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# Reading Nostalgia, Anger, and the Home in Joyce Carol Oates's *Foxfire*

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The relationship between gender-based violence, memory, and the home are prominent themes in Joyce Carol Oates's 1993 novel *Foxfire: Confessions of a Girl Gang*. Set in upstate New York during the 1950s, Oates's novel follows a group of adolescent girls who band together under the leadership of Legs Sadovsky to form the girl gang FOXFIRE.<sup>1</sup> The gang serves multiple functions for its members: it allows the girls to protect one another from violence, to enact vengeance upon the men who do them harm, and ultimately, to escape their violent homes. To this end, the gang members purchase a run-down old house in the outskirts of Hammond, New York, to live as an all-women's commune, and they commit theft to pay for their daily needs. As the group increases in numbers, tensions grow among the members, and FOXFIRE ultimately disbands following a failed kidnapping. Maddy Wirtz functions as the novel's narrator and the gang's official memory keeper, and the narrative trajectory is comprised of Maddy's notes, old journal entries, newspaper excerpts, and recollections of her youth, which she narrates from her perception as an adult, giving voice to FOXFIRE's history.

*Foxfire*'s narrative pattern is characterized by reflective nostalgia, which Svetlana Boym defines as a process that sets out to interrogate the notion of truth rather than re-create an accurate version of the past (xviii). Although the home figures prominently in reflective nostalgia, Boym explains that this "home is in ruins, or, on the contrary, has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition" (50). While feminist theorists have long been critical of nostalgia (Greene 1991; Martin and Mohanty 1986; McDermott 2002), more recent theorizations of reflective nostalgia are tremendously useful for feminist projects. For example, reflective nostalgia allows Maddy to move between time, place, and

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<sup>1</sup> I use capitalizations as Oates does in her novel. Following Oates, *Foxfire* denotes the title of the text, whereas FOXFIRE signals the name of the girl gang.

perspectives over the course of the narrative. Through reflective nostalgia, Maddy also unearths forgotten events and details from FOXFIRE's past, connects these to Legs's anger, and interrogates dominant notions of the home that largely exclude the girl gang's lived experiences. Within the parameters of this paper, I am particularly interested in the ways that the dialogue between the past and present that characterizes reflective nostalgia interrupts the notion that we can produce an authentic or true record of the past. Rather, reflective nostalgia foregrounds the reality that our recollections of the past and written histories are necessarily fragmented, rife with omissions, and fraught by contradictions (Su 3). Rather than deny their presence, we can read contradictions and omissions as acts of agency. Reflective nostalgia allows a person to decide how to remember, what to omit, and how to deploy these memories (Su 4). In this sense, nostalgia is empowering, as it allows subjugated groups to write themselves into histories from which they are largely excluded. Reflective nostalgia is a means through which marginalized groups can designate specific events as politically important and as worth remembering (Wilson 47), and to exclude other stories.

This paper draws upon the scholarly discussions of nostalgia that I have briefly mapped above to explore the intersections of memory, home, violence, and anger within *Foxfire*. I contend that because nostalgia centers on the home and/or the domestic realm it is ideally suited to foreground the untenable nature of idyllic or hegemonic constructions thereof. Drawing links between reflective nostalgia, the home, anger, and domestic abuse is particularly important within in an American cultural climate where "the home is actually a more dangerous place for American women than the city streets" (Antonia Novello qtd. in Coontz 3). My analysis will pay special attention to the nostalgic elements that characterize Maddy's multifaceted narrative, which moves between the past and the present to explicitly link forgotten or hidden memories and events to the home. Rather than recall the home (in this case, the girls' individual homes before they form FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD) as a utopic place of belonging, Maddy's nostalgic chronology moves between past and present in order to link abuse to various iterations of the home, to foreground the egregious violence the girls suffer, to link anger to the domestic realm, and ultimately, to write the members of FOXFIRE back into dominant narratives that largely exclude their lived experiences.

