

Monsters, Magnates, and Maims: Reading #MeToo Trauma Narratives in Dizz Tate's *Brutes* (2023)¹

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Abstract: Dizz Tate's *Brutes* (2023) commences with an ominous "Where is she?", which reverberates in a narrative haunted by the disappearance of fourteen-year-old Sammy. Noticeably informed by the testimonies that survivors of Jeffrey Epstein's Palm Springs underage exploitation pyramid (2001-2006) offered during #MeToo, Tate explores the pervasiveness of sexual trauma in the lives of the protagonists. She paints a vivid portrait of a contemporary Florida, parallelly haunted by a lake monster and the ominous presence of showbusiness magnate Stone. Through a close reading based on the affects derived from sexual trauma—namely guilt, shame, and pain—this paper intends to frame this novel as part of the growing literary corpus to be forwarded by the affective forces of #MeToo. It will specifically focus on the notions of disruption, breakage, and disappearance of the self as trauma response, as conceptualized by trauma theorists Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Anne Whitehead; and on the manifestation of trauma through the monstrous and the uncanny, informed by Laurie Vickroy's theory.

Keywords: #MeToo literature; trauma theory; gender; sexual violence; Dizz Tate

ES Monstruos, Magnates, y Heridas: Leyendo Narrativas de Trauma del #MeToo a través de *Brutes* (2023) de Dizz Tate

Resumen: *Brutes* (2023) de Dizz Tate, comienza con esta sibilina pregunta. La desaparición de la hija del pastor, Sammy, sacude las vidas del grupo de trece añeras que se encargan de la brumosa y claustrofóbica narración en primera persona del plural de esta historia. Cuando Mia, la mejor amiga de Sammy, toma a las chicas bajo su ala, comenzarán a descubrir la oscuridad y los secretos que provocaron la desaparición de Sammy. Tate pinta un retrato vívido y gótico sureño de una Florida embrujada de igual manera por un monstruo en el lago, y por el poderoso y sombrío magnate del "showbusiness" Stone. A través de su narrativa, indudablemente inspirada por la red de prostitución de menores de Jeffrey Epstein en Palm Springs, Tate explora la ubicuidad del trauma sexual en las vidas de las chicas, así como las consecuencias afectivas de culpa, vergüenza, y dolor que las supervivientes de Epstein han expresado durante el movimiento #MeToo. A través de un análisis literario de lectura detallada informado por críticas de los estudios de trauma como Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, Anne Whitehead, y Laurie Vickroy, este artículo pretende caracterizar *Brutes* como una de las primeras novelas producto del #MeToo y sus afectos.

Palabras clave: Movimiento #MeToo; estudios de trauma; literatura contemporánea; género; lectura detallada.

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1. Introduction: The #MeToo Novel and Trauma Narratives

2017 was defined by the digital “march” that thousands of people made to Twitter (now X) to state that they, too, had survived the endemic and pervasive harms of sexual violence in any of its forms. The year would become the threshold of what Lisa Corrigan later reckoned as a “rhetorical zeitgeist” (2019, 264). It was one where listening to narratives of sexual violence and their trauma, tied with the notion that we should “believe women” (Vogelstein and Stone 2021, 8), would transcend the feminist spaces that they had been somewhat constrained to before and enter the public dialogue. The #MeToo movement, created originally in 2006 by feminist activist Tarana Burke, as “Me Too,” and taken to Twitter by actress Alyssa Milano, quickly proved its incendiary force and transcended the digital space. It has since been defined as the emblematic inauguration of fourth-wave feminism and has generated a new environment around narratives of sexual violence. In her recent volume on #MeToo, Marta Fernández-Morales states that “#MeToo did not give survivors a voice. What it did was lend them an attentive ear” (2025, 5). An ear that, thanks to the movement’s unprecedented “rhetorics of amplification”² (Winderman 2019, 327), is still listening eight years later.

Since its early days on Twitter, the movement has sparked its fair share of skepticism among some sections of the feminist movement, and not without reason. An important part of the conflict at hand was effectively symbolized through the binary distinction between the figures of Tarana Burke and Alyssa Milano. Burke’s original 2006 “Me Too” initiative had been a project based on affective solidarity and mutual support of survivors of sexual violence, focused mostly on working-class black and brown women and girls (Burke 2021, 239). In turn, Milano’s main goal in her post was to illustrate the pervasiveness of sexual violence as a means to draw attention, specifically, to the allegations that several show-business industry women had been presenting against magnate producer Harvey Weinstein. Thus, where Burke’s project had had a focus on collective healing and on structural violence (Burke 2018, 27), Milano’s intentions had been read as focused on the case of an individual perpetrator who needed to be stopped. The emphasis that a large section of #MeToo had on naming individual perpetrators as well as its spotlight on white celebrity caused concern that the more vulnerable working-class women were going to be disregarded (Berg 2020, 261), and that the movement was leaning more to a “bad apple” approach (Rottenberg 2019, 47), rather than one that focused on a communal project that contemplated the systemic violence that permeated the intersecting realities of women.

Yet, some theorists who themselves have been critical of the movement’s limitations have also pointed to the relevance of individual testimony in regards to sexual violence, and have insisted on the importance of not ignoring these depositions. Jilly Boyce Kay, for one, foregrounds that capitalism, patriarchy, and racism are indeed the “ultimate structural enablers” (2020, 42) of sexual violence, but warns against the symbolic harm of ejecting or pathologizing affects born from individual maims. She underlines: “[T]he very nature of sexual abuse and harassment is that it is so often experienced at an individual level; it does take away your sense of self – it is done to you by actual, individual people – it is acutely physically painful” (2020, 42-43; italics in the original). A focus on collective healing and on holding structural powers accountable does not necessarily render individual testimony useless. The personal, after all, is still very much political. What #MeToo succeeded at is, precisely, creating a forum where survivors can tell their own stories and the public sees them not in isolation from each other, as separate incidents, but as a collective, endemic issue. Leigh Gilmore puts it best: “Reading individual accounts of rape as examples of a collective problem, which is the core of #MeToo, clarifies that women’s diminished right to lodge credible complaints in processes that grant men impunity from those complaints is a structural problem” (2023, 9). Individual and collective testimony are not inconsonant; they work together. Every survivor’s testimony and affects are woven into #MeToo’s narrative, affective, and political fabric.

