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# "Death Stars, Death Breathes:" The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao and the Trauma of Diaspora

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**"DEATH STARS, DEATH BREATHES": *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*  
AND THE TRAUMA OF DIASPORA**

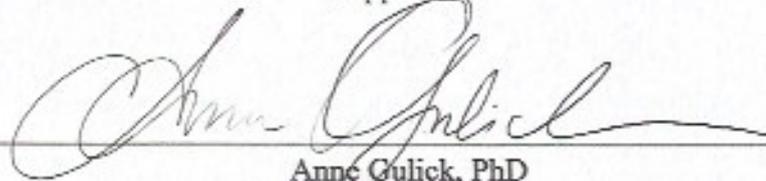
By

Hannah Quire

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for  
Graduation with Honors from the  
South Carolina Honors College

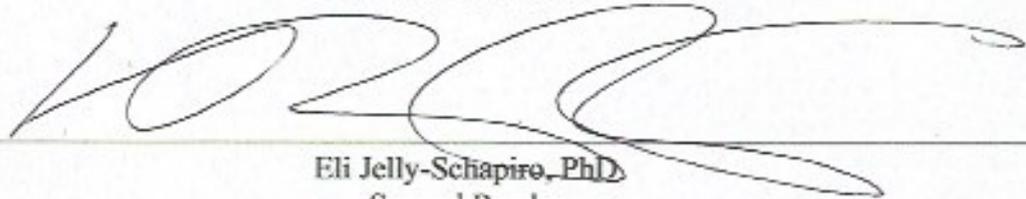
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## Thesis Summary

The following thesis aims to examine the interlocutions of diasporic trauma and genre in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* by Junot Díaz. Centering the work of prominent theorists regarding diaspora, trauma, and literature, this project enacts a close reading of the novel in order to frame it as a text that is at once principally concerned with diasporic trauma while also defying thematic labels and genre categorization. This project begins by foregrounding the work of trauma and diaspora scholars to demonstrate the relationality between the two fields of study, while the second chapter examines those presences in *Oscar Wao*; the third chapter then takes the alternative approach, demonstrating the importance of moving beyond a singular framework of diasporic trauma, and the final chapter connects those articulations to the novel. Ultimately, this thesis demonstrates how *Oscar Wao* reckons with the diasporic trauma of the Dominican Republic through the lens of magic and fantasy.

## Introduction

Published in 2007, Junot Díaz's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, is a work of magnificent proportions. At its center is Oscar de León, "a sweet but disastrously overweight ghetto nerd" who navigates the difficult terrains of growing up, immigration, and the latent "curse" upon his family. As the novel moves chronologically through Oscar's life, it is interjected with flashbacks to the past in order to unveil the stories of Oscar's mother and maternal grandfather. *Oscar Wao* collapses time and space to reckon not only with Oscar's precarious journey to authentic Dominican masculinity as he attempts to lose his virginity, but also with the diasporic trauma running through the Dominican Republic as a site of colonization and enslavement. This dichotomous relationship with both the small-scale story of the de Leóns and the large-scale excavation of Dominican history takes root in the novel's narrator, first introduced as "the Watcher" but later revealed to be Yunió, Oscar's college roommate and one of Lola's ex-boyfriends. Despite his lack of blood relation to the family, his status as a fellow Dominican-American situates him firmly within the novel's scope. At once concerned with the undulations of diasporic trauma within the Dominican Republic as a nation while also rooting itself in the realm of fantasy and magical realism, *Oscar Wao* demonstrates the complications in excavating these identities, and the genre bending such an act requires.

The novel itself begins in Oscar's youth, describing his "Casanova" days in primary school and then his struggles in relating to women throughout high school (Díaz 11). After, however, Díaz initiates the first of his interruptive forays into the past, detailing the history of Beli, Oscar's mother. Raised by La Inca, her adoptive mother and her father's cousin, Beli's story is shot through with whispers of a traumatic childhood; as she grows from a stubborn and unremarkable child into a hardheaded and love-crazy adolescent, Beli abandons school to work

at a Chinese restaurant where she waits tables, meets new friends, and begins to come into her own. She grows up in the midst of the regime of Trujillo, “one of the twentieth century’s most infamous dictators,” and La Inca fears for Beli’s life and reputation (2). One of her newfound friends, Constantina, invites Beli to go dancing at the Hollywood, leading her to meet her greatest love: the Gangster. Beli falls pregnant by him only to discover that he is married to none other than Trujillo’s sister; when the Gangster’s wife (nicknamed La Fea) finds out the truth, she sends two men to kidnap and assault Beli. They take her to the canefields, the most remote location in Santo Domingo, and Beli suffers tremendous damage and loses her baby, but survives. This moment leads La Inca to send Beli to New York in order to save her life and prevent her imminent murder. On the plane ride, Beli meets “her husband and the father of her two children” (164); diaspora is the vessel through which Oscar and Lola come to be.

After revealing this portion of the story, Yunion is officially introduced to the text, fittingly beginning: “It started with me” (Díaz 167). Through his first chapter, Yunion explains that he and Oscar became roommates as a result of Oscar’s suicide attempt the year prior; he then details Oscar’s struggles in college, the girls he falls in love with (and has his heart broken by), his attempts to make Oscar lose weight, and his own tumultuous relationship with Lola and countless other women. On their final night as roommates, Yunion departs to visit one of his many girls, and Oscar attempts to kill himself a second time; although he fails, this attempt is crucial for Oscar’s trajectory throughout the novel, as he begins to come to terms with his family’s history and his role within it. The chapter immediately following this attempt is Díaz’s second shift into the past, signaling the importance of that jump to Oscar’s own excavation of inheritance; in this flashback, Yunion reveals the story of Abelard, Beli’s father and Oscar’s maternal grandfather, and the trauma and tragedy that resulted in Beli’s orphanage. Living in the

midst of Trujillo's most vicious era, Abelard is recounted as having interacted with Trujillo himself on numerous occasions; "the Cabrals were numbered among the High of the Land... members of the Fortunate People," signaling their power and wealth in their society (211-213). Abelard was a brilliant doctor; his wife, Socorro, was his right hand nurse; and his two daughters, Jacquelyn and Astrid, were just as brilliant and accomplished. Their home, Casa Hatüey, becomes mythologized by La Inca throughout Beli's own life.

After Abelard begins leaving Socorro and Jacquelyn at home rather than bringing them along with him to Trujillato events, on account of "Trujillo's notorious rapacity and his daughter Jacquelyn's off-the-hook looks," he encounters trouble with the regime (Díaz 216). Refusing to allow either his wife or his daughter to accompany him despite Trujillo's explicit request, Abelard falls prey to the corruption of dictatorship, and is put in jail for "[s]lander and gross calumny against the Person of the President" (233). Immediately after he is arrested, Socorro discovers she is pregnant with Beli, "Abelard's Third and Final Daughter" (242); not long after her birth, however, the Cabrals are effectively wiped out. Socorro "stepped in front of a speeding ammunition truck and was dragged nearly to the front of La Casa Amarilla before the driver realized something was wrong" (248). The daughters are then sent to family members, where "Jackie, the family's Golden Child, was found drowned in her godparents' pool" (249) and Astrid, her sister, dies by "a stray bullet [flying] down the aisle and [striking] her in the back of the head" while she is praying (250). Beli is left alone: a sickly and underweight baby, she nearly dies as an infant before being "sold to complete strangers in another part of Azua," where she is turned into an indentured servant and suffered tremendous abuse (253). After a particularly brutal incident, La Inca learns of Beli's existence, and promptly retrieves her from Azua and brings her to La Inca's own home in Baní. The reader is caught up on the history of the de Leóns

and Cabral, and on the points at which Trujillo, the Dominican Republic at large, and their own personal narrative coalesce.

When Díaz shifts back to Oscar and his story, he has finished college at Rutgers and moved home, where he teaches English at his old high school, Don Bosco. He not only feels unfulfilled, but also has had his “elder spirits talking to” him, encouraging him to go back to Santo Domingo for the summer (Díaz 272). On this trip, he meets a girl – Ybón, an older prostitute and girlfriend of a police officer, nicknamed the capitán – and falls in love. Oscar decides to stay in Santo Domingo after Beli has left, and his close relationship to Ybón results in her boyfriend sending his henchmen to hurt Oscar; they take him to the canefields, just as the Trujillato did to Beli, and Yúnior notes that “[i]t’s not clear whether they intended to scare him or kill him. Maybe the capitán had ordered one thing and they did another... All I know is, it was the beating to end all beatings” (298). Saved by his family’s taxista, Clives, Oscar is sent back home to Paterson to recover but promptly makes his way back to the Dominican Republic to be with Ybón. It is after this return that the capitán finds him again, and Oscar returns to the canefields one final time, where he is executed.

*Oscar Wao* is a text, as demonstrated, concerned both with the localized story of the de Leóns as representatives of the Caribbean diaspora at large, but also with the traumatic underpinnings of the diaspora. However, this is not its only focus; Oscar is, as aforementioned, deeply rooted in nerd culture and an “outsized love of genre,” facts that leak into the text from every angle (Díaz 21). Even throughout his articulations of diasporic subjectivity in the Dominican Republic, Díaz permeates bits of fantasy, magic, and mystery. As a result, *Oscar Wao* defies categorization into the ranks of either “a trauma novel” or a “science fiction novel.”

As a result, this project aims to unveil the novel's centrality to the work of diaspora and trauma scholars while also emphasizing its decided connections to fiction.

