budapest' that maps the Hungarian capital from the point of view of diplomacy. In conclusion I also discuss the last story in Oates's collection, entitled 'Our Wall', in which the novelist conjures up a dystopian vision of the world behind the Iron Curtain. In line with the theme of this volume, I will explore the relationship between culture, power and the politics of space in Oates's stories by combining insights offered by geocriticism with the idea of liminality as applied to space and travel. In doing so, I will also address the 'imagological' dimension of Oates's representation, pointing to the cultural imagery which accrued to the European East in the second half of the twentieth century and which the stories reflect to a certain extent. Although Bertrand Westphal (2011: xi), the originator of the concept of *geocriticism*, contrasts a spatial approach with that prescribed by imagology, suggesting that the latter 'studies the insurmountable gap between a looking subject and an observed object and presumes that their respective places cannot merge in a global human space', I hope to show that the two approaches may nonetheless complement each other. It is true, however, that the cultural context in which Oates's works were produced implies bipolar divisions, which translate into inter-human relations portrayed by the novelist.

The above-mentioned works form part of the 'Our Wall' section of Oates's 1984 collection of short stories entitled *Last Days: Stories*.³ In

3 The collection of stories is divided into two parts: 'Last Days' and 'Our Wall'. The first section comprises narratives set in Oates's domestic environment of rural and urban America. In Brenda Daly's assessment, both sections 'mirror each other in a variety of ways' as well as 'move us, literally and figuratively from the United States

hindsight, the title of the volume sounds somewhat prophetic – as Brenda Daly observed, ‘*Last Days* might be described as predicting the “last days” of the wall itself [...]’ (1995: 87). As prescient as the name may seem almost three decades since the collapse of communism in Europe, I wish to argue the opposite: rather than portray the Cold War world nearing its end, Oates casts the communist hemisphere as a timeless space and a universal symbol of divisive boundaries both on the map and in the mind.

While the interplay of culture and power is crucial for understanding the context in which Oates’s diplomatic mission took place, the notions of space and mapping promise to shed some light on the author’s engagement with Eastern Europe in the short stories under discussion, and, in a broader perspective, on the area’s position in the American Cold-War imaginary. Spatiality has been a potent critical trend in literary and cultural studies for some time now. In *Introducing Criticism at the Twenty-first Century*, ‘space and place’ are listed among major critical themes or orientations which, despite having emerged in the previous century, ‘continue to provide different epistemological foci in the humanities’ (Wolfreys 2002: 4). Indeed, as Robert T. Tally Jr. (2013) demonstrates in *Spatiality*, geocriticism is a rich critical field inspired by philosophy, urbanism, and postcolonial studies, to name but a few disciplines shaping the critical treatment of spaces in literature, as well as the idea of literature as a form of mental cartography. Thus, the work of literature which portrays a given locus constitutes a singular map evoking the image of this place on the mind of the reader, while the writer assumes the role of the mapmaker whose power to select and omit allows her to chart the map which reflects her way of seeing. At the same time, argues Tally Jr. (2013: 79), the reader may play an active part in this literary cartography, introducing new, hitherto unseen ways of perceiving the entity that is being mapped, as in Daly’s interpretation of the title *Last Days* in terms of it being the harbinger of the decline of the bipolar world. What ensues is a new quality, or rather a new literary map, in which the

to Europe’ (1995: 87). Apart from the tales discussed in this chapter, ‘Our Wall’ contains also two more stories: ‘Détente’, which dramatizes Soviet-American cultural and political differences, and ‘The Lamb of Abyssalia’, set in a fictitious Third-World country.

real and the imagined coalesce as the *poetics of space*, to borrow Gaston Bachelard's (1969) turn of phrase, blends in with the place-as-it-is.

Tally Jr's spatial approach to literature brings to mind Edward Said's influential concept of *imaginative geographies*, which captures the idea of creating mental maps of peoples and places that 'articulate the desires, fantasies and fears of their authors and the grids of power between them and their "Others"' (Gregory 2009: 370). Said coined this term to theorize Western cultural representations of the Orient, but the idea has travelled beyond *Orientalism* (1978), influencing scholarly works concerned with the tradition of imagining otherness as a means of consolidating one's self-image and identity. One of them is Larry Wolff's seminal work *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), which constitutes the point of departure for studying the position of Eastern Europe in the Western imaginary in the post-Second World War era, when the geopolitical partition between the East and the West went hand in hand with the mental division into a better and a worse Europe. According to the historian, the divisive rhetoric about the Iron Curtain severing Europe into two unequal halves, which emerged following the war, hid 'traces of an intellectual history that invented the idea of Eastern Europe long before' (1994: 4). Through the analysis of eighteenth-century sources, Wolff argues that Eastern Europe as an idea and a mental map was conceived in the Western mind in the Age of Reason, when the enlightened intellectuals charted, described and dissected the area for the sake of their contemporaries, measuring it against Western standards of what civilized society should be like. Each traveller undertaking a journey to Eastern Europe, whether real or imaginary, was equipped with a mental map ready 'to be freely annotated, embellished, refined or refolded along the way' (Wolff 1994: 6). Such mental mapping involved the process of association and comparison; the lands of Eastern Europe were mentally associated with one another and juxtaposed with the Western ones. Eastern Europe, however, was not so much a counterweight to the refinement of Europe proper as a polymorphous, interstitial area conjured out of fact and fiction and hovering somewhere between the civilization of Western European capitals and the barbarism of the ultimate Orient: Asia. In other words, the enlightened imaginative cartography mapped Eastern Europe

