

“You”: A Girl amidst Images and Sounds of Adult Violence in Joyce Carol Oates’s *Rape: A Love Story*

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Teena Maguire and her child, Bethie, are brutally attacked and beaten by a mob of violent young men in a park at night. While the mother is gang raped and nearly killed, the daughter is both the witness and the victim of physical and psychological violence. Through its innovative second-person narration, Joyce Carol Oates’s novella *Rape: A Love Story* (2004) contributes to her sustained interest in family relationships, violence, crime and justice. However, rather than focusing on the victim of the rape, Oates writes a coming-of-age story that explores the daughter’s trauma, posttraumatic stress disorder and fight for survival, a struggle that coincides with the girl’s critical passage from childhood to adulthood. During the months after the assault, Bethie’s innocence is also repeatedly violated by the aggressors’ intrusion into her life and the hostility of the community in the town of Niagara Falls and its social institutions, such as police, school, media, healthcare and the judicial system. Unable to cling to girlhood or to find maternal protection, her forced witnessing of her mother’s gang rape compels Bethie to mature too early while experiencing her first love for a man.

Keywords: gang rape; second-person narration; trauma; recovery; adolescence; Joyce Carol Oates

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“Tú”: una niña entre imágenes y sonidos de violencia adulta
en *Rape: A Love Story*, de Joyce Carol Oates

Teena Maguire y su hija Bethie son atacadas y golpeadas por una furiosa manada de jóvenes de noche en un parque. Mientras la madre es violada en grupo y casi asesinada, la hija es testigo y víctima de violencia física y psicológica. A través de su innovadora narración en segunda persona, *Rape: A Love Story* (2004) confirma el interés de su autora Joyce Carol Oates por las relaciones familiares, la violencia, el crimen y la justicia. No obstante, en lugar de centrarse en la víctima de la violación, Oates escribe un *Bildungsroman* centrado en el trauma, el estrés postraumático y la lucha por sobrevivir de la hija, una batalla que coincide con el momento crítico de su transición de la niñez a la edad adulta. Durante los meses posteriores a la agresión, la inocencia de Bethie se ve ultrajada en repetidas ocasiones por la intrusión de los atacantes en su vida y la hostilidad de las instituciones de la comunidad de Niagara Falls: policía, escuela, medios de comunicación, sanidad y sistema judicial. Imposibilitada de aferrarse a la infancia o a la protección materna, el hecho de haber presenciado la violación en grupo sufrida por su madre fuerza a Bethie a madurar prematuramente mientras experimenta el amor hacia un hombre por primera vez.

Palabras clave: violación en grupo; narrativa en segunda persona; trauma; recuperación; adolescencia; Joyce Carol Oates

There is a cop who is both prowler and father:
 he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers,
 had certain ideals.
 You hardly know him in his boots and silver badge,
 on horseback, one hand touching his gun.
 You hardly know him but you have to get to know him:
 he has access to machinery that could kill you.
 [...]

And so, when the time comes, you have to turn to him,
 the maniac's sperm still greasing your thighs,
 your mind whirling like crazy. You have to confess
 to him, you are guilty of the crime
 of having been forced.
 "Rape"
 (Rich 1973a, 44-45)

1. INTRODUCTION: WHO IS THE STORY'S PROTAGONIST?

In 1996, after the Fourth of July fireworks, thirty-five-year-old Teena Maguire is gang raped and left for dead by a mob of angry party boys in a boathouse by a lagoon in Rocky Point Park in the town of Niagara Falls (New York State). For Teena, the aftermath of this phallic rage and attempted murder is the initial danger of death, eternal weeks of convalescence in hospital and lifelong physical sequelae. In addition, she is forced to attend a humiliating preliminary hearing as there is a risk the attackers will be acquitted otherwise, while enduring the already condemnatory verdict of unsympathetic townspeople that she is a "hooker" (Oates 2004, 54), guilty of desiring, and therefore deserving, to be sexually assaulted by a pack of all-American boys. Oates's factual narration of these events is occasionally intertwined with media reports by journalist characters, as well as the rape victim's disjointed flashbacks of anger, fear, fragility, verbal inarticulateness and emotional numbness—all of them capturing a blurry self-portrait of a woman wishing to surrender and withdraw, to sleep and die. The sudden "happy ending" for this story is Teena's presumed forgetting of her ordeal and ultimate reconstruction of her love life despite an uneven landscape of worldly justice: the escapes, deaths and jail sentences eventually imposed upon her multiple rapists. Nevertheless, the fate of the physical victim of rape is not at the heart of Joyce Carol Oates's *Rape: A Love Story* (2004). This work of fiction does not focus on the case of the sexually abused woman Teena, although her traumatic experience can certainly resonate with female readers, whether they are survivors of sexual assault themselves or they engage in the act of imagining what rape is like from a position of relative safety—in fact, Kate Kellaway holds that Oates's novella is intended for "every woman who has ever feared rape or experienced it and for all the women who

have seen their attackers walk free from court” (2005). However, Teena is not Oates’s main character; indeed, she mostly remains a voiceless, dormant, unintelligible figure who vanishes from her own story or else she is prejudicially depicted through the insults and negative accounts of third parties and social institutions, which degrade, nullify and symbolically beat her for months after she is gang raped. Instead, Oates privileges the narrative filter of the other victim and survivor of sexual trauma: Teena’s prepubescent daughter Bethie, whose eyes and ears are forced to see the darkness and hear the roar of adult violence and then endure the social stigma of her mother’s rape. Although Bethie escapes and hides from her attackers, she is also virtually gang raped through her experience as an auditory witness to the sexual assault suffered by her mother. In fact, the purpose of this article is to argue that Bethie is the novella’s true protagonist. For some time, her girlish innocence is collectively violated by the group of neighbors that raped her mother, who constantly menace her physically, and by the psychological harm inflicted on her by US social agents, such as hospital staff, policemen, school workers, journalists and judicial system employees.