In the first chapter, I center the theoretical frameworks for diaspora and trauma necessary to begin this project. Saidiya Hartman figures prominently in this interrogation, specifically through *Lose Your Mother*, her book about her own trip to Ghana to retrace the route of the Atlantic slave trade; although her focus resides in African-American literature and history, centering enslavement in her analyses, *Lose Your Mother* and Hartman's personal reckonings with her Black Atlantic diasporic subjectivity create a useful groundwork for unveiling the same percolations of history in *Oscar Wao*. Avtar Brah's *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* complicates contemporary diaspora(s) and their relationality to the past. Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, a groundbreaking text of the Negritude movement, is also usefully diasporic through his renderings of the "native land." Here, he envisions the native land as a space in which diasporic subjectivities can be contested and the historic trauma at work in the Caribbean can be unraveled. For the perspective on trauma, I turn to Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* as well as responses to her seminal work by Greg Forster to establish the theoretical baseline for the field of study.

The second chapter tackles the ways in which this theory permeates *Oscar Wao*, positioning the novel as one notably concerned with diasporic trauma. With issues of colonial inheritance, nativity, and return at the center of studies on diasporic trauma, this analysis unveils those same permutations in *Oscar Wao*. The invocation of the family curse, fukú, also initiates broader connections to the historical trauma of colonization and enslavement embedded within the Dominican Republic itself. Through fukú, the principal players of the novel – including Trujillo, Yunior, and the de Leóns themselves – all exact specific returns metaphorically to the

historical past as well as literally to the physical sites of colonial inheritance upon the native land. This analysis also reintroduces Césaire's *Notebook*, pointing to the connections both overt and subtle drawn by Díaz throughout the novel, and highlights the linkages to Hartman's assertions about the necessity of death for return in conversation with Oscar's own execution at the close of the novel.

In chapter three, I turn to Yogita Goyal's "Africa and the Black Atlantic," in which she critiques the direct linkage of diaspora and trauma within Black Atlantic theory and literature, a move she terms "the *Beloved* moment" (ix). Articulating a need for novels that tackle more than the pain and suffering of diasporic trauma, Goyal hails *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as the poster child for this switch. Using the work of Afropolitan theorists such as Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi, this chapter aims to discuss the merits of abandoning a trauma framework in Black Atlantic diasporic literature and theory; referencing Hartman and Césaire once more, this analysis also posits that even the frames of diasporic trauma grounding this project are not as cut-and-dry as they appear to be on the surface.

The final chapter of this project undertakes a final return to *Oscar Wao* to showcase the ways in which Díaz participates in Goyal's argument and takes it a step further. While the text explores the historical inheritance of the Dominican Republic as native land, it also injects elements of fantasy and supernaturalism; through this process, Díaz transforms *Oscar Wao* into a novel that is not principally concerned with either diasporic trauma or magic singularly but rather both at once, arguing that each actually *necessitates* the other. Ultimately, this project aims to privilege *Oscar Wao* as a unique interrogation of the Caribbean diaspora and its traumatic ramifications upon subjects of the past, present, and future.

## I. The Trauma of Diaspora

Diaspora is a concept rife with conflicting and complicated definitions and connotations. Its origin can be traced back to very recent history as a term ascribed to the mass dispersion of Jewish peoples in the aftermath of the Holocaust's horrors; over fifty years after that historical moment, however, diaspora has come to encompass a vast array of persons and locations, the result of a rapidly globalizing society and its cultivation of transnational experiences. Avtar Brah highlights that diaspora "embodies a notion of a centre, a locus, a 'home' from where... dispersion occurs. It invokes images of multiple journeys," and this definition indicates the pluralized nature of diasporic experience in the twenty-first century (181). Historicizing diaspora and delineating the specific diaspora this project tackles is essential, because every diaspora has its own history, identities, and cultural significances that cannot be lumped together in one moniker. Diaspora in the context of this project alludes to the Black Atlantic diaspora, occasionally referenced as the African or the Caribbean diasporas; this diaspora centers on deals the dissemination of (enslaved) peoples and cultures and the ramifications of that forced migration in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Given Brah's definition, diaspora contains several components. Her specifications about diaspora as a *dispersion from* and the aforementioned "multiple journeys" underscore the most crucial and obvious layer: the physical movement of places, the tangible act of crossing borders. Many articulations of diaspora relate specifically to this invocation, wherein "any reference to materials or evidence or texts from a region outside the United States is coded as 'diasporic'" (Grewal and Kaplan 665). To be diasporic, however, is more than being "foreign" or physically moving continents or countries. Brah indicates that diasporic existence is more than the mere physical act, but is also bound by a distinctly emotional and spiritual one. This idea of a *home*, a

central point of origin, unveils a complicated interconnection between the emotional and physical upheavals that are intrinsic to diasporic existence. There is a constant tension between one's *homeland* and one's *home right now*, catapulting diasporic subjects into harsh oscillations between belonging and unbelonging.

This is not to say that migration is immune to similar pressures, especially since immigrant itself “is a term which, Stuart Hall asserts, ‘places one so equivocally as *really* belonging *somewhere else*’” (Boyce-Davies 114). But diaspora and migration are not coterminous, and the tensions incurred by diasporic subjects are not equivalent to those of other types of immigrants. Even the constructs of language seen in the usage of terms like *immigrant* as used above underscore these innate differences; in classifying or unpacking the identities of Black Atlantic diasporic subjectivities, for example, *immigrant* is not only incapable of encompassing the specific experiences and contexts from which this diaspora emerged, but is also dangerously sanitizing to the reality of the enslaved past coded into the Black Atlantic diaspora. Enslaved peoples did not “immigrate” consensually or consciously, and delimiting them and their lineages within the constructs of “migration” sanitizes their history, a factor that is fundamental to their *diasporic* subjectivity. The experiences for those descended from enslaved peoples as they grapple with their own iterations of belonging and unbelonging are not the same as those classified as “immigrants,” and cannot be read as such. The usage of the term “diasporic subject” throughout this project is an acknowledgment of that difference, and of the *forced* migration experienced by the enslaved and colonized.

The ineptitude of “immigrant” as a term to capture the migratory experience of the enslaved is equally felt by their descendants. Diaspora cannot be contained within a specific time frame or geographic area; as an antidote to this, Brah conceptualizes *diaspora space*, a location

she imagines exists within and is created by diaspora itself. She explains that “the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement, intertwining of genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’” (208). In Brah’s eyes, these dichotomous spaces are produced by and within one another, creating overlapping narratives, identities, and peoples that are equally diasporic even *without* the physical act of migration. Diaspora space does not mean that the experiences of those who leave and those who are left behind are equivalent: “What is especially important... is the way in which... the same geographical space comes to articulate different histories and meanings, such that ‘home’ can simultaneously be a place of safety and terror” (207). The paradoxical experience of “home,” that emotional and spiritual center to which diasporic subjects yearn to return, creates new experiences of belonging and unbelonging that are uniquely felt by each inhabitant of diaspora space. Each feels the same pulls native to diasporic subjects regardless of physical mobility, just through different frames.

The importance of that “home” presents a unique challenge for Black Atlantic diasporic subjects who oftentimes are not sure of their exact origins. Saidiya Hartman describes her experience with that very act, explaining how even she “who was three generations away from slavery and who had neither country nor a clan to reclaim, hadn’t been deterred from searching” (155). She then writes, “It was one thing to be a stranger in a strange land, and an entirely worse state to be a stranger to yourself... what, if anything, could I remember after hundreds of years of forgetting?” (157) Reconciling Black Atlantic diasporic subjects’ longing for home with its absence requires an intersection of past and present, one that can be found in physical and emotional returns. The notion of return is a crucial hinge of diaspora scholarship; Boyce-Davies’ asserts that Caribbean diasporic subjects, specifically, are “hurled into a movement of exile and *return* which is so *fundamentally inscribed* in ‘New World’ post-/modern identities” (2,

emphasis added). The construction of diasporic subjectivities, especially for those of the Black Atlantic, is predicated upon return; in order to unpack diaspora, it is equally essential to unravel the pertinence of return to diasporic subjects.

Aimé Césaire's seminal work, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, deals very specifically with return and is a crucial first step in understanding return as a function of colonial inheritance and diaspora. Pinning Césaire's *Notebook* into one genre is difficult; oscillating between poetry and prose, it is also marked by the historical, autobiographical, and theoretical as he meditates upon the reality of African diasporic subject. Césaire is best known for his work in the negritude movement, which he founded in the 1930s alongside other Francophone members of the African diaspora and cultivated the idea of a central Black cultural self that would unit all of African descent across the globe. However, negritude and diaspora studies are not mutually exclusive subjects of scholarship; rather, the foundations of the negritude movement itself actually collapses diaspora space in order to unite the diaspora across borders and languages within the singular identity of "Blackness." These similarities may be the result of Césaire's own diasporic subjectivity: born in Martinique, a small French-governed island in the Antilles, his upbringing was founded upon the conflicts of belonging and unbelonging innate to diaspora, and he ultimately immigrated to France to complete his education. Césaire is especially important to the context of this project, as he is a Caribbean diasporic subject forged in the midst of the transition out of colonialism. The *Notebook* also delves into the Caribbean as a site of colonial inheritance, the ramifications of enslavement and colonization upon the Antilles, and the Caribbean's connections to Africa, all of which factor into the text's negotiation of return.

The narrative opens in the Caribbean, signaling the land's importance to Césaire's interrogation of return and diasporic subjectivity. Césaire writes, "At the end of first light

burgeoning with frail coves the hungry Antilles, the Antilles pitted with smallpox, the Antilles dynamited by alcohol, stranded in the mud of this bay, in the dust of this town sinisterly stranded” (1). These lines call forth the image of the Caribbean islands in the aftermath of colonization and enslavement, the degradation of the land itself as well as of its people. In beginning his own “return” in this way, Césaire points to the cruciality of history as a mechanism for the present, and indicates that a meditation upon the Caribbean and African diasporas *cannot begin* in any place but these touchstones. He goes on to emphasize the collectivity of this experience, calling the broken and beaten landscape – “the extreme, deceptive desolate eschar on the wound of the waters; the martyrs who do not bear witness; the flowers of blood that fade and scatter in the empty wind” – a product of “the dreadful inanity of **our raison d’être**” (1). Césaire positions the Antilles as “the native land” of which the title speaks and also as *the* “reason for existence” for its diasporic subjects. In juxtaposition with the first passage, the tragedies of enslavement and colonization and the effects upon the Antilles are as much a part of this diasporic identity as the nation itself. They are the inheritance not only of the land, but of the subjects who descended from the land, as well.

