

The Joyce Carol Oates Society

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Call for Papers 2027

Unique CFP for both:

- JCO Society Panel at ALA Boston (Westin Copley Place – May 26-29, 2027)
- *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies* Volume 8

We invite scholars to submit paper proposals on any aspect of Oates studies for our panel at the annual ALA conference in Chicago. Proposal deadline: December 1, 2026. Please send proposals of approximately 200 words, along with a short bio, to Tanya Tromble-Giraud (tanya.giraud@univ-amu.fr) and Randy Souther (southern@usfca.edu). Speakers will be invited to develop their papers into articles for submission to our journal.

For those who are unable to attend the ALA conference, we invite article submissions directly to *Bearing Witness* at any time: <https://repository.usfca.edu/jcostudies/>

In 2027, we particularly invite paper and article proposals on:

Page as Performance in the Work of Joyce Carol Oates

“Yet *meaning* in prose fiction, no less than in poetry, derives from language – voice, rhythm, interior music – the indefinable essence of a work. What do we mean by ‘voice’? – is it as mysterious in art as in life?” (Oates, *Story* 830). Oates asks this question in her preface to *Story: Fictions Past and Present*. These lines parallel Sartre’s remarks that, “One is not a writer for having chosen to say certain things, but for having chosen to say them in a certain way. Style is what gives prose its worth” (Sartre 30, our translation).

Over her more than sixty years of publishing fiction, Joyce Carol Oates has proven herself to be a master wordsmith. Yet, the crafting of words into sentences, and their organization into paragraphs, sections, stories, chapters, etc., is not the sole technique she employs to engage her readers, create her style, and convey meaning. Indeed, in many of her texts, various aspects of the page layout are equally important to this process of transmitting meaning from the author’s mind, onto the page, and from there, on to the reader. In this way, the page becomes a type of performance space through which the interaction between author and reader occurs.

Oates has long considered herself a formalist who likes to experiment with structure, form, genre and language. She points to the necessity of finding forms in which to put our stories, and says of her own work that it “is always carefully calibrated” (Miller). She is very concerned with the length and symmetry of the sentences, paragraphs, sections, chapters and parts that make up her works and she speaks of herself as being excited by forms in the same way as poets are excited by them. There is more to this than the simple challenge of finding words to fit into a certain rhyme and meter. What Oates is trying to emphasize is the importance of finding a form that will be best suited to the translation of her ideas onto paper. In this respect, layout becomes an essential tool; the use of italics, gaps, ellipses, dashes, etc. all contribute to meaning-making, as do certain stylistic techniques such as repetition and poetic overlapping.

For example, in order to address the issue of our unfathomable states of mind, Oates makes frequent use of repetition and poetic overlapping because, as she has commented, “a novel with no repetitions would be a novel without memory, wouldn’t seem psychologically plausible” (Miller). The concrete result is often a thread of characters’ italicized thoughts running periodically through the text. Italics in Oates’s works often stand for thoughts that come to us unbidden, from our deep subconscious. They are, in fact, the attempted manifestation in print of that which is ultimately unknowable, the uncontrollable mad obsessions of our psyches, or what William James describes as “the ‘transitive parts,’ of the stream of thought” (James 2). At times, these thoughts take the form of an obsessive sort of mantra, as is the case in the novella *Beasts* (2002) with the repetition of the phrase “*Go for the jugular!*” Such techniques find their place in Oates’s project of evoking a psychological reality for her readers, effectively performing the characters’ obsessions for the reader to feel, not just to intellectually process (see Tromble, “Transcribing Enigmatic”).

Other techniques used by Oates to construct the “foregrounds” of her texts include the absence of words (gaps, ellipses, dashes, etc.), the use of varying typography (italics, capital letters, hand-written words, etc.), recourse to drawings, and other forms of visual representation. Oates uses the term “foreground” to refer to “each sentence of each paragraph” in a text, as opposed to “background,” which refers to “overall rhythm or structure and theme” (“Eye for Detail” 38).

In his biography, Greg Johnson informs us of Oates’s tendency to create maps of her fictional settings to consult while working on a long novel:

While writing *You Must Remember This* [1987], in which certain features of Lockport, including the canal, dominate the landscape of “Port Oriskany” and the life of the novel’s heroine, Enid Stevick, Joyce taped a map of her fictional city to the wall above her desk (she followed this procedure for other novels as well) so that in her imagination she could “traverse its streets, ponder its buildings and houses and vacant lots, most of all the canal that runs through it, as it runs through Lockport, New York . . . the canal that, in Enid’s heightened and often fevered imagination, as in my own, seemed an object of utter ineffable beauty.” (Johnson 12)

Yet, perhaps somewhat curiously, this map is not included in the volume for reader. Its creation seems essential for Oates, though, in her process of communicating this literary world to her readers through the page. Other works, however, do include visual aids. The earlier *Bellefleur*

(1980) includes a family tree, and the later *The Accursed* (2013) does include a map for readers to consult.

In addition to these para-textual elements, in some Oates works, drawings and other forms of visual representation are present in the body of the text as meaning-bearing elements equal to the words that surround them (*Zombie*, 1995). In other works, symbols are used as story titles. For example, the recent “***” (*Flint Kill Creek: Stories of Mystery and Suspense*, 2024).

Inversely, as Brenda Daly explores in her article on the film adaptation of the story “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?,” writers can also organize elements on the page to evoke meanings that cannot so easily be transferred into other visual media. Words sometimes fall short, and benefit from pictorial enhancement, but not always, as Daly’s discussion shows.

In short, we are interested in exploring the process that sees an idea which develops in the author’s mind find some sort of concrete form upon the page so as to be transmitted to the reader, particularly through techniques that might be considered less than conventional. Techniques that enhance the author’s words to “perform” an enhanced, hybrid, multi-modal meaning are of particular interest. We invite paper proposals that seek to examine any facet of the interaction between Joyce Carol Oates, the author, and her readers, through the page. In this way, we will continue to advance our understanding of the ways in which Oates weaves words, forms and images into a vast web of interconnected meanings.

Non-exhaustive list of related themes:

- Narrative strategies
- Character development
- Construction of voice
- Use of typography, font, hand-writing
- Forms of visual representation
- Materiality
- Intermediality: drawings, maps, musical structures
- Visualizing the creative experience
- Symbols as story titles
- Cinematic eye/I
- Layout
- Textual devices that emphasize the insufficiency of language

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