The Representation of Inherited Trauma in Junot Diaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representation of individual and intergenerational trauma in Junot Diaz's novel *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007)*.It adopts literary trauma theory to uncover how the brutal legacy of the Trujillo dictatorship in the Dominican Republic haunts the characters and shapes the novel's fragmented, non-linear structure. Trauma is a pathological mental and emotional condition, an injury to the psyche caused by catastrophic events, or by the threat of such events, which overwhelm an individual's normal response mechanisms (Kurtz 2018: 2). The study focuses on the visceral embodiment of trauma in Beli, the silences and postmemory that scar Oscar and Lola, and the ways in which the "blank pages" of the family's history reflect the cultural ruptures inflicted by authoritarian violence. The paper illuminates how the novel embodies the potential for diasporic, post-traumatic creativity to transform personal mourning into collective remembrance and cultural renewal.

Keywords: Trauma, Fukú, Blank pages, Postmemory, Dictatorship, Silence, Violence

تمثيل الصدمة الموروثة في رواية جونوت دياز "ألحياة العجيبة القصيرة لأوسكار واو"

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الملخص

تبحث هذه الورقة في تمثيل الصدمة الفردية والصدمة بين الأجيال في رواية جونوت دياز "الحياة الرائعة القصيرة لأوسكار واو". تتبنى نظرية الصدمة الأدبية للكشف عن كيفية تأثير الإرث الوحشي لديكتاتورية تروخيو في جمهورية الدومينيكان على الشخصيات وتشكيل البنية المجزأة وغير الخطية للرواية. الصدمة هي حالة عقلية وعاطفية مرضية، إصابة في النفس ناجمة عن أحداث كارثية، أو التهديد بمثل هذه الأحداث، والتي تطغى على آليات الاستجابة الطبيعية للفرد. تركز الدراسة على التجسيد الحسي للصدمة في شخصية بيلي، والصمت وما بعد الذاكرة التي تترك ندوبًا على أوسكار ولولا، والطرق التي تعكس بها "الصفحات الفارغة" من تاريخ العائلة الانقطاعات الثقافية التي تسببها العنف الاستبدادي. توضح الورقة كيف تجسد الرواية إمكانات الإبداع ما بعد الصدمة في الشتات لتحويل الحداد الشخصي إلى ذكرى وتجديد ثقافي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصدمة، فوكو، الصفحات الفارغة، ما بعد الذاكرة، الدكتاتورية، الصمت، العنف

Introduction

The word “trauma” is derived from the Greek term for ‘wound’, which in turn stemmed from the verb “to pierce” (Fletcher 2013: 125). It initially denoted physical harm done to a body. In its subsequent usage, especially in the medical and psychiatric discourse, and most notably in Sigmund Freud’s work, trauma is defined as a “wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 1996: 3). Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (1996: 11). She further argues that trauma is “not locatable in the simple violent or original event in the individual’s past”, but only recognizable in “the way it is precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (1996: 17).

Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, distinguishes between two forms of remembering traumatic events: “acting out” and “working through.” Acting out involves a compulsive repetition of the past, where the traumatized individual is trapped in a cycle of reliving the trauma without any critical distance or perspective. In contrast, “working through” involves a process of coming to terms with the traumatic past, and to acknowledge its impact while recognizing the difference between past and present (2001:2). In addition, Marianne Hirsch's concept of “postmemory,” developed in *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, is particularly relevant to understanding the transgenerational dimension of trauma in Diaz’s novel. Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” has to the collective trauma experienced by their predecessors. This second generation, Hirsch argues, grows up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose personal belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated (٢٠١٢: 5). This paper examines the representation of intergenerational trauma and its impact on the Dominican diaspora.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (henceforth *Oscar Wao*) is saturated with trauma from the level of individual characters to the structure of the novel itself. One of the primary traumatic events that haunts the narrative is the brutal dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, whose reign was marked by widespread terror, torture, and massacres. Dubbed “the Dictatingest Dictator who ever Dictated” (Diaz 2007: 80) Trujillo is portrayed as a demonic force, a “Sauron” or “Arawn” who destroys everything in his path. For the older generation of the de León family, direct experiences of Trujillo's violence, such as the torture and imprisonment of Abelard Cabral or the massacre of Haitians ordered in 1937 produce a profound rupture in their sense of

safety and coherence. These traumas become unspeakable, “páginas en blanco.” or blank pages in the family history. The withholding of traumatic memory becomes a form of transmission, what is unspoken nevertheless makes itself felt across generations.