Return becomes a natural successor to the recognition of this bond. Césaire writes:

At the end of first light, the wind of long ago – of betrayed trusts, of uncertain evasive duty and that other dawn in Europe – arises...

**To leave.** My heart was humming with emphatic generousities. **To leave...** I would arrive sleek and young in this land of mine and I would say to this land **whose loam is part of my flesh**: “I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores.”

I would come home to this land of mine and I would say to it: “Embrace me without fear... And if all I can do is speak, it is for you I shall speak.”

And again I would say:

“My mouth shall be the mouth of those calamities that have no mouth, my voice the freedom of those who break down in the prison holes of despair.”

And on the way I would say to myself:

“And above all, my body as well as my soul beware of assuming the sterile attitude of a spectator, for life is not a spectacle, a sea of miseries is not a proscenium, a man screaming is not a dancing bear...”

*And behold here I am come home!* (17, emphasis added)

The assertion that this “loam is part of my flesh” underscores the relationality between the diasporic subject and the physical native land itself. Its juxtaposition alongside the oscillating “exile and return” (“To leave... To leave...”) also highlights the ways in which those physical movements are tethered to the colonial inheritance of the Caribbean. In Césaire’s rendering of the Black Atlantic, return is an exercise in inheritance; by “com[ing] home,” as the last line announces, Césaire reckons with his inheritance as a Caribbean diasporic subject through the vessel of return. The personal and historical are collapsed into one frame – the native land – creating, as Brah writes, a space in which “boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ are contested” (208-9).

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The essentiality of return within diasporic subjectivity creates other connections, as well; united under this umbrella is the equally fraught and complicated concept of trauma, a field of study curated by Freud and which has since become tenuously linked to diaspora studies in recent years. Historicization is as important to trauma studies as it was to definitions of diaspora, and it is not without note that trauma and diaspora studies share a clear historical moment: the Holocaust. Just as diaspora was originally conceptualized as the dispersion of Jewish peoples in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the Holocaust itself serves as the origin point for understandings and conceptions of trauma. Freud and other leading trauma scholars delineated the Holocaust as

*the* traumatic event in history, using it as the definition of what could be seen as traumatic. In so doing, Freud and his contemporaries unveiled a new form of analysis that focused upon trauma “as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3).

In her landmark text *Unclaimed Experience, Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Cathy Caruth sets forth her own vision of trauma studies. Following in the footsteps of Freud, she charts trauma as something punctual, “experienced less as an ongoing set of processes” but more so as specific “blow[s] to the psyche” (Forster 259). This conceptualization of trauma can be best envisioned in the form of a finger prick: at first, there is little pain or even notice by the one being pricked. But when one hits one’s finger accidentally, pain rushes in, rendering the initial prick traumatic *because* attention was called to it in another way. Punctual traumas are usually not categorized as traumatic in the moment the event is occurring, but rather are retro-determined (or, determined in the aftermath) as such when triggered by other forces. Caruth explains, “The story of trauma, then, as **the narrative of a belated experience**, far from telling of an escape from reality – the escape from a death, or from its referential force – rather attests to its **endless impact on a life**” (7, emphasis added). Caruth situates the Holocaust within this framework and delimits its trauma as punctual on two counts: by the singularity of the event rather than its duration; as well as by its “belated experience,” where she asserts victims understood the Holocaust as traumatic only by retro-determining it as such instead of in the moment.

Despite the importance of Caruth’s work to the field of trauma studies, contemporary theorists and critics have begun engaging with *Unclaimed Experience* and problematizing its claims. These scholars have contributed to new breadths of work that position themselves against this paradigm of trauma, shifting the perspective away from punctual traumas. A great deal of emphasis has been placed on “those forms of trauma that are *not* punctual, that are more

mundanely catastrophic than such spectacular instances of violence as the Holocaust” (Forster 260); Hartman echoes these sentiments in a specifically Black Atlantic context, referring to “the terror of the mundane and quotidian rather than... the shocking spectacle” (5). These forms of trauma are denoted as *social* traumas; they are not relegated to one identifiable event, as in the punctual, but are instead systemic and everyday, born out of one’s day-to-day lived experience.

Binding trauma and diaspora together, however, is return. Caruth asserts, “[T]he story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return” (7). The associations of trauma with retrodetermination also highlight the importance of the past as it affects the present, but fixate more on the *mental* returns as opposed to the physical: “[W]hat returns to haunt the victim... is not only the reality of the violent event,” indicating the metaphysical and psychological ramifications of traumatic experience (Caruth 6). Forster also uses the dreamscape as the point at which trauma is contested and revisited: “The victim *literally* dreams about and imaginatively returns to the experience that traumatized him” (267). Each of these invocations of return echoes the experiences of Brah, Hartman, and Césaire above; although Hartman’s return to Africa is physical, Césaire’s is not, and Brah frames diaspora as something *not* contingent on physical mobility. Return ironically redounds in the theory of both trauma and diaspora scholars, and hinges the two fields together.

Understandably, however, diaspora is not a concept that can be readily boxed off into one clear-cut category, and the process of directly aligning it with trauma must be undertaken with care. Suki Ali writes that the word “diaspora” itself is one “that needs to be used with sensitivity,” as “the de-politicising of [it] is problematic; neither is it necessarily an appropriate term for those of multiethnic heritage, unless they retain connections with, for example, ‘the’ African diaspora” (124). It is essential to keep this warning in mind when using words like

diaspora and transnational as catchall terms for, as she puts it, “multiethnic” experience. Brah also indicates the ways in which the contemporary moment has implications for the idea of “diaspora at large” as we currently understand it: “[R]ecent migrations are creating new displacements, new diasporas. In the context of a proliferation of new border crossings the language of ‘borders’ and of ‘diaspora’ acquires a new currency” (179). In the same way that we have come to understand modern social and political ideologies in multiplicities, so, too, does diaspora inhabit a nebulous identity, one that is constantly shifting and reforming in the wake of new borders and new migrations. This is clearly witnessed in the shift in terminology just in the last half of a century and laid forth at the start of this chapter; the pluralization of diasporas requires those engaged in both trauma and diaspora studies to be conscious of how these terms are being used and to what ends they are being invoked.

However, trauma and diaspora are undeniably connected to a certain extent, and it is critical to unpack these ties in order to thoroughly investigate and represent the present. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman explains, “[W]riting the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of the dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but *also a reclamation* of archival material for contrary purposes” (10, emphasis added). The exploration of diasporic trauma within literary narratives renegotiates the terms of Black Atlantic storytelling, foregrounding those who endured the trauma. Diaspora, history, and trauma are undeniably intertwined not as a result of inherent suffering or pain, but rather as a means through which diasporic subjects are able to *reclaim and rewrite their pasts* as a means through which to understand the indelibility of history upon the present.

Saidiya Hartman’s second book, *Lose Your Mother*, is a stunning portrayal of that very act. Spurred on by scholarly pursuits as well as her own personal interest in reclaiming her past,

Hartman details her experience traveling to Ghana to retrace the steps of the slave trade. Much like Césaire's *Notebook*, *Lose Your Mother* is difficult to define; even as it is representative of a memoir in its exposition of Hartman's personal experiences in Ghana, it is simultaneously interspersed with scholarly criticism and elements of historical fiction, all wrapped up in her stunning prose. The similarities between the two text's negotiations of the personal and political are illustrative of diasporic subjectivity itself; just as the diasporic subject inherits its native land's suffering and its history in Césaire's text, *Lose Your Mother* reproduces the same ideas, aligning the African and Caribbean diasporas once again. The issues of identity and the absence of a particular home intrinsic in diasporic subjectivity are foregrounded throughout the text, problems heightened by Hartman's status as an African American in Africa. The Ghanaians refer to her an *obruni* ("stranger"), underscoring the rootlessness incurred by the descendants of enslaved peoples: "*Obruni* forced me to acknowledge that I didn't belong anyplace. The domain of the stranger is always an elusive *elsewhere*" (4). She goes on to describe how the term "stranger" acts as "the placeholder for the missing, the mark of the passage, the scar between native and citizen. It is both an end and a beginning... And the longing and loss redolent in the label were as much my inheritance as they were that of the enslaved" (8). This dichotomy of shared inheritance and simultaneous ostracization indicates the cavernous nature of diaspora, and this pilgrimage is a means through which Hartman tends to both the bandaging and the excavation of the wounds incurred by this rupture.

The text teases out the importance of diasporic trauma even from its earliest pages. Although her journey is undertaken for myriad reasons, Hartman's fixation on this idea of "inheritance" highlights just how fundamental reclamation is to her interrogations of belonging, history, and legitimacy. She notes at one point later in the book, "Inheritances are chosen as

much as they are passed on” (100); this indicates that for Hartman, the legacy of slavery and its impacts have both been thrust upon her by fate and history, but it is also a facet of her identity that she willingly retains. The trauma of slavery and its ramifications is not limiting for Hartman, but rather opens doors for new forms of and literatures about Black existence to emerge. *Lose Your Mother* digs in its heels with regards to the insolubility of exorcising the past from the present: “The past is neither inert nor given. The stories we tell about *what happened then*, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present” (133). For Hartman, the factual reality of enslavement is an inexorable creator of the present and is thereby the inheritance of the Black Atlantic.