as a liminal 'paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe' (Wolff 1994: 7).

In a sense, the second half of the twentieth century brought about similar (conceptual) in-betweenness. Speaking about the literary production in the east-central parts of Europe, Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999) employs the term *in-between peripherality* to theorize the complex situation of cultural liminality understood in terms of negotiating one's national cultural identity in relation to two major centres of influence: the Soviet Union and the West. Yet the scholar's turn of phrase may also be applied to the representational strategies employed with respect to the area which, as the generic Westerner from Philip Longworth's *The Making of Eastern Europe* (1994: 4) puts it, cannot be termed 'Third World, but it is certainly not the Western world either'. In this sense, the very designation *Eastern Europe* may be seen as a semantic expression of the area's liminality, denoting particularly in Western eyes, its entailment with the Soviet East and thus its peripheral position within the continent.⁴ Following Paul Connerton's terminology, *Eastern Europe* functions thus as a *place-name* which is not only a delimiter of a place, but 'encapsulates a well-known narrative' (2009: 10).

Importantly, in Oates's short stories Eastern Europe's in-betweenness has also a *spatial* dimension, as the American characters portrayed by the novelist map Eastern European alterity through exploration of the urban space which has the capacity to affect those who interact with it. By venturing behind the Iron Curtain, the Americans step into a liminal dimension which counterpoints the ordinary and is charged with the feeling of what-may-be. Removed from the familiar Western realities, the places depicted in the stories promise a liberating break from the structured normality of

4 It is noteworthy that this designation was employed particularly in Western Europe and the US, while the native intellectuals of such countries as Czechoslovakia or Poland would think of themselves as Central Europeans. The idea of Central Europe as a counterweight to the Soviet-bound homogeneity of Eastern Europe was most famously expounded by Czech novelist Milan Kundera (1984), but it also appears in the writings of Polish émigré writer Czesław Miłosz (1986), among others.

everyday life and thus entry into the realm of possibility.⁵ At the same time, travelling beyond the perimeter of the familiar entails breaking out of the ‘comfort zone’ and exposing oneself to the unknown, which in the context of Eastern Europe carries some disturbing overtones. As Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts argue in *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-between* (2012: 6), when applied to space liminality often implies not only the playful and the liberating, but also ‘counter ideas’, such as power relations, terror, or surveillance, which in-between spaces may engender. Accordingly, I wish to suggest that the encounter with the European East

- 5 In fact, the notions of space and travel are embedded in the concept of liminality developed originally by Arnold van Gennep and elaborated by Victor Turner. In *The Rites of Passage* (1977: 18), first published in French in 1909, van Gennep illustrates the universal pattern of the rite of passage by likening it to the movement between two territories which implies suspension and potentiality: ‘[w]hoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds’. In a similar vein, Victor Turner, in his application of the concept to the rituals performed by the Ndembu of Zambia, points to the liminal stage as the space-and-time in which neophytes become physically and metaphorically separated from the world as they knew it, divested of their habitual structures of thinking, feeling and acting, and made to reflect on their society and ‘the powers that generate and sustain them’ (1967: 105). As a result, they emerge transformed: enriched by fresh knowledge – *gnosis* – and ready to return to the community as new, more mature beings. Recognizing the concept’s significance beyond the context of tribes, Turner looked for manifestations of liminality in industrial societies, inviting others to focus their attention on liminal processes, which may ‘paradoxically expose the basic building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and before we re-enter the structural realm’ (1967: 110). The anthropologist himself identified a liminal world in Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (1957), which celebrates life as an unending passage from one place to another charged with potentiality; in addition, Turner’s extensive work on pilgrimage attests to his interest in the generative potential of travelling beyond the ordinary. The productive potential of the physical journey away from the familiar and into the new and the unexplored underlies also more recent scholarship in liminality, which theorizes travel in terms of a liberating transitory experience in which ordinary life is put on hold. Tourism, for instance, emerges as such a liminal time and space characterized by the suspension of ordinary rules and norms and permeated with a sense of potentiality and expectancy. As Mark Gottdiener puts it, ‘[t]ravel is always an adventure, always an encounter with the “new”’ (2001: 11).