Trauma's “Ground Zero” and the Inherited Wounds in *Oscar Wao*

Oscar's mother, Hypatía Belicia Cabral or Beli, most viscerally embodies the devastations of trauma. As the “third and final daughter of the Family Cabral,” Beli suffers an almost Job-like litany of losses and abuses. Born just after Trujillo's henchmen caused the death of her mother and sisters, Beli is described as “the literal Child of the Apocalypse,” inheriting a familial and national legacy of trauma from birth (Diaz 2007: 251). She then endures a Dickensian childhood of abuse, rape, and abandonment. When La Inca rescues her at age nine, Beli is scarred by the trauma. She has forgotten who she was. In one of the novel's most harrowing scenes, the teenage Beli is viciously beaten and left for death in a canefield after offending Trujillo's sister by becoming pregnant with her husband's child. Diaz unflinchingly describes the attack in visceral terms “They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog…It was the beating to end all beatings. It was the Götterdämmerung of beatdowns” (Diaz 2007: 298). This shows the dehumanizing and world-destroying power of violence. Beli's individual experience of trauma intersects with the collective traumatic history of colonialism and slavery invoked by the canefield setting and beating her like “a slave." The simile links Beli's story to the more extended history of racialized and gendered violence against black and brown bodies in the Americas. Though Beli physically survives the attack, its psychic toll is inestimable. However, a “creature that would have been an amiable mongoose if not for its golden lion eyes and the absolute black of its pelt” (Diaz 2007: 149) visits Beli. Drawing from African diasporic trickster traditions, the creature “cajoles” Beli to rise,

telling her “you have to rise now or you'll never have the son or the daughter” (Diaz 2007: 149). The Mongoose's uncanny intervention allows Beli to imagine a future beyond trauma.

Beli's encounter in the cane field becomes a site of profound terror and unexpected salvation: “A broken girl, atop broken stalks of cane. Pain everywhere but alive. Alive” (Diaz 2007: 148). Canefields become a haunting space, a site where individual and intergenerational traumas brutally converge. When the adult Beli sees nightmares at night, she would wake up screaming back in the canefields as the “Faceless Man” haunts her. Trauma obliterates distinctions between past and present, haunting survivor and generations to come with this unclaimed experience. Notably, the novel suggests how the amnesias and silences surrounding traumatic events compound their haunting power. Beli responds to her near-fatal beating by repressing the memory, never speaking of it:

[F]or forty years…She embraced the amnesia that was so common throughout the Islands, five parts denial, five parts negative hallucination … Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was, but we shall never know because it’s not something she talked about. All that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly (Diaz 2007: 147-258).

Silence becomes a survival tactic, but it does not neutralize the effects of trauma so much as to disguise how they permeate the next generation. The secretiveness and silence surrounding trauma do not prevent it from being passed on (Byers and Gere 2007: 387). It instead serves as the most prevalent and effective mechanism for the transmission of trauma on all dimensions (Danieli 1998: 66) .Beli's children, Lola and Oscar, inherit a more insidious traumatic legacy, one born from silences, absences, and their mother's impenetrable sadness

and rages. Her unresolved trauma fuels her simultaneous overprotectiveness of and cruelty toward her children, particularly Lola, whom she tries to shield from the male desire that destroyed her youth while moreover calling “fea” (ugly) and beating her when she rebels.

Lola's and Oscar's identities are fragmented by the traumatic absences and unuttered horrors of their family history. Lola feels alienated from herself, she cycles through attempts to forge an identity as a goth, punk chick, “prep school kid”, but never feels at home, inheriting her mother's “inextinguishing longing for elsewheres” (Diaz 2007: 77). Oscar, the “ghetto nerd” who dreams of becoming the Dominican Tolkien, likewise struggles to find a place for himself, whether in the U.S. or the D.R. Importantly, both Oscar and Lola are drawn to speculative literature and pulp genres like sci-fi, fantasy, and comic books. These non-mimetic genres offer a vocabulary for the “unspeakable” and monstrous. When Oscar describes Trujillo as “Sauron” or “Arawn,” the Dark Lord villains of Tolkien's world, he finds an analogic language for depicting extremes of evil and terror that otherwise elude representation . Similarly, the family fukú story, the “curse or doom of some kind” that stalks the Cabrals, reads almost as a horror or fantasy tale, revealing how curses and monsters become necessary fictions for portraying traumatic experience.

Diaz further mirrors the non-linear, recursive action of traumatic memory through the novel's disjunctive form. The story cycles through multiple periods and settings, shifting abruptly from the characters' present-day struggles in New Jersey to the horrors of the Trujillo regime and back again. This splintered chronology suggests how trauma disrupts linear conceptions of time. Memories of traumatic events intrude upon the present, triggering flashbacks and emotional states that collapse past and present. The novel's opening lines introduce the concept of fukú, a curse that is believed to have first come from Africa but finds terrible expression during the Conquest and enslavement of the Americas. This

immediately frames the story of the de León family within the traumatic longue durée of the African diaspora and positions the Dominican Republic as “Ground Zero” for the apocalyptic forces unleashed by colonialism. Thus from its beginning, the novel situates its characters' lives within the massive historical traumas that continue to reverberate across time and space. Diaz uses dashes in place of words in order to emphasize missing words and blank space.

