It must be recognized as a memory, a distorted one, it is true, but nevertheless a memory. It has an obsessive quality; it simply must be believed. As far as its distortion goes it may be called a delusion; in so far as it brings to light something from the past it must be called truth.

Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* 205

In this short passage from *Moses and Monotheism*, Sigmund Freud proposes that the rise of Monotheistic religion is in part a function of the return of a “truth” in the guise of delusion. Freud refers to this “truth” as an “historical truth” and differentiates it from “material truth” inasmuch as it conveys not verifiable certainties, but rather a clue about – or “trace” of – particular foundational structures of (collective) identity (204-5). For Freud, the vehicle of this truth is memory – a hitherto repressed memory of trauma that irresistibly returns. Freud’s musings here are indicative not only of the complexity and centrality of memory within his extensive discourse, but also of the ambivalent character that the concept of truth holds for the psychoanalytic enterprise. Within Joyce Carol Oates’ novella *Black Water*, in which a fictionalized account of Edward Kennedy’s infamous incident at Chappaquiddick is presented, both the structural complexity of memory and the ambivalent character of truth are broached.

The notorious incident that Oates’ novel engages occurred on July 19, 1969 at Chappaquiddick, Massachusetts, where Senator Edward Kennedy drove off a wooden bridge in an accident that led to the drowning death of his passenger, 28-year-old Mary Jo Kopenchne. This incident is widely recognized to be one of the key factors that ended
Kennedy’s presidential prospects. Indeed, the specter of this event continued to haunt Kennedy’s senatorial career well into the 1990s, emerging to compromise his influence and credibility at critical junctures such as during the Senate Judiciary Committee inquiry into the sexual harassment case brought against Clarence Thomas by Anita Hill, as well as during the investigation concerning the rape case brought against Kennedy’s nephew William Smith. This profound and enduring pressure that the Chappaquiddick incident has exerted upon Kennedy’s life has in large part been a function of public speculation surrounding the senator’s culpability. The incident itself is certainly well known, but official accounts of it – including Kennedy’s public statement – are lacking in detail and fraught with inconsistency. In her novella, Oates provides a fictional account of the incident (and events leading up to it) via a unique narrative contemplation of these omissions and inconsistencies.

In structural terms, Black Water can be understood according to how its narrative bears out the contradictory/oscillating mechanisms of traumatic anamneses. Oates’ narrative descriptions of the events leading up to the drowning, and the drowning itself, are primarily delivered in third person and interspersed by remembered fragments of dialogue, commentary on a range of topics, and the (first person) delusive imaginings experienced by the protagonist while drowning. These components are presented in a fragmentary and chronologically disjunctive way. And although the chief narrator assumes a seemingly impassive and objective tone, the effect of this impassivity against what is conveyed is one that is provocative because what is produced is a voyeuristic
proximity to the unfolding drama and horror experienced by the protagonist. This is evident from the very onset of the narrative:

The rented Toyota, driven with such impatient exuberance by The Senator, was speeding along the unpaved road, taking turns in the giddy skidding slides, and then with no warning, somehow the car had gone off the road and had overturned in black rushing water, listing to its passenger’s side, rapidly sinking.

*Am I going to die? – like this? (3)*

This opening passage depicts one of the scenes that the narrative returns to again and again via the protagonist’s own obsessive fixations whilst drowning. Even though we are familiar at – or before – the outset with the outcome of this drama, we are nevertheless compelled into a mixture of fascination and dread with the presentation of such an intimate expression of trauma.

In bridging disparate theorizations surrounding both Jean Laplanche’s development of the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (as “Afterwardsness”) and Jacques Lacan’s oppositional paradigm between Truth and Knowledge, the present study will analyze the relationship between trauma and memory as it is presented in *Black Water*. The aim of this analysis will be to identify the ethical coordinates of Oates’ text in relation to current debates *apropos* the accountability of literary representations of traumatic or traumatizing historical events.