portrayed by Oates incarnates both the escapist quality of threshold experiences and the darker side which the liminal may entail. Devastated by Nazism and staggering under the burden of communism, Eastern Europe seems hostile and potentially menacing to the American visitors. While still part of the old world, the area is imagined as existing in a different time and space, where ordinary rules do not apply and one's behavior is not gauged by the same standards as in the West. As a result, Eastern Europe is both the object of Western gaze, an imaginative Cold-War geography, but also a space that affects those who come into contact with it; a locus of potential self-discovery and change. In this sense, Eastern Europe's liminality is both conceptual and spatial, as the characters portrayed by Oates map Eastern European other and, in doing so, get to know the self by traversing the urban space of the capital cities: Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest.

Mapping the Liminal Site of the Berlin Wall in 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner'

One of the most powerful liminal tropes is that of the line which at once joins and separates two worlds, entities or territories. In fact, the very word liminality comes from the Latin term *limen*, which denotes a threshold. As the common heading of Oates's peripatetic stories suggests, the organizing metaphor of the tales is the wall, both as a tangible physical barrier and a boundary in the mind, but also as a liminal site of danger and possibility. It comes to the fore already in the opening story, 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner', which focuses on the most spectacular incarnation of the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall, dramatizing West Berlin as the city on the threshold between the East and the West. Like '[a] jewel afloat upon the sea of [Soviet] darkness' (108), West Berlin is mapped as a liminal paradox which pertains to the West but would not exist without the East, whose shadowy presence, embodied in the Wall, looms large over the German capital.

Oates's fictional geography of Berlin is constructed out of hard facts and eerie fiction. Rooted in the Cold-War dynamics of international relations,

the city is also deeply scarred by the recent history of the Second World War, whose memory stealthily creeps into the protagonist's expedition. At the same time, Berlin is also mapped as a timeless city; a generic space of captivity overshadowed by the Wall, which is at once a monstrous phantom and the object of the protagonist's desire. The story is narrated by a nameless American man who comes to Germany to uncover the reasons that led his younger brother to approach the Wall from the East, a seemingly senseless feat for which he was shot to death by the guards. However, each attempt at solving the puzzle is thwarted, as the bits and pieces he manages to collect refuse to form a coherent picture. The fragmentary quest is reflected in the narrative. 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner' is divided into blocks of text which beat out an irregular, almost spasmodic rhythm, mirroring the narrator's frantic search for truth. In cinematic fashion, we follow the American as he moves through the German capital trying to piece together the events which led up to his brother's death. While at the outset of the story the narrator may resemble Charles Baudelaire's (1964: 9) nonchalant *flâneur*: a passionate yet detached spectator of the crowd who like 'a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness' refracts a bustling cityscape, he soon becomes engulfed by the oppressive atmosphere of Berlin's urban substance, inadvertently following in his brother's footsteps.

Paradoxically, one reason for the emotional disturbance that the narrator experiences in Berlin is the city's uncanny resemblance to his home ground. Berlin is so Western that the narrator has difficulty deciding where he is: 'It is America. But no it is Berlin. West Berlin. Germany. But no it is America. No? Yes? America? But with such strong accents?' (100). This representation of the German capital as a Western city reflects the spirit of the times. Following the Second World War, Berlin became 'embedded in America's own political mythology, closely linked to what was defined as the United States' unique mission in the world' (Daum 2000: 56). Particularly the events of the Blockade, the Airlift and, most importantly, the erection of the Berlin Wall contributed to the formation of the cultural image of the city as 'America's Berlin', that is, West Berlin became associated with American democratic values in the midst of the totalitarian East.

Yet Oates seems to challenge the dominant political narrative embodied in John F. Kennedy's eponymous pronouncement. Berlin's 'westernness'

has little to do with the lofty ideals of freedom and democracy fostered by the United States' State Department, manifesting itself instead in urban excess and corruption: revues and sex shops abound, underage prostitutes ramble the streets, and the city's air is filled with '[o]dors of grease-fried foods, spilled beer, the companionable blare of American acid rock' (102). In fact, Berlin's apparent 'Americanness' seems to be only a lurid veneer concealing a self-contained panoptic space in which the narrator's every move seems to be closely watched by invisible forces. Oates gradually builds up a sense of entrapment, infusing seemingly innocuous objects and incidents with meaning. Accordingly, the narrator is transfixed by the sight of 'marvelous gleaming pyramids of shoes' (102), which brings to mind the ceiling-high piles of shoes stored behind the glass panes at the Auschwitz Concentration Camp Museum. Also the name of the hotel where the man is staying, the Berliner Hospice, connotes death and suffering; in addition, his room is depicted with bellicose metaphors as a 'sealed capsule, a bunker' with a ventilation system 'which might from time to time emit its own subtle gases' (107). The feeling of physical and mental oppression culminates in the narrator's dramatic cry, which evokes the memory of Nazi gas chambers: 'O, help, I know you are listening, is the doorknob riveted in place? – are the poisonous gases being filtered in?' (108).⁶

