

Visual Narrative of Racial Identity and double Consciousness in *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*

Chun Ying

Southwest University, Chongqing, China

The issue of race is the focus of Oates' novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*. The racial identity metaphors in the photos in the novels show the characteristics of racial ideology. This paper argues that photographs are no longer used as external cultural metaphors, but as invisible references to racial prejudice and racial contradictions. This article re-examines Oates' racial issue writing in the form of visual narratives and considers the ambivalence of the dual identities and double consciousness of blacks in New York City in the late 1950s from the visual ethical interpretation of black identity awareness, and the perception of cruelty and violence of social inequality. The historical limitations of the harsh reality of racism make a critical intervention in visual ethics.

Keywords: racial identity, visual narrative, double consciousness

American contemporary prolific writer Joyce Carol Oates, in her 1990s novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, skillfully integrates photographs into literature. The creation accurately analyzes the racial issues related to the contradictory awareness of the dual identity and double consciousness of blacks in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It tells the story of Jinx, an excellent and introverted black boy, in case of an attempt to protect the white girl Iris, accidentally murdered a white boy Garlock who harassed her. Jinx should have got a scholarship to go to college, but he encountered a tragic fate since he was dragged in this murderer incident. In her novels, Oates reflects her allegory of racial discrimination and racial prejudice in the mainstream society of New York in the 1950s. In the whole process, she used many photographs to metaphorize racial discrimination and racial contradictions, showing the implicit racial issues and their ethical connotations in the form of photos and visual narration. This ethical connotation is not only continued in Oates' novels, but also of contemporary significance.

Based on Oates' novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, this paper examines the racial issues in northern New York, and interrogates how the racial discourse in American society in the late 1950s and early 1960s in the form of photographs, the harsh reality of violent racism, and the gulf between the two worlds-whites and blacks. As a new art form, photographs reflect the visual existence of American history at that time, a typical portrayal of the "new" historical experience of the United States, and a portrayal of the immediately available

visual memory of the past. Thus the camera served as a recorder of new social life in late 1950s to early 1960s America, writing about the transitional anxieties and cultural roots of new urban blackness.

The “black and white images” of the photos frequently appearing in the novel have become a symbol of racial contradictions and represent the confusion of black boy Jinx about his black identity and racial contradictions. Through “Photography”, this article does not focus on objective facts, but instead explores the construction of black racial identity, and the morphological characteristics of racial and cultural consciousness in New York City in the 1960s United States through the medium of visual narration in the form of photographs.

“Black Resentment” and Double Consciousness of New York Urban Blacks

As the fight against racism and segregation in 1960s America, *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, racial prejudice seemed entrenched widely and broadly. The body of a white boy Garlock Jr. floated frantically on the Cassadaga River flowing along the small town of Hammond in upstate New York. The photographer’s real-time shooting and local newspaper published photos seem to convey the news of Garlock Jr.’s death more concretely and intuitively to the unknowing Hammond locals. As Sontag puts it, “Photography has become one of the principal devices for experiencing something, for giving an appearance of participation.” (Sontag, 1973, p. 7).

Each photograph contains its own inner information that may not be immediately apparent on the surface. The photographs directly recount Garlock Jr.’s death by dead body photos, a real-time visual narration. Meanwhile, Photographs have an underlying visual narrative impetus, the authenticity of the content narrated in each frame and the traceable underlying realistic background. When whites read newspaper photos, their suspicion of the murderer is locked in the inexorable gangsters or blacks; while blacks are more inclined to the actions of gangsters, but not whites on first sense. In this case, these photographs and the published newspaper information reveal the contradiction between Jinx’s double consciousness, surrendering himself to atone for his “American” identity, or the sin and punishment brought about by his “black” identity.

The first half of *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* uses flashbacks to recount the events leading up to Garlock Jr.’s death. Iris, a 13-year-old white girl was tailed and harassed by Garlock Jr., a spiteful, deranged delinquent, while a 15-year-old black boy Jinx, in purpose to help and protect Iris, enraged by Garlock’s insulting and harassing to this white girl, in the middle of prevention, accidentally hit his head to death. Subsequently, in fear of incident of murder, Jinx dragged the body out and threw it into the Cassadaga River. Iris and Jinx bound by the murder since that on, live onward both carrying their own “crime” because of guilt.