Hartman also meditates upon return and memory, both of which recur ceaselessly in her excavation of the past and contribute directly to the diasporic trauma shot through the text. It is essential to note that, although Hartman does physically return to Ghana, she is unsure if this is even the nation from which she is descended, as the genealogies of the enslaved were long forgotten in the abyss of time. Her physical return to her assumed country of origin is crucial, but no more so than her mental returns to the history that produced her in the present. She writes, “Being a stranger concerns not only matters of familiarity, belonging, and exclusion but as well involves a particular relation to the past. If the past is another country, then I am its citizen” (17). Without a country to which she can tether herself, she must settle for an association with the past, uniting history with the plight of diasporic belonging. This is confirmed by her statement that “[t]here was no going back” to the pre-slavery days, in which she also says, “I knew that no matter how far from home I traveled, I would never be able to leave my past behind” (40). The past is her inheritance as a diasporic subject, but is also the very fabric of her identity; as it sustains her, it also creates her. The mental and physical returns of Hartman and other Black

Atlantic diasporic subjects are coalesced in Ghana and along the slave route, exhibited when she visits one of the crucial sites of slave trading, and writes, “‘Return’ was the word that reverberated throughout Elmina Castle, as though the only life possible was one that existed in the past” (89). Here, physical return to the place at which enslavement originated and mental return to the past in which such events took place are amalgamated, rendering Hartman’s experience an act of both, and demonstrating the ways in which trauma and diaspora can be understood as interlocuting and indefinite experiences.

Return is pivotal for Hartman both in her experience at Elmina Castle but also within the history of enslavement as a whole. She details a specific story in which the wealthy of a village were all captured and enslaved in one of the posts across Ghana, and after insurrecting and taking over the castle’s walls, they committed mass suicide. “Before they fired their rifles, they avowed, ‘When I die, I shall return to my own land,’” echoing a common notion that “only death would make return possible” for the enslaved and their successors (95). These ideas pop up again and again for Hartman, where she states that “return is what you hold on to after you have been taken from your country, or when you realize that there is no future in the New World, or that death is the only future,” and that “not even death brought an end to the wretchedness of slavery, because the children of the enslaved assumed the condition of their predecessors” (99, 106-7). These invocations of return differ from those presented previously and author a new terrain for the multitudes implicit in diasporic trauma itself. Black Atlantic trauma cannot be confined to a singularity, but must instead be read in all of its forms, a matter tread heavily throughout the course of *Lose Your Mother*.

The ties to trauma studies abound within the text, as well, especially given the persistent language of “wounds.” Caruth’s image of the wound plays heavily into Hartman’s assertions

about the implacability of time and the redounding nature of history; she writes, “History was an open wound, as Jamaica Kincaid writes, that ‘began in 1492 and has come to no end yet’” (166). Directly aligning the linchpin of trauma studies – wounds – alongside an articulation about the past’s ceaselessness, Hartman offers up her own juxtaposition of diaspora and trauma. She conducts a similar act of alignment with the *personal* elements of her journey, noting, “I went to [Ghana] to excavate a wound” (40). The local and the global are collapsed within this plane and united under the helm of trauma studies; Hartman establishes that her journey to Ghana was one borne out of both a scholarly desire to uncover the mysteries of the slave route, but also as an attempt to reclaim the history stolen from her and repair the “breach between me and my origins” incurred as a result (Hartman 199). In this manner, the experience of diasporic subjects – here, namely Black Atlantic diasporic subjects – is one of a profoundly social trauma; as explicated by Forter, these experiences and remembrances are constant and unrelenting, permeating the everyday regardless of the era of origin. Hartman eloquently positions herself and her book as representative of a particular element of Black Atlantic diasporic trauma: one not represented exclusively by death and impossibility, but rather one of hope and futurism, a process of *repossession* that still retains the truth of the past. *Lose Your Mother* carves out a necessary space in which to explore diasporic trauma outside the realm of the purely academic, privileging that of the literary, instead.

## II. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* as Trauma

Published in the same year as Hartman's *Lose Your Mother*, Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* foregrounds the story of Oscar de León and his family in order to unravel the centrality of diasporic trauma to Caribbean diasporic subjectivity. The novel maps the history of the de Leóns alongside that of the Dominican Republic, entangling each within the other to illustrate the multilayered effects of colonial inheritance. Drawing direct inspiration from Césaire's *Notebook*, Díaz situates the Dominican Republic as the native land: a Caribbean nation forged from colonization and enslavement, the Dominican Republic is rooted in a Black Atlantic context, tethering it to the same inheritances and returns. Just as Díaz firmly grounds the text in the localized story of the de Leóns, he is equally fixated on the effects of diasporic trauma writ large, vacillating across continents and decades and collapsing notions of past/present and here/there. Díaz uses the de Leóns as the embodiment of Caribbean diasporic subjectivity itself, positioning them as the anchors between the novel's excavation of the Dominican Republic as native land and its impacts upon its diasporic subjects.

Although the novel itself does not follow a linear trajectory, this analysis begins on the first page of *Oscar Wao*, as it best demonstrates the interlocutions of large- and small-scale diasporic trauma. The opening line of the novel reads, "They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles" (Díaz 1). Here, "it" is fukú, also known as the "the Curse and the Doom of the New World" (1); the Watcher notes that "the arrival of Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since" (1). Fukú is the manifestation of the history of colonization and enslavement and is

thereby connected to the inheritance of the Dominican Republic as native land. It also, importantly, occurs on scales “both... little and large,” implicating the localized story of the de Leóns (as representative diasporic subjects) alongside that of the Dominican Republic (1). These links are concretized when the Watcher announces, “As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, I have a fukú story too” (6). Through the Watcher’s eyes, Oscar and his brief wondrous life are *part* of fukú. From these earliest pages, Díaz grounds *Oscar Wao* as an exploration of the relationship between Caribbean diasporic trauma on the level of the subject as well as that of the nation.

Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, the tyrannical dictator of the Dominican Republic from 1930 until his assassination in 1961, epitomizes this connection in the novel. His connections to fukú are immediate: “No one knows whether Trujillo was the Curse’s servant or its master, its agent or its principal, but it was clear he and it had an understanding, that them two was *tight*” (Díaz 2-3). Here, Trujillo is presented as the agent of fukú upon the Dominican Republic, while his ascendancy is also fukú’s doing. As nations entered postcoloniality, the political vacuums left in many countries fostered dictatorships and political upheaval; with this historical context in mind, Trujillo can be read as the natural consequence of the colonization of and enslavement within the Dominican Republic. The relationship between Trujillo and this broader political history is established when the Watcher points out, “Outstanding accomplishments include... one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western Hemisphere” (3), and that “the First American Occupation of the DR... ran from 1916 to 1924,” dates that fall precipitously close to the beginning of Trujillo’s reign (19). By directly aligning the United States’ foreign policy with Trujillo’s instatement and subsequent violence, Díaz illustrates the undulation of the Dominican Republic’s colonial inheritance from “little” to “large.” Backed by the United States, Trujillo is able to exact the same tyrannical practices witnessed within

colonization and enslavement. The Watcher comments, “You didn’t know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don’t worry, when you have kids they won’t know the U.S. occupied Iraq either” (19). By juxtaposing these two American military interventions, Díaz indicates that Trujillo is the embodiment of mid-twentieth century imperialist practices while also pointing out the contemporary recursions of those practices.

The incessancy of time connects the Trujillato, the Dominican Republic at large, and *Oscar Wao* as a novel to the returns implicit in diasporic trauma. Díaz instigates a form of return for himself by framing the novel as a callback to Césaire’s *Notebook*, explicitly doing so by labeling the section in which Oscar makes a trip back to Santo Domingo with Beli “The Condensed Notebook of a Return to a Native Land” (Díaz 272). An analysis of return in *Oscar Wao* necessitates an equal privileging of return in the *Notebook*, and Césaire is a crucial entry point into the text’s interrogation of Caribbean diasporic trauma. The Trujillato is a manifestation of the past in the present, indicating the ways by which the redolence of history enacts a form of return within the novel that extends beyond the literal move back “home.” Césaire undertakes a similar task, framing history as the hinge upon which diasporic subjectivity is founded:

No, we’ve never been Amazons of the king of Dahomey, nor princes of Ghana with eight hundred camels, nor wise men in Timbuktu under Askia the Great, nor the architects of Djenne, nor Madhis, nor warriors. We don’t feel under our armpit the itch of those who in the old days carried a lance. And since I have sworn to leave nothing out of our history (I who love nothing better than a sheep grazing his own afternoon shadow), I may as well confess that we were at all times pretty mediocre dishwashers, shoeblacks without ambition, at best conscientious sorcerers and the only unquestionable record that we broke was that of endurance under the chicote...

And this land screamed for centuries that we are bestial brutes; that the human pulse stops at the gates of the barracoon; that we are walking compost hideously promising tender cane and silky cotton and they would brand us with red-hot irons and we would sleep in our excrement and they would sell us on the town

square and an ell of English cloth and salted meat from Ireland cost less than we did, and this land was calm, tranquil, repeating that the spirit of the Lord was in its acts. (25-27)

For Césaire, the history of enslavement and colonization is tethered both to the physical land itself as well as to the subjectivities of its inheritors. In these passages, Césaire reframes history into two separate but corresponding forms: History, the mythologized written record that inscribes power relations in the present; and history, the personal and localized experiences of the enslaved and colonized. Each exists within and produces the other, and Césaire seamlessly transitions the paragraphs to demonstrate how the realities of violence and suffering during enslavement in the second passage are merely an extension of the History of colonization of the first. Importantly, as well, Césaire uses present tense verbs and collective language to signify that each of these histories and their interconnectedness are still rebounding within the current moment, and are the inheritance for *all* Caribbean diasporic subjects.

In *Oscar Wao*, both histories begin to coalesce with Abelard, Oscar's maternal grandfather. The Watcher writes, "When the family talks about it all – which is like never – they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo," and goes on in a footnote to state, "There are other beginnings, certainly, better ones, to be sure – if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards 'discovered' the New World – or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916" (Díaz 211). In this moment alone, the history of the de Leóns is collapsed within the scope of the History of the Dominican Republic as native land; Trujillo and the de Leóns are both framed as echoes of the past in the present. As a result, the familial inheritance of the de Leóns is equally entrenched in the postcolonial and historical. This is concretized when the Watcher notes, "[A]nyone who plotted against Trujillo would incur a fukú most powerful, down to the seventh generation and beyond" (3); with "the Bad Thing," Abelard doomed his family to both the "Curse... of the New World," as well as the Curse of the

Cabrals. As Trujillo is part of the Dominican Republic's inheritance as native land because of his postcolonial connections to fukú, his relationship to Abelard and to the tragedy of the Cabrals renders him a piece of their inheritance, as well.