In this vein of thought, it is also relevant to understand the practice of naming perpetrators with further nuance. Some of the infamous names that were pointed at during the #MeToo moment had been touching, groping, and grabbing as they pleased, safely tucked away in their lofty perches long before the eruption of the movement with little to no repercussion. Power, Gilmore states, can be translated into credibility (2023, 8), especially when one is able to pay for it. Through the #MeToo movement, survivors found that it was collectivity, plurality, and community that gave them the power to be believed. The movement effectively changed the way that women’s testimony about sexual violence is looked at, moving away from “men’s denials, women’s defenses of men, the exonerating ‘he said/she said,’ and survivors’ discounted testimony. There is a new focus on abusers’ words and actions” (Gilmore 2023, 11). This shift in the emotional climate, which placed relevance on the abusers’ accountability instead of the survivors’, opened the gate for a moment of reckoning in which the many voices of women together were able to rattle those lofty perches on which these tycoons had comfortably lain for so long.

Among the most renowned cases to which #MeToo brought mass attention is that of American financial magnate Jeffrey Epstein, whose sexual misconducts first came to the public’s attention in 2005. In March 14, the stepmother of a fourteen-year-old girl from West Palm Beach, Florida, reported that her stepdaughter had been molested by New York mogul Jeffrey Epstein. The girl told in her deposition that she was brought to Epstein’s Palm Beach residence under the premise that she would be massaging him. In turn, he sexually

² Emily Winderman understands anger’s expression as regulated through “volume,” which she contends is either “amplified” or “diminished” according to the sociocultural categories of race, gender, and class. She argues that the #MeToo movement served as a form of amplification for women’s testimonies of anger, which had traditionally been diminished in public emotion, in this sense aligning with the aforementioned idea that #MeToo did not give women a voice, but instead made them heard.

assaulted her and paid her three hundred dollars. Police began interviewing other local girls, finding that several other minors had the same story. During the following months of 2005, the investigation and legal process were constantly hindered by irregularities. Epstein was believed to have inside information on the investigation, as he was able to remove several computers from his residence which were believed to have information about the victims. The families of the victims also reported being harassed by “Epstein-paid private eyes” (Baltz 2025, n.p.). In 2007, Epstein signed a non-prosecution agreement with then-US Attorney Alex Acosta, which caused the indictment to disappear and the case that the FBI had against Epstein to be stopped. On June 30th, 2008, a last-minute hearing was scheduled, without informing the victims, their lawyers, or the Palm Beach Police Department about its transcendence (Bryant 2020, ep. 3 00:03:43). In this hearing, Epstein had to plead guilty only to a charge of solicitation of prostitution and a charge of solicitation of a minor for prostitution, which caused federal sex trafficking charges to disappear and granted immunity to co-conspirators. He was sentenced to eighteen months of jailtime, and released to house arrest in 2009. In early 2017, only a few months before the eruption of #MeToo, Miami Herald investigative journalist Julie K. Brown began researching the Epstein case, focusing her approach on the testimonies of the survivors. Brown uncovered eighty potential survivors and included eight testimonies in her reports, published in November 2018 (Brown 2018a, Brown 2018b, Brown 2018c). Brown has often been credited for re-opening the Epstein case (Siegel 2019, Pilkington 2019). Only one year after her publication, Epstein was arrested and Acosta resigned from his position as US secretary of labor. Ultimately, Epstein did not face trial as he was found dead in his prison cell. His death was officially ruled a suicide.

Although Brown began her investigation before the outbreak of #MeToo, her approach, based on testimony and the dismantling of a system of silence, fits within the main tenets of the #MeToo moment. #MeToo’s relevance in shaping new discourses on sexual violence was undeniable, and the shift it caused in how we looked at sexual violence was soon reflected in different media ventures. In film and television, several high-profile narratives that explored themes of power and abuse began to spring out around 2019—think of *The Morning Show* (2019), *The Assistant* (2019), *Bombshell* (2019), *Promising Young Woman* (2020), or *Women Talking* (2022)³. The “affective economy” (Ahmed 2004) of pain and anger shaped by #MeToo soon began permeating literary fictions also, and authors and publishers began putting out stories that were either influenced by the movement or written from its affective prism. Already in 2019, critics were pointing to the increasingly consolidated literary current that #MeToo had pushed forward. In *The Guardian*, Rhianon Lucy Cosslet pointed out that “[n]ow that the frenzy has passed, a new literature is in the process of emerging and it is subtle and nuanced, reaching beyond relatability and identity, and offering no easy answers” (2019, n.p.). In *The New York Times*, Parul Sehgal conceptualized the “#MeToo novel” as “disparate stories of sex and power suddenly regarded as timely, and read through the lens of an unfolding movement” (2019, n.p.). #MeToo literature forwarded new ways of writing about trauma within a broad lens that contemplates the nuanced spectrum of gendered violence (Sehgal 2019, n.p.) and that deviated from traditional scripts for the “victim’s narrative” (Doherty 2020, n.p.).

In this vein, this paper offers a close reading of Dizz Tate’s novel *Brutes* (2023) as a #MeToo novel, characterized as a representative trauma narrative of the #MeToo era. *Brutes*, largely informed by the public testimonies of Jeffrey Epstein’s survivors, partakes in a literary trauma paradigm analyzed extensively by critics since the late 20th century. This paradigm is based on techniques of experimentation, fragmented narratives, non-linear sequence, and processes of symbolization that try not to emulate, but to narrate from the perspective of the traumatized subject. However, it fits with the new approaches to trauma literature that Sehgal and Doherty described, as it adapts and intermixes these literary techniques with the notions and affects of trauma that #MeToo brought about, making the novel a distinctively #MeToo era work that is defining of its moment of production and partakes in the circulation of the movement’s affective economy, namely affects of pain, anger, and shame.