However, as much as the city reflects the cultural memory of Nazism, it is also curiously ahistorical at the same time, paradoxically because of

6 In the light of imagology, Oates's representation of Berlin seems to reflect a more general pattern of cultural imagery which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. According to the imagologist Waldemar Zacharasiewicz (2007), the positive representation of Germans as competitive, industrious and cultured (the image undoubtedly related to West Berlin's singular position within the American political mythology) was conveyed mainly through travel and nonfiction works. As for American fiction, from the 1960s onwards the imaginative geography of Germany was infused with dark and gruesome imagery inspired by its recent Nazi past. Although Oates's story is not explicit in this respect, her literary map of Berlin seems to resonate with the contradictory perceptions of Germany in the American post-war imaginary, something which imagologists refer to as an *imageme* – that is, a representation which is not homogenous but straddles 'compounded polarities' (Leerssen 2007: 344).

the most spectacular symbol of the Cold-War era: the Wall. In her study of American images of post-communism, Andaluna Borcila employs the epithet 'liminal' to capture the Wall's intermediate location between the opposing political systems of East and West, as well as to emphasize its status as a 'liminal site, at the threshold between a Cold War and emerging post-Cold War imaginary' (2014: 24). In both cases, the liminality embodied by the Wall is inextricably linked with Cold-War politics. In 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner', Oates steps beyond the context of the Cold War to cast the Wall as 'a threshold of unpredictable dynamics' (Benito Sánchez and Manzanás 2006: 2) and a liminal site in its own right, where the past and the present are fused in an almost indistinguishable blend: 'As one nears the Wall the curious thing is, history is left behind. There is nothing here to indicate what year this might be, which language might be spoken if there were anyone at hand to speak ...' (106).

In deleting the historical context, Oates allegorizes the Wall, turning it into a universal symbol of separation between people and nations: '*The Wall is forever*' is the message left by the narrator's brother. However, the Wall's symbolism is taken even further, as Oates interprets it along the lines of Freudian psychoanalysis as an allegory of human existence, understood as the perennial struggle between the life and death instincts (Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is found among the deceased's papers): 'Consider the eternal wisdom of the groin which opposes that of the Wall: for the Wall is Death. No mein Herr, I believe you are mistaken: the Wall is Life [...]. For, as one approaches the Wall, even from the "Western" sector [...] – note how the pulse helplessly quickens [...], note how the heart grows tumescent, how vision is sharpened, the very air rings with delight' (110).

Thus, the Wall itself becomes the object of desire and the deadly act of approaching it is likened to the thrill which precedes sexual intercourse. By casting the Wall as the embodiment of life's essence – the perilous dance between Eros and Thanatos – the story conveys an impression that the Wall and, by extension, this part of Europe, is an unreal space existing beyond time and history. This representation is further reinforced by the use of a legend-like narrative at the end of the story, in which the Wall transforms into a tower dungeon erected by a cruel landowner to imprison wrongdoers '[o]nce upon a time, in the remote days of the Holy Roman

Empire' (111). The only escape route from the dungeon is a narrow opening through which daylight and sounds from the outside world enter the prisoner's cell. Although no one has ever made it out of the dungeon, the lure of freedom makes prisoners seek escape and they inevitably die in the attempt, for, as the legend's moral goes, the human drive towards freedom is oblivious even to death.

Although this 'folk wisdom' (112) seems to offer a symbolic rationale for his brother's high-risk conduct, the American narrator's research remains inconclusive. He does not ascertain whether his brother's death was an accident, a suicide or a political gesture, but he does come close to comprehending his obsession, his 'morbid interest' (100) as he is transformed by the liminal experience of Berlin and overwhelmed by the tantalizing, sexual appeal of the Wall, where '[d]eath silently and secretly and ceaselessly pulses. One touch – ! One touch' (111).