Dori Laub argues that the person who hears a trauma survivor's story becomes a witness himself, not only to the survivor's narrative but, moreover, to the act of telling it (1991: 62). Indeed, storytelling and witnessing emerge as vital ways of contending with the traumatic experience. Yunior, the novel's narrator and (possibly unreliable) witness, opens the novel by invoking fukú as the curse believed to have doomed Oscar and his family. He pieces together the fragments of the Cabrals' story and voices them as an act of superheroism, a way of defying the erasures of history and bearing witness to generations of silenced trauma. Though Oscar is the hero of the novel's title, his story can only be told in light of the stories of his mother, his grandparents, and the generations before them, all children of the “Apocalypse." By braiding together these narrative threads, Yunior resists the centripetal force of trauma that would scatter selfhood and meaning. Instead, he seeks the counterspell to fukú in zafa, or the healing power of language. Yunior's cobbled-together narrative becomes a model for how trauma survivors, both within the novel and outside it can restore a sense of agency and identity through the arduous process of piecing together a story from the shards of traumatic memory. Even more, than Yunior, Oscar embodies the drive to transmute trauma into the narrative. Like Scheherazade of *One Thousand and One Nights*, Oscar spins story after story as a fortress against annihilation. He writes ceaselessly, creating speculative fiction that transmutes the ghastly extremes of

tyranny and torture into dark fantasy tales. In a sense, his writings are an extended attempt to find language for the fukú that has fractured his family and nation. Though Oscar is tragically murdered before finishing his opus, his labor to wrest meaning from trauma assumes epic, even sacred overtones. In one of his last dreams, Oscar imagines himself in an ancient ruined bailey where a masked man presents him with an open book, “The book is blank” (Diaz 2007: 302). The dream suggests Oscar's aspiration to fill the blank pages of traumatic history to write meaning into the void.

The brutal beating that almost claims young Beli's life forms the traumatic “ground zero” that unleashes shockwaves through generations. Narrated in searing detail, Beli's assault by Trujillo's goons after her doomed affair with the Gangster encapsulates how sexual and political violence intertwine to shatter psyche and body under authoritarian rule. Beli is discovered to be pregnant with the Gangster's child, a potential claimant to Trujillo's seat of power. In a cane field that evokes the site of unspeakable tortures, she suffers a beating “so cruel and relentless that even Camden, the City of the Ultimate Beatdown, would have been proud” (Diaz 2007: 298) .Beli barely survives this assault, waking battered in body but moreover mired in traumatized silence. Having nearly died trying to voice and live her desires under a regime that seeks to quash all such self-determination, she cannot integrate the magnitude of what befell her:

Of those nine years … Beli did not speak. It seems that as soon as her days in Outer Azua were over… that entire chapter of her life got slopped into those containers in which governments store nuclear waste, triple-sealed by industrial lasers and deposited in the dark, uncharted trenches of her soul (Diaz 2007: 258)

The metaphor of sealing trauma in “nuclear waste” containers captures its toxic buried quality in the aftermath of atrocity. As Caruth argues

,trauma is “a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time” (1996: 61).Beli cannot “speak” this “dark, uncharted” material; it is an annihilating rupture she must dissociate from to survive. Her ravaged, now infertile body itself contains the story, as a kind of corporeal text whose scars speak what psychic scars cannot.

Yet such preverbal encoding of trauma, as an unintegrated foreign body within the self, prevents full recovery. Still in an unhealed state, Beli goes on to displace her wounds in ways that shape her mothering of Oscar and Lola. Though she escapes Trujillo's immediate reach by immigrating to America, she cannot wholly escape his imprint on her inner world and family system. Her “uncharted trenches of the soul” – the exiled, disavowed sites of traumatic rupture – transmute into a more subtle legacy of fragmentation and yearning that her children must navigate. As an orphan who travelled to the campus from a poor neighborhood, she did not share the high social status of her peers. Her dark skin marked her as inferior within the typical Dominican racial hierarchy. She exhibited a degree of aggression and defensiveness that turned others against her as she projects her unclaimed experience on her offspring as a symptom of acting out.

The inherited trauma of Oscar and Lola is established from the opening pages of the novel, as the anonymous narrator describes the “fukú americanus, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and the Doom of the New World” (Diaz 2007: 1). Brought to the Caribbean through the violence of colonialism and enslavement, fukú becomes a metaphor for the rape, genocide, and economic adversity inflicted upon Caribbean peoples, traumas that cannot be relieved or overcome in any single lifetime. In other words, fukú sums up how foundational cultural traumas continue to reverberate across generations of the Caribbean diaspora. It is the narrative

manifestation of postmemory, the way collective catastrophe persists in haunting descendants of the original victims.

For Oscar and Lola, the inheritance of fukú is most directly channeled through their mother's diasporic trauma. Beli's experience as part of the generation of young Dominican women who would come to bear the weight of the Trujillo regime and the abuses it inflicted on their bodies" marks her physically and psychologically, shaping her into a "hardnosed" unforgiving mother perpetually bracing for disaster. Though Beli rarely speaks directly about her past, it is ever-present in the fear, anger, and dislocation that characterizes her parenting. Her unprocessed trauma seeps into her behavior towards her children, trapping them within the what Hirsch calls world of ghosts and memory that she cannot escape (2012: 14). Although they live in the America , t and physically separated from their motherland , they still have a solid connection to it. The nation is represented in the individual, as the epigraph emphasizes with Derrick Walcott's words "Either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation."

This atmosphere of dread and displacement that permeates Oscar and Lola's upbringing exemplifies how postmemory makes the traumas of their parents' past a central component of their lives and identities. According to Hirsch, postmemory is the experience of individuals who are raised surrounded by stories that happened before they were even born. Their private stories are overshadowed by those of the previous generation, which are shaped by horrific events that are impossible to understand or repeat (2012: 22).In essence, postmemory characterizes the bond that the subsequent generation has to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who were born before them.