**Understanding *Black Water* as an Account of *Nachträglichkeit***

Freud, as part of his later-abandoned “Theory of Seduction,” initially developed the term *Nachträglichkeit* in order to posit a relationship between memory and trauma whereby
the (repressed) trauma pertaining to a discrete event is retroactively triggered by a later ostensibly unrelated event. With Jean-Bertrand Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche initially outlines Nachträglichkeit as a process in which:

… the subject revises past events at a later date (nachträglich), and that it is the revision which invests them with significance and even with efficacity of pathogenic force. (112)

In other words, Nachträglichkeit describes a process by which the experience of trauma is initially not registered because the subject lacks the understanding to place that trauma in a context that is meaningful (i.e. traumatic). This trauma, which remains latent until it emerges in connection with a seemingly unrelated occurrence, is only experienced as trauma after the subject acquires the knowledge necessary to grasp the originary experience as one that is traumatic. However, even at this point, the subject is not able to consciously link this trauma to the originary event.

In order to apply the concept of Nachträglichkeit to the representational nexus between trauma and memory in *Black Water*, at least two related contingencies require consideration. In the first place, even though it is almost painfully drawn out through the entire narrative, the protagonist’s experience of drowning is shortly followed by her death. Indeed, in “real time,” only moments transpire between what occurs on the above-quoted first page of the novella, where the protagonist – as the Senator’s car is overwhelmed by “black rushing water” – asks, “*Am I going to die? – like this?*” (3), and the last page, in which the same “black water” is described to finally “fill her lungs” (154). What this means is that if the notion of Nachträglichkeit is to be applied to the
representation of the relationship between memory and trauma in *Black Water*, the experience of drowning – despite its structural centrality to the plot – cannot be conceived as the originary traumatic event. Rather, it is necessary to understand the drowning event as the *trigger* for the meaningfulness of a prior and hitherto latent trauma to emerge, one that only acquires traumatic significance in the context of the protagonist’s drowning.

So that if it is indeed the case that the protagonist’s drowning serves only as a trigger, a second issue with discovering commensurability between the notion of *Nachträglichkeit* and Oates’ narrative arises in that the identity of the originary trauma is not explicit for the protagonist. No “moment of truth” materializes for the protagonist whereby she *consciously* connects her experience of trauma with a specific moment or entity. And that the experience of drowning for the protagonist is not itself yet registered as traumatic is demonstrated not least by the tone of incredulity that accompanies her conscious recognition of her impending demise as her own lungs fill with malevolent black water. This is comparable with Freud’s case study of Emma, in which a girl of 8 is sexually molested by a shopkeeper but fails to register the trauma of the event. In his analysis, Freud discovers a link between this episode and an account the subject provides of a subsequent and seemingly extraneous incident in which she is an adolescent and experiences anxiety and distress when, in a different store altogether, she witnesses the banal scene of two store clerks sharing a laugh. As is the case for the protagonist in *Black Water*, the subject of Freud’s study does not herself recognize the link between the
originary event and the trauma she experiences during the subsequent event. In *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche examines Freud’s case study and explains that:

Neither of the two events in itself is traumatic … The first one? It triggers nothing: neither excitation or reaction, nor symbolization or psychical elaboration; we saw why: the child, at the time she is the object of an adult assault, would not yet possess the ideas necessary to comprehend it. … If the first event is not traumatic, the second is, if possible, even less so. (41-42)

*Mutatis mutandis*, in *Black Water*, we are presented with a range of disjointed scenes and observations with a certain dispassionate objectivity. Although both the narrator’s remarks and the thoughts of the drowning protagonist that are presented are not entirely without affect, differentiation between the commonplace musings about astrological ‘star signs’ or romance and the more pointed considerations about politics and ideology is difficult. This, of course, is a function of the lack of any sense of topical or temporal ordering for these scenes and observations. These fragments are, moreover, interspersed with both the delusive imaginings of the protagonist about being rescued by the Senator, and “real-time” snatches delineating the physical horror of the car accident and drowning. This topical and temporal entanglement is evident, for example, in the following passage:

She’d never loved any man, she was a good girl but she would love that man if that would save her.

The black water was splashing into her mouth, there was no avoiding it, filling her lungs, and her heart was beating in quick erratic lurches laboring to supply oxygen to her fainting brain where she saw so vividly jagged needles rising like stalagmites – what did it mean? Laughing ruefully to think how many kisses she’d had tasting of beer? Wine? Whiskey? Cigarettes? Marijuana? You love the life you’ve lived, there is no other.