The (Un)homely Poland in 'My Warszawa: 1980'

The transformative potential of the journey East is also explored in 'My Warszawa: 1980', the story framed by American cultural diplomacy. Accompanied by her partner Carl and several other intellectuals, the American novelist Judith Horne travels to Warsaw to take part in a conference on American literature. As in the Berlin story, walking the city becomes the form of mapping the unfamiliar space of the Polish capital on Judith's and the reader's mind. However, while West Berlin reminds the story's narrator of the bustling American metropolises, at least in its flashy visual layer, Warsaw seems to Judith alien and menacing, making her feel anxious and vulnerable at the same time. There seems to be a mental (iron) curtain separating Judith from the Poles whose incomprehensible tongue and unfamiliar body language bother and confuse her. It is as if this part of Europe constituted a separate category within Judith's personal classification of alterity: '[E]ven the hand gestures – lavish, stylized – confuse her. If she were in France, or Italy, or Spain – if she were in Germany – she would

immediately feel at home' (147). Clearly, despite being located within the bounds of the old continent, Eastern Europe is *not* Europe proper, and the premonition that Judith has entered a world apart intensifies as the story progresses. Gradually, the city, shrouded in a pervasive cigarette smoke and urban pollution, imposes itself on the novelist, threatening her customary poise, her safe American self. In this sense, Eastern Europe's liminality is not just a matter of the marginal position it occupies within the American imaginative geographies of the time, but it also has a profoundly personal dimension.

In the course of the story, Judith suffers from a sense of alienation and displacement that is directly related to the physical space in which she has found herself and its imagological charge, that is, what this space stands for in the common imaginary, and for Judith personally. In *The Location of Culture* (2004: 13) Homi K. Bhabha reaches for Sigmund Freud's striking notion of the *unhomely* to speak about 'the relocation of the home and the world' – a sense of displacement in which the boundaries between the private and the public become blurred, and the confusion results in estrangement and disorientation. For Bhabha, the *unhomely* operates when 'the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history' merge with 'the wider disjunctions of political existence' (2004: 15). Although he identifies it predominantly with the colonial and postcolonial condition, he also admits that the *unhomely* may infuse 'fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites' (2004: 13). It is crucial that the *unhomely* is a spatial condition, inextricably bound to the physical place whose historical and/or political substance invades the private, disturbing the delicate balance between the self and the world. This is what seems to happen to the nameless narrator of 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner' who, on coming to Berlin, develops a morbid fascination with the Wall, and ends up imitating his brother's descent into madness. This is also what befalls Judith Horne in Warsaw.

Before arriving in Poland, Judith had been warned by her partner Carl that the journey to Eastern Europe might be a trying experience, not only because "East Europe is a strain on anyone's nerves" (146) but especially given the writer's ethnic background. Born and raised in New York City, Judith grew up unconcerned by the painful memory of her Polish relatives

who died in Auschwitz Concentration Camp. Despite being aware of her Jewish heritage, she did not embrace it, choosing to be defined solely by her professional work. However, Warsaw turns out to be the liminal space of Judith's late self-discovery. Removed from the safe haven of New York, there she is forced to confront what she has been trying to suppress most of her life. As she moves through the streets of the Old Town and the never-ending meetings with Polish intellectuals, Judith's sense of displacement grows, as if Warsaw with its layers and layers of history and smoke-filled air oppressed her physically, clinging to her skin in the form of '[l]ayers of grime, flakes, near-invisible bits of dirt' (178).

The process of mapping the city is, as in the Berlin story, intense and disturbing. The urban substance of the Polish capital imposes itself on Judith's psyche as smells, voices, and architectural loci become infused with second meanings; smoke-filled air is likened to poison, while overflowing churches and the omnipresent Madonnas – the emblems of the Polish Catholic Church – remind her of the absence that nobody seems to mention, and which Judith did not think about until now. Suddenly, she is full of questions about 'the Church and Polish history, Jews, discrimination, mass graves, death ...' (152). Thus, the embodied past of the Warsaw cityscape, with its rebuilt Old Town, the Jewish Cemetery and the traces of the former ghetto, acquires a personal significance for Judith, serving as a catalyst for her 'undoing': 'Warsaw is an occupied city, an occupied zone, Judith thinks, waking, staring at herself in the dim bathroom mirror – and something is happening to her here. *Is there a subtle poison in the air?*' (163).

Judith's vulnerability, which she has kept at bay in the safe American environment, comes to the surface in Warsaw, resulting in the *unhomely* sensation of being somebody else: 'She feels weak. She feels Jewish at last. And womanly – in the very worst sense of the word. A Jew, a woman, a victim – can it be?' (148). This curious gradation, in which ethnicity is closely linked to gender, signals Oates's preoccupation with the cultural dimension of identity – one of the key themes in her fiction. As it turns out, Judith's carefully constructed American self is not immune from either her roots or her femininity.