In addition, Diaz reflects on the intergenerational transmission of trauma through the recurring motif of the "Faceless Man." This ominous figure is devoid of distinguishable features and serves as a manifestation of the inner turmoil experienced by the traumatized characters .It represents

the evolving forms of violence and oppression that affect the Dominican diaspora. The faceless man, who haunts Socorro's dreams mere days before Abelard's imprisonment, resurfaces in Oscar's hallucinations moments prior to his demise in the cane fields. The emergence of this mysterious character foreshadows the characters' tragic fates and their subjugation to dangerous circumstances from which they cannot escape. In Socorro's visions, she finds herself paralyzed, unable to "scream" or "say anything," as the frightening presence of the Faceless Man looms over the beds of her husband and daughters. His manifestation embodies her anxiety regarding Trujillo's authority and the dangerous position in which her family finds themselves after declining the dictator's invitation for Socorro and her eldest daughter to attend one of his meetings.

Hirsch's argues that the offspring of the victims who are “directly affected by collective trauma inherit a terrifying, unknown, and unknowable past” (2012: 34). Although they have ever known life in America, the specter of fukú means Oscar and Lola can never feel entirely at home or at peace. Their hyphenated status as Dominican-Americans only compounds this sense of in-betweenness. For Lola, the literal absence of her father combines with the more metaphorical absence created by displacement from her ancestral homeland and her mother's withheld affection. All of these combine to create the ineradicable void she would carry within her that is the inheritance of postmemory.

Oscar experiences a similar sense of deracination, of always being an outsider both within mainstream American society as an overweight “ghetto nerd” and within the macho culture of Dominican-American identity. His anomalous status is another symptom of the disorienting effect of postmemory on second-generation immigrant children. Inheriting the weight of ancestral trauma without straightforward ways for

how to process or overcome it, Oscar is left unmoored, desperately searching for a place to belong. This search takes the form of his all-consuming love for the fantasy genres of sci-fi, comic books and role-playing games. For Oscar, these imaginary worlds provide an alternate homeland. In losing himself within the empowering mythologies of fiction, Oscar attempts to escape the inescapable fukú of his real-world inheritance.

Yet even as Oscar immerses himself in the alternative realities of his beloved genres, he can never entirely elude the curse "what more sci-fi than Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?"(Diaz 2007: 6) for Oscar, the history of their ancestral homeland will always carry an element of the dreamlike. The traumatic past of colonialism, enslavement and dictatorship is so extreme, so ungraspable in its horror that it takes on a surreal, almost supernatural quality. Since trauma breaks linguistic representations, magical realism is an alternative language to portray diverse traumatic historical wounds from the perspectives of the oppressed and victimized (Abdullah 2020: 5). In this way, the speculative aspects of the novel, the "magic realism" of the Mongoose and No Face Man (Faceless Man) become expressions of the distorting, mythmaking power of postmemory. For Oscar and Lola, the harrowing truth of their family history can only be approached indirectly, cloaked in the half-reality of fantasy.

In different ways, each sibling enacts an exilic state of psychic unbelonging, a restless quest for roots and selfhood. Their double consciousness as bicultural, hyphenated subjects – a condition heightened by growing up in a traumatized immigrant household – leaves them torn between worlds.

Overweight the nerdy and hopelessly romantic Oscar emerges as particularly emblematic of the "Intrahistoria," or secret history of ancestral trauma his family cannot openly discuss. His extreme

alienation as a ghetto nerd of color in America replays his grandfather Abelard's doomed resistance to Trujillo's totalizing power. Like Abelard, whose dissenting voice and desire dared transgress the regime, Oscar refuses to conform to restrictive Dominican masculine norms of only hits the books to “pile up the girls”. His awkward, earnest quest for the cure to the Cosmo DNA speaks to the diasporic child's search for healing, but moreover to the gaps in meaning where ancestral stories have vanished. Cut off from Dominican collective memory, Oscar's anomie manifests in eating for comfort, suicidal depression, sorrow. His compulsive writing – the unfinished opus filling refrigerators “as the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything” – shows the traumatized subject's fragmented attempts to shore up identity against erasure (Diaz 2007: 330).Of all the characters in the novel, Oscar experiences the most acute alienation, marginalization and 'othering' as a “nerd” and “immigrant” of color. Straddling multiple social margins, Oscar embodies the diasporic subject's struggle to forge identity and belonging amidst the dislocations of ancestral trauma and displacement. His life and death highlights the traumatic unbelonging the Dominican diaspora must navigate in a post-dictatorship America still shadowed by white supremacy and xenophobia.

From childhood on, Oscar finds himself painfully at odds with both mainstream American and Dominican expectations of masculinity. As the narrator states “Our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about – he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock” (Diaz 2007:11). Rather, as an “overweight…Brown, nerdy, and painfully shy” boy who prefers “role-playing games and…Japanese animation” to sports and girls, Oscar is a social introvert who “trembled with fear during gym class” (Diaz 2007: 22). This failure to conform to the macho dictates of Dominican identity marks Oscar as alien within his

community. The internalized white gaze of his peers, who call him “Bobo” and “Huáscar,” compounds Oscar's sense of aberrance and defectiveness.

