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# The Role of New Orleans Parish Prison in Joyce Carol Oates's "Aiding and Abetting"

Tanya TROMBLE

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- 1 The vast majority of Joyce Carol Oates's fictional work is set in the state of New York, where she grew up, and more recently around the Princeton, New Jersey area where she has lived for many years. Occasionally, she has branched out to other locations. Oates stories can be found set in Seattle, Kansas City, rural Kentucky, and even several European locations. Though no Oates story exclusively uses New Orleans as setting, the city does play an important role in "Aiding and Abetting"<sup>1</sup> through the mention of its prison facility which Oates refers to as the "New Orleans Parish Prison." The actual name of the facility is simply the Orleans Parish Prison. Oates may have felt the need to clarify the geographical location for her readers by adding on the word "New" which unmistakably points to the famous city.
- 2 There can be no doubt that the city of New Orleans holds a special place in the American imagination. In "Lust and Languor in the Big Easy: The Literary Mystique of New Orleans," Kenneth W. Holditch explains:

This is a city that over the two and a half centuries since its founding has retained certain qualities that are marvelously seductive and foreign to tourists from Oregon, Iowa or Maine, qualities that are undeniably different from those defining characteristics of Dubuque, Newark, or any other city in the United States. New Orleans has both more bars and churches than any other American city; New Orleanians eat more bread, and consume more coffee and alcohol per person than residents of any other place in the country. (qtd in Bourdelais 1)
- 3 The geographer Martine Geronimi confirms this attraction to the city, associating it more specifically with the historical French connections that have been consistently underlined by the tourism industry from the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

Nostalgia for the turpitude and vice attributed to a society of low moral standards such as that of the French at the colony's beginnings, leads to a licentious romanticism and the authorization of temptations. Even French accents are

considered "sexy" by Americans. In this way, the French Quarter retains its charm as a garden of French delights. (223, my translation)

- 4 Thus, "New Orleans" as a term has become a shortcut evocation of vice, crime, the seedy night-side of life, and hidden impulses. The notions of guilty pleasure and excess that many Americans associate with the city are further complicated by the prominent geographic location of the Orleans Parish Prison which is such, tucked in beside the freeway and in between two exits serving the downtown area, that any visitor to the city cannot miss the sinister establishment nor its inmates who may stand at the chain link fence watching cars zoom by. At times, the sheriff's office has even used the outside walls of the prison for public service announcements, increasing the likelihood of attracting the passerby's gaze.<sup>2</sup> Oates, who travels frequently around the country for events related to her writing, may very well have seen this imposing facility first hand. In this way, the notion of crime is given a prominent place in the community and becomes indelibly linked to the perception of New Orleans as a city of pleasure and excess, an understanding that has been consolidated in recent years by nationally publicized scandals involving both the city's police department and its prison facility.

## 1. The Orleans Parish Prison

- 5 The Orleans Parish Prison is one of those notoriously famous penitentiary facilities like San Francisco's Alcatraz and New York's Rikers Island that has achieved name recognition far beyond the confines of its city and state. In the case of the Orleans Parish Prison, this notoriety has less to do with the identity of certain inmates and the degree of security afforded by the facility and much more to do with deplorable conditions and corruption scandals. A *Los Angeles Times* article stated in April 2013: "For years, the Orleans Parish Prison has been criticized by the U.S. Department of Justice as being so dangerous and poorly run that the facility violates inmates' constitutional rights" (Pearce). This notoriety swelled even more in the Spring of 2013 when a shocking video was made public, described by the *Los Angeles Times* in the following way: "a prison video presented during testimony for a class-action lawsuit showed inmates doing drugs, fiddling with a gun while in a cell and roaming free on the streets in 2009" (Pearce). However, the prison's reputation does not stem uniquely from this incident. In August 2007, the *Chicago Tribune* covered an American Civil Liberties Union report which complained that "the city's jail is plagued by inadequate medical care, violence, overcrowding and squalid conditions." The same report criticizes the sheriff's office for "failing to seek expert guidance in developing a proper emergency preparedness plan for the jail, which wasn't evacuated until it flooded in the aftermath of Katrina in 2005" (Possley). The inadequacy and sinister qualities of the establishment are issues that have been periodically surfacing in the press for a number of years<sup>3</sup> and one which Oates briefly, but faithfully, evokes in her short story.
- 6 In "Aiding and Abetting," originally published in January 2002, the main character, Steven, watches an NBC news report "of deplorable conditions in the New Orleans Parish Prison which detains Asian and Haitian immigrants for the federal Immigration and Naturalization Service." The report includes "interviews with visibly scarred, injured men," including "the testimony of a hospitalized Asian detainee who'd been beaten nearly to death by Caucasian prison guards," and "protestations and denials from prison authorities" (AA 45). Such a news story was, in fact, reported in the national media in the