### ***Foxfire* and Nostalgia**

Svetlana Boym is at the forefront of renewed scholarly interest in nostalgia, and outlines restorative and reflective nostalgia as two loose trends within ways of looking at the past. Restorative nostalgia figures as a longing for a linear past grounded in hegemonic gender roles and untenable notions of home. Janice Doane and Devon Hodges argue that within American culture and politics,

dominant conceptions of nostalgia signal a desire for a past that “authenticates women’s traditional place” where “men were men, women were women, and reality was real” (qtd. in Greene 296). In contrast, reflective nostalgia points towards a “homesickness for a lost past” (Pickering and Keightley 922), but is mindful that this past might not have existed from the outset. Reflective nostalgia thus spans beyond a mere longing for simplicity, and points towards feelings of displacement in relation to a person, place, thing, or set of circumstances (Boym xiii). Reflective nostalgia is often symptomatic of an individual’s dissatisfaction with her current state. Pickering and Keightley explain that nostalgia is not “living in the past,” but rather, “can function as a dialogue between the past and the present” (923). This dialogue blurs the lines between the real and the imagined, problematizing claims to truth, authenticity, and interrupting the notion that we can write the past “as it happened.” Reflective nostalgia is fruitful for a number of reasons. In Boym’s words: “this typology of nostalgia allows us to distinguish between national memory that is based on a single plot of national identity, and social memory, which consists of collective frameworks that mark but do not define the individual memory” (xviii). My use of nostalgia in this paper follows Boym’s theorization, and when I use the term nostalgia, I understand it as what Boym would term reflective nostalgia.

This iteration of nostalgia is particularly relevant to my discussion as *Foxfire*’s narrative pattern and thematic content adhere to many of the hallmarks of reflective nostalgia. As the story unfolds, Maddy uses reflective nostalgia to move between past and present to interrogate dominant narratives surrounding FOXFIRE’s collective anger, to subvert widely held ideas about the gang, and to underscore her claim that “you must labor to invent History” (Oates 44), as truth is “not always recalled accurately” (196). For example, *Foxfire* begins as Maddy, now an adult, sifts through old journals, newspaper articles, notes, and memories in order to commit her FOXFIRE CHRONOLOGY to paper. As she writes, Maddy repeatedly contrasts her perspective as an adolescent with her perspective as an adult, creating a dialectic that functions as her “double-voiced narration,” which allows her “to present events through the eyes of the adolescent girls and her own younger self, and only then to pull back and present her mature perspective” (Cologne-Brookes 184). This shifting between past and present is possible through reflective nostalgia, which rebels against the modern notion of a linear timeline and unyielding progress. More specifically, reflective nostalgia oscillates between the past and the present to construct a complex narrative, in order to seek out forgotten details rather than construct a grand narrative of the past (Boym xviii). This dialectic allows Maddy to put the past in conversation with the present (Daly 15), and rather than organize her recollections into a linear narrative of fond memories linked to the home, Maddy’s dialectic brings unpleasant details to the forefront, giving voice to “the things you don’t want to

think about if you're female" (Oates 101). By committing these events to paper, and by contrasting dominant accounts of the past with FOXFIRE's perspective, Maddy revisits the past and writes FOXFIRE back into narratives from which the girls have long been excluded.

The vignette entitled "the strange episode of the DWARF-WOMAN" (Oates 195) is a striking and gruesome example of this process. Before narrating this sequence of events, Maddy warns her reader "it is an ugly nasty episode of utter mystery to me (why Legs got so involved, whether in fact she *did* get so involved as she claimed), I'd forgotten completely about it except looking through the notebook I suddenly remembered" (195). Here, Maddy undermines her own credibility as FOXFIRE's official scribe by suggesting that this episode might never have occurred, or that Legs might have exaggerated this story. Maddy thus invites her reader to consider whether "language can be trusted" (195), reminding her audience that hers is but one out of many possible narratives, and her chronology, like dominant notions of history and truth, must always be interrogated.