Oates’s prolific writing career chronicles the history and social reality of the US in the second half of the twentieth and the early twenty-first century. The notions of crime and justice, as well as the detrimental effects of criminality on its victims, are central to her fiction (Tromble 2016, 2). Many of her novels and stories also involve women, particularly mothers and daughters, with an emphasis on their—harmonious or conflictive—relationships. Mothers in Oates’s work are typically strong, cold and self-sufficient, while daughters—the subject of Oates’s particular narrative attention—are introspective, fragile and insecure (Creighton 1978, 165). As one of the most harmful experiences of women’s victimization within patriarchal societies, the rape of adolescent girls haunts Oates’s imagination. This theme is at the heart of her anthologized short stories “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (1970a) and “The Girl” (1976a), as well as her novel *We Were the Mulvaney*s (1996). Conversely, it is a middle-aged woman who is sexually assaulted in “Naked” (1991a), which refutes the notion that sexual abuse only affects youth and insists that in fact it remains a pervasive risk for the entire female population regardless of age. In the twenty-first century, the author has expanded her sustained interest in crime-and-justice and mother-daughter narratives with the astonishing tour de force *Rape: A Love Story*.

As already mentioned, in this novella Oates identifies two victims of gang rape, Teena and her daughter Bethie. Interestingly, she intermittently opts for second-person narration both to address and to refer to her novella’s true protagonist, the young girl: “You were Bethel Maguire everybody called Bethie. Your childhood ended when you were twelve years old” (Oates 2004, 17). This unusual type of narrative can be understood as a *double address* because although readers are not addressed directly by the author, they may feel addressed and so imagine themselves in the place of the protagonist or even accept the fiction of themselves being the protagonist of the story (Reitan 2011, 147, 170-71). Thanks to Oates’s decision to use the personal pronoun “you,” Bethie

and the reader “become” one sole person, whereas the traditional third-person narration would have limited readers to the role of spectators and mere witnesses to the crime and its harrowing aftermath, with the main character being unquestionably Teena, the adult victim of the sexual assault. Kenneth Millard holds that youth, together with the ideal of youthful innocence and the subordination of young individuals to institutional authority, enables many adult writers to express their own desires and anxieties about their social position, as well as address the most pressing problems of the contemporary world (2007, 12-13). In this light, Oates arguably chooses to focus on Bethie, instead of her mother, both to denounce the sexual vulnerability of women in the US and to make her the imagined embodiment of the hope of overcoming the stigma of female victimhood in the nation’s future. In fact, this article reads *Rape: A Love Story* as a coming-of-age novella about Bethie’s painful adolescence and her ultimate growth towards trauma recovery, rather than simply as a report of Teena’s ordeal. Although Bethie’s passage into adulthood is marred by the vicarious experience of her mother’s rape and social discrimination, in eventually writing and narrating her own story, she demonstrates her strength and courage to survive. Her story is also done “justice” in other ways that are discussed in detail below and that have to do with her infatuation with John Dromoor, the policeman who seems to protect her and her mother. Apart from some book reviews and a poorly received film adaptation, little attention has been paid to *Rape: A Love Story*.¹ This article aims to contribute to filling that gap by approaching Oates’s novella through the lens of trauma and rape studies.

2. THE RAPE OF A GIRL’S CHILDHOOD INNOCENCE

Traditionally, the narration of rape focuses on the male assault and enhances the woman’s powerlessness as a victim, but the placement of sexual abuse at the beginning of a story also suggests that this crime is “a necessary milestone” for her “in order to achieve maturity” (Atkins 2002, 435). To avoid the conventional literary script of the centrality of the rape scene, in *Rape: A Love Story* the brutal assault is peripheral and nonsequential. Beyond a concise report of the before and after of the sexual crime, Oates does not maintain the chronology of events and omits many details in her description of the gang rape that, even in the first few pages, readers possibly anticipate is to come. Instead, the author prioritizes the aftermath of sexual violence and concentrates the readers’ attention on the brutal violation of Bethie’s childhood innocence and on how this traumatic experience forcibly accelerates her psychological maturation. Indeed, Oates’s story emphasizes that Bethie suffers both physically and emotionally at the hands of her mother’s aggressors, while tracing her transitional life stages from being a helpless child to becoming an adult survivor of violence.

¹ The Hollywood movie *Vengeance: A Love Story* (2017) directed by Johnny Martin and starring Nicolas Cage, Anna Hutchinson and Talitha Bateman.