year or so leading up to the short story's publication. A January 2001 *New York Times* article reports:

The immigration service uses more than a third of the \$800 million budgeted to house detainees on about 225 jails, many in rural areas, where there is space and per diem costs are low. Of the jails, immigrant advocates often cited the Orleans Parish Prison in New Orleans as one of the worst. Detainees there have detailed frequent beatings by guards to numerous advocacy groups. (Hedges)

- 7 The article cites testimony of abuse by several former detainees and mentions a lawsuit filed in 1999 against the Orleans prison by 13 Asian detainees for consistent abuse at the facility. Though the lawsuit was settled out of court, prison officials consistently denied any wrong-doing. The article concludes with testimony from a former Iraqi detainee who claims to speak from experience, saying: "I have been in 11 different state prisons, 8 federal prisons and 14 country [*sic*] jails, and the House of Detention in O.P.P. was by far the worst" (Hedges).
- 8 A February 2000 *Los Angeles Times* article calls the Orleans Parish Criminal District Court in New Orleans "the grimmest courthouse in the biggest city in the strictest state" in the country based largely on the statistic that according to "the U.S. Justice Department's most recent data, 461 of every 100,000 Americans are now serving a prison sentence of at least one year. [...] In Louisiana, the rate is 736, tops in the nation" (Katz, "A Nation"). But poorly managed prison facilities and high incarceration rates are not without their connection to high crime rates. Indeed, the same *Los Angeles Times* reporter, writing in 1995, affirms that "brutality and vice long have been enmeshed in the fabric of this steamy Mississippi River port, which has weathered colonial rule, slavery, piracy, Civil War, ethnic rioting, political scandal and a tradition of police corruption matched by few other U.S. cities." The article, whose headline parodies the city's famous nickname the "Big Easy" as the "Big Sleazy," points to New Orleans as the nation's 1994 murder capital and insinuates that police corruption is both directly and indirectly responsible for the high rate: "The rise in violence is more than a coincidence, contend local watchdogs who blame police misdeeds for fueling the carnage directly or alienating the residents who are needed to restore peace." Indeed, in the mid-90s, the New Orleans Police Department was enmeshed in a major corruption scandal and underwent a series of major reforms, the insinuation in this article being that in "the *laissez faire* world of New Orleans law enforcement," violence bred violence no matter what side one was supposedly on (Katz, "Corrupt Cops").
- 9 In "Aiding and Abetting," Oates takes this notion one step further by transferring the city's endemic violence across the nation by way of a television news report. After watching a brief segment on the "New Orleans Parish Prison," the main character chooses a course of action that is morally questionable if not outright illegal and that will have unfortunate unforeseen consequences. In this way, violence not only influences him, but is invited by him into his cherished family sphere.

## 2. "Aiding and Abetting"

- 10 In "Aiding and Abetting," Oates once again uses the urban northern New Jersey setting for the backdrop of a domestic drama. However, the story's main character is influenced by pre-conceived cultural notions of a city—New Orleans—located over 1,000 miles away

that will fan his pre-existing incendiary attitude towards his brother-in-law and incite him to base behavior himself.