In this vignette, Legs comes across a ramshackle house outside of the city where a group of men hold a mentally and physically disabled woman captive. The woman wears a dog collar around her neck, which is attached to a wire stretching the length of the property so that she can move about the yard, but cannot leave. The woman introduces herself to Legs as Yetta, they chat briefly, and Legs wonders how the woman came to live under such horrific conditions (198). Later that week, Legs and Goldie return to the house, peer through the window, and witness

a sight they wished afterward they'd never seen . . . a four-poster bed, and the dwarf-woman is lying on it naked, spread-eagle . . . her wrists and ankles tied to the bed's four posters so her deformed body is completely exposed and completely open . . . and one by one men come into the room. And shut the door behind them (200).

Legs and Goldie watch through the window as three different men rape Yetta. Legs flies into a rage, demands that the men let Yetta go, and the men retort that she is happy living where she does (201). Legs sneaks back to the home the next night, finds cans of kerosene in the shed, douses the house in the flammable liquid, and sets the house ablaze with the men asleep inside (202-3).

While it is ambiguous whether Yetta or her abusers are able to escape the flames (or if Legs set the house on fire at all), it is clear that Legs's anger, and her corresponding desire to enact vengeance upon the men, leads her to commit shocking violence that traumatizes Maddy, even though Maddy did not witness it first-hand. Maddy commits these events to paper, and the graphic details she gives of Yetta's rape and confinement ensure that Yetta's story (or one possible version

of this story) is told. Here, Maddy contrasts the dominant narrative about Yetta, which reinforces ongoing rape myths (specifically, that Yetta enjoys being raped and confined) with her revision of these events. While she writes Legs and Yetta back into a story from which they had previously been erased by the logic that women invite and enjoy sexual abuse, this juxtaposition also suggests that the reader must question the veracity of this written account. We can also read Yetta's home as an extreme variation of the abuse all of the gang members endure in the domestic realm, and we can understand her mental and physical impairments as metaphorical representations of the devastating impact of this violence. Ultimately, these acts of writing and remembering are politically significant processes, as Susan Watkins explains "to make a traumatic event into a narrative is to turn the unspeakable spoken. This, in turn, helps the victim go beyond the dis-ease of individual suffering and become part of history" (105).

Oates's text is also characterized by reflective nostalgia though its interrogation of taken-for-granted notions such as truth and authority. For instance, Maddy continuously reflects on the process of writing history, and the corresponding instability of the self, of truth, and of authority (Daly 220). Maddy opens her chronology by asserting that her goal is to subvert dominant misconceptions about FOXFIRE, and describes her journal as a "secret document . . . in which Truth would reside forever" (Oates 3). Knowing that written documents make a claim to truth that other forms do not, Maddy feels that the act of writing history will provide her with a venue where "*distortions and misunderstandings and outright lies could be refuted*" (3). However, Maddy's entries soon show that the binary between truth and falsehood is not as clear as she initially states, and she repeatedly undermines her own claims, in one case by explaining that the memories she records are untrustworthy:

what is memory but the repository of things doomed to be forgotten, so you must have History. You must labor to invent History. Being faithful to all that happens to you of significance, recording days, dates, events, names, sights not relying merely upon memory which fades like a Polaroid print where you see the memory fading before your eyes like time itself retreating. (44)

Although Maddy expresses a desire to record "events not as [she] remember[s] them, but as they occurred" (195), she is implicitly acknowledging the subjective nature of memory, as she repeatedly shows that it is impossible to draw firm distinctions between one and the other. Maddy undermines herself once again by claiming that one invents "History," and goes on to ask her reader "can language be trusted?" (196), suggesting that a complete or comprehensive history is impossible: "for every fact transcribed in these CONFESSIONS there are a dozen facts. A hundred facts, my God maybe a thousand left out . . . can you tell the

truth if it isn't the *entire* truth—and what *is* truth?" (99). Following Boym, this ongoing negotiation of truth is characteristic of reflective nostalgia, and Maddy calls this process of naming truth only to disrupt it "the *paradox of chronology*" or, "being made to know that no thing can have happened without another thing preceding it and another preceding *that* to the very beginning of Time" (196). Here, Maddy's recollections are necessarily informed by her experiences, and she interprets each new event in light of those that came before. As she continues to grow and change, her recollections will follow suit. Like Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, which is grounded in an ever-changing truth, Maddy's *paradox of chronology* does not seek to establish a single true plot (or establish events "as they happened") as she initially claims, but rather allows her to explore and juxtapose different perspectives.