The rest of the book is about the aftermath impact of Garlock’s death to two teenagers involved: a white girl Iris Courtney and black boy Jinx Fairchild, a promising basketball scholarship student. Iris lives at the poorest end of the white neighborhoods, Jinx at the best end of the black neighborhoods. The invisible color lines of race cut the two families into two completely different worlds; yet there is a strange, essentially secluded connection. Resentment, passion, and guilt form a bond between the two, at first tacitly, and then slowly, year after year, the inevitable ‘black and white’ existence. Iris later realizes that part of the reason Jinx intentionally injured himself during the basketball game and drop out of school was his guilt towards Garlock Jr.’s death, and that his scar was imprinted through compensation or self-punishment. In fact, for Jinx, both Iris and Garlock Jr. are white people

who make him “resentful”. He attempt to tell his grievances to his father, however, once again uncover his father’s old dismissal scar.

In a blind rush of words Jinx says, Pa, I made this mistake, I guess. About three weeks ago. Was in Chaney’s just closing up and this girl came running in. Jinx hesitates. Should he say the girl was white?

Is that part of the story? White girl, he says weakly. I don’t know her really well, but I know her some. A nice girl. Couple years younger than me. And she was scared. said there was this guy, this nasty mouth guy from the neighborhood, after her.

And. Jinx pauses again. He’s beginning to sweat. His father’s big hand is on his shoulder now and his father’s eyes have a look of retreating, contracting. Jinx senses that after hearing the words white girl his father stopped listening. (Oates,1990, p. 143)

Jinx’s father’s silence is the trauma of his early “accusations of blackness.” He is unjustly accused by a parent for acting as a “molester” who reached his “dirty black hand” to a little white girl, just because being a black janitor. No surprise, he was forced to leave his job and go home with the “shame” of “black men molesting white girl.” So, when jinx’s ‘mistakes’ for a white girl, his father Woodrow apparently unable to digest anymore, and the tolerating “white scars” was unfolded again, which had been his years’ efforts to heal his racial wounds. However, coincidently, his son was caught in the same predicament of “white girl”. His father’s scar is “inherited” to his son Jinx’s to confuse his double consciousness and racial identity, which obscures his sense of identity and deepens his “resentment” towards white people.

He’s thinking, he hates white people.

White men, especially. Just hates them, as if the color of their skin is their fault cause it’s their choice while the color of his skin isn’t. He’ll go to the police, even if they’re the white police. white fuckers. Tell them the truth of all that happened, even if he doesn’t re ally re member. And if he is tried as a murderer, and if he is sentenced to die in the electric chair must be, it’s only what God commands. (Oates,1990, pp. 159-160)

Above description is of Jinx’s hates and abhor to white people. Killing a white man made him feel much less guilty than he hated the color of his skin. The famous sociologist, civil rights activists W.E.B. Du Bois used the term “double consciousness” in an article titled “Strivings of the Negro People”. In his book, *The Souls of Black Folk*,¹ “It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (Du Bois, 2007, p. Xiii). Jinx’s “double consciousness” is between being an “American” to protect Iris, a white girl who is harassed, and being a “black” to ignore whites’ help seeking. He chose the former and saved Iris as an

¹ A number of scholars have traced possible sources for Du Bois’ adoption of this term both in the American Transcendentalism of Emerson and in the ‘new psychology’ of Du Bois’ former teacher William James. See esp. Rampersad, *Art and Imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*, 68-90; Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., ‘W. E. B. Du Bois and the Idea of Double Consciousness’, *American Literature* 64/2 (June 1992), 299-309; and Shamoan Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888-1903*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 153-168.

“American”, which resulted in a humiliation of his “black” identity. Therefore, he chose to “give up” the good life with the “sin” even when he did good things with his “black” identity consciousness.

In school, at work, riding the city bus, drifting off to be by himself, Jinx Fairchild steals these quick shy glances at his hands.

It’s as if he has never really looked at them before. The dark brown skin with its faint oily-red sheen, the pinkish palms, light nails.

Such moments, he’s fascinated to realize that being brown-skinned is an ambiguous thing, as if his skin’s color could fade or wear out. (Oates, 1990, p. 127)

Du Bois’ description of “two souls struggling in a dark body”, citing Goethe’s theory as its basis, is like Faust’s anguished cry “Two souls, alas! Living in my breast, each repels its brother” (Bruce Jr., 1992, pp. 299-309). When Jinx sees Garlock’s bleeding white body, he can’t tell if it’s his own black soul or another evil soul has redeemed the white man. Jinx’s interpretation of black and white skin color comes from self-identity doubts, doubts about one’s own blackness, indignation at the opposition between black and white blood. Obviously, these doubts are undoubtedly the catalyst for the formation and condensation of the contradictory nature of Jinx’s double consciousness of his identity.