2. Reading Trauma and the Loss of the Self: Theory and Methodology

In her revolutionary study *Trauma and Recovery* (1992), Judith Herman contended that trauma often causes subjects to lose their grip on essential notions that configure their sense of self. She exemplified how severe trauma may cause the loss of trust in oneself, in close ones, or in broader belief systems such as religion (2015, 75). Susan Brison, in her academic memoir about rape, also testifies to this loss of self, describing the traumatic event as “self-annihilating” (2003, 38).

Trauma theorists like Laurie Vickroy have also expanded on this effect, by contending the upshot that trauma has on the human psyche as changing of the individual’s “psychological, biological, and social equilibrium” to the point that the experience tarnishes all other life occurrences, calling the traumatic effect a “tyranny of the past” (2002, 12). This notion of the tyranny of the past goes hand in hand with pivotal trauma theorist Cathy Caruth’s approach to trauma as “the story of a wound that crie[s] out” (1996, 4). Trauma, in Caruth’s theory, comes to be between a “crisis of death” and a “crisis of life:” “Is trauma the meeting and dodging death, or is it this ongoing presence after having survived it?” (1996, 7). Rape narratives from the

³ All of these films and series tackle themes of sexual violence against women, gendered power, and institutional complicity in different contexts. Considering corporate environments (*The Morning Show*, *The Assistant*, and *Bombshell*), university campuses (*Promising Young Woman*), and religious communities (*Women Talking*), they explore institutional protection of abusers and isolation of victims and survivors. Released after the initial boom of #MeToo, they align with its explorations on rape culture, the silencing of victims and complicity of patriarchal structures, and present female protagonists that actively begin to resist these injustices.

#MeToo movement often convey trauma as a “rupture” or “loss” of identity. Characters are ultimately changed by the traumatic event and the entirety of the narrative works to reflect this. Having experienced a loss of self after the traumatic event, they narrate the story from the in-betweenness that the crisis of death and the crisis of life produce.

To explore such elusive notions that resist conceptualization, literary narratives of trauma turn to experimental techniques. Some critics, like Francisco Collado-Rodríguez have suggested that these textual strategies that have been traditionally labelled “experimental” are obvious and necessary to trauma narratives (2011, 129). Vickroy and Anne Whitehead have also contended that trauma narratives call for a departure from conventional linear sequences and instead tend to internalize the rhythms, processes, and structure of traumatic experience in order to underline the chaotic aspects of trauma (Vickroy 2002, 28; Whitehead 2004, 6-7).

Considering these aspects, the analysis of such texts must adapt to the particularities of each narrative. Since, as Dominic LaCapra stated, “a post-traumatic response [...] becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition” (1999, 699), the critical analysis of trauma narratives must also resist constrained systematization. Thus, the literary analysis of trauma shifts from a methodological approach to an interpretive orientation; not attributing fixed values to each formal aspect of the text, but rather examining closely how the text shapes experience, time, and memory through language and form. In order to effectively make this interpretation, it is also crucial to understand the sociocultural and historical values shaping the meaning of trauma (Berger 1997, 573; Pederson 2014, 339-349). Because of this, the reading of trauma in *Brutes* is understood within the context of it being a #MeToo rape narrative. Each of the experimentative techniques it employs to depict trauma (fragmentation, aporia, ellipses...) are not read in isolation, granting them specific values. Instead, they are analyzed and evaluated for the ways in which they all interact, aiming at achieving an appropriate representation of the trauma that Epstein survivors have expressed.

This paper will thus consider *Brutes*'s formal and stylistic elements and place them in dialogue with the trauma that the characters endure in the narrative, illustrating how those experimental techniques that Tate employs are essential, as Collado-Rodríguez argued, to convey the magnitude of trauma. *Brutes* follows a group of thirteen-year-olds who share one narrative voice in first-person plural. However, this choral narration is interrupted by first-person singular narrated chapters from each member of the group in their adulthood. Through these chapters, the reader is presented with how each member of the group deals with the sexual trauma they endured as children, and attains more clarity on the events that take place in the childhood narrative line, filled with ellipses and silences. The presence of trauma in both timelines is strongly defined, through a magic realist approach, with a lake monster haunting the group. Thus, this analysis will focus on how the narrative voice, the fragmented timeline, and magical realistic techniques work together to depict the loss of self and crisis of life that the traumatic event entails. Also, and as mentioned before, this paper defends the cultural-dependent nature of trauma, and therefore will analyze how the aforementioned elements relate to the affects and forms of trauma that were conveyed in #MeToo testimonies and narratives, specifically those by Jeffrey Epstein survivors.

3. *Brutes* (2023) by Dizz Tate as a Trauma Narrative

Leila, Britney, Jody, Hazel, Isabel, and Christian are the teenagers that form the tight-knit group, so close that their identities are often indiscernible from each other, through which *Brutes* is focalized. The girls⁴ live in a small town in Florida, which is harshly marked by class segregation, represented by the living spaces. The girls all live in what they call “the apartments”, whereas other wealthier characters reside in a gated community of mansions called Falls Landing, which the former often stalk or try to get into. Between the two spaces, there is an eerie black lake that the girls have been taught to fear immensely: “We have been told since birth never to go near the lake, and it is the only rule no one is tempted to disobey” (Tate 2023a, 103). They even believe that there is something living inside it, which both terrifies and attracts them: “The lake never moves, but we find its stillness hard to believe. It seems to be tricking us, and we swear if we look quickly enough just once we will catch it, squish the truth it is hiding like a fly in our fists” (Tate 2023a, 15).