Maddy's narrative style is not only dialectical because she puts the past in conversation with the present, it also brings dominant beliefs about gender-based violence into a dialectic with FOXFIRE's opposing and collective viewpoint, thus allowing the girl gang to write themselves into history, particularly when dominant perspectives elide their experiences. For example, FOXFIRE designates men and adults as its primary enemies, as these groups are largely responsible for the misconceptions that circulate in Hammond about the gang. It initially appears that the distinctions between friend and foe are informed by age and sex. However, it is soon clear that other markers of identity, such as class, are the grounds upon which these lines are drawn. For example, when the girls are arrested for stealing a car, Maddy reflects "Lowertown girls, especially living around Fairfax Avenue, down by the river, you can bet we were arrested" (166). In this case, as poor young women, they are subject to police surveillance, and are punished for their crimes, whereas their affluent peers might have more freedom. This trend becomes clear if we explore Maddy's re-telling of the car theft in more detail. For example, in the wake of this theft, animosity towards FOXFIRE becomes widespread in Hammond, and the dominant discourse surrounding FOXFIRE frames the girls as a threatening group of delinquents, which erases the reasons why the girls banded together in the first place. Maddy has grown so accustomed to this trend that she groups her readers with FOXFIRE's enemies, and addresses them as follows: "you safe and snug and self-righteous thinking *juvenile delinquents—gang girls—little bitches—right?* Yeah I don't blame you. That's how most people in Hammond were thinking" (129). This public perception stands in stark contrast with the girls' self-perception, as they feel that FOXFIRE is a necessity that protects them from gender-based violence (8). However, as young women living in an economically deprived area, the girls lack the social capital to self-define as anything other than a public menace.

This is made clear on the day Legs is sentenced for the theft. During her hearing, Legs's father Abe testifies against her. Despite his general absence from

Legs's life, Abe tells the judge that he can no longer control his daughter, and attributes her actions to her mother's absence. When the judge asks if Legs is promiscuous, Abe only "stared at his shoes like he couldn't bring himself to answer" (133). Maddy angrily writes that Abe has a "reputation everywhere in Lowertown for his bad temper, his crazy-quick temper, propensity for fighting, drinking, drinking, drinking and problems with women and employers" (132). Despite his reputation, the judge interprets Abe's silence as an admission of his daughter's promiscuity, and Maddy recalls the absurdity of Legs, who abhors all men, being cast as promiscuous (133). In this case, the circumstances that have led to Legs's alienation from her father such as his addiction, his violent temper, and ongoing abuse are obscured by the familiar discourse of unruly and promiscuous young women deployed by Abe, and legitimized by the court's decision to convict Legs and send her to Red Bank Correctional Institute (132). The justice system proves to be a powerful site in the production of truth, particularly as it affirms the notion that women's sexualities are the property of men, legitimizing the surveillance of young women through the logic of promiscuity. Maddy recalls that *The Hammond Chronicle* reported the incident within the parameters of a special report on the growing problem of outlaw gangs in public schools (130). Maddy ultimately returns to this memory later in her chronology to recall her disgust with one editorial describing FOXFIRE "like we were part of some older guys' gang, actual criminals, car thieves or something" (166). In this case, not only does the discourse of promiscuous young women erase the violence that leads the girls to join FOXFIRE, the notion that FOXFIRE is an autonomous gang is also incompatible with dominant scripts of gangs being male-centered. Maddy's use of reflective nostalgia foregrounds the reality that the trial, the legal framework of incorrigible young women, and newspaper coverage of the theft reduce FOXFIRE to the sexual auxiliaries of male gangs. However, through her multifaceted narrative, Maddy mines through the past and sheds light on the details that led to the theft and Legs's subsequent sentencing, inserting their experiences and perceptions into a history from which they have largely been excluded by written documents, such as newspapers, that make a claim to truth.