The Curse of the Cabrals operates as a form of diasporic trauma that engenders new inheritances, and thereby new returns, for its only surviving member: Beli. Despite her physical and emotional ostracization from her family, Beli remains tied to the legacy of the Cabrals despite attempting to shake herself free of it; La Inca “expected Beli to be the last best hope of her decimated family, expected her to play the key role in a historical rescue mission, but what did she know about her family except the stories she was told ad nauseam? ... She wasn't a maldita ciguapa, with her feet pointing backward in the past. Her feet pointed forward, she reminded La Inca over and over. Pointed to the future” (Díaz 81). Beli attempts to extricate herself from the grip of each of her histories throughout the text, epitomized in her “inextinguishable longing for elsewhere” that plagues her throughout her life (77); as the Watcher recalls, “She wanted, with all her heart, something *else*. When this dissatisfaction entered her heart she could not recall, would later tell her daughter that it had been with her *all her life*” (79). This language of “elsewhere” is crucial for understanding the linkages between Beli and the inheritance placed upon her by her family's Curse and the Dominican Republic as native land. Hartman asserts that “elsewhere” is fundamental to the “domain of the stranger,” which in her eyes is the embodiment of diasporic subjectivity at its core. Díaz aligns Beli with a similar identity, thereby establishing her as a diasporic subject even before her exile from the Dominican Republic; the mere act of crossing from her “home,” Casa Hatüey, to her “home right now” in Outer Azua and then La Inca's house severs her from her family, and she is fittingly

nicknamed the “Empress of Diaspora” (106). Cut off from her “home” without consent, Beli seeks stability in an unnamed and unknowable *elsewhere*.

Hartman’s language of the “stranger” also tethers Beli to her diasporic identity in the novel. Without any relationship to her dead family, she experiences the same “breach between me and my origins,” one that is both physical and emotional. Even as La Inca attempts to remind her of her parents, “recount[ing] for Beli her family’s illustrious history while they pounded and wrung dough with bare hands (Your father! Your mother! Your sisters! Your house!),” their deaths create an immutable rupture (Díaz 78). For the diasporic, however, as much as this “breach” is not wholly reparable, it is also not wholly permanent; Beli naturally inherits this past despite her own attempts to evict herself from it, underscoring the implacability of diaspora time itself. When she begins going to a new school, for example, she masquerades it “as a paradise,” making up stories to tell her only friend, Dorca, about her plethora of friends and her handsome boyfriend in order to imagine the life she wishes she possessed (85). In this fabrication, however, “[s]he in fact, without knowing, was talking about the life she never knew: the life of Casa Hatüey” (87). Beli is intractable from the history from which she so desperately tries to distance herself, illuminating the pervasive burden of diasporic inheritance embedded within and placed upon her.

As aforementioned, Trujillo remains a central figure in the inheritance of the de Leóns; while the end of Abelard’s life was during Trujillo’s most fervent years, Beli’s youth takes place in his final ones. His essential role in the promulgation of the Curse of the Cabrals also renders him arbiter to Beli’s experiences. Importantly, Trujillo’s reentrance into the narrative is the consequence of Beli’s attempts to unhinge the past from her present: Beli’s greatest love, the Gangster, is “a flunky for the Trujillato” whom she meets out dancing one night as she tries to

forge her own path (Díaz 119). The Gangster is the vessel through which Beli reckons with her family's inheritance as well as her own diasporic one, epitomized when the Watcher states, "There it was, the Decision That Changed Everything. Or as she broke it down to Lola in her Last Days: All I wanted was to dance. What I got instead was *esto*, she said, opening her arms to encompass the hospital, her children, her cancer, America" (113). His relationship to the Trujillato and his pivotal role in "catapult[ing] her and hers into Diaspora" demonstrate the confluence of time and inheritance for the de Leóns (115). The conflation of the *new* inheritance of diaspora and the *old* inheritance of the Trujillato – which is a product of another inheritance, that of colonization and enslavement – demonstrates the endless stream of reproduction, re-experience, and return inscribed within the native land.

This confluence of inheritance is concretized as Beli's personal trauma is fused with the diasporic trauma of the text. In the aftermath of her love affair with the Gangster, Beli is kidnapped and taken to the canefields. The canefields themselves hold deep significance to the history of colonization and enslavement, as the production and harvesting of sugarcane was a common requirement for the enslaved peoples in the Caribbean. Beli's return necessitates an equal return to Césaire, who invokes the imagery of sugarcane in his depiction of the death of Toussaint Louverture, the famous revolutionary who incited a slave revolt that resulted in the freedom of Haiti: "[A] lone man imprisoned in whiteness / a lone man defying the white screams of death / (TOUISSAINT, TOUISSAINT LOUVERTURE) / ... Death traces a shining circle above this man / death stars softly above his head / death breathes in the ripened cane of his arms" (19). The importance of this history to the canefields is further explored when the Watcher describes the drive away from Santo Domingo: "[O]ne second you were deep in the twentieth century... and the next you'd find yourself plunged 180 years into rolling fields of cane" (Díaz

146). The canefields are the space in which the trauma of the local and the global collide. As Beli is “marched... into the cane,” she is mercilessly assaulted, and the Watcher emphasizes, “They beat her like she was a slave” (147). In this moment, Díaz directly situates Beli as a manifestation of the enslaved history of the native land, contextualizing her present trauma as an extension of the global traumas incurred by her ancestors. The Watcher notes, “[F]ukú doesn’t always strike like lightning. Sometimes it works patiently... But be assured... no matter how many turns and digressions this shit might take, it always – and I mean always – gets its man” (5). Beli personifies this idea; despite her best efforts to remove herself from her family’s history, her colonial inheritance is enduringly tethered to her.

For Oscar, his suicide attempt is the catalyst that forces him to reckon with this family history. After jumping from Route 18, Oscar careens straight into the family history and begins to recognize his own relationship to the “curse” his family has always spoken about. As Yunior writes after visiting Oscar, “Right before I headed out, he said: It was the curse that made me do it, you know. I don’t believe in that shit, Oscar. That’s our parents’ shit. It’s ours too, he said” (Díaz 194). By directly linking his suicide attempt to the inheritance of the de Leóns and the native land at large, Oscar is able to reclaim his family history and begin to come to terms with its ramifications upon his own life. This also initiates his return to the native land, a moment shot through with percolations of inheritance and diasporic trauma as a result of Díaz’s invocation of Césaire at this moment in the novel. Lola notes, “[I]f these years have taught me anything it is this: you can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in” (209); this sentiment is echoed in Oscar’s decision to make the journey, since “even Lola quizzed him about it. You *never* go to Santo Domingo. He shrugged. I guess I want to try something new” (272). Unlike Beli, Oscar’s return is conscious and deliberate, and his confrontation of his colonial inheritance is also

consensual; using Hartman's framework, where Beli adopted her inheritance by virtue of it being *passed on*, Oscar *chooses* his own.

Given that the title for the section in which Oscar returns echoes that of Césaire's *Notebook*, Díaz positions Oscar as Césaire's counterpart. The latter's moment of return to his native land serves as a crucial anchor for Oscar's own. As previously noted, Césaire writes, "I would say to this land whose loam is part of my flesh: 'I have wandered for a long time and I am coming back to the deserted hideousness of your sores,'" and the relationship between the diasporic subject and the land here is manifold. Not only does the land produce the diasporic subject in a literal sense, but the violence done upon the land is also embedded *within* the subject, crafting a reciprocal inheritance. His continuation that he has "wandered for a long time and [is] coming back" also echoes the temporal distance between past and present and the redundancy of return to the Caribbean diaspora. Díaz reproduces these same images in Oscar; after the capitán's henchmen kidnap him, Yunion states, "Where did they take him? Where else. The canefields" (Díaz 296). Oscar goes on to note that "this world seemed strangely familiar to him; he had the overwhelming feeling that he'd been in this very place, a long time ago" (298). The multiplicity of returns embedded within the canefields – to the Dominican Republic as native land, to Beli's assault, and to Césaire himself – force Oscar to grapple with his intersecting inheritances, as well.

Just as Beli's beating triggers her own (forced) reckoning with her inheritance, Oscar's own leads him to realize "that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be *true*" (Díaz 303). This is reaffirmed when Yunion sees Oscar for the first time after the assault: "I saw his face and was like: Holy shit, Oscar. Holy fucking shit. He shook his head. Bigger game afoot than my appearances. He wrote out the word for me: *fukú*" (306). Directly correlating his

personal trauma alongside the diasporic trauma intrinsic to fukú, Oscar recognizes the ways by which his family's history and the history of the Dominican Republic as native land are coalesced and interlocking. Return remains essential to this process, for although Beli forces Oscar to come back to the United States, he initiates his own final trip to the Dominican Republic; he explains, "It's the Ancient Powers... They won't leave me alone" (315). By the close of the novel, Oscar has grappled with his own colonial inheritance, even as the rest of his family struggles to comprehend it: "Lola flew down to see him, begged him to come home... he listened and then said quietly that she didn't understand what was at stake. I understand perfectly, she yelled. No, he said sadly, you don't" (319). Here, Oscar has reconciled himself not only with the burden of his inheritance, but also with its consequences.