Since 19th century photography technology in the embedded development, especially to the middle of the 20th century, American culture has gradually built on the notion that the American people are willing to accept the photographic image as visual narration of everyday life, the subjective representation is consistent with the print culture by the idea of personal consciousness filtering text, pictures, Providing an objective, comprehensive picture of time and place. In Sontag’s words, “Photography means that if we accept the world as it is recorded by the camera, we also understand the world. But this is the opposite of understanding, which starts from not accepting the world as it is..... Only narrative can make us understand” (Sontag, 1973, p. 23). photographs take the place of actual historical experience, and the experience of photographs is equated with the actual scenes depicted by life.

Iris shows Jinx a Civil War photo collected by her uncle Leslie’s photography studio. This detailed photo narrative highlights the contradictory of Jinx’s double consciousness of his racial identity.

It’s a sepia tinted photograph, very old, measuring about six inches by eight, on stiff cardboard backing. a photograph of the Civil War.

Stiffly posed across a rural bridge, reflections sharp in the water and sky, in the background massed with junglelike foliage, are a band of Union soldiers, some on horseback, most on foot, and among the foot soldiers are several black men, uniformed like the rest. The caption, in faded ink, reads Military bridge across the Chickahominy, 1864.

Jinx Fairchild doesn’t feel any kinship with the black soldiers in the photograph. He sees to his surprise that one or two of them look younger than he. just boys. But he doesn’t feel any particular kinship. A black man in uniform troubles his soul, for you got to figure, in North America at least, it’s the Man’s uniform he’s wearing; just one other way for the Man to exploit. use up suck dry discard. Jinx doesn’t think of ancestors, and he sure doesn’t think of freed slaves. (Oates, 1990, pp. 188-190)

Visual narrative of the fascinating history of the civil war photos, unable to recover the scene in words were retained faithfully by photographs, helps blacks in the 20th century clearly obtain the encounters and endurance of blacks in the civil war illustrating the civil war events behind the photo.

Regardless of the photographer's intention in photos, Iris views white soldiers and black slaves equally fighting for American revolution. While for Jinx's view, black soldiers for American revolution and black slaves' independence too. Iris' statements inflict heavily on Jinx's double consciousness. It is the fuse that triggered Jinx's contradictory definition of his identity and that of his black compatriots. Are these black men in Civil War uniform only entitled to the status of African American slaves? For Jinx, it is hard to tell whether he should be proud or ashamed of the blacks in uniform in the civil war photos. Iris' question punctured the core of "black American" identity, re-wounding the identity that blacks had constructed in Jinx's mindset. The paradox of double consciousness lies in Jinx's being an "American" or a "black", or the "black" identity of the descendants of African black slaves. He was uncertain whether blacks like Jinx had to carry the identity tag of being descended from African slaves in the whites' mind? Are they still unable to identify themselves as "Americans"? The contradiction of double consciousness is vividly demonstrated in a series of changes, such as Jinx's indifferent attitude towards Iris, giving up the university scholarship, and ended by the enrollment of the Vietnam War. In last chapter, there is a particular arrangement of Jinx's photo taken at Leslie's photo studio before his Vietnam War dispatch, which is tightly matching up with the old photo of black Civil War black soldier's Iris showed to him on bus. Jinx designedly packed this special photo in an envelope for Iris.

The young black man in the photograph, formally, even a bit stiffly posed, in his dress uniform, hands clasped against his knees, hat smartly set on his head, was certainly Jinx Fairchild: the shock of seeing him after so long, of seeming empowered to look, in an instant, into his eyes, ran through Graice and left her weak. (Oates, 1990, pp. 402-403)

From the Civil War photos of black soldiers to Jinx's Vietnam War photos, as Oates Outlines in the novel, there is a vague sense that the choice of black fate seems to be inextricably linked. Jinx's fate changes dramatically and drastically by dropping out of school, rushing marriage, toiling work, enrollment of the Vietnam war army, and father's unemployment. These portray the 1960s New York city blacks attempt for the transformation of identity. The Civil War black soldier in the photograph can only "remember" their experience through the stories, images, and memories. But these experiences were delivered so deeply and emotionally to Jinx's generation of urban blacks that it seemed as if they themselves constituted memories of a sense of dual identity and double consciousness. As Susan Sontag put it, "cameras are particularly good at recording 'the wounds of time'... Through photographs, we trace the reality of how people age in the most intimate and disturbing way possible." (Sontag, 1973, pp. 120-121). As the timeline of slavery, Civil War and segregation events progressed, the camera recorded the process of African Americans' evolution from single identical consciousness to double consciousness in the form of photographs. The challenge for Jinx's generation of black New Yorkers is to acknowledge and accept that they have distanced themselves from previous traumatic events. Literally, trauma is not so easily contained. It seeps out boundaries and connects different subjects. The genetic trauma passed on through the evolution of their consciousness. Photographs serve as a medium of historical communication, photographic images that have survived mass destruction and outlived their subject, as an irretrievable past world. Photographs are evidence of the past, indexed to the object in front of the lens. But they