- 11 Steven and Holly's idyllic home life with their two young children is interrupted by frequent disturbing evening phone calls from Holly's mentally unstable brother, Owen, who, through his monopolization of her time, is a source of stress for the whole family: "Those evenings when Owen telephones are the only evenings when Steven and Holly, who have been married twelve years, come dangerously close to disliking each other" (AA 40). Neither mental illness nor the desire to support an unstable relative constitute criminal behavior, however, Owen's and Holly's actions appear questionable when seen through the eyes of Steven. Though the story is recounted in the third-person, it is told exclusively from his point of view, using crime metaphors to emphasize his feelings of victimization at the hands of both his brother-in-law and his wife whom he accuses of aiding and abetting her brother's weaknesses (AA 42). Owen is described as a calculating "predator" (AA 40) with violent criminal tendencies in his past: as a child, "Owen set small fires in [his] neighborhood and at school," and he has attempted various types of suicide over the years (AA 42). Owen is further villainized through his portrayal as a vampire figure with which he shares three prominent characteristics: he doesn't sleep at night, Steven describes him as eating his sister alive, and he feels as if he had a hole in his heart<sup>4</sup> (AA 39). The underlying issue between the two men seems to be one of control: "What Steven fears in Owen is that he has the power of weakness: the power to set Steven and Holly against each other, the power to subtly erode the little family from within" (AA 42). Protecting his family's well-being seems to be a question of masculine pride for Steven who sees his brother-in-law's divisive behavior as counter to this masculine ideal (AA 43). Owen is also threatening to Steven in that as the only remaining member of "Holly's original family" (AA 40), he represents a part of Holly that is inaccessible to her husband: "she loves him in a way impenetrable by Steven, in a way that pre-exists even her love for [their children] Brandon and Caitlin" (AA 43).
- 12 The key scene consists of a rare private telephone conversation between the two brothers-in-law. Owen telephones "one evening, when Holly is at the mall with the children" and Steven answers the phone. We are told from the start that at this point "Steven has what *will be* his final conversation with Owen" (AA 44, my emphasis). Steven has been watching television news and drinking beer. He is "Feeling good. Feeling generous," and is therefore disposed to stay on the line with his brother-in-law. Owen, too, seems to be in an altered state of mind, he "sounds as if he's been drinking, or is drugged. [...] lapsing with no preamble into a monologue of complaints" (AA 44). As Owen drones on, Steven continues to watch TV with the sound lowered. He watches a CNN report about the Gaza Strip, an SUV commercial, then switches to NBC where he sees the "exposé of deplorable conditions in the New Orleans Parish Prison" (AA 45). Owen's monologue continues as Steven watches this report. The intricate intertwining of the conversation with Steven's watching of the TV report reads as follows:
- Steven listens appalled as Owen resumes his monologue of complaints with renewed fervor, how hurt he's been, how depressed, [...] and the world so vicious, sometimes he wonders whether it's worth it to keep going. Steven, listening to the testimony of a hospitalized Asian detainee who'd been beaten nearly to death by Caucasian prison guards, says vaguely, "I suppose so, Owen." Owen says, "What?" Steven says, "Or—maybe it isn't. It's your call." Again there's shocked silence. Then Owen says quietly, "You're saying, Steve, I should—give up?"
- "From your perspective? Maybe."

There. Steven has said it. (AA 45)