Readers can, by themselves, reconstruct the sequence of events without any detailed chronicle of the sexual assault from the author. Minutes before midnight, Bethie is reluctant to abandon the Fourth of July party in town but has to obey her mother, who shortcuts their way home through the poorly illuminated, deserted Rocky Park Point. By 1:25 a.m., Bethie believes that Teena has been murdered by her attackers, but she has managed to seek help and the police have already cordoned off the crime scene around the park's boathouse. Readers can fill in Oates's intended narrative elisions to infer that, in the intervening time, mother and daughter are ambushed near the lagoon and that Teena is gang raped. Contrary to popular belief, sexual assaults are generally planned and are committed by average men who are often acquainted with their victims (LeGrand 1973, 941). First, a group of male adults with "familiar faces" (Oates 2004, 27) block Teena's way home with her daughter. The mother unsuccessfully attempts to converse and joke with these young men, who are high on alcohol and drugs and low on reason and pity. Her maternal instinct drives Teena to sacrifice her own physical integrity to protect her child when she realizes that the gang rape is inevitable: "Don't hurt my daughter please she's just a little girl, okay, guys? [...] let her go" (28). The mother, however, fails to placate the aggressors' sexual fury against their two targets, although Bethie fiercely resists: she screams, fights and kicks the men clutching at her and trying to gag her. Before she manages to crawl away and hide behind the stacked canoes in the boathouse, one of the rapists fondles her: "So small-boned, so skinny. No breasts, no hips. Not enough female flesh to grab on to" (29). Her premenarchal anatomy saves her from being raped; instead, her aggressor joins the "pack of dogs" (27) in their brutal assault on Teena's adult female body. Even so, Bethie is still also the victim of the gang rape. Indeed, the psychological torture of hearing her mother being savagely assaulted for thirty minutes reverberates painfully in her brain:

They would grab your mother's slender ankles, spread her legs violently as if they wished to tear her legs from her body. They laughed at her cries of pain [...]. They had torn your mother's clothes from her body as if the female's clothes infuriated them. They spat in your mother's face as if her beauty infuriated them. They yanked at your mother's hair wishing to pull it out by the roots. One of them would gouge repeatedly at her right eye with his thumb, wishing to blind her [...]. They straddled your mother's limp body and jammed their penises into her bleeding mouth and into her bleeding vagina and into her bleeding rectum. (Oates 2004, 30)

Here Oates describes what Bethie cannot in fact see from her hiding place but hears without understanding, because as a girl she lacks any sexual knowledge. Bethie is too young and naïve to know the meaning of rape, although she intuits its evilness. Indeed, the terrifying noises of kicking, thudding and thrashing, together with Teena's shouts and weeping and the savage laughs, roars and howls of her aggressors, signify to Bethie that her mother is being brutally slaughtered. While Teena's "unresisting

flesh" (30) reveals her state of defenselessness and surrender, her daughter feels helpless as soon as she realizes that she is only a girl and so cannot fight against adult male attackers and protect her mother from their violence and murder. At the same time, in the excerpt above Oates also addresses her intended adult readers and pulls at their emotions without explicitly referring to them. Unlike Bethie, they probably have a clear understanding of what a rape scene is like and so can imagine or even vicariously experience the mental ordeal of witnessing the rape of one's mother.

Bethie's childhood ends and her trauma begins at this point. Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "a wound not inflicted upon the body but upon the mind" (1996, 3), "an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events" (5) that are not fully assimilated in the moment when they occur and the response to which is often the delayed, uncontrolled repetition of intrusive phenomena (11). As Suzette A. Henke notes, there is abundant evidence confirming that women tend to manifest symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) after a crisis precipitated by rape or childhood sexual abuse (2000, xii). In her novella, Oates privileges the narration of the trauma and the daughter's PTSD to the detriment of those of the mother, whose experience of surviving gang rape is drowned in alcohol, sedatives, seclusion and silence. The author implies that Bethie suffers not as a consequence of her body being covered in bruises from the brutal attack, but as a result of having survived this ordeal in the wake of the Fourth of July fireworks.² The sexual aggression enacted on her mother, whom she first believed dead and who was indeed in danger of dying for some time after the assault, is the cause of Bethie's painful mental wounds, which constantly reopen as she repeatedly retrieves the events, even after Teena is out of danger and sent to live with her own mother, Agnes Kevecki. The trauma intrudes, interrupts and ruins the ordinary course of Bethie's life. Before even reaching menarche, Bethie must, from one day to the next, enter young adulthood, suffering both the social stigma of being the victim of a sexual crime and the loss of her mother's protection. Judith Herman identifies the main symptoms of PTSD as hyperarousal, in the form of the persistent expectation of danger; intrusion, in terms of the indelible imprint of the traumatic moment; and constriction, or the numbing response of surrender (1997, 35). In Oates's novella, Bethie indeed endures the consequences of hyperarousal and intrusion, although unlike Teena, she is not allowed to experience constriction because she cannot return to the "maternal womb" for safety or nurturance, but instead must interact with the world of adult violence and social discrimination.