Yet Oscar feels equally out of place in mainstream American culture, where his intellectual passions and racial difference mark him as marginal. His efforts to inhabit popular white nerd culture meet with brutal rebuffs, as when he dresses up as Doctor Who for Halloween only to have Yunior call him “that fat homo Oscar Wilde” as a slur . Far from finding a new hope in college, Oscar realizes that the white kids looked at his black skin and his afro and treated him with inhuman cheeriness while “the kids of color, upon hearing him speak and seeing him move his body, shook their heads. You're not Dominican” (Diaz 2007: 49). Even within supposedly welcoming subcultures, then, Oscar is perpetually reminded that he does not fully belong. As Oscar has very dark skin is deemed “too white” to fit in with his Latino peers and “too black” to fit in with white peers. He is described repeatedly as un-Dominican due to his extreme nerdiness and his lack of masculinity.

This double exclusion from both Dominican and American identities leaves Oscar radically alienated, a “stranger in a strange land” at every scale of experience . Diaz traces how the profound isolation Oscar feels as a racialized “other” in America has its roots in the political trauma and displacement his family suffered under Trujillo. Obsessed with restoring the lost pages of his family history, Oscar intuits that the silenced narratives of ancestral catastrophe, have shaped his destiny as his genes. His life story replays his grandfather Abelard's persecution as a transgressive intellectual whose very brilliance and dissidence made him a target. Just as Abelard was imprisoned for allegedly uttering the “Bad Thing” that affronted Trujillo, Oscar finds himself a pariah for his failure to fulfill the “mandatory two seconds of Dominican history”: to “be a playboy with a million hots on his jock” (Diaz 2007: 2). Thus, the

political violence that drove his family into diaspora and the attendant "amnesia" and redaction of los cuentos, the tales that would explain his legacy condemn Oscar to relive a version of his abuelo's doom.

The criticism of his dark skin can be linked to the political terror experienced by Oscar's family in the past when Trujillo tortured and killed their Haitian-looking grandfather and other relatives. When Oscar's grandfather, Abelard, was imprisoned and died at the notorious Nigua death camp, and when his grandmother and aunts were murdered, the rest of the family abandoned his mother due to her dark skin complexion.

The collective Dominican fear of dark skin can be traced back to Diaz's mention of the Dominican history of political terror when Trujillo ordered his soldiers to kill anyone who could not pronounce the word "perejil" (parsley) with a rolled "r" or anyone who appeared "Haitian" (2002: para 1). Diaz's highlights this traumatic history is in the footnotes:

In 1937, for example, while the Friends of the Dominican Republic were perejiling Haitians and Haitian-Dominicans and Haitian-looking Dominicans to death, while genocide was in fact in the making, Abelard kept his head, eyes, and nose safely tucked into his books . . . and when survivors staggered into his surgery with unspeakable machete wounds, he fixed them up as best as he could without making any comments as to the ghastliness of their wounds. Acted like it was any other day (Diaz 2007: 215).

Oscar's depression can be linked to a culture of accepted violence initiated by Rafael Trujillo in the 20th century. His extreme self-loathing and the sense that he is an irredeemable "loser" reflects the depths of his internalized otherness. As a nerd relegated to the Phantom Zone of Dominican identity he understands himself as a victim-martyr, the sacrificial "mutant" whose aberrance confirms the social order. His

suicidal thoughts and dreams of “manumission”(a release from slavery) show the agony of an existence defined by not belonging, by an ancestral curse of exclusion.

His alienation stems not only from the real world social othering he experiences, but also from the collective trauma the “Doom of the New World”. This distinctly Caribbean sorcery of historical oppression has exiled Oscar spiritually as well as physically, disconnecting him from any stable sense of home, roots or identity. Oscar cannot reconstruct a coherent self because he has been severed from the very stories of origin and strength that would ground him. His family's routine of silence and elision around their horrific history renders him a diasporic orphan haunted by all the knowledge there is no way for him to know. This highlights how the blank pages in Oscar's family history create an existential void, a blackhole where identity should be. With no affirming countermyth to Trujillato propaganda, no proud story of his ancestors' resistance, Oscar is doomed to experience his heritage as pure loss, pure negation. He remains severed from any usable past that could neutralize the traumatic erasures of the regime.

Moreover, because this violated history has been so thoroughly silenced and disbelieved, Oscar has no choice but to internalize its distortions. Diaz writes “If you ask me I don't think there are any such things as curses. I think there is only life. That's enough” (Diaz 2007: 205). Yet for Oscar, who has absorbed his family's traumatized worldview despite their silence, life itself has become a curse of otherness and exclusion. This sense of inherited doom, passed down through the generations, leaves Oscar feeling cursed in his very being –marked for annihilation by the high-level fukú that destroyed his kin. In this sense, Oscar's abject unbelonging , his certainty that he is “the neighborhood parigüayo” (a loser without luck) whom “no girl would love” –stems from

an unconscious identification with his dead and unmourned ancestors. Diaz writes :

It wouldn't have been half bad if Paterson and its surrounding precincts had been like Don Bosco or those seventies feminist sci-fi novels he sometimes read - an all-male-exclusion zone. Paterson, however, was girls the way NYC was girls" (Diaz 2007: 26).