Through reflective nostalgia, Maddy recalls the trial as well as news reports covering these legal procedures, and contrasts them with Legs's lived reality that was not addressed in court. The political utility of this process is striking, as it allows the girls to distinguish between allies and enemies for the purpose of self-preservation. However, Maddy once again undermines her credibility and her memories denote a refusal to acknowledge the reality that theft is, in fact, illegal. Rather, she and Legs justify the incident as "just riding" in the stolen car (131). However, we can also understand this refusal as an act of agency, as Maddy is choosing how to deploy her memories, and uses them to



foreground the circumstances, including sex and class, that allow FOXFIRE to be coded as criminal while allowing those she designates as enemies, such as Legs's father, considerably more freedom. Although Maddy appears to continually undermine her claims that FOXFIRE is not a criminal gang (particularly as car theft is a serious offense), reflective nostalgia allows her to contrast the prevailing narratives about FOXFIRE with the gang's counter narrative, illustrating that neither is entirely accurate.

### **Dialogical Memories and Foregrounding Anger**

*Foxfire's* nostalgic narrative pattern also allows Maddy to create an alternative narrative about Legs's anger, which is largely erased by the stereotypes mapped above. Maddy foregrounds Legs's anger through her dialogical narrative, and links it to the violence the girls suffer which would otherwise remain un-discussed. A significant example of this trend is when Maddy deploys reflective nostalgia to link Legs's anger to the gender-based abuse that marks Rita "Red" O'Hagan's childhood. Maddy writes about one particularly horrific incident, where Rita's two youngest brothers lure her to a clubhouse belonging to an adolescent gang; "captive there, Rita O'Hagan, twelve years old, was the object of certain acts performed upon her, or to her, or with her, for most of a long August afternoon" (25). This abuse is continuously normalized or ignored through the logic that by virtue of her beauty, her age, and her naïveté, Rita brings this violence upon herself. This abuse is also symptomatic of a broader social pattern in Hammond, as Maddy recalls, "to girls and women in the area, it was a time of violence against girls and women but we didn't have the language to talk about it then" (100). This violence is so pervasive, and is normalized to the extent that Maddy adheres to the dominant logic that women are complicit in sexual violence, and she views Rita, who is now molested by her teacher, with "disdain and contempt and even loathing . . . these things don't just happen to you, you let them happen" (26). As the feminist mouthpiece for the gang, Legs angrily chastises her friends for believing Rita participates in this abuse, telling them: "When that sonuvabitch picks on Rita you better tell yourself he's picking on you 'cause the fucker sure *would* if he *could*" and goes on to blame her gang-mates for letting the abuse happen because they knew about the assaults but did nothing to stop them. Legs's telling of an alternative truth allows Maddy to connect Legs's longstanding anger to the unrelenting threat of violence women in Hammond face, and she soon thinks "right away I could see the logic of that, so clear and so final it about took my breath away" (46). In this case, Maddy uses reflective nostalgia to revisit the past and to disrupt hegemonic norms, and draws connections between Legs's anger and this continued threat of violence. Maddy thus undermines dominant accounts about Legs that frame her anger as a natural inclination, or as the product of her role as the leader of a girl

gang. In the end, Maddy's recounting of Rita's multiple assaults writes Rita back into a dominant narrative that largely frames her as complicit in (or even soliciting of) the sexual abuse she endures.