also quickly acquire symbolic meaning, so that they are not just themselves, but beyond themselves. America's Civil War is one of the most widely photographed historical events of its time, yet like many extreme events, it is remembered by a handful of iconic images. Historical events have made Jinx's generation of New York blacks strive to understand and accept the merging of double consciousness. It is not hard to see that in the novel, the black soldiers in the old Civil War photos that Iris shows to Jinx, and the photo of Jinx leaves to Iris for the Vietnam War after various twists and turns, the black service in the Civil War photos is a reflection of his struggle of identity consciousness, that is, African "blacks" or "the Americans", the contradiction lies in his double consciousness of identity in a way of collision and mental battle. In the end, he chose the former, unable to face the contradictory bondage of his double consciousness.

Visual Narration of Racial Dual Identity

Compared with the past, a series of significant changes have taken place in the consciousness of dual identity of New York upstate blacks, which is manifested as the sense of identity loss and transparency. In addition to the above superficial psychological feelings, there is also a more complex psychological state: black people are self-denying and internalizing white values. This ideology, if deepened, has the potential to exacerbate identical anxiety. Blacks with dual identity still feel strong sense of threat and fear, Jinx, his father, brother, and Percia's mulatto boyfriend have the uncertainty of identity consciousness.

In middle age Leslie Courtney has become increasingly convinced that, by way of his camera, he can locate God. he can at least love God.

People think he's crazy enough: lanky, on stork's legs, two-day beard, scuffed enoc casins and rumpled trousers and gold rimmed schoolboy glasses, popping up everywhere in town with his camera, asking May I? Do you mind?

The conversations are preliminary to, often accompanying, his taking of their photographs. (Oates, 1990, pp. 208-209).

Photographer Leslie, Iris' uncle, is a white man realizes that photographs can help to construct and influence identity and promote the exchange of ideas and beliefs between blacks and whites. Among many forms of visual communication, photographs can reflect and promote specific ideologies. Under the guidance and interpretation of the narrative, the picture is easier to read and understand. In addition, narrative techniques can increase the narrative potential or narrativity of images, and photo descriptions can serve as one or more instances in the narrative (Short, Leet, & Kalpaxi, 2020. pp. 118-120).

In Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* (Williams, 1958), the transformation from agricultural to industrial society brought about unprecedented conceptual change and identity anxiety. The individual histories of Jinx and Luther King are isomorphic, while the official deviant ideology of white people represented by Duke on the existence of black Americans and the domination consciousness of white supremacists on black people in new cities still occupy the dominant position. In contrast to Duke, white people represented by Leslie have an understanding and affirmation of the existence of the new generation of urban blacks as "Americans". Although the skin color and race line between whites and blacks in the United States uncrossable, need a long-term adaptation of the historical events, but the photos appear to have increased in the framework of tolerance between different skin color, and pulling closer the anxiety and preferences of identity of blacks and whites, although there

will be a sense of identity distance of white and black. Whites stereotyped blacks as slaves because of their earlier historical context; Blacks themselves could not get rid of the slave identity of their historical passages, and easily transformed into an independent subject of “American” identity.

Photographer Leslie’s montage of photographs contain individual portraits of children, black and white, within a tree of life, conveying messages of broad social consanguinity and interdependence. Hundreds of “black and white” faces framed photo are not only an inorganic, modern society needs, mechanical reproduction of filter items, but also a deep reflection of the white and black social existence of the visual identification. Photographic critics such as Susan Sontag, Stuart Hall and Alan Trachtenberg have explored the ways in which photographs hide the mechanics of their production. The fact that photographs are part of a wider discourse structure, precisely speaking, what is obscured in the production of images that work in the shadows to ensure the dominant ideology (Barthes, 1981, pp. 56-60). The static narrative of photos is spiritual comfort and medicine for people. The function of photos is not only the picture mode, but also the dynamic story, memory or idea preserved in photos. It is a static preservation mode of dynamic stories. Barthes believes that photograph makes me appear like another person, and the sense of identity is distorted and divided (Jordan, 1993. pp. 73-74). These black “orphans” in the social and race wars all yearn for belonging and self-possessed identity. Needless to say, New York in the 1960s seemed to be hard to tolerate enslaved black Africans co-existing with “old landowner” whites. The marginalization of blacks as single African slaves in a city where whites and blacks lived together was the norm in New York in the 1960s. Leslie’s self-examination of racial differences lies in putting black and white people in the same picture frame, so that a unique relationship will emerge, which has the power to sustain for life. Perhaps like Leslie’s belief in art, what is works of art, photography, great traditions? Black and white photographs of the Christmas tree metaphor blacks and whites’ childish innocence and the expectation of harmonious coexistence, and Leslie’s “empathy” to blacks in the photos of unusual expression, rather than adults in the reality of racial struggle between different skin colors, photos can contact as a black and white on the ethical level of neutral medium. A photo can be of two different skin colors of white and black together. Leslie, as a photographer, knows that photographs are regardless of color and racial differences have a beauty that strike something deep in nature of human.