This tragicomic aside reveals how profoundly Oscar has internalized his place outside human connection and continuity. As the scion of a "violated" lineage, Oscar is convinced that the cure to what ails him can never be found. His existential dread, his inability to imagine any future beyond loveless isolation, replays his grandfather's grim trajectory as surely as his genes. He is the mine of the very memories and meanings the regime sought to expunge. His freakishly marginal status, his refusal to yield his "fatboy's" dreams of true love and books in order to conform, marks him as a living reminder of all that is unresolved in the aftermath of dictatorship. As a transgressive artist-intellectual much like Abelard, Oscar testifies to the persistence of an unspeakable past simply by existing. Thus, Oscar's alienation is not merely personal, but cultural and political, a sign of the broken links and silences haunting the post-Trujillo generation.

Yet even as Oscar's life dramatizes the depths of traumatic estrangement the displaced survivor navigates, his death moreover represents a radical attempt to transform exile into immanence, and silence into "song". His climactic choice to return to the DR and pursue his final romantic conquest, even at the cost of his life, enacts a rebellious recovery of the "Patria" (homeland) that has rejected him. In embracing his destiny as a doomed lover-boy, a tragic hero and martyr in the grand Dominican tradition, Oscar redeems his misery by transforming it into myth. His suicidal quest to "get the girl" and recover the lost knowledge of his ancestry becomes a radical act of decolonial

self-fashioning (constructing identity) and a way of resisting social death through joyful self-assertion. As Van der Kolk and van der Hart argue, in order to integrate traumatic memories into pre-existing mental schemes, they must be converted into narrative language. Once this first act of narration is completed, the story can be told and the individual can reflect on what transpired because it has now become part of his life narrative (2018: 68).

Oscar's final letter proclaims that "anything you can dream…you can be" is an extraordinary declaration of autonomy for a victim-martyr once defined solely by negation (Diaz 2007: 322). In imagining himself as the avenger of his family's decimated history, the artist of resurrection piecing together their blank pages, he transmutes inherited trauma into a new model of diasporic identity . His sacrificial return to the Ground Zero of annihilation thus becomes a way of bearing witness to Dominican selfhood beyond dictatorship. Oscar rejects the fukú's script of endless repetition, insisting on his right to author his destiny. As he states "So this is what everybody's always talking about! Diablo! If only I'd known…the beauty!" (Diaz 2007: 335).

His tragedy highlight how the diasporic subject's struggle for post-traumatic selfhood is inseparable from the reclamation of missing histories and broken solidarities. His painful life and delighted death make viscerally real the psychic splitting that marks the transnational survivors of authoritarianism. Through his astonishing journey from abject "otherness" to visionary sacrifice, Oscar demonstrates that only by confronting the blank pages of ancestral catastrophe can the displaced inherit a future beyond apocalypse.

Lola's course traces another valence of the second generation's struggle with inherited trauma. Watching her cancer-ridden mother, toxic to herself and others inspires terror that she has "craziness". To forge a self beyond her mother's wounds and her culture's constraints, Lola tries

on identities from punk chick to “Siouxsie and the Banshees-loving punk chick” at the cost of remaining a “perfect Dominican daughter, which is just a nice way of saying a perfect Dominican slave” (Diaz 2007: 54-56).When Oscar asks his mother if he is ugly, she answers in between sighs “Well hijo,”, “you sure didn’t take after me” (Diaz 2007: 30). Lola explains that their mother lacks affection toward her kids as she states “You know, ..we colored folks talk plenty of shit about loving our children but we really don’t” (Diaz 2007: 35) On the same page, Oscar tries to put a hand on his sister’s shoulder to empathize with her but she does the only thing she has been taught to do , she shrugs it away. Oscar becomes helpless never feels loved. He subconsciously handles on to psychologically damaged characters who cause him further disgrace.

Lola's protective urge to cloak herself speaks to the displaced child's imperative to shield a fragile ego from engulfment. Beli's tempest temper and craziness, subtly linked to the political terror she fled, haunt Lola as negative mother interjects she must resist to survive. At the same time, Lola poignantly intuits that “the only way out is in”; she cannot wholly deny her legacy but must integrate it (Diaz 2007: 209). Her journey through rebellion to a more “honest” adult selfhood models the potential for the second generation to mourn and reclaim its history. She resentes her mother for her illness , and because she does not believe her to be a mother.

The fraught bond between Beli and her daughter Lola forms a central thread of the narrative, revealing how the traumas of the mother are visited upon the daughter in an endless cycle of repetition and rupture. According to Philippe Codde, growing up in a traumatized household is enough to have an effect on the child (2009: 63). Beli's experience of violence and the loss of her mother leaves her ill-equipped to nurture Lola. As her unmetabolized pain fuels a brutal overprotectiveness that borders on cruelty:

When that thing happened to me when I was eight and I finally told her what he had done, she told me to shut my mouth and stop crying, and I did exactly that, I shut my mouth and clenched my legs, and my mind, and within a year I couldn't have told you what that neighbor looked like, or even his name (2007:57).