Death is, as Hartman points out in *Lose Your Mother*, the only true return for the children of the enslaved. As a result of his native land, it is also Oscar's final inheritance. However, his last return, this time to the canefields, is markedly different from his first: "This time Oscar didn't cry when they drove him back to the canefields. Zafra would be here soon, and the cane had grown well and thick... The smell of the ripening cane was unforgettable, and there was a moon, a beautiful full moon" (Díaz 320). Echoing Césaire's imagining of Toussaint Louverture's own death, Díaz presents Oscar as being ready to embrace death as the ultimate return to the native land. As Oscar is marched into the canefields for the last time, he gives one last speech:

He told them that it was only because of [Ybón's] love that he'd been able to do the thing that he had done, **the thing they could no longer stop**, told them if they killed him they would probably feel nothing and their children would probably feel nothing either, **not until they were old and weak or about to be struck by a car** and then they would sense him waiting for them on the other side and over there he wouldn't be no fatboy or dork or kid no girl had ever loved; over there he'd be a hero, an avenger. Because anything you can dream (he put his hand up) you can be.

They waited respectfully for him to finish and then they said, their faces slowly disappearing in the gloom, Listen, we'll let you go if you tell us what *fuego* means in English.

Fire, he blurted out, unable to help himself. (321-22, emphasis added)

Here, Oscar highlights the eternity of *fukú* by noting it is “the thing they [can] no longer stop.” He also implies that return does not end with his death, but rather that *in* death, he will reappear to those who have murdered him; the importance of death to return for diasporic subjects is also concretized in his assertion that only in their *own* deaths will they be able to reconcile their past with their present as he has done.

Endings, however, are not in the cards for the diasporic. Near the close of the novel, Yunior cites one of Oscar's favorite comic books: “Oscar – who never defaced a book in his life – circled one panel three times... Veidt says, ‘I did the right thing, didn't I? It all worked out in the end.’ And Manhattan, before fading from our Universe, replies: ‘In the end? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends’” (Díaz 331). *Fukú*, as aforementioned, “always... gets its man,” and its intractability does not cease with Oscar's execution. When Lola has her own daughter, Yunior writes, “One day, though, the Circle will fail. As Circles always do. And for the first time she will hear the word *fukú*... Not now, but soon. If she's her family's daughter – as I suspect she is – one day she will stop being afraid and she will come looking for answers” (330). Oscar's death does not break the chain of repetition, nor does it extract the Dominican Republic's history as native land. The trauma of the Caribbean diaspora is rooted in the redolence of *both* forms of history in the present: “Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country... she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are” (324). Just as Trujillo was the product of *fukú* itself as the physical manifestation of postcoloniality and its ramifications for the Dominican Republic, so too are the subjects of its diaspora. *Oscar Wao* provides no answers or solutions for the rectification of such a wound; for Díaz, “the rupture [is] the story” (Hartman 42).

### III. The Troubled Marriage of Diaspora and Trauma

Just as there is a great deal of literature fusing diaspora and trauma studies together, there are also a number of authors currently challenging the pervasiveness of this unification. A thorough interrogation of diasporic trauma, particularly Black Atlantic diasporic trauma necessitates an excavation of these oppositional frames. As Brah points out, the proliferation of “new diasporas” means it is not quite accurate to classify the experience of the Africa diaspora writ large as something *intrinsically* traumatic, and it is this exact linkage that Yogita Goyal problematizes in her essay “Africa and the Black Atlantic.” Here, she argues that privileging the past limits the future of African diasporic subjects, especially through the lens of literature; for her, these works that revolve around the past produce “romantic narratives... [that] prioritize an image of Africa as anterior to modernity,” using Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* as the prime example (v). “[W]hat has become normative,” Goyal notes, “is the notion that the contemporary era is to be understood as the afterlife of slavery,” a line of thought that “relies on the axiom that racial injustice in the present can only be understood by recovering the slave past” (viii-ix). She continues, “[I]t is by seeing history as history (not as the key to the present) that we might be able to imagine a future that is post-racial in a utopian rather than a color-blind sense” (ix). Goyal positions Black Atlantic diasporic literature as an opportunity not to forget the trauma of enslavement or the Middle Passage, but rather to complicate diasporic experiences beyond the realm of pain, suffering, and uprooting.

To Goyal, the fixation of prominent diaspora scholars upon the history of enslavement and its reproductions in the present is an extension of that very act. She informs her argument using two of Toni Morrison’s novels – *Beloved* and *A Mercy* – to illustrate how the resurrection of the past can be unhinged from an analysis of Black Atlantic diasporic subjectivity. Goyal

positions the former as emblematic of “[t]he melancholic historicism” present in the work of theorists who fixate upon the past as a referent (ix). Set in the 1850s, *Beloved* traces the story of Sethe and her children, highlighting the violence she experienced as an enslaved person and its reverberating effects in the lives of her children. The echoes of enslavement in the present are witnessed when Sethe learns her old master is coming to bring her back to the plantation, and she attempts to murder each of her children (only successfully killing one, the titular *Beloved*). When *Beloved* literally returns from the dead, she attempts to kill Sethe as an act of retribution, demonstrating the ways by which the violence of enslavement is not relegated to those who were enslaved but also rebounds and reproduces itself in the aftermath; *Beloved* “conceives of a present that is haunted by the ghosts of Atlantic slavery” (Goyal ix). However, “Morrison herself has moved away from everything she so influentially inaugurated” through her later novel, *A Mercy* (ix). There, she “reveal[s] a world where slavery and race are not yet conjoined... [the novel] does not offer the past as either explaining the present or redeeming it” (ix). By “offer[ing] history as simply history,” *A Mercy* demonstrates how the history of enslavement can still remain relevant in Black Atlantic texts without its violence consuming the narrative (ix).

The juxtaposition of *Beloved* and *A Mercy* presents the central dichotomy at play in Goyal’s exhibition of African diasporic trauma and literature. Importantly, the latter novel is still told from the perspective of an enslaved girl and is therefore not wholly removed from the trauma of enslavement; however, Morrison’s decision to fixate not on *that* trauma, but rather on the coming-of-age for her central character, demonstrates the shift Goyal yearns for in African diasporic literature. She explains, “Rethinking diaspora by unmooring the past from slavery alone does not mean returning to a historical amnesia about slavery, but recognizing that no ‘single story’ ... can capture the heterogeneity of the diaspora” (xvi). Goyal’s essay is an attempt

to reframe Black Atlantic diasporic identity and literature away from the trauma of enslavement, which relegates Africa as “anterior to modernity” as explicated above. *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie serves as her pinnacle for that achievement, a text that is “simultaneously more playful and more serious than its American counterparts,” effortlessly transposing a narrative about the struggles of immigration within a tale of love and redemption. Importantly, as well, “Adichie challenges the association of Africa with trauma, torture, and politics” (xvi) in order for her novel to foreground itself “as a new kind of black novel, an exploration of blackness that does not highlight injury or trauma, but focuses on romantic love, hair, and nostalgia” (xiv). This image of a renewed Africa and African diaspora moves beyond the violence of enslavement and the continent’s stereotypical image, charting a fresh landscape for African subjectivity in the diaspora and beyond.

Goyal is not singular in her efforts to contest a marriage of African diaspora and trauma studies. The emergence of Afropolitanism, a discourse produced in the early twenty-first century, presents a useful lens through which to consider the diversity of African diasporic experiences because it focuses wholeheartedly on the future as opposed to the past. In her essay “Bye-Bye Barbar,” Taiye Selasi explains what it means to be an Afropolitan:

They (read: we) are Afropolitans – the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon, or collected already, at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You’ll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes. Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic language or two, we understand some indigenous language(s) and speak a few urban vernaculars. There is at least one place on the Continent to which we tie our sense of self: be it a nation-state (Ethiopia), a city (Ibadan), or an auntie’s kitchen. Then there’s the G8 city or two (or three) that we know like the backs of our hands, and

the institutions (corporate/academic) that know *us* for our famed work ethic. We are Afropolitans – **not citizens, but Africans, of the world.** (528, emphasis added)

The Afropolitan discourse is intended to be “a little self-congratulatory,” Selasi notes, because it embodies “the effort to understand what is ailing Africa alongside the desire to honor what is wonderful, unique” (530, 529). This is a stark turn away from Gilroy’s Africa; as opposed to romanticism of the past, in which Africa remains an untouched paradise, Selasi envisions an Africa that is at once problematic but still thriving. Afropolitanism offers a unique entry point into diaspora studies, because while the diaspora theorists laid out in chapter one are entrenched in undulations of past in present, the Afropolitan abandons all notions of victimhood in order to graft a more optimistic and creative future. As a result, Afropolitan discourse is antithetical to that of diasporic trauma, creating a space in which “to map new itineraries of identity, migration, and resistance” (Goyal xviii).

The image of “Africans of the world” provides a useful foundation upon which to excavate contemporized images of the continent and the diaspora. Achille Mbembe, whose essay “Afropolitanism” disseminated the term in academic circles, writes, “Afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of a victim identity – which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its peoples by the law of the world” (28-29). It is essential to include this formulation of Afropolitan identity because it demonstrates the means by which Afropolitanism does not merely criticize the percolations of trauma within diaspora studies; instead, Mbembe argues that Afropolitanism is capable of both acknowledging the vitality and tangibility of that history while also refusing to allow it to tether the African diaspora to the past. African diasporic subjects are rendered, as blogger Minna Salami notes, “shapers of globalization and all its inherent contestations.” By unmooring the present and future from the

past, the African diaspora is able to transcend the stagnation of the romanticized primitive history of Gilroy's Black Atlantic in order to become active participants and "shapers" of the world at large.

