

I. Title: The Politics of Cultural Trauma and Violence in Junot Diaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*.

II. Sponsor: Dr. Mónica G. Ayuso, Professor of English at California State University, Bakersfield.

III. Statement of Purpose:

This study will use the 2007 novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, by Junot Díaz to connect the repetition of imagery to cultural trauma and the recurrence of transgenerational violence inside families of the Dominican Republic's political diaspora after the ruthless years of Rafael L. Trujillo's regime in the DR. (1931-1960). Diaspora is a term used to describe the mass dispersions of people from a nation, and in this paper, I focus on the political relationships to the Dominican dispersion of the period mentioned above. The purpose of this study is to better understand the causes of trauma, and thus, to find the resolutions of cultural trauma. Cultural trauma is the experience of a group of people who collectively suffer unspeakable acts of horror which shape their culture. My research will utilize existing qualitative studies, quantitative studies, analytical literary studies, and philosophies from contemporary scholars such as Habermas and Derrida to support my preliminary theory that a direct relationship exists between political strife (which evokes racism) and cultural trauma. Where my research differs is that I will use Trauma Theory to establish political and psychological relationships between the Dominican Republic's cultural problems and The United States' cultural problems. Trauma Theory is a contemporary term used in the field of literary criticism to connect the repetition of images and events in the plot of a literary work to highlight the deeper meaning of the relationships which lie between trauma and post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD). For instance, the image of a man without a face reappears in Díaz's novel, marking the relationship, among others, of the 1937 genocide of Haitian laborers (highlighted in the novel) on the Dominican/Haiti border who were massacred with machetes in the sugar cane fields. The iterative nature of the faceless man represents the anonymity of the torturers and the subjugated silence of the victims.

IV. Expected Outcomes and Deliverables:

Outcomes: My research will contribute to the on-going application of Trauma Theory to the study of literature. So far Barad, Kirmayer, & Lemelson (2007), Bhugra & Jones (2010) and Cummings, Plotsky, & Schechter, et.al (2010) will help me to prove this theory. My thesis extends the relationship between the political and the psychological and the usage of the method of Trauma Theory as it relates to the effect of immigration and transference of trauma into the family and nation's culture.

Deliverables: Once complete, this project will help me to find deeper meaning in the effort toward a thesis paper for the English Master's program. It will also assist me in submitting my findings to the peer-reviewed journal, *Callaloo*, published by The John Hopkins University Press, which is famous for publishing articles on Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Additionally, I plan to share my findings in the CSUB Student Research Competition, and if I

place, I will go on to present at the CSU statewide conference. This conference consists of attendees and judges of professional experts from major corporations, foundations, public agencies, as well as professors from colleges and universities in California. Furthermore, my research is already finding its way into my network of philosophy as a writer of humanitarian themes and as a teacher, by improving the depth of themes in my writing and by improving the delivery of instruction to my students. Both my academic teaching and creative writing projects will continue to reach mainstream readers and students to raise awareness of cultural trauma.

V. Significance: Since 1991, cultural bereavement has been documented with symptoms and experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Cultural bereavement is the mourning that occurs due to loss of culture. It has been noted that PTSD can prove to be a significant finding across specific ethnic groups, including Afro-Caribbeans of the diaspora. Additionally, several studies showed that rates of schizophrenia were higher among these immigrant groups than the native groups (Bhugra and Jones 17). Like Díaz's main character in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Afro-Caribbean males are more likely to have been separated from their fathers for longer than four years and thus patterns of diminished attachment, diminished self-satisfaction and underachievement may play a role in their lives (Bhugra & Jones 22). Furthermore, qualitative studies over a period of ten years have shown that trauma may be transmitted from generation to generation (Schechter 256).

Additionally, many immigrants have testified that an additional traumatic experience occurs when refugees immigrate to another country because of dependency on government for basic survival, rejection and prejudice from natives, and a new life living in crowded conditions. These contemporary studies show that the highest rate of current PTSD symptoms can be connected to immigrants of past wars and genocide (Barad, Kirkmayer & Lemelson 2-3). These issues are all utilized by Junot Díaz to flesh out the plot, imagery, and themes of his novel. These facts inspire the discussion of how history, politics, and culture in the Dominican Republic all lead to the transference of cultural trauma, not only within the family, but within a nation. Furthermore, this project addresses Kaplan's argument (2005) that the controlling lens of media blunts our moral engagement toward massive social (and cultural) trauma (Kaplan 87). Díaz's novel draws heavily on media (i.e. movies, comics, and televised science fiction programs) as an antidote to the stress of cultural trauma.

VI. Preliminary Findings: Applying Trauma Theory as it relates to the political cause of what ails us as a whole society helps us to understand the root of the major political themes and symbolic motifs in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. It also deepens our understanding of the significance of the author's interviews and leading criticism in the area of fragmentation, one aspect of Trauma Theory. For example, Monica Hanna's "Reassembling The Fragments: Battling Historiographies, Caribbean Discourse, and Nerd Genres in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*" addresses the need to counteract political trauma when she asserts that Junot Díaz writes his historiography to recall the fragmented Dominican history in order to counteract a history of nationalism embraced by regime (Hanna 504). According to Hanna, Díaz highlights American political involvement in the Dominican Republic to show the reality of political trauma (Hanna 516). This reality is that the Dominican Republic and the United States are now forever linked through their politics when America invaded the Dominican Republic on April 28th, 1965. As Oscar and his family emigrate out of the D.R. and into The United States, they find themselves irretrievably tied to both nations and further traumatized with divergent

customs and culture. Furthermore, each time immigrants are plucked from their native country, they experience the confusion of their sense of identity, which forces them to understand new social and political protocols because their native social and political protocols are rejected in The United States. Scholar Ramon Salvádar explains that this fragmentation of culture requires political representation and acknowledgment when he writes that in the twenty-first century, the relationship between race and history requires Dominican writers like Díaz to invent a new imaginary for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction. It also requires the invention of new forms to represent it. Race can no longer be considered exclusively in the binary form, black/white, which has structured racial discourse in the U.S. (Salvádar 574-575). This discourse moves beyond the postcolonial discussion of trauma to the post-race discussion that takes into account economic opportunity and shatters the cycle of political and cultural prejudice which causes trauma.

VII. Contributions and Future Research:

This study will contribute to the on-going political discussion of cultural trauma within the context of Trauma Theory and transgenerational violence. It will address the gap of U.S. involvement in the evolution of our own culture through the political trauma we incur on other nations.

Future research would include the analysis of other quantitative studies relating to political and cultural trauma, and it would include studies of novels pertaining to other diasporas and the repetition of their imagery as they relate to transgenerational violence and political trauma.

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