The reality that women do not "ask" to be assaulted is harshly reaffirmed to Maddy when her uncle attempts to molest her as she tries to purchase a typewriter from him. Maddy is surprised that she would be vulnerable to sexual assault, telling Legs "but—I'm not Rita," to which Legs replies, "Oh Maddy-Monkey, shit—we're all Rita" (71). In this case, as she mines through the past, Maddy connects her own assault to the abuse Rita suffers, as well as to Legs's corresponding anger. Now cognizant that all women are vulnerable to violence, Maddy understands the root of Legs's anger, and is able to look to the various incidents in her past to make broader and more coherent connections between Legs's emotional responses and ongoing violence in Hammond. For instance, Maddy recalls that in the early days of FOXFIRE, Legs would get "worked up" about events that did not directly impact anyone she knew, such as a man who raped and strangled a young nursing student, a man who stabbed his pregnant wife to death, a masked man who killed eight girls and women over the course of fifteen months in upstate New York, and a man who slashed the face, body, and genitalia of a six year old girl to ribbons (100). In effect, Maddy initially thinks of these events as "things you don't want to think about if you're female, say you're a young girl or a woman you're *female* and that isn't going to change, right?" (101). While Maddy did not have the language to name this abuse as a teenager, as an adult, she is able to connect the notion that "we are all Rita" to Legs's being "worked up" or angry to the threat of violence they all face by virtue of being female. In this case, reflective nostalgia allows Maddy's to give voice to the experiences of many of the gang members where they otherwise would not have been recorded. It is important to note, however, that Maddy gives voice to these events once she has undermined her authority as FOXFIRE's official memory keeper. As a result, her use of reflective nostalgia and anger de-stabilize the seemingly neat binary between narrative and counter narrative, creating space for multiple and contradictory recollections of an event or a way of thinking.

### **Linking Anger to the Home**

Maddy also uses reflective nostalgia to link anger to FOXFIRE's lived experiences of violence that are normally concealed by the closed doors of the domestic realm. Reflective nostalgia is an ideal means to connect anger to the home because the home and nostalgia are inextricably linked: nostalgia literally means homesickness (Wilson 21). John J. Su explains that nostalgia signals the constructed nature of places, as "even the most personal and intimate of places, the home, can function as a site for such explorations" (22). This is significant, as once Maddy is able to use reflective nostalgia to renegotiate the home, she is able

to write new stories and histories. This project has important social justice implications, as Bidy Martin and Chandra Mohanty argue that home is often an illusion of coherence and safety that is grounded in the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and struggle (196). In this sense, the ongoing construction of the idyllic home relies on the repeated exclusion of stories that deviate from the domestic ideal, and as discussed above, the silencing of female voices. Capitalism plays an important role in this process, as Duyvendak argues “capitalism in the late 1970s was blamed for trapping women in the home—and profiting from their unpaid ‘reproductive’ housework—capitalism today is blamed for trapping women (and men) at work and not providing enough time to be at home” (45). Although he rightly shows how the social production of the home is a capitalist project, Duyvendak ultimately ignores the wealth of feminist theory that foregrounds the interplay of race and class that are integral to the myth of domesticity. The idyllic middle class home of the 1970s and beyond excludes racialized women and other minorities, and the current conception of the home as a consumer project relies on the labor of marginalized groups around the world. Although the home continues to figure prominently in restorative narratives of place and identity, Su and Boym’s analysis indicates that we can participate in nostalgic acts of constructing the home without re-articulating this myth. Specifically, while nostalgia means homesickness, the home that resides at the center of this longing or remembering does not necessarily have to adhere to these idealizations.

The intersections between gender, class, anger, and the hidden violence of the domestic realm figure prominently in *Foxfire*. For members of this girl gang, the home is not in shambles because of the absence of a maternal figure. Rather, the maternal figure is often responsible for abuse that is concealed within the home, or the home is a locus of violence from which the girls try to escape. Maddy recalls her childhood home as a dilapidated house where her mother sporadically appears from a drug-induced trance, displaying the horrific markers of a string of abusive relationships such as a black eye or a broken nose (Oates 58). Maddy eventually witnesses her mother “carried out of their house on a stretcher with the neighbors on the sidewalk staring . . . sobbing whimpering soiling herself like an infant” (101). Now lacking a legal guardian, Maddy lives with her aunt Rose Packer, who launches into regular diatribes against “the pack of notorious bitches sluts juvenile delinquents” (209) that comprise FOXFIRE. Maddy recalls that she paid her aunt every cent she earned as a hotel maid to cover the cost of room and board, which Rose charged her every month because her “mother is such a tramp” (208). In this case, Maddy’s memories do not adhere to the narrative of a mother (or ersatz maternal figure) presiding over the domestic space, but rather, home is a temporary dwelling governed by absent, abused, or abusive women.