The girls' lives are driven by their immense curiosity for the lives of others, especially the older girls, and their burning desire to move to California in the pursuit of fame. These aspirations for celebrity are shared by all the girls in town and their mothers, especially those from the apartments. For this reason, all of them long to take classes in a franchise academy for dancing and modeling called Star Search, owned by the novel's most ominous figure: Stone, a show-business mogul who lives in Falls Landing and, aside from owning the academies, has several connections with Hollywood agents. The children who take classes at Star Search are allowed to audition for them, but to do so they have to pay extensively:

If you paid to do six months of classes with Mia's mother, you got to do an audition at the mall for a casting agent and Stone. Stone ran all the Star Search schools in Florida. He used to be a photographer and he took the headshots everyone wanted, where girls didn't smile and looked so over it all. Sometimes he came by to watch the dance classes, and we noticed how our mothers, watching us,

⁴ Throughout the paper, Christian will be referred to as one of ‘the girls’ following the novel's terminology. Despite Christian being and presenting himself as a boy, the girls note when they speak about how they became friends with him and his brother Eddie that “Eddie always stayed a boy but Christian became a girl and now he is one of us” (Tate 2023a, 41).

tightened up as soon as he slid in the door. We hardly ever heard him speak. He watched. Very rarely, we heard him shout at our mothers, and thought it was rare. (Tate 2023a, 29)

The novel begins with a disappearance. The day before the action starts, Sammy, the fourteen-year-old preacher's daughter, whom the girls idolize and adore, vanishes without a trace. For most of the previous year, Sammy had been best friends with Mia, whose mother is the dance teacher at Star Search. This connection had made Mia and Sammy very close with Stone, visiting him often and working as "talent recruiters" for him. The two girls were assigned to choose other girls from their school that they thought Stone would like and take them to audition to get a place in his classes. From the girls' mordant yet incredibly naïve narration, it is slowly inferred that Mia and Sammy, as well as the girls that they recruit, are being sexually abused by Stone. This is first explicitly stated when Mia intends to convince one of the girls, Leila, to get her pictures taken by Stone in exchange for two hundred dollars, which the latter refuses. This issue, hinted at in the chapters narrated by their younger selves, is made clear in several of the adulthood chapters. In Britney's adult chapter, she is struggling with an abuse that she endured in her childhood. She recounts watching the trial against her abuser on TV, and remembers him as someone who "signed [her] mother's pay cheques for years" (Tate 2023a, 84), as Britney's mother worked for the Star Search academy as a secretary. In Christian's adulthood, he confronts Mia about what she was doing, although she is remorseless:

'What have you come here for, to judge or blame me? Convert me to Jesus or Jehovah? What are you gonna do? Stab me?' (...) 'I didn't do anything to you,' she says. 'You knew what the deal was, everyone did. Two hundred dollars. You know how many kids did it? It's not my fault he got handsy with your friend and you left her there. And it's not my fault if you came back.' (Tate 2023a, 161)

Brutes is not only inspired by the several trauma testimonies aired by #MeToo, but also models its plot after the aforementioned sexual pyramid scheme that Jeffrey Epstein profited from in his time in Palm Beach. Similar to *Brutes*'s Stone, Epstein would target girls from low-income families to massage him under the premise that they would then get two hundred dollars. Most if not all the girls that were coerced into going to Epstein's mansion were not from Palm Beach but West Palm Beach, the neighboring city, described as "a whole different world when you cross the bridges" (Bryant 2020, ep.1 00:66:04). West Palm Beach is an area built out of working-class communities that draws a striking difference with the mansions of Palm Beach, a juxtaposition that was also present in *Brutes* through the separations of settings between "the apartments" and the gated community Falls Landing. Some of the abused girls, like Mia, would be groomed into recruiting other girls from similar ages to come do the same, and both the second girl and the recruiter would then get extra money (Robson 2024, n.p.). Inspired by testimonies of the victims, *Brutes* deals with the aftermath of sexual violence itself, but also with the guilt, shame, and trauma that many of Epstein's victims have admitted to feeling in their adulthood after recruiting other girls.

3.1. Post-traumatic time and its narrative forms

In an interview soon after the publication of *Brutes*, Tate stated that the novel was originally intended to be a straightforward narrative, with a linear timeline and a first-person singular narrator. However, as she continued to write, she realized that this form felt untrue and was not productive to the story. Thus, she scratched the project and rewrote it entirely from the first-person plural and with the non-linear timeline that it has now (Tate 2023b, n.p.). This decision aligns with the priorly mentioned idea that trauma narratives demand a deviation from traditional narrative forms in order to accurately convey the complex effects that trauma causes on the cognition of the traumatized subjects. Time, perception, and understanding become blurred and tainted by trauma, thus the narrative must reflect these vicissitudes.

In *Brutes*, the most prominently experimental techniques are the non-linear narrative and the shifting focalizations. Through the time shifts between womanhood and girlhood, the reader is presented with the pervasiveness of trauma that accompanies the girls throughout their lives. In adulthood, they are all haunted to some degree by their traumatic childhood. Christian and Britney are drug addicts, Leila and Hazel try to forego their trauma by investing themselves in dysfunctional relationships, and Isabel and Jody are haunted by the image of the monster of the lake. They are all obsessively drawn to remembering their childhoods together and even border on an over-glorification of that past; yet, paradoxically, the ones who have left Florida hate or feel unease at the thought of returning, choosing instead to avoid the others, refusing to engage in any kind of meaningful conversation about their shared experiences. This proves how they are most definitely "stuck" in that traumatic space between the "urge to know and the need to deny" (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 2011, 9) what happened when they were children.