There are two occasions in Oates's fragmentary narrative that fully demonstrate the extent of Judith's disintegration. Distressed to the point of

hysteria, she first breaks down emotionally in the company of her partner Carl ('she strikes out with her fists, sobbing like a child' (174)), and then during a meeting with a Polish journalist, Marta, whose face bears Semitic features not unlike her own. While talking to the woman, Judith comes to realize that she is a convert. The conversion would not be so surprising in itself had it not been for the fact that the woman is clearly an anti-Semite, convinced that those Jews who had perished in the Holocaust 'could have saved themselves [...]. But they did not try' (182). She even goes as far as to call them ignorant peasants. Marta's condescension towards her kin strikes a chord in Judith, because it is her and her family's identity that is being assaulted. Devastated, she leaves the journalist without a word in a trance-like state, her Eastern European rite of passage finally complete. In other words, she symbolically assumes her Jewish legacy with its adjacent painful history as part of her American identity – a heritage which she has deliberately chosen to neglect up to now, but which she has carried within nonetheless.

In this sense, Warsaw becomes a liminal site in which Judith's inner transformation is enacted; a place which, through its history, embodied in the city's architecture, language, and stories, triggers a process of discovery which, distressing as it is, ultimately allows Judith to embrace the Eastern European in her, to map herself as part of this place. Thus, only at the end of the story is the meaning of the title fully revealed. The Polish *place-name* 'Warszawa', used instead of the common English variant 'Warsaw' and preceded by the possessive 'my', marks Judith's symbolic reconciliation with the city which, though hardly homely, is nevertheless hers. In a broader perspective, by evoking the well-established trope of searching for one's roots, Oates casts Eastern Europe as America's other but also an integral part of its cultural heritage – a missing link in Judith's transatlantic quest for the self.⁷

7 And perhaps also in Joyce Carol Oates's. As Greg Johnson (1998) reveals in his biography of the novelist, the stories hide traces of Oates's family history. Oates's beloved paternal grandmother, Blanche, was born in a Jewish family, but her parents had changed the German-sounding surname 'Morgenstern' to the conventionally American 'Morningstar', in a symbolic denial of their Jewish background. Moreover,

The Eastern European Spectacle of 'Old Budapest'

Despite the fact that the story entitled 'Old Budapest' offers a less dramatic vignette of Eastern Europe in the 1980s, it nonetheless falls within the conceptualization of the area as a liminal space of potentiality. In fact, there is a connection between 'Old Budapest' and the previous tale, as the story's protagonist, a glamorous American diplomat named Marianne Beecher, has been among the American delegates to the literature conference in 'My Warszawa: 1980'. The action of 'Old Budapest' is set two years later in the Hungarian capital, where Marianne has been sent by the US National Science Education Foundation. Yet what exactly Marianne does behind the Iron Curtain remains a matter of speculation – she is rumoured to be a secret agent travelling 'about East Europe spying on foreign service people for their mutual employer, the State Department' ('My Warszawa: 1980' 156). Moving away from the domain of writers and academics, which Judith Horne represented in the Warsaw story, this time Oates imagines the world of diplomacy and people who, equipped with the magic ticket, the American passport, cross geopolitical thresholds with ease. If in 'My Warszawa: 1980' space had a distinctly personal dimension, in 'Old Budapest' the focus is on power and politics. Within American diplomatic circles, Eastern Europe is synonymous with 'absurd little countries' which 'would be at one another's throats' if it were not for the Russians (196). Politically marginal, they are nevertheless considered to be attractive diplomatic destinations, given the amount of power the diplomats are granted there. "You can change someone's life by making a telephone call [...]. You can save people. You can punish them", observes the director of public relations from the safety of the opulent residence belonging to the deputy chief of mission (202). Although Marianne does not seem to possess quite the same amount of power as the diplomat, she shares his condescending

Oates's maternal grandparents immigrated to the US from Budapest. Although the writer's Hungarian roots got 'ignored, or denied, or repressed' during most of her life, her visit to Budapest provoked an uncanny feeling of ethnic affinity with Hungarians and a strong sensation of being 'at home' (Johnson 1998: 1–2).

attitude towards Eastern Europeans. When a Hungarian dissident, called Ottó,⁸ trusts her with a subversive manuscript, she agrees to help him but then forgets about the precious document, letting it be stolen from her hotel room together with a card bearing the author's name. It is not hard to envisage that her recklessness and ignorance will probably cost Ottó his already precarious freedom.