You love the life you’ve lived, you’re an American girl. You believe you have chosen it.
And yet: he was diving into the black water, diving to the car, his fingers outspread on the cracked windshield and his hair lifting in tendrils, Kelly? – Kelly? (152)

Here, descriptions of the material experience of “black water” invading her lungs, are juxtaposed at once against the protagonist’s fantasy of being rescued by the Senator and conferring him with her love, as well as her rueful consideration of the hollowness of “American dream” platitudes and the intoxicated kisses of strangers.

Despite the disorder with which components of the narrative are arranged, it is nevertheless possible for us, as witnesses to this drama, to deduce that it is in fact the Senator, or at least the protagonist’s encounter with him, that is the cause of the originary trauma. This is primarily because we bring to our encounter of the text the knowledge that the narrative enacts a speculative exploration of what has been omitted from official accounts of the Kennedy-Chappaquiddick incident. With this foreknowledge, it becomes clear how the unnamed Senator is the most recurrent feature of the narrative and that he is in some way linked, by both the narrator and the protagonist, to each image and observation of the confused flotsam. In other words, the Senator functions as what Jacques Lacan calls the sinthome for the narrative. The haunting specter of his presence serves to suture every other aspect of an otherwise chaotic array. To more clearly apprehend the significance of this structural disposition of the unnamed Senator, it is necessary to consider it in relation to the way in which Laplanche develops Freud’s notion of Nachträglichkeit.
**Laplanchean Afterwardsness and the Desire of the Other**

What distinguishes Laplanche’s notion of “Afterwardsness” from Freudian *Nachträglichkeit* is its emphasis upon a third term in the dialectic between remembering and (mis)identification. According to Laplanche, Freud only takes into account the relation or psychical trajectory between the subject before s/he encounters an originary trauma and the same subject after that trauma is triggered by a secondary event. What is missing in this equation is a third factor that, in effect, operates as the actual catalyst for the subject’s reinterpretation of the originary trauma as trauma.6 This third factor that Laplanche identifies takes the form of the desire of the other. This alien desire is perceived by the subject not only as an invasive, foreign, and external force, but one that poses an indecipherable question. As Laplanche explains in an interview with Cathy Caruth:

> The reality of the other … is absolutely bound to his strangeness. How does the human being [subsequently traumatized subject] … encounter this strangeness? It is in the fact that the messages he receives are enigmatic. His messages are enigmatic because those messages are strange to themselves. (Caruth 27)

In a qualification that will become meaningful presently, Laplanche goes on to clarify that this otherness takes the form of the concrete other as opposed to the Lacanian big Other (viz., the Symbolic Order that mediates social reality). Notwithstanding this qualification, what Laplanche’s words indicate for our present reading is that the key to understanding the trauma of the protagonist lies in pinpointing the effect of the alien strangeness (incarnated by the other) upon her. In the following scene, which the protagonist remembers shortly prior to her demise, this alien strangeness is borne out as the insatiable and penetrating desire of the Senator:
As he kissed her those several times, kissing, sucking groping as if, though they were standing fully clothed on a beach that, though not very populated, was nonetheless not deserted, he was in an agony to find a way into her, she felt a jolt of desire: not her desire, but the man’s. As, since girlhood, kissing and being kissed, Kelly Kelleher had always felt, not her own, but the other’s, the male’s desire. Quick and galvanizing as an electric shock.

Feeling too, once she caught her breath, that familiar wave of anxiety, guilt – *I’ve made you want me, now I can’t refuse you.* (115, emphasis in original)

It is axiomatic that the key component of this scene is the ambivalence that is experienced by the protagonist: she encounters at once pleasure at being the object-cause (*objet petit à*) of the alien masculine desire, and guilt about her putative role in engendering the desire of the violating other. This ambivalence is properly hysterical since in psychoanalysis the nosological designation of hysteria is characterized by questions such as, “What am I to the Other?,” “What does the Other want from me?,” and so on. In his own application of Laplanche’s afterwardsness effect to the treatment of trauma in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Spellbound*, Richard Rushton speculates of Freud’s Emma case study:

… it is not the nature of the hidden memory that is important in trauma: Emma’s phobia does not arise as a result of her having been sexually violated by the shopkeeper and the subsequent repression of this violation. The essence of her trauma is not reducible to her repression of the shopkeeper’s actions; his grabbing cannot in any way be said to have *caused* the trauma. […] … rather than being the *event* of the shopkeeper’s actions that is crucial to the trauma, it is the *pleasure* obtained from the grabbing that is repressed by Emma, a pleasure that is repressed “afterwards”, after Emma’s introduction to a fully sexual world, and which introduces the trauma retroactively. (374, emphasis in original)

Rushton’s theorization about the *true* origin of Emma’s trauma presents us with a fitting heuristic through which to elucidate the guilt and anxiety that the protagonist of *Black Water* experiences in her encounter with the Senator’s desire. In this vein, it is possible to
argue that what is repressed by the protagonist is in fact the ambivalent pleasure/guilt that she experiences in response to the Senator’s othered desire. This pleasure-guilt is, in the final instance, the uncanny truth that engenders the acephalous sense of trauma staining the fragments and snatches that comprise the narrative. The ambivalent nature of this truth raises certain questions with regards to the commensurability between our present theoretical framework and the contemporary debate surrounding the ethical status of literary narratives that depict the past.

The Ethics of Truth contra Knowledge

In his essay “Mending the Skin of Memory: Ethics and history in contemporary narratives” Tim Woods contemplates the healing capacity of literature that engages with historically traumatic events. Vis-à-vis the putative ethics of postmodern “micro-narratives” and postcolonial “counter-histories,” Woods posits:

Conceiving of history as a national or racial trauma which needs to be healed or cured, is frequently offered as a reason for the retrieval of the past. Literature is one mechanism for effecting this ethical relation with the past. It provides a medium in which to imaginatively retrace the past and, in exhuming the forgotten events, offers a means of overcoming any instability, insecurity or reification of the past. (347)

Woods’ reference to “the ethical relation with the past” is one that draws from both the Emmanuel Levinas’ gesture of an openness towards the other (341), as well as the Kristevan “ethical imperative” which seeks to destabilize conceptions of identity, meaning, and truth (342-3). Needless to say, although Black Water can indeed be considered a postmodern “micro-narrative,” Woods’ notion of ethics is not one that is fully amenable to the present psychoanalytic account. Black Water certainly presents a
version of a historically traumatic event that calls into question the verity of established and hegemonic accounts of it. Nevertheless, as we have demonstrated, not only is the other (and his desire) in Oates’ novella one who is characterized as a menacing force, but the narrative’s structurally circular recreation of the protagonist’s trauma resists any sense of resolution or hope. Moreover, in contrast to the Kristevan ethical stance of rejecting moral messages, Oates’ dystopic vision is clearly founded upon a didactic standard of morality that is unquestionably subjective. In his own (Lacanian) (re)deployment of afterwardsness, Rushton argues that the recognition of the source of a trauma does not necessarily lead to healing:

For psychoanalysis, it is not merely the representational remembering of an original trauma that is at stake; it is not the unearthing of an ultimate event at the heart of the subject’s symptoms that can guarantee a cure. Rather, the representative remembering of an originary trauma is but one step – and perhaps a minor one at that – along the path of psychoanalytic treatment. (372)

Therefore, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, if we agree with Rushton that trauma is not resolvable via the identification of its source, what ethical value does Oates’ narrative carry?

Within Lacanian psychoanalysis, the notion of “truth” always pertains to truth about desire (which is always subjective and subjectivating), whereas Knowledge refers to “knowledge in the real” – a kind of acephalous non-subjectivized knowledge. In The Plague of Fantasies, Slavoj Žižek explains this Lacanian opposition between truth and knowledge as the difference between interpretation and construction. He notes of the analyst-analysand relationship:
an interpretation is a gesture which … aims to bring about the effect of truth apropos of a particular formation of the unconscious (a dream, a symptom, a slip of the tongue …): the subject is supposed to ‘recognize’ himself in the signification proposed by the interpreter, precisely in order to subjectivize this signification, to assume it as his own … The very success of interpretation is measured by this ‘effect of truth’, by the extent to which it affects the subjective position of the analysand (stirs up memories of hitherto deeply repressed traumatic encounters, provokes violent resistance …). In clear contrast to interpretation, a construction (typically: that of a fundamental fantasy) has the status of a knowledge which can never be subjectivized – that is, it can never be assumed by the subject as the truth about himself, the truth in which he recognizes the innermost kernel of his being. (35-36)