There is only one character from the set of girls who does not have her own adult chapter: Jody. The only access the reader has to her adulthood is through her sister Hazel's chapter. This is significant. At the end of the novel, Jody is raped by Stone, being the first of all girls. During the rape scene, there is a quick and disturbing change of focalization. The girls have been taken to Stone's house by Mia and are pressured into massaging him. The scene, where the girls try to retain humor, soon becomes menacing and dreadful. As they take turns to massage Stone, they begin thinking in unison about their need to leave and their inability to do so, not knowing the house or how to get out. However, in the middle of their trains of thought, the narration goes from the now familiar and even comforting first person plural to an isolating and eerie first-person singular. Jody is left alone in the room with Stone, and most certainly has no way out:

We imagine ourselves in reverse, moving backward through the doors and the trees and under the fence, back to our mothers, moving their way through the light (...). But we cannot reach our mothers in the light because we are in the dark. Even in our thoughts, they are too far, the house is too large, and we cannot remember where the door is. We know clocks cannot turn backward, anyway. After a while, I look around and realise the others have left me. I am alone and he turns to look at me. It is not a look I like. (...) He says it is my hands that lead him, he shows me this even as he holds down my wrists. (...) I do not want to be you. I do not want to be you. I do not want to be you. I look around for someone else to be but I am alone and I have always been so scared of being alone. (Tate 2023a, 172)

The shift in focalization manages to represent several relevant points. First, it marks the tonal shift that the rape means for the narrative. From this scene onwards, the novel only has one more scene with the plural narrator, and that is a flashback. The rest of the childhood timeline remains with Jody as a first-person singular narrator. The narrative, like Jody herself, is irrevocably changed after the traumatic event. Second, the focalization shift also marks a shift in the girls' perception of the world. Before the rape, they felt a strong sense of safety in being together. They wandered the town with the feeling that nothing bad would happen to them. However, after this event, they are no longer an ensemble. Each of them is an individual who has lost their trust in goodness. They lose their innocence and their identity, which was deeply linked to their sense of group. Finally, they also lose their sense of self in the way Herman describes as characteristic of trauma victims.

The themes of losing oneself and "disappearance" are extremely recurrent in the novel to the point of becoming a motif. All the girls who are raped by Stone experience some degree of disappearance. While this idea is most obviously conveyed through Sammy's disappearance, all girls who survive sexual abuse endure a process of fading in one way or another. As mentioned above, the lack of an adult chapter by Jody reinforces the idea of her actual disappearance and her loss of self after the trauma. In addition, the idea is overtly expressed when she sees her mother after the abuse: "I can faintly hear my mother screaming, and as I listen I can tell her voice forms the shape of my name, but I have disappeared and I know she cannot see me anymore" (Tate 2023a, 183). Mia also disappears at a certain point in the novel. After she becomes extremely anxious performing in the audition in front of Stone and the agent, she runs away from them and from her mother, and the girls struggle to chase her down and describe her leaving: "We watch as she disappears into the whiteness of a bare Florida afternoon" (Tate 2023a, 78). Then, naturally, there is Sammy's physical disappearance, which is filled with ellipses. Sammy's character is the most elusive in the novel. It is only towards the end of the narrative that her whereabouts are partly revealed: she was planning to escape, and the other girls agreed to help her and hid her in the abandoned house in their town. However, nothing else is known about Sammy. The extent of her relationship with Stone, how she became friends with Mia, or why she wanted to leave all of a sudden. A key piece of information is provided by Mia during her confrontation with Christian, when she says: "Then [my mother] sent me to the preacher to get more hands on me" (Tate 2023a, 162). The preacher is Sammy's father. Thus, it could potentially be inferred that Sammy might have also been molested by her father and was "talent recruiting" with Mia to obtain the money she needed to escape the abuse at home. In this respect, her disappearance can be read as the physical realization of her posttraumatic loss of self, as she becomes inaccessible to the girls. In fact, the only reappearance of Sammy in the adult timeline occurs in Isabel's chapter, in which the latter takes her children to a Catholic theme park and sees Sammy playing Mary Magdalene and screaming "[h]e would not have died if you were here!" (Tate 2023a, 140). The fact that the only time one of the girls sees Sammy in adulthood is not only in costume, but as a saint, goes on to insist on how the girls idealize Sammy, and see her as entirely unreachable. To reinforce the motif of disappearance and inaccessibility to the girls who have survived sexual violence, *Brutes* has a running repetition of the sentence "where is she?", which even opens the novel. The question, repeated thirty-eight times throughout the narrative, becomes almost a chant sometimes, and is intoned especially by mothers who regret the loss of their daughters. The repetition of this lamentation of the loss of the girls throughout the narrative, played as an endless loop, becomes a representation of that wound that cries out; a thought, a regret, that never abandons the characters.

3.2. Portraying trauma beyond realism

The elusive nature of trauma and the simultaneous grip it holds on the traumatized subject requires that authors who intend to portray it seek alternative forms of narration which deviate from straight-forward, realists accounts. Magical realism has emerged in contemporary trauma narratives as an effective mode for articulating the experience of trauma in the literary text. The blending of the everyday with the supernatural mirrors the elusive, hard-to-grasp, and uncanny nature of trauma (Arva and Roland 2015, 10). Tate depicts the landscape of Florida from a magic realist angle, mixing the girls' everyday lives with monstrous beings and supernatural events. The magic realist approach is a common one to depict those aspects of reality that are somewhat inaccessible to the characters. In the novel, the girls struggle, both in childhood and adulthood, to understand and come to terms with the violence that surrounded them in their hometown and the traumatic memories thereof. Tate's portrait of Florida is marked by a sense of mysteriousness and darkness. Covered by the glittering promise of stardom, the girls' Florida is marked by heat, and a sense of decay, rot, and haunting:

I think when you grow up in Florida, it almost feels like an unbelievable place. The lovely swamp. The beauty of it all. And the danger. It feels like a party being thrown at the end of the world. I like Southern Gothic more than some realism, although I like both. It feels sometimes to me like realism unpicks

consciousness and thought, but it misses the dream-state, the unconsciousness, that sticky mystery beneath the daily reality of life. Realism feels like recognition, revealing, understanding, but Southern Gothic to me points out that nothing can ever be understood, it's a gesture never an explanation. (Tate 2023c, n.p.)