Marianne's patronizing behaviour towards Ottó is symptomatic of her attitude to Eastern Europe, which seems to exist only as an exotic spectacle or a romantic, if somewhat quaint, backdrop for her privileged life to unfold. Conveniently far from home, it provides her with an opportunity to live a liminal experience free of constraints and everyday routine: 'But what was quite like the queer intoxicating air of suspension, of a journey behind the "Iron Curtain"? – the term itself, corny and endearing, evocative of romance?' (207). The Iron Curtain is thus not the menacing political divide, embodied by the smooth concrete of the Berlin Wall, but rather a threshold to the world where the routine of everyday life is placed on hold. Thus, it is behind the Iron Curtain that Marianne ventures into terrains that could prove precarious in other circumstances. Untied either by family obligations or economic constraints, she glides through Eastern European capitals, exploring her 'limitless capacity for romance' (206) by engaging in impassioned affairs with other temporary inhabitants of Eastern Europe, usually high-ranking-diplomats. Unlike Judith, Marianne is not weighed down either by the tragic past or the dismal communist present of Eastern Europe. Although she does at times feel 'a certain indefinable melancholy' and 'the force of nostalgia' for 'those tragic countries' (208), their turbulent history only adds to the region's romantic allure: 'The romance of East Europe [...]. The tacky, seedy, despairing glamour of lost causes; the air of the fantastical and the drab; the queer elation of the American, in striding through this world, as through a twilight world beyond the looking-glass' (194).

8 Marianne's ignorance is exposed when one of her lovers, the deputy chief of mission, tells her that Ottó's name is in fact his surname, since the name and surname are reversed in written Hungarian (211).

Oates reaches for the liminal trope of the looking glass to convey the somewhat otherworldly experience that Eastern Europe is for Marianne. The world behind the looking glass connotes a titillating fantasy, a space of potentiality where bellboys offer to exchange currency 'with the breathless air of offering illicit pleasures,' while telephones ring at night 'with an exuberant life of their own' (207). But it also carries more disturbing overtones. While Marianne is free to pass through the (iron) mirror,⁹ those behind the looking glass remain eternally trapped in their misery, like Ottó who has been denied his freedom of expression and whose only opportunity to outwit the system lies in the hands of a foreigner.

The mirror motif reappears in the imposing Hilton Inn Hotel, Budapest's bold and controversial landmark, where Marianne moves from her shabby Hungarian hotel at the invitation of her current lover. Located atop Castle Hill in front of the city's most historic landmarks, the hotel's striking bronze-tinted exterior reflects the scenery while at the same time preventing onlookers from peering inside. While the hotel guests, presumably Westerners, may admire the historic Budapest, they remain protected from the intrusive gazes of those remaining outside, who can only see their own reflection against the city's monumental backdrop. Similarly, Marianne is comfortable admiring and judging Eastern Europeans from the snug position of an American diplomat, while at the same time remaining sheltered from the world which lies behind the protective walls of the Hilton, shielded from the burden of being part of it. Here, the 'insurmountable gap' between the *spected* and the *spectant*, which Bertrand Westphal criticized in the context of imagology, is perhaps most vivid, as Budapest is mapped as an exciting, orientalist spectacle staged for Marianne's pleasure and which she may cease to watch if the performance does not live up to her expectations.

9 The image of the Iron Curtain transforming into a mirror is explored by D. Quentin Miller (2001: 206) in his analysis of one of John Updike's short stories on Eastern Europe. The idea of an 'iron mirror' is explored in Joseph Benatov's dissertation: *Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958–2001* (2008).

Conclusions: Liminal Paradoxes of Eastern Europe

Travel and space are at the heart of the three stories analysed in this chapter; they determine the characters' behaviour and their state of mind. The cross-border movement connotes the suspension of everydayness typical of tourism, but the destinations, the Eastern European capitals, bring out the darker facets of liminal situations: displacement, trauma, and transgression. Oates's fictional maps of Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest seem to be as much the fruit of her eastward journey as of the cultural imagery which has accrued to the region. The stories combine authentic details of topography and architecture with attempts at rendering some kind of elusive *genius loci* of the world behind the Iron Curtain, as seen by the American characters. In this sense, the communist realities are as important in mapping Eastern Europe as the area's turbulent recent past, particularly World War II and the Holocaust, which keep defining it in Western eyes. History in Eastern Europe is tangible and space-bound. It resides in buildings, like the damaged Kaiser Wilhelm Church in Berlin and the rubble-resurrected Old Town in Warsaw, but also in the sensual experience of the city – its smells and sounds and the influence they exert on the American characters. The urban space is thus not just a framework or a container in which the inner voyage is enacted, but rather the trigger for the liminal experience of confronting the other and thus getting to know the self. The space's generative potential is revealed in 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner' and 'My Warszawa: 1980', whose protagonists are physically and mentally affected by the oppressive, historically charged atmosphere of Berlin and Warsaw, respectively. The cities gradually impose themselves on their psyches, exposing cracks and fissures in their hitherto complete American selves and rubbing salt into invisible wounds. Thus, the personal and the urban merge together resulting in the liminal condition of the *unhomely* in which the characters' microcosms fracture under the weight of 'history's most intricate invasions' (Bhabha 2004:13).