- 13 It is unclear whether Steven is appalled at the prison exposé or at Owen's never-ending litany of complaints. In any case, it seems that Steven's response to Owen is somehow mixed up with his reaction to the harsh treatment of detainees and the testimony of the severely battered Asian detainee, and reflection about why people continue to struggle on in the face of so much hurt and abuse. Whatever the reason, Steven has clearly suggested suicide as an option for Owen, and this immediately following the news report on the New Orleans Parish Prison. In this way, Steven reproduces with his brother-in-law the model of abuse he has just learned about in the prison exposé, namely, the abuse of a person in a position of weakness—a detainee or a mentally compromised individual in the case of Owen—by a person in a position of authority.
- 14 The notion that this particular news report has a shaping influence on Steven's suggestion to Owen is supported by the fact that immediately upon switching back to CNN and a different news report about the President, Air Force One and Europe, Steven begins to regret his words. However, the seed has been planted, and nothing Steven says can dissuade Owen from the perceived wisdom of his original suggestion. Before the conversation ends, Owen suggests that driving would be the preferable mode of execution, to which Steven concurs: "Driving – would be good. An accident" (AA 46).
- 15 Steven here acts impulsively according to his vision of what is best for his family, namely a world without Owen in it to disturb them. His thoughts during the final conversation, represented in italics, communicate his true feelings: "*Die, why don't you. You pathetic loser. Put yourself out of your misery. Give us a break*" (AA 45, my emphasis). His hubris blinds him, however, to the possible negative side effects on his family of such an act on the part of Owen. The final episode takes place at least a week later: "Then one evening when Steven returns from the city, Holly tells him happily that Owen finally called, and dropped by the house; in a 'very upbeat mood'; he stayed for only a few minutes because he was driving to see a friend in Manhattan" (AA 48). The greater problem becomes evident a few lines later when we learn that Owen has taken Holly and Steven's son Brandon with him in his car to drop him off at a friend's house across town. The story ends with Steven anxiously awaiting news. Brandon is late to arrive at his friend's house and Steven sits with his daughter in the family room while his wife makes dinner: "the TV's on, CNN with the sound nearly inaudible; Steven's thumb on the remote control, poised and ready to strike" (AA 48). From a position of power in which he can attempt to act wisely and maturely in his family's best interest, and choose to use his words to influence the behavior of others, Steven has been reduced to the caricature of an impotent male who can control only his choice of television viewing.
- 16 The NBC exposé on the New Orleans Parish Prison clearly occupies a pivotal role in the construction of Oates's short story. Not only does the mention of the prison encourage Steven in his transgressive act, in addition, the "deplorable conditions in the New Orleans Parish Prison" serve as a metaphor for feelings of victimization and imprisonment on the part of each of the characters, as well as a metaphor for Steven's own mistreatment of his mentally scarred brother-in-law whose fragility he takes advantage of by suggesting he commit suicide, thus himself taking on the role of criminal.

### 3. Wider Implications of an Essential Detail

- 17 A great deal of both latent and explicit violence inhabits "Aiding and Abetting": Steven's loathing of his brother-in-law, spousal resentment, the manipulative suggestion of suicide by car, the implication that Steven's son could be killed as well, the victimization of inmates by authorities. Frequently criticized for recourse to violence in her fiction, Oates denies any gratuitous use of it, elaborating, rather, as early as 1966, a strict theoretical framework to govern its presence: "If violence erupts in fiction, it should be the outcome of tension; it should not come first, nor should it be accidental. [...] quality stories usually refine action onto a psychological level. There is 'action' – movement – but it takes place in a person's mind or in a conversation." To this end, she prizes stories that "build up tension through an accumulation of detail" rather than resorting to gratuitous uses of violence (Oates, "Building Tension" 12).
- 18 Oates's 1964 story "First Views of the Enemy"<sup>5</sup> illustrates this theory in terms of her own writing. The story is a glimpse into the life of a middle class family through the experience of mother and young son one afternoon. Their brief encounter with a group of migrant workers as they drive past their broken down bus creates a feeling of unease and insecurity that does not pass until they have barricaded themselves in their home and relaxed into frivolous, indulgent consumption. The third-person omniscient narration in this story follows a standard chronology, but not much happens event-wise. Rather, as the story proceeds, the reader witnesses the fear of violence irrationally building up in the protagonist's mind, becoming all-consuming. Oates explains it as follows: "The tension is psychological, not active; the 'enemy' does not appear after the first encounter. We see that the true 'enemy' is the woman's hysterical selfishness, which she is forcing upon her child also" (Oates, "Building Tension" 12). Oates's story thus effectively conveys class tension between a materialistic middle class woman and a group of socially-marginal migrant workers with only the briefest of physical encounters between the two groups.
- 19 In "Aiding and Abetting," tension is created in much the same way using a technique that highlights both the power of suggestion and the intensity of the psychological realm. Indeed, the violent intentional car crash so feared by Steven never actually occurs in the text, but remains relegated to the realm of psychological tension. Like the mother in "First Views of the Enemy," Steven, too, imagines a violent threat to his family—in this case, his brother-in-law—and creates tension for himself by imagining worst case scenarios that may in fact be unfounded. The suicide-by-car suggestion concretely underlines the degree of psychological friction between these two egotistical protagonists. However, if Owen really is the self-centered egotist Steven takes him for, it is far from certain he is predisposed to follow his brother-in-law's ill-willed advice.
- 20 The news report on the New Orleans Parish Prison is an essential detail to the construction of tension in the story. It acts as a trigger inciting Steven to externalize his built-up resentment towards Owen through the voiced suicide suggestion. It therefore concurrently evokes several notions. It is a textual shortcut to notions of vice and criminality which raises the question of the influence of collective associations on individual behavior. Furthermore, it indirectly sets up a parallel between Steven and Owen and the State prison authority and its inmates. The fact that Steven occupies the same role as the prison authority in the parallel relationship structure reinforces the