The author's description of her home state as a "party at the end of the world", and her swindling between realism's "unpicking of consciousness and thought" and Gothic's "dream-state" and "unconsciousness"⁵ expresses the adequacy of a hybrid genre to represent the traumatic space between knowing and not knowing. Authors' choice of subgenres like magic realism, Gothic, and fantasy, among other "antirealist" approaches to trauma, has also been studied by critics, as these forms allow for experimentation with narrative technique and content that trauma narratives often demand. In this sense, Michael Rothberg has analyzed the implications of both realist and antirealist approaches to the Holocaust novel in *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (2000). He argues that realistic approaches are appropriate for narratives that depict the trauma as knowable and that can be represented through mimesis, while unrealist ones postulate that trauma is not knowable and cannot be captured in traditional representational schemata. Applying Rothberg's distinction to trauma narratives in general, Jean Michel Ganteu expands on these ideas in the following terms: has noted the preference of contemporary trauma fiction for unrealist approaches, since it is "characterized by a great deal of epistemological, cognitive failure, whether it be radical blotting out or relative uncertainty" (2011, 25-26). Because of these characteristics, authors will tend to favor the "unrealistic pole of representation" by focusing on the uncanny and the sublime (2011, 26).

Ganteu also describes that "in most cases, the sublimity of trauma is considered in connection with the privileging of a gloomy atmosphere verging on the apocalyptic" (2011, 28). This aligns, once again, not only with Tate's direct description of her native Florida as a "party at the end of the world," but also with the contemporary Southern revival of the Gothic tradition, in which *Brutes*'s the overall gloominess of participates, where the murkiness is not attained through foggy landscapes, but instead through heat and stickiness. This sensation is evoked by Hazel when, in her adult chapter, returns to Florida to visit Jody: "There is a specifically Floridian smell, the stink of America (microwaved plastic, air freshener, hot oil) mixed with mildew and something else, something ancient, rotting, and sweaty, possibly life" (Tate 2023a, 59).

Hazel's perception of Florida's asphyxiating atmosphere leads to the other main aspect of the unrealistic approach, according to Ganteu: the use of the "uncanny". The uncanny, originally deployed by Freud in an essay with the same title (1919) refers to something that is both familiar and strange at the same time to the beholder. In *Brutes*, the uncanny takes shape through the lake and the monster that inhabits it. From the start of the narrative, the girls fear the lake immensely and seem to believe it may be a living entity. The girls' fear of the lake is such that they stay away from it for the first half of the novel. They do not approach it until Mia takes them there. In Mia's audition in front of the Hollywood agent and Stone, the agent asks her to remove her ever-present big sunglasses, which she wears constantly in a shield-like effort. When she takes them off, reluctantly, the girls are baffled to see her eyes for the first time: "Her eyes are as black as we imagined they would be, or almost black, the colour of the lake" (Tate 2023a, 75). Without her glasses, Mia becomes agitated and is unable to perform well at the audition, which causes her to flee in the middle of it.

After that, the girls follow Mia, and Leila, the leader of the group, is particularly keen on comforting her. As a result, Mia begins to bond with Leila, taking her away from the others and isolating her from her friends. She takes her to the lake, while the rest of the girls follow and spy from a distance. Placing Leila against the shore of the black lake, Mia begins to pressure the former to go with her to Stone's house to get her picture taken by him. In a claustrophobic scene, she tries to coerce her friend while closing the space between her and the black water:

'You don't have to do anything,' we hear Mia say at the edge of the lake.

'Have you done it?' says Leila.

'Sure,' says Mia. 'You just stand there.'

'What about the pictures?'

'They don't have your face in them. You check. And you get free classes or you can take the two hundred. Whatever you want.'

Leila takes a small step away from her. She is closer to the lake than we ever normally dare go.

'You're lucky,' says Mia. I don't just ask anybody.' (...) 'If you don't want to, it's no big deal,' says Mia. She takes a step toward Leila, closing the space between them. The edge of the lake is black and still, brushing at Leila's heels. (Tate 2023a, 100)

When Leila refuses to go to Stone's, Mia angrily pushes her into the lake. When she falls in, the girls note that the lake does not behave like normal water but instead begins swallowing Leila as if it were black petrol. The girls become petrified and do not approach them while Mia watches Leila struggle in the water. In the end, it is Eddie, Mia's ex-boyfriend who rushes to pull Leila out of the water and yells at Mia: "What are you doing pushing girls around all the time?" (Tate 2023a, 110). During their confrontation, the girls, who watch from a distance, are covered in red ants and run into the lake, which does not swallow them as it did with Leila. In these scenes, the lake can be read as the door to the danger that haunts their town, and most particularly the

⁵ The exploration of the hidden or repressed aspects of the human mind, such as memories, desires, or fears, is one of the defining features of the Gothic. It has traditionally relied on using the supernatural, darkness, and eerie landscapes to depict these aspects of consciousness. In the more modern tradition of Gothic literature, magic realism is featured often for this same purpose (Armitt 2014, 227-228).

door to Stone's house. In this respect, Eddie's remark about Mia pushing girls into the lake is his accusation of her taking girls to Stone's house.

If the lake stands as the door to danger, the danger is what lives inside the lake: the monster. After Jody's rape in the childhood timeline, the monster begins to be featured more prominently. After leaving Stone's house, the girls go to see Sammy, who was hiding in an abandoned house waiting to escape the town. When they find her, she is suffering from a severe stomachache. The girls attend to her, and Sammy gives birth to, in a not-so-subtle metaphor, a stone lake, confirming that she, too, was enduring abuses from Stone. Britney picks up the stone and puts it in her pocket, but it becomes a small monster that bites her in the leg and escapes into the lake. Britney's bite mark is featured in her adulthood chapter. She does not remember how she got it but relates it to Stone: "My mother says I've had the mark since birth. She insists on it. Once in high school I came home so drunk I cried and told her about him, about the house. (...) [I] felt he had given it to me somehow" (Tate 2023a, 81).