Hyperarousal often erupts in Bethie's life. She is essentially raped between the detention of the rapists and the trial through a threatening anonymous message against her mother, the murder of her grandmother's pet cat and her encounter with the sister

² Since 1776, the Fourth of July fireworks celebrate the Declaration of Independence proclaimed by the thirteen colonies of the British Empire in North America, including their fundamental rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Oates's novella deflates those ideas by focusing on the pervasiveness of male (institutional) violence in the US and its female victims.

of the Pick brothers—two of the accused—in a store: “You better watch your mouth, bitch. You better not be saying wrong things about my brothers, bitch. ‘Cause what they begun out there in the park, they’re gonna finish up, you and your bitch momma don’t keep your fucking mouths shut” (Oates 2004, 62). This intimidating confrontation not only activates Bethie’s hyperarousal in the shape of alertness to the risk of bodily harm being perpetrated against her by an older girl, but also triggers the posttraumatic stress response of intrusion: she is reminded of what happened in the park—the gang rape as the original traumatic event—and the threat of the repetition of a similar assault in the future if she and her mother testify against the rapists in the first court hearing. When the attackers are released on bail before their trial and Bethie sees Marvin and Lloyd Pick, her hyperarousal is translated into hypervigilance. On one occasion, she sees the Pick brothers’ car circling the block where she lives with her mother and grandmother and thinks, “It’s them. Come back to finish the job” (119). When she sees one of the other rapists, Fritz Haaber, staring at her on the street and at the mall, she recognizes him as the attacker who scared her the most. Although he was prohibited by the court from approaching her or her mother, Bethie’s traumatized mind believes that Haaber is sending her a life-threatening message from a distance: “Oh Christ wishing he’d killed you! Slammed your head against the boathouse floor when he’d had his fucking chance. Broken you with his fists, his stomping feet. And fucked you, too. When he’d had his chance” (135). Here, readers are looking through the lens of Bethie’s terrified consciousness. When she returns home, the pernicious synergy between intrusion—the imagined repetition of the attack—and hyperarousal—her current fear of seeing her aggressor so close to her, his prominent teeth and jawline reminding her of the wolf in children’s fairy tale—provokes her emotional collapse. In fact, Bethie retrieves fragmentary memories of sensations of bodily harm when Haaber stares at her, which she translates into an unreal mental narrative that frightens and menaces her. Caruth claims that traumatic events are not assimilated and experienced fully at the time they occur, but only belatedly, as the victim is initially possessed by the image or event from the past, which distorts her current perception of reality (1995a, 4-5). At the mall, Bethie finally understands Haaber’s intentions towards her on the Fourth of July, replicated now in the wordless message he conveys through his eyes, which leads her to a delayed understanding of what rape is. In this public space, she is afraid because she expects physical danger again, so she cries out for adult protection. This shows that she is still a helpless girl yet she is forced to partly become a woman by identifying herself with the ordeal of rape her mother went through.

Although the aftermath of the sexual crime is marked by Bethie’s defenselessness, she is not allowed to experience the posttraumatic symptom of constriction because, unlike her mother, she cannot surrender, stay in her bedroom and disassociate herself from the outside world. Instead, Bethie must walk down the street daily under the insensitive or hostile eyes of rapists, neighbors, journalists and townsfolk. She also visits her mother at the hospital, goes to school, gives a statement to the police and

testifies before a judge in court—her life simply will not stop because of her trauma. Laurie Vickroy holds that when the victim's environment fails to provide her with the support needed to heal, the victim loses not only her self-confidence but also her trust in the social structures and cultural attitudes that are supposed to create order and safety (2002, 13). Furthermore, trauma can be even more damaging in the case of an adolescent girl whose identity is being formed and whose self-reliance is still fragile. In *Rape: A Love Story*, it is social institutions like healthcare and hospital staff, Bethie's classmates, the media, the police, the justice system and the community in the town of Niagara Falls that should protect her. However, they turn out to be the very agents that psychologically violate her innocence and decisively contribute to putting an abrupt end to her childhood. In the first days after the gang rape, her mother is in a coma and on life support at the intensive care unit until she finally wakes up and is discharged from hospital some weeks later. The medical insurance refuses to pay for an extra room for the grandmother and granddaughter to keep vigil for Teena. Physicians are doubtful and evasive about her prognosis—"We can only hope for the best" (Oates 2004, 47)—and are insensitive to the fact that Bethie can hear what they are saying about her mother's state. Moreover, none of the doctors takes the time to explain to her the purpose of the medical examinations and scans required to treat her mother. Although most healthcare workers are cautious, smiling and sympathetic, Bethie overhears one nurse talking to a colleague in the corridor: "That poor girl [...]. They didn't rape her, too, did they?" (51). Once again, then, more than the sense of sight, Oates enhances the importance of hearing, here to explore the girl's trauma. Bethie's ears are not only assaulted by the unendurable noises of the gang rape episode when she was partly blinded by the darkness of night, but she is also haunted by the memory of the sounds that reach her in the aftermath of the sexual crime, which accentuates her PTSD symptoms and jeopardizes her chances of recovery.