Here, the silencing of Beli's trauma by her mother sets the stage for the erasures and occlusions that will haunt her relationship with Lola. Raised in the shadow of her mother's unspeakable pain, Lola inherits a legacy of both fierce love and annihilating abandonment. Beli sees Lola's blossoming body as a reminder of her personal violation. However, Beli's attempts to protect Lola through control and intimidation only breed further cycles of rupture and rebellion. When Lola cuts her hair in an act of defiance, Beli rebukes her and refuses to recognize her private trauma reflected in her daughter's eyes. The primal rage that possesses Beli, the anger she cannot name or explain, becomes the toxic atmosphere Lola must navigate to survive. Lola's character dramatizes the ways in which the daughters of traumatized mothers must struggle to forge a sense of self in the face of their mothers' psychic wounds. Lola's "punk chick" persona and her shoplifting become ways of both armoring herself against her mother's anger and reenacting the violent ruptures that have shaped her family history. When Beli's cancer necessitates that Lola care for her, their relationship is forced into a crisis of reckoning and role reversal.

Beyond its searing portraits of individual and familial trauma, *Oscar Wao* tackles the broader cultural and collective scars of authoritarian violence in the Dominican imaginary. Diaz frames the De León saga as a synecdoche for the intimate human costs of the Trujillo regime's systemic brutality, which sought to crush all dissent, desire and self-determination. In doing so, he illuminates how political atrocity ruptures not only individual psyches, but the very fabric of community. Jeffrey C.

Alexander in his *Trauma: A Social Theory*, argues that cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity believe they have been exposed to a horrible event that leaves indelible marks on their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irreversible ways (2012: 6).

A central metaphor for this cultural trauma is the blank pages that haunt the text as an emblem of all that has been lost or silenced under dictatorship. When Abelard is imprisoned for supposedly uttering a joke critical of Trujillo, his books and writings are burned; all that remains of him are blank pages. Similarly, the family's “casa” or ancestral home is confiscated, leaving a gaping “blankness” where collective memory should be . These literal and symbolic blank pages suggest the dictatorship's assault on Dominican selfhood and continuity, the way it has placed generations under erasure. In Diaz’s view, Trujillo sought to author the national narrative single-handedly, violently redacting all other voices and versions of history.When Oscar and Yunior dedicate themselves to writing as an almost sacred practice, they are symbolically reclaiming the collective blank pages from the dictatorship's legacy of censorship and redaction. Their books of genesis represent the imaginative legacy of a people committed to chronicling their truths against oblivion.

LaCapra stresses the importance of shifting from acting out to working through, a process that restores the differentiation between past, present, and future while also allowing for a political agency (2001: 102). He urges the collectivity to pursue truth to assimilate the reality of that past which has the capacity to fragment groups and traumatize people. Past knowledge is a vital component in the process of working through it (2001: 696).In this sense, Diaz positions storytelling itself as a vital form of cultural healing and “ working through “ by seeking a critical distance to stop the cycle of repetition ,a way of splicing together

a polyvocal resistant version of history from the fragments that remain. Yunior's cobbling together of Oscar's writings and his insistence on bearing witness to the secret history of the Dominican Republic is also the story of Oscar's family, exemplifies this act of narrative reconstruction. By braiding the personal and political, subaltern voices and public histories, Yunior aims to restore the human faces and textures of life" that Trujillo sought to whitewash. His patchwork tale, equal parts "monstro" and "dream," is the novel's attempt to grapple with cultural trauma in all its contradictory, unresolved complexity. In weaving this story, he symbolically mends the torn "páginas" of the national narrative. This healing extends into the diaspora, the "contraseña to a new life… beyond the Plátano Curtain" (Diaz 2007: 259). For survivors like Beli and inheritors like Oscar and Lola, the diaspora is furthermore a project of post-traumatic growth. Their struggles in America to forge coherent identities, to navigate between ancestral inheritance and invented selfhood, reflects the broader challenge facing the displaced Dominican subject. How to integrate the ruptured past while still dreaming a future? How to honor the dead while affirming the living? In their oscillations between forgetting and remembrance, silence and story, the characters mirror the larger community's fitful attempts to reckon with its blank pages.

It is the diasporic generation's task to transform these blank pages into a new archive of cultural memory and imagination. This is the "Cosmo DNA" Oscar intuits as the "cure to what ails" his displaced people (Diaz 2007: 333). His sacrificial journey to recover this healing "knowledge" and bequeath it to the future reflects the novel's conviction that only by confronting the past can the community reinvent itself. In his final dream to Yunior of rising as a masked, whole-bodied figure in an ancestral library of blank pages, Oscar becomes an emblem of the diasporic artist of resurrection. With "seamless hands" and knowing eyes, he invites

subsequent generations to fill in the silences with their “wondrous” truths.

In this sense, the characters' post-traumatic journeys allegorize the broader cultural work of negotiating the pitfalls of amnesia as well as the ironies of collective remembrance that faces the Dominican diaspora. By confronting the traumatic past and daring to reinscribe its blank pages with new meanings, they blaze a trail for collective healing. Their stories honor the legacy of survival and creation that has always pulsed beneath the surface of the “national romance”, even in its darkest chapters (Diaz 2007: 201). In imagining a way beyond the “apocalypse,” beyond the “Darkness,” they illuminate the power of diasporic “wizardry” to alchemize historical wreckage into a new cultural renaissance (Diaz 2007: 285).