As a heuristical device, this opposition between Truth and Knowledge offers a substantive means through which an ethical comparison between Black Water and official accounts of the Chappaquiddick incident can be conducted. In the first place, it is clear that the latter serves the function of non-subjectivized knowledge. In presenting an authoritative and hegemonic version of an incident that has had a far-reaching political and social impact, these accounts serve not only to desubjectivize the drowning victim of Kennedy’s folly, but also to negate the collective (intersubjective) investment in the ideological and idealistic rhetoric of the American Democratic party. And it is precisely this operation that gave rise to such a sense of betrayal amongst Kennedy’s hitherto faithful electorate. As indicated above, Laplanche conceives of the other in his formulation as the ‘small’ concrete other person. However, within the context provided by Oates’ novella, it is also possible to consider the Senator as a metonym for the Lacanian big Other that has somehow betrayed and thus hystericized not only the protagonist and the narrator, but the reader as well. It is certainly notable that not only does the Senator remain nameless, but for the protagonist, his identity is itself not enduring.
In contrast to the “knowledge” offered by official accounts of the Chappaquiddick incident, Oates’ narrative serves the purpose of construction. Its effect upon us (as readers/witnesses) is – to use Žižek’s phrase – a “truth effect” in that it allows us to recognize in its phantasmatic construction a materialization of the truth about our own desires, suspicions, and therefore origins. It is in this way that via her text, Oates gestures towards a radical ethics of delineating the past: more than simply providing a counter-narrative to a historically traumatic event, Black Water tethers itself to a subjectivized truth that renders the master-narrative – or the Master’s narrative – superfluous.

Works Cited


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1 During the time of the inquiry, various commentators raised concerns about Kennedy’s integrity as one of the senior Democrats whom reviewed the case against Thomas. For example, in an article featured in *Time* magazine, Barbara Ehrenreich asks, “… isn’t this a little like asking Michael Milken to monitor the SEc [Securities and Exchange Commission]?“(104). See also Fred Bruning’s article “Comeuppance for a Kennedy” featured in *Maclean’s*.

2 See for example an article featured in the May 1991 issue of *Maclean’s* by Tom Fennell and William Lowther titled “A deepening sex scandal” as well as Elanor Clift’s *Newsweek* piece “A Problem With Women.”

3 See Robert Sherrill’s *The Last Kennedy* and *Chappaquiddick: The Real Story* by James E. T. Lange and Katherine Dewitt Jr.

4 The theoretical utility of *Nachträglichkeit* has been explored in various capacities by a number of theorists. Some of the more notable thinkers who have engaged with *Nachträglichkeit* include Jacques Lacan (“The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis” in *Écrits*), Jacques Derrida
(Freud and the Scene of Writing” in Writing and Difference), and Jean-François Lyotard (in various publications). It is, however, Jean Laplanche’s development of Nachträglichkeit as ‘afterwardsness’ (après-coup) that will be employed in the present study because we believe that it offers the most expedient means of delineating the complex links between trauma, memory, and ethics in Oates’ text.

5 In An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Dylan Evans notes that although the sinthome was developed by Lacan from his work on the symptom, it came to designate (in Lacan’s later work) “a signifying formulation beyond analysis, a kernel of enjoyment immune to the efficacy of the symbolic” (189). In other words, unlike the symptom, the sinthome is not a ‘trace’ of jouissance but rather that which structures its Drive.

6 The distinction between afterwardsness and Nachträglichkeit is elucidated in greater detail in numerous texts including Paul Sutton’s essay “Afterwardsness in Film.”

7 See Slavoj Žižek’s The Ticklish Subject (249).

8 See also Woods’ collaborative effort with Peter Middleton, Literatures of Memory. This text provides descriptions of a wide range of authors and theoretical frameworks germane to the debate on the ethical implications of representing the past.

9 Since the beginning of the narrative coincides with its conclusion, a nightmarish effect is produced in which the protagonist is perpetually experiencing the throes of a drowning death.

10 See Middleton and Woods pp. 74-78.