notion of Steven as the oppressor, raising the broader theoretical question of ethical responsibility to the vulnerable in terms of both individual and state behavior, ideas that have been the focus of contemporary theories of care ethics, for example. Daniel Engster's "minimal capability theory" posits "that all human beings are dependent upon others to develop their basic capabilities, and that in receiving care, individuals tacitly and logically become obliged to care for others." This care should be governed by the three principles of attention, responsiveness, and respect (Sander-Staudt). However, Oates's "Aiding and Abetting" reminds us that both individually and collectively, we are far from the ideal in terms of an ethical responsibility to care for others.

- 21 "Aiding and Abetting" thus makes an implicit critique of the incarceration system through the mention of the report on the New Orleans Parish Prison and the parallel structure comparing Steven to the administrative prison authority. A more explicit critique of the system has developed in Oates's work since she taught writing workshops at San Quentin Maximum Security Facility for Men in California in the spring of 2011. Three stories published since—"San Quentin," "Anniversary," and "High"—deal in various ways with prison education programs. *Carthage*, a novel published in 2014, includes a wrongly imprisoned character and another working on an exposé on prison executions. Oates also edited a story collection of fiction by inmates, *Prison Noir*, published in 2014. These works combine to create testimonies to prison life in the United States and raise questions about the nature of the system.

## Conclusion

- 22 Oates has also briefly mentioned New Orleans in two subsequent short stories. Each mention clearly associates the city with notions of crime and questionable unorthodox behavior. In "Doll: A Romance of the Mississippi," the eponymous protagonist mentions New Orleans as a place she'd like to go for rest and vacation: "Saying to Daddy, Know what? I want ostrich boots for Christmas. I want some sun in New Orleans" (58). Doll and her father are quite the pair of misfits themselves. The story tells the disturbing tale of this father/daughter duo who roam Mississippi river cities from Mille Lacs, Minnesota to Greenville, Mississippi, setting up lucrative clandestine appointments for live child pornography, leaving a trail of corpses behind them whenever Doll's mean streak comes out and incites her to savagely murder a client with a razor blade to the carotid artery. The mythical debauchery of New Orleans seems the perfect place for such an odd criminal couple to go for refuge and rest. In "Evil Eye," Mariana, a PhD candidate in film studies, and Austin, director of the film Institute where she studies, discuss the work of the pioneering feminist film *noir* director Ida Lupino, including
- an obscure *Twilight Zone* episode Lupino had directed called "The Masks" in the 1950s. Together, Mariana and Austin analyzed the parable-like plot of this TV drama in which craven individuals at Mardi Gras in New Orleans are obliged to don masks whose ugly features reveal their inner selves—and, when they remove the masks at midnight, their faces bear the imprint of the ugly masks. (18)
- 23 Though Lupino's episode clearly seeks to denounce the impulses of her characters, once again, Joyce Carol Oates associates New Orleans with craven individuals and twisted revenge.
- 24 Through these brief mentions of New Orleans, Oates taps into the collective myth of the city as a place of vice to effectively use it as a synecdoche for temptations of debauchery

nationwide, while at the same time gently prompting the reader to reflect on the issues of incarceration, crime and victimization.