This “wizardry” is ultimately the novel's own. In its radical polyvocality, its temporal and geographic sweep, its blurring of boundaries between private story and public history, fantasy and testimony, the text itself performs a syncretic, post-traumatic reinvention of Dominican identity. Interweaving the silenced histories of the nation with the “intimate arcs” of character generates a new, resistant archive to stand against the dictatorship's legacy of erasure. In this sense, the novel materializes as the Zafa to the fukú of the Dominican experience, the counterspell against amnesia and elision that will be the survivors' sustaining inheritance.

Oscar and Lola's dual journeys back to the Dominican Republic and back in time to reconstruct their family saga form the novel's most potent gestures of healing. Each sibling returns to the Island at critical junctures, culminating in Oscar's final fatal voyage. These journeys serve as both literal and symbolic homecomings to the site of primal wounds, the “ground zero” of trauma their family fled. Crucially, it is through story and imagination on these returns that the characters begin

to integrate the “dark, unmapped trenches” of their psychic inheritance and move toward wholeness. Back home, Oscar had nightmares of the canefield, and tells Yunior that the *fukú* curse causes his misfortune.

Oscar's final return enacts the novel's vision of healing ancestral trauma through imagination and narration. In a bid to rekindle his star-crossed love with the semi-retired prostitute Ybón, Oscar travels back to the DR despite multiple ominous warnings. This time, he was “feeling resurgent” - a newfound energy linked to embracing his destiny as the family's victim-martyr (Diaz 2007: 271). Like his grandfather Abelard, whose dissenting voice made him a target of Trujillo's vengeance, Oscar holds tight to “the cure to what ails us... the Cosmo DNA” (Diaz 333). He pours himself into one last writing jag - an “opus” documenting his conclusions about “Abelard vs. Trujillo” (Diaz 2007: 245).

His near-fatal attack reprises the terrible attack his mother suffered more than thirty years prior. Many of the details surrounding Beli’s trauma repeat in Oscar's story. Both of them were attacked due to their romantic involvement with an individual who had another lover and received ruthless beatings by two henchmen in a secluded canefield. Both had mysterious encounters with a “golden-eyed mongoose”, and barely survived and subsequently left the Dominican Republic to America. The uncanny repetition of events appears to confirm Yunior’s theory that the curse established with Abelard’s “Fall” has persisted through the generations of his family. Moreover, the sense of déjà vu Oscar felt when he reached the cane field highlights a kind of genetic memory of Beli’s tragedy even though his mother never told him about her experience, and it happened before his birth. This strange form of recollection provides further evidence that the fukú that drove Beli to near destruction returned to affect Oscar.

In his last words, he frames this farewell time as “The beauty! The beauty!” a transformation of personal and historical pain into something

transcendent. While his murder brutally cuts this short, his quest to deliver the cure for his generation's sad story renders him the hero he had always yearned to become. Oscar's death reflects the novel's model for mourning and recovering from intergenerational trauma. His embrace of his role as the family's designated victim-martyr and tragic hero enables a form of narrative healing. In possessing his inheritance of doomed "lover-boy" personae extending back to his grandfather, he simultaneously breaks free of the compulsive repetition of the past. In the end, Oscar's brief, blazing life encapsulates the novel's hope that even the most abject histories can be redeemed through fearless telling. The fragmented manuscripts he sends home before his murder represent the survivor's blank pages that connect the past and future. These pages await the next generation's inscription and imaginative explanation. By leaving them to Yunior and Isis, the "Daughter of Lola" and spiritual heir to his dreams, Oscar ensures the survival of both the biological and familial line and a larger fabric of collective memory against historical amnesia and denial.

In the closing dream that Yunior imagines will "knock at [his] door" when Isis comes seeking answers, he and Oscar meet in "some kind of ruined bailey that's filled to the rim with old dusty books" (Diaz 2007: 320). Oscar is "holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look," evoking the scene from one of his beloved post-apocalyptic movies, and the trauma reaches the narrator: "I want to run from him, and for a long time that's what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling" (Diaz 2007: 325). This dream figuration of Oscar as a masked, resurrected figure in an archive of ancestral memory suggests the uncanny power of the dead to transmit wisdom to the living. The blank pages he holds symbolize the ever-unfinished story of collective trauma and survival, at once a testament to all that

has been lost and an invitation to future generations to fill in the gaps. His “seamless” hands suggest both his bodily martyrdom and a body made whole again through the story's power to splice together fragments. The novel's characters demonstrate that healing from trauma requires acts of mourning, returning, and telling that re-cross the distances exile has imposed.

Conclusion

Diaz criticizes Trujillo's dictatorship by uncovering the traumatic effects of violence and brutality on the Cabral family as reflected by the fuku curse. This serves as a broader commentary on the traumatic postcolonial history of the Dominican Republic, represented by the motifs of blank pages and the Faceless Man, which embody cultural and collective trauma. For the first generation immigrants, Diaz shows the failure of silence and overprotectiveness as means to shield the second generation from the past. The second generation internalizes this trauma, which affects their identity formation, as shown in Oscar and Lola's failure to integrate and create healthy social relationships in America as children of the diaspora. Diaz further offers a method to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma by returning to the site of trauma represented by the motherland and reconnecting to the traumatic history to turn it into narrative memory through writing the blank pages to fill the gaps of silence as a counterspell (zafa) to the fuku. In doing so, Oscar's death represents the sacrifices necessary for this healing process, as he becomes both a victim-martyr and a tragic hero.

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