According to Martha Feynman, professor of law and interdisciplinary studies, at this moment in American history, there is a great need to emphasize our collective interdependence, because there can be no society unless we acknowledge the constant need for care, not only between individuals or within families (Fineman, 2005, pp. 179-192). Oates has long promoted similar ideas in critical essays and interviews. In 1972, she told Newsweek’s Walter the Devil, “We’re connected—it looks like we’re separate, but we’re not”.

Conclusion

Timothy Adams argues that “transforming actual photographs into literary descriptions” enables them to “overcome an inherent feature of photographs which is fixed point of view”, thus providing them with a variety of interpretive possibilities and cultural works (Adams, 2000, p. 73).

The novel *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* seems to be a broad narrative and reflection on the increasing racial and social tensions in the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the racial issue was still unresolved, and a reconsideration of the racial issues raised in Oates’s novels. The intervention of

photographs in the text guides the reader to learn to “see” in the process of “reading”, supplementing, and enriching the reading experience and perception on another level. Oates’ clever application of visual narrative, and expressed her perspectives on image, text, language in the race, and in accordance with the method of “text-image” to construct the unique racial discourse and the 1960s New York blacks’ double consciousness struggle. Photograph is no longer regarded as a metaphor for external culture, but as a concrete and perceptible object of cognition and aesthetics.

By cherishing with a photographic eye what remains unspoken, unconcealed, unrevealed—the darkness and pain of the heart—it is not embarrassed by the revelation of guilty secrets. In this gloomy atmosphere, all kinds of problems emerge one after another. What is the self? How is identity formed? Must a person’s past or origin be preserved and recognized, or discarded like a dilapidated house or a dirty neighborhood? Oates’s early works not only focus on the distortion of the inner world of the characters, but also begin to explore the nature of ethics from the multiple narratives of science, religion, psychology, and literature.

This paper attempts to analyze the double consciousness of blacks in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the introduction of photographs in the text can be a return of sensibility, which operates through the immersion of the audience and is a kind of unmediated communication. It outlines the process and growth of the blacks in New York City in the late 1950s and early 1960s in pursuit of the ethical freedom of dual identity. The photograph, as a metaphor, becomes the carrier and cultural characteristics of this change. In the process of identification, reflection, and irony of the “American” identity of blacks, the real identity recognition and the reconstruction of the real subjective consciousness.

References

- Adams, T. D. (2000). *Light writing & life writing: Photography in autobiography*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Barnaby, E. (2018). *Realistic critique of visual culture*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bruce, Jr. D. D. (1992). W. E. B. Du Bois and the idea of double consciousness. *American Literature*, 64(2), 299-309.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (2007). *The souls of black folk*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fineman, M. A. (2005). Cracking the foundational myths: Independence, autonomy, self-sufficiency. In M. A. Fineman and T. Dougherty (Eds.), *Feminism confronts homo economicus: Gender, law, and society*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- Jordan, S. M. (Ed.). (1993). *Broken silences: Interviews with black and white women writers*. Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP.
- Mirzoeff, N. (2002). *The visual culture reader* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1980). *The language of image*. Chicago: The UP of Chicago.
- Oates, J. C. (1990). *Because it Is bitter, and because it is my heart*. New York: Dutton.
- Rampersad, Arnold. (1990). *Art and imagination of W. E. B. Du Bois*. Cambridge: Harvard University press.
- Reynolds, P. (Ed.). (1973) Novel images: Literature in performance. *Film and literature* (Vol. 4). New York: Routledge.
- Short, M., Leet, S.-K., & Kalpaxi, E. (2020). *Context and narrative in photography* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Sontag, S. (1973). *On photography*. New York: Rosettabooks.
- Williams, R. (1958). *Culture and society 1780-1950*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc..
- Zamir, S. (1995). *Dark voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American thought, 1888-1903*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.