After helping Sammy escape, the girls go to the lake, where a boat search party is looking for her. Instead of Sammy, they pull out the monster: a black, bulbous creature, which many people mistake for a deformed alligator. The men who catch the monster feel victorious and begin trying to kill it by stabbing it, but the creature does not die. Jody, who narrates the scene, notes how the man doing the stabbing suddenly decides to stop after a while, not really knowing what else to do, and leaves the creature for dead. Eventually, everyone assumes the monster has perished, and mothers begin trying to get their children out of the area, telling them the monster is only sleeping to calm them. Jody, on the other hand, stays still on the shore watching the lake:

I do not move. I shake my arm free.

I stare at the surface of the lake. (...)

I watch the water move.

No one else seems to see.

The mothers retreat, the little girls and boys retreat.

They drift past me. They talk about dinner, drinks, sleep, babies, money.

I cannot stand it.

I cannot let them leave.

'It isn't sleeping!' I scream.

And the lake bursts into flame.

They all turn back to watch.

Curtains of fire rise from the mud that wraps around the lake's edges. The smell of burning fertiliser is unbearable. (...) It seems like it could blow in any direction, towards us or away, but I am not afraid of the lake anymore.

Sometimes the world deserves a burning. (Tate 2023a, 192-193)

Reading this final scene from a perspective informed by #MeToo, the monster stands for Stone's sexual abuses and how his violence has haunted the town, materializing in the lake. The men stabbing it, like traditional forms of justice against sexual violence, punish it until they decide that justice has been restored, and leave the matter for solved. Jody's scream, however, like all the trauma testimonies that flooded digital spaces and feminist protests during the movement, makes everyone look again and pay attention to the unresolved issue. Her scream, like the victims' testimonies, has an incendiary effect, forcing everyone to see, once more, that what has happened is far from over.

This scream also comments on the aforementioned "bad apple" approach to sexual violence. Jody sees the harmed or dead body of the monster that was captured, but the lake still moves: Just because this one monster is dead does not mean that there are not others in the lake. She makes those around her divert their attention from this one individual monster to the larger, polluted lake. In the documentary *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* (Lisa Bryant, 2020), Virginia Roberts-Giuffre⁶, one of the most well-known victims of Epstein's sexual trafficking, finished her contribution speaking, precisely, about the need to think about the other monsters out there: "Epstein did not act alone, so my next step is holding other people accountable. The people that were involved, the people that actually participated. (...) The monsters are still out there and they're still abusing other people" (Bryant 2020, ep. 4 00:53:15). Jody's call to pay attention to not only the individual who perpetrated this specific abuse but to pay attention to the issue as a whole mirrors Roberts-Giuffre's purpose after Epstein's death: the efforts of the survivors do not end with the one man who abused them, they move to a larger project to dismantle a system that enabled this abuses to occur in the first place.

The metaphor of the monster as the post-traumatic effect of rape is further reinforced by its presence in the adult timeline. As mentioned above, Britney is still marked by the monster and haunted by the memories of Stone and his house, but she cannot recall them entirely or correctly. In Isabel's adulthood, the monster makes an actual appearance. Isabel's chapter is marked by an enormous amount of guilt, presumably for

⁶ Virginia Roberts-Giuffre was an American woman who came into contact with Jeffrey Epstein when she was sixteen years old and working in Mar-A-Lago, Donald Trump's Palm Beach property. She was then hired by Epstein as a masseuse, and was repeatedly abused by Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell. She was trafficked for the next two years by Epstein, with Prince Andrew being one of the most well-known abusers. Roberts-Giuffre escaped Epstein when she convinced him and Maxwell to pay for her going to Thailand's International Training Massage School. She did not return to Epstein and established a family in Australia. In 2010, she decided to speak out about the abuses and set up an organization called Victims Refuse Silence in 2014. Roberts-Giuffre was one of the most public faces among the survivors of Epstein that spoke out against him. She died by suicide on 25 April 2025. (Roberts-Giuffre 2025, n.p.)

the girls' abandoning of Jody in Stone's house. It takes place entirely in a Catholic theme park, and she is constantly haunted by a sense of remorse and a need to repent. Her guilt expands into her feelings about her daughter, who has an immense fear of some form of aquatic monster: "She says there is a monster in the house. 'It lives in the walls,' she says. 'I hear it in the drains, in the tub. It likes water'" (Tate 2023a, 139). Isabel feels for her daughter, but she is convinced that she is not the appropriate person to protect her from the things that she did when she was a child: "She needs to know that some of us took other girls back. Some of us led girls by their hands and closed the doors behind them" (Tate 2023a, 143). She is so consumed by blame that she ends up taking her daughter in front of a water tank and forces her to watch as the monster appears in front of them:

We wait for the bubbles to clear in the water before us, but I already know what my daughter will see if she looks in the empty tank. I can see it, too, clear as a memory, the outline, dark and sticky, creeping closer, a story I wish she did not have to know. (...) When I feel her calm against me, soften, convince herself that I am there, that it is nothing but a bad dream, I shove her. I shove her toward the glass. (Tate 2023a, 144)

This episode speaks to the traumatic symptom of repetition and compulsion that some traumatized individuals experience. Guilt as a trauma response has also been closely linked to repeated risk exposure after the traumatic event. LaCapra (2000) has developed his theory on how a key factor of the aftermath of trauma is its repetition in thought, experience, and representation. Some traumatized subjects may try to re-enact aspects of trauma as if the past were still happening at the present moment. Isabel's largest burden is her guilt for having left her friend to be irreparably harmed. Thus, she re-enacts being the enabler of a loved one's fear and damage, forcing her daughter to see the horrific monster.