Her family being unable to pay for a private educational institution, Bethie remains as an eighth grader at Baltic Senior High School in Niagara Falls, a school community she must share with the rapists' relatives and sympathizers. Again, no constriction is allowed her. Bethie cannot flee from her duty of going to class, the same way she cannot evade the repudiation and dangers outside the classrooms. Ordinary activities, like going to the lavatory or passing by her locker, are true ordeals for her because older girls call her "damn liar" (132) or spray paint slurs against her: "B.M. SUKS COKS. FUK B.M." (133; capitals in the original). These hateful sounds and images accelerate Bethie's understanding of the sexual implications of the brutal aggression she and her mother experienced. Even worse, the ugly messages bombarding her mind also drive her to realize that, unlike her aggressors, she—as a victim—is not understood by her classmates, so she internalizes that she is a pariah or "a rat" (132). The school system does not take the necessary measures to protect Bethie, which further damages her. In fact, the educational environment is only a microcosm that mirrors the macrohostility toward Bethie and her mother in Niagara Falls. Even the Church, incarnated by Father

Muldoon, justifies the gang rape on the grounds of rumors that suggest that Bethie's mother has a history of "promiscuous and reckless sexual behavior" (112). Teena is a young widowed mother who, before the attack, goes out at night, drinks alcohol and enjoys having fun and being attractive to men. She is outgoing and joyful, wears the clothes she likes and is sexually active with several different male partners. In other words, she does not match the local community's expected image of a widow, who should renounce love, sex and happiness after her husband passes away. While the rapists are "good boys" in the eyes of the Niagara Falls community, the victim is not perceived as such. Instead, her rape is considered to be the punishment she deserves for having enjoyed sexual freedom as a widow. Unlike her hard-of-hearing grandmother, who thinks her neighbors clamor against "those animals" (55), Bethie can hear the conversations of the townspeople. She also lip-reads out loud their accusations against Teena: "That woman. What did she expect? Asking for it, the bitch. Dressed like a hooker" (54). Furthermore, Teena is deemed to be a bad mother, with people claiming that she involved her own daughter in her sexual escapade in the park on the Fourth of July. Television, radio news, newspapers and sensationalist magazines finally echo the almost unanimous climate of Niagara County against Teena Maguire. Gradually, the local media coverage begins to discredit her: there was no gang rape; rather it was consensual sex for money, so she is no longer "the victim," but the "*alleged* gang-rape victim" (129; italics added). As a consequence of Teena's refusal to give her own testimony to the media, a tabloid chooses to interview the mother of the Pick brothers so that readers will sympathize with the "good" average American families ruined by a "hypersexual" woman—Teena. Thus, Bethie's ears and eyes witness how her own story of the sexual crime is not told to the media by herself or her mother, but only by others, so that her helplessness increases.

Before the dissemination of the news—gang rape—followed by fake news—consensual sex—Bethie tells and retells her own first-person account of the attack to detectives and before a judge. Whether in forensic interviews or in court, minors as victims have valuable information to give, particularly in the cases of child abuse, since their reports rely largely on eyewitness evidence and memory (Schaaf et al. 2002, 342). Indeed, Bethie saw the attackers at Rocky Point Park so she is able to identify five of them for the police, because "you could never forget those faces" (Oates 2004, 41). Although, on the one hand, having to repeatedly recount the brutal assault has a traumatic flashback effect on Bethie, on the other her eyes are trusted by the police and the suspects are taken into custody. Nevertheless, before the preliminary hearing for trial, the lawyers defending the rapists are the first social agents to discredit Bethie's story and persuade the judge—and public opinion—that only adult accounts of the facts are admissible in court. According to them, Bethie's age means that her testimony could be easily influenced by her mother and that she is an unreliable witness because she did not actually see, but rather "believed that she heard [the sexual crime]" (74). In this novella revolving around the importance of the sense of hearing during the traumatic event and its aftermath, the

power of Bethie's ears is, thus, disregarded by the defense attorneys. Only eyewitness evidence is legally acceptable because the lack of verifiability of sounds and noises makes them inadmissible evidence. Thus, it is ruled that Bethie's voice should not be heard in court since, although she saw the attackers, she then hid and hence did not see the actual rape. From a legal standpoint, she was not harmed by anyone—she injured herself when hiding among the canoes—and the suspects claim in court that they were not aware of her presence. On the grounds that Bethie is not even an eyewitness, it is concluded that she is not a victim of rape but a collateral victim of her mother's money-body transactions with a group of young men. It is not even acknowledged that Bethie saved her mother's life when she went to get help after the attackers left Teena to bleed to death. Despite the overwhelming DNA, forensic and clinical evidence to demonstrate the brutal physical and sexual attack that almost killed Teena, according to the defense attorney the Rocky Point incident cannot be defined as a crime.