If in 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner' and 'My Warszawa: 1980' the space of Eastern Europe is heavy with history and memory, in 'Old Budapest' it is woven from breezy pre-conceptions which together form a dense veil,

clouding the vision and distorting the picture of the Hungarian every-day. Marianne's failure to comprehend (and take seriously) political realities not only endangers Ottó's life, but also contributes to a reductionist representation of Eastern Europe. In this sense, the liminal dimension of Budapest as a transitory and thus constraint-free phase in Marianne's diplomatic travels reinforces the city's marginal status, casting it as an unreal, half-romantic, half-tragic Old-World setting which, as the scene at the diplomat's residence demonstrates, is politically insignificant yet provides the characters with the possibility of enacting their personal fantasies of power and romance.

Yet while the stories can be read as testimonies to a bygone era and the fictional maps of Cold-War geographies, it would be a mistake to reduce them in this way. Although Oates peppers her narratives with specific topographical, architectural, and linguistic details which give the narratives a here-and-now quality, there is a strong allegorical air to her representations. Thus, the Berlin Wall is not just the Cold-War barrier separating the West and the East but also a symbol of the perennial human struggle between life and death instincts. Similarly, Oates's portrayal of Warsaw is less concerned with the realities of living under communism, even though the author includes references to actual events, people and places, than with exploring the relationship between self-made identity and arbitrary ethnicity. In this sense, the political realities of Eastern Europe, closely interlinked with the area's complex historical predicament, 'are not all important as facts, or social or cultural truths, but as signs and symbols of an ancient heritage of human potential and failing' (Andrzejczak 1995: 311).

As a way of concluding, I would like to bring up the last story of the collection, whose title attests to Oates's fascination with the liminal trope of the threshold, and where the symbolic role which Oates envisages for Eastern Europe is fully explored. 'Our Wall' maps a dystopian space whose central element is a Wall erected so long ago that nobody questions its presence any more. Although neither time nor place are specified, this anonymous landscape bears a striking resemblance to East Berlin in the grip of Soviet Russia, providing a counter-image to the fictional map of West Berlin charted in 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner'. In the story, East Berlin/Eastern Europe is imagined in terms of an eternal confinement, where repression has been internalized to such a degree that it is no longer perceived as

such. Those who put it into question suffer terrible consequences, just like the narrator's late brother, who lost his life in an attempt to defy the regime by seeking to escape into the world behind the Wall. The boy's premature death echoes the demise of the American character in 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner', both of whom seem to be modelled on the notorious shooting of the eighteen-year-old German youth, Peter Fechter, who was killed on 17 August 1962 while trying to climb the Berlin Wall and escape into the West. By replicating Fechter's fate first in 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner' and then in the ahistorical 'Our Wall', Oates fashions Eastern Europe into a nightmarish dystopia; a space of captivity in which a nameless boy keeps climbing the Wall and dying in the attempt again and again as others (we? the West?), passively, watch. Yet the story, as does the collection, invites a more universal reading, particularly if seen from the post-1989 perspective. In Erica Jong's words (1984), in 'Our Wall' Oates 'reaches beyond realism to create, in metaphorical terms, the philosophical underpinnings of all walls'. In doing so, she transcends the Cold-War context to explore the borders existing not so much on the map but in the mind, ultimately incorporating the foreign space of Eastern Europe into her American fiction and thus turning it into fodder for her favourite theme: the painful and violent microcosm of the self within the macrocosm of (American) history and society.

Refracted through the author's inner geographies, the fictional map of Eastern Europe charted in *Our Wall* is thus as much a testimony to a specific historical moment as a universal tale about people whose lives become embroiled in history and politics. Approached from the perspective of geocriticism, Oates's stories offer a fascinating example of how the space-as-it-is coalesces with the collective and individual mental mappings to produce a cartography which is simultaneously topical and universal. Moreover, it provides insights into American perceptions of Eastern Europe, revealing the area's position within the American imaginary at the time when the demise of the binary world seemed like a distant fantasy. In this sense, Eastern Europe exists on the limen of Western geopolitical consciousness, constituting a category apart within the protagonists' worldview. At the same time, the realm's liminal dimension manifests itself in the way the protagonists' journeys behind the Iron Curtain shape their actions and their

sense of self. Removed from their domestic environment, Oates's American characters experience the transformative and revelatory potential of the encounter with otherness, as the Eastern European capitals turn into sites of self-discovery and transgression.

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