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## NOTES

1. Originally published in *Playboy*, n° 49.1, January 2002, p. 120, 160-166. This might amusingly be considered an appropriate venue for the story as it is frequently associated with the same risqué clichés of sex and hidden impulses as the city of New Orleans itself. Citations in this paper refer to the version of the story collected in *I Am No One You Know* and will be abbreviated AA for in-text citations.
2. Private conversations with former New Orleans resident Mary Boyington in October and November 2013.
3. This article began as a paper delivered in November 2013. At the time, even as these scandals were being made public and the sheriff's office claimed to be reacting accordingly, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* ran a 31 October 2013 story by Naomi Martin about a whistleblower, Deputy Bryan Collins, who claimed nothing had changed: "And even as [Sheriff] Gusman pledges a new day for the long troubled lock-up, Collins says there have been no meaningful changes and the violence that led to the [consent] decree continues unabated. Collins is the first Sheriff's Office employee to speak publicly about the jail. He said the public should know that the Sheriff's Office routinely fails to conduct thorough investigations into contraband and violence."
4. Vampire folklore traditionally maintains that the hearts of vampires shrivel up and disappear from lack of use.
5. "First Views of the Enemy" was first published in *Prairie Schooner*, The University of Nebraska Press (Spring 1964) and collected in *Prize Stories 1965: The O. Henry Awards* before appearing in Oates's 1966 collection *Upon the Sweeping Flood*.

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## ABSTRACTS

Though no Oates story exclusively uses New Orleans as setting, the city does play an important role in the short story "Aiding and Abetting" (collected in *I Am No One You Know*, 2004). Steven and Holly's idyllic home life with their two young children in urban northern New Jersey is interrupted by frequent disturbing evening phone calls from Holly's mentally unstable brother, Owen. In this context, the mention of "deplorable conditions in the New Orleans Parish Prison," which Steven hears in an NBC news report while he is on the phone with Owen, serves as a metaphor for feelings of victimization and imprisonment on the part of each of the characters, as well as a metaphor for Steven's own mistreatment of his mentally scarred brother-in-law whose fragility he takes advantage of by suggesting he commit suicide. The mention of the prison also somehow encourages Steven in his transgressive act. This article explores the role played in the story by the New Orleans Parish Prison and examines the implications of the use of this ultra-marginal space in the fiction of a traditionally northern writer.

Oates n'a jamais choisi La Nouvelle-Orléans comme cadre d'un récit fictionnel. Cependant, la célèbre ville joue un rôle important dans la nouvelle « Aiding and Abetting ». Le bonheur domestique de Steven et Holly est souvent troublé par des appels téléphoniques de la part de Owen, le frère de Holly atteint de troubles psychologiques. Dans ce contexte, les commentaires sur les conditions déplorables au sein de la prison de La Nouvelle-Orléans qu'entend Steven aux informations lorsqu'il est au téléphone avec son beau-frère représentent métaphoriquement les sentiments de victimisation et d'emprisonnement propres à chacun des personnages. Par ailleurs, Steven profite de la fragilité mentale instable de son beau-frère et lui suggère d'envisager le suicide, ce qui, dans l'économie de la nouvelle, est une conséquence directe du reportage sur la prison. Cet article examine le rôle de cette institution carcérale ainsi que les motivations de Oates.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** crime, incarceration, tension, transgression, victimization, violence

**Mots-clés:** crime, incarcération, tension, transgression, victimisation, violence

## AUTHOR

### TANYA TROMBLE

Université Lumière-Lyon 2, docteur du LERMA (Aix Marseille Univ, Aix-en-Provence, France)  
tanya.tromble@gmail.com

Tanya Tromble is an associate member of the LERMA EA 853 research group at Aix Marseille Université. She defended a doctoral dissertation entitled "Interminable Enigma: Joyce Carol Oates's Reimagining of Detective Fiction" and has published articles in English and French on various aspects of Oates's fiction including crime fiction, the epistolary form, violence, the gothic, religion, and 9/11. She is a member of the editorial board for the journal *Bearing Witness: Joyce Carol Oates Studies*. She is currently co-editing a volume of essays on Oates and her work for the *Cahiers de l'Herne* series.