Although it is acknowledged that prosecuting the perpetrator is an important way to validate the victim's experience, for many children the trauma associated with testifying at court can outweigh the advantages of a successful prosecution and leave them more powerless in relation to their abusers than before trial (Morrison 1994, 42). Bethie is eventually allowed to testify in the preliminary hearing. Even though her words are more eloquent than the feeble voice of her disoriented mother, she is "visibly trembling" (Oates 2004, 72) and is often interrupted by the severe middle-aged judge. In fact, this pretrial experience reinforces Bethie's trauma. Her testimony is categorized as "fabricated and misleading" (74) by Jay Kirkpatrick—the money-driven defense attorney of the Pick brothers—and she witnesses her mother's emotional collapse after listening to his argument on behalf of his clients: after the Fourth of July party, Teena Maguire deliberately met with young men who were known to her in the park for an orgy, where she made sexual advances toward them and asked for money in exchange. The history of rape in the criminal justice system, reinforced by social conventions and the law even today, persists in conveying the powerful message that unless a woman is "pure" and the assailant is a stranger, she is not the "genuine victim" of "real rape" (Tellis 2010, 44). This is so even if so-called rape shield laws, which prohibit the introduction of the victim's past sexual history in court (O'Toole et al. 2007a, 198), were passed across the US in the late 1970s and early 1980s and eventually the federal rape shield Violence Against Women Act (1994) was also passed in order to reinforce state rape shield laws. The rape case presented in Oates's novella fits this description. Teena is catalogued as promiscuous and her aggressors are not strangers, but neighbors. Kirkpatrick's distortion of the truth in order to win a highly publicized case is grounded upon gender prejudices against Teena's sexual freedom and local rumors about the socially unacceptable practices of promiscuity or even prostitution attributed to her as a widow. The spread of such rumors makes it impossible for Teena to benefit from rape shield laws during trial. In sum, *Rape: A Love Story* shows that US courtrooms in the 1990s were not yet prepared to accommodate children as witnesses

and, more specifically, that legal professionals—whether judges, prosecutors or defense attorneys—were not trained to listen sensitively to girls testifying in court. In addition, Oates's novella also reveals that the US judicial system, primarily consisting of male decision-makers, mirrored the markedly patriarchal culture of the US in the 1990s, which still sexualized women and criminalized their so-called immoral sexual conduct far more than it did men's violent crimes against female victims.

After the painful, humiliating experience before the trial, Bethie's grandmother articulates the common feeling of the whole family about Teena's calvary when Harriet Diebenkorn—the deputy prosecutor—visits her client at home: “Not just those animals but you people at the courthouse have destroyed her.’ [...] ‘That man [Kirkpatrick] calling my daughter a whore! [...] You allowed it, you did not prevent it” (Oates 2004, 88-89). Despite the disastrous hearing, Diebenkorn tries to convince Teena not to drop charges but rather continue with the legal proceedings and permit her daughter to testify. However, the grandmother claims “a trial would kill all of us” (89), insisting that the judicial system will fail to provide justice and instead further traumatize three generations of women from the same family. On another occasion, Diebenkorn attempts to persuade Bethie to intercede with her mother so that Teena will cooperate because her belief as a lawyer is that any jury would feel sympathy for mother and daughter. While Diebenkorn describes to Bethie all the evidence against the rapists that should ensure certain prison sentences, readers come to realize that the girl has developed a self-defense mechanism to immunize herself against any reminders of the gang rape and the external aggressions found in adult words. This disassociation tactic of self-preservation—not listening to what she hears and not looking at what she sees with her own eyes—is essential to Bethie's self-assuring internal monologue: “you have a new habit of going empty-eyed and uncomprehending when it suited you” (90). In fact, the author suggests that Bethie uses this same tool of self-absorption in other unavoidable social interactions over the years so as to avoid reliving the traumatic event at the park.³ Moreover, there is a reversal in the family roles: the daughter becomes the mother while the mother becomes a baby. Bethie nurses Teena, watches her sleep, protects her from the world outside her bedroom and even dismisses Diebenkorn when she wants to talk to her client by cursing at her: “‘Fuck you” (93).

Together with the trauma of rape, orphanhood also marks Bethie's passage from girlhood to adulthood. Her father had passed away some years before, her grandmother fails to preserve her from social aggressions and Teena is an absent parent—inebriated and suicidal, in a state of mental collapse and regression to infancy. However, Oates's novella is also a love story, wherein a surrogate father figure functions as a savior who avenges the crime against the mother—that is, the “chivalric actions” of the policeman

³ There are certain parallels between Oates's *Rape: A Love Story* and Maya Angelou's coming-of-age autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* ([1969] 2009), where the victim of physical rape is an adolescent girl whose testimony is dismissed at the courtroom, so she temporarily chooses not to communicate with adults to shield herself from the sexual trauma.

John Dromoor attempt to free Teena and her daughter from the painful court trial (Creighton and Binette 2006, 454-55). This former soldier, who had fought in the Gulf War in the early 1990s, is the NFPD officer who rescues Teena from certain death at the boathouse after having been alerted by Bethie, who was “disheveled, [with] torn clothing, bleeding at the nose and mouth” (Oates 2004, 35). Dromoor’s profession and his portrayal as a hero are, indeed, two of the most controversial elements in the novella.