Many of the others girls have similarly troubled domestic lives. Maddy writes how Rita's mother responded to her twelve year old daughter's sexual assault:

[she] screamed at her and slapped her and did not then, or subsequently, inquire of her what had happened that afternoon—whether anything had happened at all. Mrs. O'Hagan's primary concern was that her husband know nothing since Mr. O'Hagan . . . was inclined to melancholic binges of drinking and sporadic acts of violence, most of them domestic, when things troubled him. (26)

Not only does Rita's mother fail to protect her from harm (or even attempt to offer such protection), she perpetuates the notion that Rita brings this abuse upon herself, and punishes her for doing so. However, Maddy's chronology also unearths another hidden reality: Rita is the victim of an intergenerational cycle of abuse, and her mother's reaction must be understood in light of her own struggles with domestic violence. Without Maddy's use of reflective nostalgia to sift through the past in order to commit multiple perspectives to paper, both of these realities would remain untold.

Legs's household also deviates from the idyllic domestic norm, as she shares her home with an abusive alcoholic father rather than a maternal figure. Rather than an idyllic middle class house, Legs's place of residence figures as a

blurred passage of soiled wall paper, doorways, dim-lit rooms, rug remnants laid upon unpainted floorboards and gauzy curtain panels from Woolworth's or Grant's affixed at the windows with thumbtacks, there was an odor of cooking grease, there was an odor of cigarette smoke. (37)

Through reflective nostalgia, Maddy moves between time and perspectives to foreground the reality that “there wasn't one of us who was not, and had not been for some time, at odds with her family: or what passed for ‘family’ in our lives” (208). Maddy juxtaposes these descriptions with the purchase of FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD, and once again, she uses reflective nostalgia to connect anger and violence to girls' unstable lives at home. The members of FOXFIRE long to live together “like true blood-sisters . . . free and clear of all Others” (204), and buy a run-down house on the outskirts of Hammond and call it FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD. Legs and Muriel Ovis, her father's pregnant ex-girlfriend, orchestrate the purchase of the house, and as they negotiate the deed, Legs's anger surrounding the abuse they all endure at home becomes clear. Muriel is skeptical that moving into a filthy, ramshackle house is a sound financial decision, and accuses Legs of being “hot headed” “impulsive” and “extreme” (209-210) when

Legs refuses to reconsider the purchase. Legs angrily responds that she has been weighing the decision for a long time, and when Muriel demands to know how long, she retorts “all my fucking life, if you want to know” (211). In her narrative, Maddy moves directly between documenting the turmoil of living in Rose Packer’s home with this exchange between Legs and Muriel, illustrating that Legs’s anger is connected to all of their domestic troubles. However, FOXFIRE’s motive for buying a house to live away from their parents is obscured through the dominant media narrative that FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD is a criminal commune (247). Nevertheless, by moving between perspectives and through time, Legs’s anger makes it clear that their homes are the locus of alienation and abuse rather than a place of belonging, and that their “criminal commune” is a safe haven for the young women. Jan Duyvendak explores the emotions at work within dominant conceptions of the home, and explains “whether experienced as a haven or heaven, feeling at home is a highly selective emotion: we don’t feel at home everywhere, or with everybody. Feeling at home seems to entail including some and excluding many” (36). Following Duyvendak, FOXFIRE renegotiates home as a chosen place of belonging, and family becomes a group of “blood-sisters” rather than a heterosexual nuclear model. Where dominant accounts of FOXFIRE erase the benefits of forming FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD, Maddy’s dialectic narration moves between the past and present to re-write an alternative history of the gang. Moreover, like her negotiation of Yetta’s story, this re-writing functions as an act of agency: once Maddy has disrupted the notion that “truth” and “history” are possible entities, she is able to write her own version of the past that had previously excluded her viewpoint.