The most explicit appearance of the monster in the adult timeline is in Hazel's chapter. Hazel, who is Jody's little sister and has just been through a breakup, flies to Florida to stay with Jody for a few days, as the latter is still living in their hometown. While Hazel expects to be coddled by her older sister in her heartbreak, Jody is somewhat cold and detached, does not really listen to Hazel's feelings and is instead obsessed with showing her something she has found in the lake. Apparently, Jody has had an obsession with monsters and the occult for years: "I drop her hand. I have ignored her weird messages for a long time, although she has started sending them more frequently over the past year. Long links that take up the whole of my phone screen directing me to incomprehensible forums with names like, 'The truth about Bigfoot'" (Tate 2023a, 58). At her house, Jody shows Hazel a video of a family in a boat on their hometown lake, which is rocked and sunk by the shadow of a monster. When her husband sees them, he shuts the computer and tells Hazel: "Maybe you can help. (...) Help her move on from this? She's been getting really obsessed lately. Especially since the baby" (Tate 2023a, 61). That night, Hazel goes with Jody to the lake, where they stay in the car in the darkness. When Jody turns the headlights again, the monster is in their windshield: "I see a creature adhered to the glass. It is achingly familiar, like a part of my own body that has been wrenched out and displayed" (Tate 2023a, 65).

The presence of the monster in the adult timeline suggests the pervasiveness of the trauma. The use of metaphor and processes of symbolization in trauma narratives has been eloquently explored by Vickroy and strongly resonates with the girls' experiences, particularly Jody's obsession with monsters:

Disturbed symbolization processes emerge out of poor early object relations, trauma, or other psychic upheavals, where the individual never develops or loses the ability to distinguish between inner and outer reality. Such disturbances are indicated in individuals' use of symbolic equations, which indicate a defensive fusion between self and object, or object and symbol. (...) With the decreased ability to separate one association with another, random exposure to anything remotely associated with a trauma could return the victims to that experience. (...) Victims become obsessed with any association that can be linked to the trauma, even if they exist within different contexts. (2022, 31)

Once more, Jody's fixation with finding monsters, either one of the lake or any other, can be read as "being caught between the compulsion to complete the process of knowing and the inability or fear of doing so" (Laub and Auerhahn 1993, 288). Hazel complains that her sister will not engage in meaningful conversations with her about their lives, issues, or traumas, but instead insists on talking about monsters and trying to find them. Jody's true desires are to unmask the pervasiveness of sexual violence in their hometown, especially, as her husband says, now that she has a baby herself. However, she struggles to access the memories of her own rape and does not want to talk about it openly. The use of monsters, for Jody, is a way to try to fight against this evil without truly dealing with her own memories of rape. Laub and Auerhahn have stated that, when too close to an "extreme experience, survivors are captive observers who can only repeat it. Indeed, they may not even be able to remember it, except from the haunting [...] percepts that they cannot integrate in their personality" (1993, 288). Not being able to integrate the trauma in her personality and being completely taken over by it, Jody once again "disappears" in it. She has lost all sense of self that is not tied to this monster. Critics like María Jesús Martínez Alfaro have dealt with how survivors may use fairytales "as masking while simultaneously narrating the teller's trauma", that is, the tale being both a result and a symptom of their trauma (2011, 190) illustrating Herman's "central dialectic" of trauma: a knowledge so partial that it borders on denial, a revelation so incomplete that it obscures (1992, 1). We encounter this notion with Jody's monster-haunting. She is not overtly vocal about her motivations in capturing it or unmasking it. To the outsider figure, like her husband, this obsession with monsters lacks meaning or sense; it "masks" Jody's trauma. Yet, Hazel does not doubt her sister's motives. Without explicitly stating so, her lack of hesitation to accompany Jody in her search for the monster points to her understanding of her sister's true motives. Once again, this highlights

the foundation of mutual support and empathy from #MeToo. Hazel knows Jody is trying to haunt the monster that has been haunting her since she was thirteen, and she is more than willing to back her.

4. Conclusions

Written in the aftermath of the #MeToo moment, *Brutes* intends to go further than depicting a case of individual trauma. It aims to represent the pervasive nature of sexual violence and how it leaves a burning mark in the consciousness of the girls. Informed by the testimonies that survivors of Jeffrey Epstein shared during #MeToo – filled with pain, anger, and guilt – Tate builds a narrative that effectively conveys the forms of trauma that these survivors testified to. Framed within a larger paradigm of trauma literature, Tate chooses to deviate from traditional narrative forms and lean into experimentation, aiming to do justice to the tumultuous, clouding, and fuddling nature of trauma. Through the use of fragmentation, a non-linear timeline, shifting focalizations, and magical realism, she achieves a narrative that succeeds at capturing the enduring harm that sexual trauma has on the girls' time perception and identity. The fragmented timeline and the jumps between past and present, enhanced by the shifting between the childhood narration in plural and the adulthood one in singular, captures the belated presence of trauma in later stages of life and the break of the group's identity into individuals. Besides, the use of the monster in the everyday setting of *Brutes* is key in the representation of how the horror of sexual violence and its consequent trauma is something that survivors have to live with in their daily lives, knowing that this presence will prevail.

All of the experimental narrative techniques that Tate employs all work together as an engine to communicate the long-term effects of trauma, namely the loss or disappearance of the self. *Brutes* thus contemplates the aftermath of trauma from the lens of testimony provided by #MeToo, reimagining the experience of survivors and bringing light to the predatory behavior that powerful men like Stone/Epstein made of girls from working-class backgrounds. The novel, following the conventions of trauma narratives and speaking specifically to the testimonies of #MeToo, can be framed within the larger paradigm of what is being built as #MeToo literature.

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