3. “BAD MEN” VERSUS THE MALE HERO

In the 1970s and 1980s, the antirape movements within US feminism succeeded in creating public awareness of gender violence and forcing legislative reforms to condemn sexual crimes suffered by women as well as the passing of the rape shield laws mentioned above. Nevertheless, there is substantial research indicating that law enforcement continues to be a patriarchal institution that does not always support female rape victims. In relation to the UK, Liz Kelly et al. point out in *A Gap or a Chasm: Attrition in Reported Rape Cases* (2005) that there is a “culture of skepticism” that prevents police officers from investigating rape allegations if they do not conform to the stereotypical understanding of a “real” sexual crime—i.e., one perpetrated by a stranger with a weapon (quoted in O’Keeffe et al. 2011, 229)—an observation that holds for the US too. The police tend to discount reports of rape and instead blame the raped women for their victimization on the assumption that they fabricate false narratives of rape against men or do not take precautions to predict danger and avoid sexual assaults (O’Toole et al. 2007a, 199). In addition, police officers tend to be insensitive to the emotions of abused women and their sexist treatment of victims can inhibit full prosecution of rape cases (Kruttschnitt et al. 2014, 12, 47). Adrienne Rich’s poem “Rape” (1973a)—in the epigraph of this article—both reflects the uninterrupted present continuous tense of the past sexual assault inside the victim’s mind and illustrates the misogynist alliance between rapists and policemen. Armed with a destructive phallic gun, the cop living in the neighborhood of the poem’s victim not only embodies male authority, but he is also her confessor and then goes on to emotionally rerape her when, in effect, he forces her to plead guilty to being to blame for the sexual abuses she suffered. Like Rich’s poem, Oates’s story stresses the raped woman’s defenselessness and hyperarousal vis-à-vis a patriarchal US society that exonerates its male “comrades” from any responsibility in sexual crimes and repeatedly assaults her with its lack of sympathy at best, and calumny or scorn at worst, because she is suspected of (un)consciously desiring to become a victim of men.

Conversely, *Rape: A Love Story* reframes the figure of the cop as the typical symbol of power abuse and male chauvinism by depicting Dromoor—Bethie’s first love object—as the fearless avenger and protector of female victims. Arguably, the outcome of such a choice on Oates’s part is not so much to absolve the institution of the US police from allegations of misconduct in sexual assault cases, but rather to ennoble an individual

US male as a hero or a superman, at least in the eyes of an adolescent girl. In fact, Dromoor is, above all, a projection of Bethie's imagination constructed on the basis of traditional cultural materials regarding gender roles—e.g., romantic stories with bold knights riding to the rescue of young damsels in distress. The still childish Bethie uses her fairy-tale imagination to transform a common NFPD officer—who simply shows sympathy toward her and her mother—into her Prince Charming, complete with his shining armor of bravery and justice. In this sense, Oates's novella may be seen as perpetuating a traditional cliché—a woman can only be rescued by a man, not by herself. Furthermore, Bethie's teenage idolatry of an everyman potentially discredits her account of the aftermath of the rape, although his vital role in her trauma recovery should not be disregarded. That said, Dromoor is a familiar face for both mother and daughter, to the extent that he had almost had a love or sexual affair with Teena in the past. After rescuing Teena, Dromoor visits her in hospital and later leaves his phone number for Teena and talks to her daughter at Mrs. Kevecki's. These actions can be interpreted in one of two ways: either Dromoor cannot help being emotionally involved in the rape case, or he simply sees his interaction with the victims as part of his duty as a policeman.

Soon after the sexual assault and the police rescue, when Bethie encounters Dromoor again, he has become her hero and she feels the first inklings of love through the senses of sight and hearing, paradoxically the same senses implicated in the gang rape and the ensuing trauma. Although she does not hear Dromoor calling her by her name, she experiences a sensual or sexual awakening—common in coming-of-age narratives—that is compared to the beautiful, forceful sound of nature from the nearby Niagara scenery: “A roaring in your ears, as if you were leaning over the railing at the Falls: the visceral wallop of infatuation, the most powerful emotion you'd ever experienced in your life” (Oates 2004, 85). It is equally delightful for Bethie to see Dromoor when he visits Teena at home. At this point, she realizes that her feelings can be divined by the policeman. Embarrassed, she fears that he can see the confession of love in her young eyes: “[He] must have known, at that moment. The look in your face. The heat in your face. Yearning, desperation. *I love you. You are all to me*” (85; italics in the original).

According to Oates's second-person narration privileging Bethie's viewpoint, Dromoor takes on an extrajudicial role at the edges of the law by killing some of the perpetrators of the gang rape to protect the two victims from them, as well as from the machinations of the justice system and the malevolent local community. During a fight, Dromoor shoots James DeLucca, a homicide either committed in self-defense, as recognized by the law, or to avenge Teena, as Oates suggests. Incognito, he also takes the law into his own hands when Haaber—Bethie's main tormentor—burns alive, although it is legally recorded as a suicide. The Pick brothers seemingly jump bail and flee to Canada before being tried, so they become the most wanted fugitives in the county. However, the rapists' car, presumably used to escape, is later found intact in town. By means of Bethie's mental construction of Dromoor as an avenger, readers are led to conclude that the policeman has also dispatched the two brothers and disposed of their bodies.