Finally, Maddy also uses reflective nostalgia to connect Legs’s anger to FOXFIRE’s inability to reproduce the middle-class domestic ideal. Once FOXFIRE takes possession of their house, the girls attempt to replicate what they think is a middle-class American dwelling. They purchase curtains, fabric, furniture, and appliances (212), and Maddy remembers that their beds were “outfitted . . . with nice sheets, real woolen blankets. Even bedspreads” (247). Although the girls have long believed that “the propertied bourgeoisie” are “class enemies” (93; 263), they attempt to adhere to this model of middle-class life. This contradiction is unsurprising, as Coontz explains that the white, middle-class family figures prominently in the creation and articulation of the myth of the idyllic American home. Not only are these families particularly well situated to act as the primary myth-makers in U.S. culture, the media transforms fragments of the white middle-class experience into truths, and into natural ways of organizing kin (6). Given their experiences in abusive homes, and their idealizing of living free from “Others,” it is clear that FOXFIRE does not have an alternative to the binary of either idyllic or abusive homes, nor are they immune to the attractive image of the middle-class American dwelling. While they problematize

this construct by living as sisters rather than as a nuclear family, they police the boundaries of their group by preventing outsiders from crossing the threshold into their domestic space—in one instance, preventing two Black women from joining the gang (Oates 223), a racist exclusion that causes tremendous strife among the gang members.

Despite their efforts to live independently, FOXFIRE cannot maintain their home on the paltry wages the girls can earn legally, and they must resort to stealing to make ends meet. Their collective inability to pay for their expenses foregrounds the reality that they cannot reproduce a middle-class home, and Legs feels intense anger as the result of this knowledge. For example, upon befriending Marianne Kellogg in a plot to kidnap her father, Legs wanders through the Kellogg's enormous home. The contrast between the Kellogg's home and FOXFIRE HOMESTEAD leaves Legs "disoriented for an instant, and overcome with an inexplicable rage. *How the fine handiwork of the poor, the exhaustion and depletion of their souls, slave-labor, wage-slave-labor, ends up ineluctably in the possession of the rich*" (268). Here, Legs makes the connection between the unpaid labor of the poor and the idyllic American home, and not only does her temper flare because FOXFIRE is unable to replicate this model, she is also deeply angry that this model is contingent upon the exploitation of others. Maddy reaffirms these connections as she moves between time and perspectives to contrast Legs's reaction to the Kelloggs' opulent home with Muriel's financial difficulties after she gave birth to a daughter who needs extensive medical care (224). Maddy explains that as FOXFIRE organizes their finances, Legs feels "a renewed almost white-hot fury at her father Abe: abandoning Muriel and his own baby daughter, the fucker. Already Muriel owes more than two thousand dollars in medical expenses and the end . . . isn't in sight" (225). Through the dialectic between past and present, Maddy is not only able to link Legs's anger to the unequal distribution of resources by contrasting the Kellogg's wealth with FOXFIRE's own desperate poverty, she is also able to illustrate that reflective nostalgia can foreground the experiences of marginalized groups for whom the middle-class American home is an impossibility. Maddy uses reflective nostalgia to tell a story that is erased or normalized through the dominant myth of the middle-class American home.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this paper, I have argued that reflective nostalgia allows Maddy to interrogate notions such as truth and history. Reflective nostalgia also enables Maddy to draw links between anger, violence, and the home. In the end, reflective nostalgia foregrounds the untenable nature of many taken-for-granted constructs that are central to American cultural mythology, and sets the stage for a telling and re-telling of the past. While I do not claim that the home is

necessarily the site of oppression and violence, revisiting these pervasive social constructs, like revisiting truth, history, and anger, creates space for more nuanced discussions of how these function in our daily lives. While I have briefly touched upon the function of anger in *Foxfire*, the broader implications of anger within Oates's work merit in-depth scholarly analysis. For example, Gavin Cologne-Brookes has skillfully mapped the ways popular reviews of *Foxfire* have tended to focus on Oates's angry narrative tone and characters. These reviews disparage Oates's writing style and violent content as shrill, denounce her as complaining, and accuse her of hating men (184). Cologne-Brookes's analysis foregrounds the reality that it is often difficult for women to express anger in public forums such as literature, and raises the question of how literary scholars can explore anger in Oates's work. In the end, Oates's narrative, and the nostalgic elements therein, force readers to interrogate long standing myths about gender-based violence, the home, truth, and history, setting the stage for more nuanced discussions of anger in her prolific body of work.

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