Reading diaspora through an Afropolitan lens is not a perfect practice, however. The discourse has been met with a great deal of controversy since its inception; some critics argue that it commodifies Africanness and abandons Pan-Africanist politics. In "Exorcising Afropolitanism," Stephanie Bosch Santana focuses on the fashion-oriented nature of Afropolitanism, critiquing not only Selasi's emphasis on these new "stylish Africans" but also of the promulgation of those images in media and art, including within the culture magazine "The Afropolitan." She goes on to write, "Style, in and of itself, is not really the issue. Rather, it's the attempt to begin with style, and then infuse it with substantive political consciousness that is problematic... style and 'worldview' become conflated, [and] not only products, but people and identities are commoditized." This reliance on capitalist structures, which are part of a decidedly colonial and imperialist frame, complicates the scope of Afropolitanism's political reach. Goyal echoes these same concerns when she describes how Ifemelu, upon returning back to Nigeria, is seen "both participating in the discourse of Afropolitanism and mocking its pretensions to an identity based in style, attitude, and consumption rather than (for example) the political consciousness of Pan-Africanism" (xv). Attempts by scholars to move *beyond* enslavement are flouted by a loss of substance, while entrenchment in the past leaves little room for a productive future.

It is therefore essential to locate a middle ground, a place at which the past can be acknowledged but not excised and where the future can proliferate freely but constitutively. In an

essay published a year before “Africa and the Black Atlantic,” Goyal offers such a frame, arguing that modernist literature fill these gaps:

Although this type of experimentation [with narration and temporality] was once seen as a withdrawal from history and politics, such a binary between aesthetics and ideology is now being dismantled. Repetition, return, or the recursivity of time signals not the disavowal of trauma, but its haunting presence and formal experimentation can be tied to a text’s negotiation of history rather than its disavowal. The rethinking of time and space that geomodernism calls for thus offers both formalist and historicist benefits... (91)

Modernist literatures, which she contends have been “expanding... forward temporally into the late twentieth century and beyond,” provide a stable ground to excavate the contentions of time, space, history, and trauma. The importance of a complicated return is presented by Hartman, as well: “The story that unfolded was less about what happened then than it was a way of navigating our present,” demonstrating how even foregrounding the past does not mean a complete erasure of the *now* (190). She continues: “Coming [to Ghana] was simply a way of acknowledging [the past]. There was no turning back the clock. But it didn’t feel like it was moving forward, either” (199). Return is not a cut-and-dry process, even for scholars like Hartman deeply rooted in the study of Black Atlantic diasporic trauma; rather, her own struggles with return demonstrate problematize attempts to transcend the history of enslavement. For diasporic subjects and theorists, the continued rebounds of an enslaved past in the present shape the identities and politics of the Black Atlantic diaspora in the twenty-first century. Hartman points out: “[R]eturn and remaking, or restoration and transformation, can’t be separated into tidy opposing categories. Sometimes *going back to* and *moving toward* coincide” (96). In order to achieve a new branch of African diasporic literature, in which the trauma of the diaspora is amalgamated within the story of a bright and tangible future, reclamation of the past must be met with an Afropolitan-esque vision of a new world.

#### IV. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Genre

Genre is an important crux for all of the literary referents of this project. Both *Lose Your Mother* and *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* avoid direct categorization, functioning as deeply literary, historical, autobiographical, and personal texts all at once. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* falls in line with each of these: although firmly situated as a novel, the first half of the text features a plethora of (oftentimes lengthy) footnotes; it historicizes the text globally while dealing with the de Leóns personally; and also features, rather prominently, tokens of science fiction and magical realism. Reading *Oscar Wao* requires not only unpacking each of these units and their relationality to the text's articulation of diasporic trauma separately, but also recognizing how each works together. The novel's evasion of a singular genre classification is just as important as the content itself, for its reproduction of Caribbean diasporic experience goes hand in hand with its infusion of the spectacular; the trauma of the Dominican Republic as native land is shot through, moment by moment, with elements of supernaturalism. For Hartman and Césaire, reckoning with their colonial inheritances requires privileging the historical realities of enslavement and colonization upon the present moment; for Goyal, this constrains the Black Atlantic diaspora to the realm of uprooting, trauma, and violence. *Oscar Wao* meets them somewhere in the middle. The novel is not merely fixated on diasporic trauma singularly; instead, it at once recognizes the realities of Caribbean diasporic subjectivity without allowing it to swallow the text whole.

The pervasion of the supernatural into the Dominican Republic and its stature as native land is sprinkled throughout the novel. In the very earliest pages, the Watcher recalls, “[Oscar] was a hardcore sci-fi and fantasy man, believed that was the story we were all living in. He’d ask: What more sci-fi than the Santo Domingo? What more fantasy than the Antilles?” (Díaz 6)

Here, the Dominican Republic is situated not only as a site of colonial inheritance for its subjects at home and abroad, but also exists as a grounding force for the supernatural. The Watcher goes on to state, “But now that I know how it all turns out, I have to ask, in turn: What more fukú?” (6) By linking the text’s embedment in fantasy alongside its interrogation of fukú, the vessel for diasporic trauma itself, Díaz demonstrates their mutualistic relationship. To Díaz, the colonial inheritance and diasporic trauma at work in *Oscar Wao* relies upon an equal analysis and recognition of the novel’s more fantastical elements; the former *requires* the latter, and neither can exist wholly detached from the other. That task, for Díaz, begins with fukú. It is the active agent in dispersing the inherited histories of the enslaved and colonized while also, as epitomized above, functioning as a manifestation of the supernatural.

Just as Trujillo became the physical embodiment of fukú as an arbiter of diasporic trauma, he remains equally entrenched in its more magical properties. Yunion notes:

Sometimes in 1944 (so the story goes), while Abelard was still worried about whether he was in trouble with Trujillo, he started writing a book about – what else? – Trujillo... His shit, if we are to believe the whispers, was **an expose of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime!** A book about the Dark Powers of the President, a book in which Abelard argued that the tales the common people told about the president – **that he was supernatural, that he was not human – may in some ways have been true.** That it was possible that Trujillo was, **if not in fact, then in principle**, a creature from another world! ... Alas, the grimoire in question (so the story goes) was conveniently destroyed after Abelard was arrested. No copies survive... What can I tell you? **In Santo Domingo a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow.** (Díaz 245, emphasis added)

The content of this “Lost Final Book of Dr. Abelard Luis Cabral” places Trujillo as a distinctly supernatural figure, not only in the novel but also in the context of the Dominican Republic at large (246). In his notation that this story of Trujillo’s inhumanness “may in some ways have been *true*... if not in fact, then in principle,” Díaz complicates what exactly fact and fiction *mean*

in the context of the Dominican Republic's history. The inclusion of the phrase "in some ways" demonstrates the impossibility of truly nailing down an accurate, honest, or "real" portrayal of the Dominican Republic as a site of colonial inheritance. Yuniors goes on to write, "Oscar, as you might imagine, found this version of the Fall very very attractive... a supernatural, or perhaps alien, dictator who had installed himself on the first Island of the New World and then cut it off from everything else, who could send a curse to destroy his enemies" (246). By positioning the fantastical version of the Trujillato alongside the regime's political ramifications, Díaz connects diasporic history and its ensuing trauma to the supernatural elements running through the novel.

Writing the history of the Dominican Republic, let alone an honest account, is an insurmountable feat in Díaz's estimation *because* of these connections to fantasy. Abelard's attempt to tell the "real" story of the Trujillato's supernatural roots is thwarted by Trujillo himself, indicating the ways in which the diasporic trauma and inheritance of the Dominican Republic interacts specifically with and alongside the superhuman. Additionally, Trujillo himself remains a specter throughout the novel and in the Dominican Republic; the Watcher states that he "was too powerful, too toxic a radiation to be dispelled so easily... Even after death his evil *lingered*" (Díaz 156). This is most clearly seen in his continued political import in the Dominican Republic, for although Trujillo himself died, his legacy exerted a great deal of power over the politics of the nation. He was immediately succeeded by Joaquin Balaguer, "one of [Trujillo's] more efficient ringwraiths... who oversaw/initiated the thing we call Diaspora" and served in the Dominican Republic "from 1960 to 1962, 1966 to 1978, and again from 1986 to 1996" (90). Balaguer is directly tied to the diasporic trauma of the Dominican Republic on two counts: by his central role in commencing the dispersion of Dominican peoples, as well as by his continuation of the Trujillo legacy even decades after the dictator's death. Just as Trujillo himself was a

symptom of the Dominican Republic's inheritance as native land, Balaguer is the manifestation of the nation's reckoning with that inheritance. The Watcher writes, "[W]hen twentieth-century Dominicans first uttered the word *freedom* en masse the demon they summoned was Balaguer" (90). The "freedom" mentioned here is the freedom *from* Trujillo and thereby from the violence and trauma of his regime, indicating the Dominican Republic's attempt to decipher their recent history and move forward into the present. The impossibility of a "true" history, as exposed with Trujillo above, produces Balaguer instead; this retention of the past is also a callback to diasporic trauma, underscoring its correlation to this element of fantasy correlates to diasporic trauma.

Importantly, Balaguer is an agent of Caribbean diasporic trauma not only as the subsequent of the Trujillato, but also in his own active participation in (attempting) to write the historical record. Just as Díaz problematizes the idea of a "true" history, demonstrating through Abelard's lost manuscript its impossibility, Balaguer obstructs his own attempts:

Considered our national "genius," Joaquin Balaguer was a Negrophobe, an apologist to genocide, an election thief, and a killer of people who wrote better than himself, famously ordering the death of journalist Orlando Martínez. Later, when he wrote his memoirs, he claimed he knew who had done the foul deed (not him, of course) and left a blank page, a *página en blanco*, in the text to be filled in with the truth upon his death. (Can you say *impunity*?) Balaguer died in 2002. The *página* is still *blanca*. (Díaz 90)

This literal blank page effectively erases a portion of Dominican history, and as the final sentence notes, *remains* blank even decades after Balaguer's death. His *página en blanco* was "to be filled in with the truth," and its blankness is the physical manifestation of the *absence* of truth in the Dominican Republic's history. For Díaz, there is no delineation between fact and fiction in *Oscar Wao* or in his estimation of the Dominican Republic as native land; in order to craft a novel that deals with diasporic inheritance, fantasy and magic must be infused. The recurrence of the *página en blanco* throughout the text functions both literally and metaphorically: Abelard's

book is destroyed and Balaguer's memoir remains unfinished, but the *página en blanco* also symbolizes fantasy's incursion into reality as history is dispossessed of truth.