Katherine Hunt Federle posits that the immediate effects of abuse and neglect suffered by children can translate into lifelong consequences, including mental disorders, difficulties in social interaction, poor academic performance, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality, alcohol and other substance abuse, offensive conduct and the victimization of their own children (2012, 400-401). Bethie is the victim of postrape maternal neglect, as well as suffering from psychological abuse committed by multiple social perpetrators, not only the rapists. Nevertheless, Dromoor's imagined heroic execution of various homicides contributes to soothing Bethie's pain and hence preventing the pernicious consequences listed by Federle. In other words, the girl (un)consciously chooses the NFPD officer who had rescued her to fantasize about his chivalrous deeds as a self-defense mechanism to enable the "goodies" to defeat the "baddies" during the aftermath of her trauma, as well as later, when she writes her coming-of-age story. Bethie embraces the ideal of romantic love to avoid hating all men, or perhaps she simply idealizes Dromoor in order not to lose her confidence in human goodness completely when the adult world fails to protect her and administer justice. Vaguely sketched in its conclusion, Oates's novella suggests that Bethie, during her rite of passage to adolescence, escapes severe behavioral sequelae or mental disorders that could have ruined her adult life. The girl's infatuation with her "knightly savior" Dromoor is depicted in the novella as a kind of therapy that helps her evade her hostile reality, cope with adversity and recover from trauma. In the months after the aggression, the policeman gains space in Bethie's mind and, unknowingly, displaces the intrusive PTSD that was affecting her. Although Bethie is frustrated because she cannot get to know him personally or see him more often, she worships him and when she is haunted by fear due to the proximity of her aggressors when they come out on bail, the fantasy of Dromoor coming to rescue her from peril comforts her, restores her faith in human nature and helps her become an adult.

4. TRAUMA RECOVERY AS CONCLUSION

Bethie Maguire's gateway to adolescence is neither an ordinary nor a dreamlike occurrence, but the real nightmare of sexual assault as a bleeding vestige of the Fourth of July revels. She is not only the witness to her mother's brutal gang rape by a mob of young men she is familiar with in a deserted park, but also the victim of physical and psychological violence herself as she is also beaten, molested and almost sexually assaulted. That the incident happens before she has reached puberty and is still sexually naïve forces a farewell to the innocence of her childhood and ushers trauma into her existence, while dramatically accelerating her passage to adulthood. In fact, this harrowing experience threatens to affect Bethie forever, interrupt the normal course of her life and repeat itself through constant traumatic replicas. After enduring the sexual assault, Bethie continues to grow up amidst sounds and images of adult violence and social discrimination. Her PTSD is intensified by her mother's emotional withdrawal, her aggressors being out on

bail and the hostility of the local community. Nevertheless, her suffering is attenuated by the first symptoms of love: in her fantasies, the “superhero” Dromoor protects her from afar. While the gang rape changes the lives of Teena and Bethie—there is a before and an after—the novella hints that “future happiness is not impossible” (Tripney 2005, 53). Indeed, Oates concludes with two hopeful snapshots. One image is a postcard from Teena, travelling with a new boyfriend nine months after being gang raped, although she is still an absent mother who is missed by her teenage daughter. The other picture jumps forward to Bethie’s adulthood in New York City: she has a husband, but Dromoor still dwells in her mind. Now her memories are not directly associated with the sexual assault itself, but with trauma recovery. Her eyes saw that the surviving rapists pleaded guilty and accepted prison sentences without a trial and that Teena remarried, while her ears heard that her hero was promoted. Referring in general to women’s life writing, Henke holds that “the authorial effort to reconstruct a story of psychological debilitation could offer potential for mental healing” (2000, xii). As such, life-writing holds curative potential for victims in that it can help alleviate persistent symptoms of PTSD (2000, xii-xiii, xv). Significantly in this regard, Bethie culminates her trauma recovery, initiated by Dromoor’s assumed safeguarding, by recollecting her past and writing about her own experience—the result being Oates’s novella. And because Bethie, even as an adult woman, wants to distance herself from her experience of sexual abuse while at the same time she desperately needs to tell her story, she removes the “I” from the narration and replaces it with “you” (Pekşen 2019, 239).

Oates’s *Rape: A Love Story* is both Bethie’s fictional autobiography about the trauma that ends her childhood and a coming-of-age narrative about the process of trauma recovery that prematurely begins her adulthood. The visual and auditory traces of her mother’s rape and her own assault are powerfully intense both physically and mentally, but also unintelligible, unspeakable and incomprehensible for Bethie on account of her young age. There is no sequential account of her extended nightmare after the Fourth of July fireworks, only disjointed memories interlacing painful sensations and emotions, chaotic images and sounds, which repeatedly bombard her brain and jeopardize her attempts at self-preservation. However, the recollection of these past horrors and her small daily victories gradually cement a healing process based on linguistic systematization and retrospective storytelling that enables her to become a survivor, enter adulthood and socialize with men, which ultimately empowers her as the author of her life-writing. While the camouflage of the “you” protects Bethie from her traumatized “I”, the second-person pronoun also universalizes her story beyond the particulars of her stifling Niagara Falls context.

Coming-of-age narratives about girls enduring men’s aggressions and hostile patriarchal environments are a consolidated genre in contemporary US fiction. *Rape: A Love Story* both innovates and perpetuates these coming-of-age conventions. This novella optimistically advocates the regenerative power of youth to successfully recover from traumatic experiences in adolescence and overcome the stigma of

victimhood, while articulating a powerful feminist protest against the dangers of becoming a woman in the US, both in the 1990s when the story is set and at the dawn of the twenty-first century when it was written and published. The fact that the gang rape endured by Teena and her daughter occurs on the Fourth of July suggests that forced sex and child abuse are as American as that particular day, when, paradoxically, a “motherland”—the US—celebrates individual freedom and independence from powerful imperial oppressors. In essence, Oates’s work denounces the normalization of male sexual violence within US culture and enables readers to hear its voiceless female victims by directly interpellating them as “you.”

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