Both versions of the *página en blanco* coalesce in Oscar's own writings. His obsession with Trujillo as an alien figure carries over into his own excavation of colonial inheritance in the novel; just after his death, Lola receives a package in the mail, which includes "a long letter to Lola, the last thing he wrote, apparently, before he was killed" (Díaz 333). Yunió recounts:

In that letter, he talked about his investigations and the new book he was writing, a book that he was sending under another cover. Told her to watch out for a second package. This contains everything I've written on this journey. Everything I think you will need. You'll understand when you read my conclusions. (It's the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA.) Only problem was the fucking thing never arrived! (333-334)

The failed delivery is inevitable, of course. Just as Abelard and Balaguer are incapable of authoring a "true" account of the Trujillato and of Martínez's death respectively, Oscar's attempt to pen his *family's* history is equally thwarted. The manuscript is "the cure to what ails us," he notes, implying that its contents will bandage the wounds of multigenerational diasporic trauma abounding throughout the text; however, that answer would be a direct paradox to the struggle of Caribbean diasporic subjects and to the very nature of the Dominican Republic as a site of inheritance. For Abelard and Oscar, writing their own history (of the Trujillato and thereby their family) is an attempt at reckoning with the diasporic trauma at work; the fact that their works become *páginas en blanco* precisely illustrates the ways in which the "inheritance" of the Dominican Republic is both colonial *and* fantastical.

The formulation of the native land through the lens of the spectacular opens up new avenues to explore this multifaceted, multigenerational inheritance at work in *Oscar Wao*. It takes unique shape in the figure of the Mongoose, an otherworldly entity that recurs selectively

throughout the text. The Watcher's brief history exposes its correlative relationship to the notions of the native land, colonial and supernatural inheritance, and the Dominican Republic specifically:

The Mongoose, one of the greatest unstable particles of the Universe and also one of its greatest travelers. **Accompanied humanity out of Africa** and after a long furlough in India jumped ship to the other India, a.k.a. the Caribbean. Since its earliest appearance in the written record – 675 B.C.E., in a nameless scribe's letter to Ashurbanipal's father, Esarhaddon – the Mongoose has proven itself to be **an enemy of kingly chariots, chains, and hierarchies**. Believed to be an ally of Man. Many Watchers suspect that **the Mongoose arrived to our world from another**, but to date no evidence of such a migration has been unearthed. (Díaz 151, emphasis added)

As “one of the greatest unstable particles of the Universe,” the Mongoose is a fantastical being situated within a distinctly non-Western mythological tradition. Its alignment with the forced migration of enslaved Africans as well as the Caribbean intrinsically connects it to the diasporic trauma examined throughout the novel; at the same time, however, the Watcher makes clear that “the Mongoose arrived to our world from another” and is not an exclusively historical entity. Throughout *Oscar Wao*, the Mongoose appears at moments of near-death and shifts the characters into new life; Díaz thereby positions the Mongoose as an instigator of a new layer of the hybridized fantastical and colonial inheritance.

The Mongoose, as a “Numinous Being,” possesses an authority fully rooted in the *future* as opposed to the past (Díaz 223). Díaz's complications of “truth” in the novel reappear in the Mongoose's first mention, with the Watcher prefacing, “Whether what follows was a figment of Beli's wracked imagination or something else altogether I cannot say. Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco” (149). Given the importance of the página en blanco to the construction of a bridged magical and colonial inheritance, the Mongoose's entrance into the novel is afforded that same importance. Where the página en blanco is symbolic of the past,

however, the Mongoose is rooted in the future, demonstrated in its first interaction with Beli after her assault in the canefields: “*You have to rise*. My baby, Beli wept. *Mi hijo precioso. Hypatia, your baby is dead*. No, no, no, no, no. It pulled at her unbroken arm. *You have to rise now or you’ll never have the son or the daughter*. What son? she wailed. What daughter? *The ones who await*” (149). As one of the Universe’s “greatest travelers,” the Mongoose is able to straddle continents as it does centuries, which explains its ability to exist both as a savior to the enslaved as well as a prophet to the de Leóns. The Mongoose then leads Beli out of the cane: “The cane didn’t want her to leave, of course; it slashed at her palms, jabbed into her flank and clawed her thighs, and its sweet stench clogged her throat” (150). The cane, emblematic of the past and the inheritance of her enslaved ancestors, attempts to restrict and contain Beli. Counteracting this force, the Mongoose guides her out, leading her to safety and back into “the open world of life” and the present (150). The Mongoose acts as the arbiter of rebirth in the wake of near-death.

As a figure of new life as well as the multigenerational inheritance of enslavement and colonization, the Mongoose reappears once more: to Oscar as he is about to commit suicide.

From what he would later recall, he stood on that bridge for a good long time. Watching the streaking lights of the traffic below. Reviewing his miserable life. Wishing he’d been born in a different body. Regretting all the books he would never write. Maybe trying to get himself to reconsider. And then the 4:12 express to Washington blew in the distance. By then he was barely able to stand. Closed his eyes (or maybe he didn’t) and when he opened them there was something straight out of Ursula Le Guin standing by his side. **Later, when he would describe it, he would call it the Golden Mongoose**, but even he knew that wasn’t what it was... They stared at each other – it serene as a Buddhist, he in total disbelief – and then the whistle blew again and his eyes snapped open (or closed) and it was gone. (Diaz 190)

Yunior’s uncertainty about the exact unfolding events, demonstrated in his refrains that Oscar “[c]losed his eyes (or maybe he didn’t),” and then again that “his eyes snapped open (or closed),”

echo Beli's interaction with the Mongoose. The fallibility of truth is, for Díaz, a distinct quality of the blended inheritance of native land and fantasy. Its recurrence in these moments of the text signals the Mongoose's own relationship to that inheritance, and the cruciality of embracing a form of mythology that does not rely on explicit "fact" or "fiction." In *Oscar Wao*, reality and history become suffused with the supernatural in order to excavate diasporic trauma; they do not exist tangentially.

It is fitting that the connecting thread for the supernatural phenomena interspersed throughout *Oscar Wao* is rooted in the dreamscape. Just as dreams play a pivotal role in Caruth and Forter's articulations of trauma for its victims, the characters in *Oscar Wao* similarly reproduce their traumatic events – whether personal or diasporic – through their dreams. As productions of the subconscious, dreams are not explicitly true nor are they always grounded in "reality" as we understand it; they perfectly encapsulate Díaz's contestation of truth that percolates throughout the novel. He centers the dreams throughout the novel, allowing them to serve as crucial storytellers for the narrative; in so doing, Díaz effectively decimates the restrictive notions of history and legitimacy by grounding *Oscar Wao* in the decidedly fictive. The iterations of the supernatural and the diasporic through the images of the Mongoose, the páginas en blanco, and the canefields feature prominently within the dreamscape, and it therefore serves as the crux for the blended colonial and fantastical inheritance of the novel.

In *Oscar Wao*, dreams are a space for reckoning. For Oscar himself, he begins to have *the* dreams about the native land immediately following his own assault in the canefields:

In that time [he was out] he had the impression of having the most fantastic series of dreams, though by the time he had his first meal, a caldo de pollo, he could not, alas, remember them. All that remained was **the image of an Aslan-like figure with golden eyes** who kept trying to speak to him but Oscar couldn't hear a word above the blare of the merengue coming from the neighbor's house.

Only later, during his last days, would he actually remember one of those dreams. An old man was standing before him in a ruined bailey, holding up a book for him to read. The old man had a mask on. It took a while for Oscar's eyes to focus, but then he saw the book was blank.

**The book is blank.** Those were the words La Inca's servant heard him say just before he broke through **the plane of the unconsciousness and into the universe of the Real.** (Díaz 302, emphasis added) The delineation between the dreamscape and "the universe of the Real" concretizes the idea that dreams are a space of *alternate* reality; of course, the very images of this dream are equally present in the supposed "Real" world, demonstrating once more Díaz's elimination of those constructs. The "Aslan-like figure with golden eyes" calls back to the Mongoose, which is described as having "golden lion eyes," while the literal blank book is a manifestation of the *página en blanco* (149). The dream acts as a means of inducting Oscar into the diasporic legacy of the Dominican Republic, for in its aftermath Oscar begins to consider "that the family curse he'd heard about his whole life might actually be *true*" (303). Despite their intrinsically unreal nature, Oscar's dreams are the space in which he begins to contemplate the "truth" about his family's history, curse, and inheritance in the Dominican Republic; they become, in this moment, more "real" than the actual history itself.

The dreams are not only a site of inheritance for Oscar, but also for the other diasporic characters in the text. Despite the fact that Yuniór is not a blood relative of the de Leóns and is therefore excluded from the familial inheritance, his role as the narrator of *Oscar Wao* signifies his importance to the family and to its own interrogation of the native land. This is concretized in the final moments of the novel, in which Yuniór reveals his own experience with the dreamscape:

About five years after he died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We're in some kind of ruined bailey that's filled to the rim with old dusty books. He's standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like, wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the

eye-holes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. **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. (325, emphasis added)

The dreams are direct parallels, but rather than being visited by a stranger, *Oscar* becomes the benefactor of inheritance for Yuniór. Oscar is implicated in the interminability of the colonial and fantastical inheritance of the Dominican Republic; his own, newfound inheritance is the duty of passing it another who will continue to carry it. Despite Yuniór's attempts to flee Oscar and thereby escape the burden of the Dominican Republic's legacy, he discovers, as Lola notes, "the only way out is in." The moment in which the book is seen to be blank signifies his acceptance of his new path, just as it did for Oscar, and Yuniór becomes the new inheritor of the native land.

In the penultimate chapter to the novel, Yuniór claims, "It's almost over. Almost done" (Díaz 329). The story, of course, never *truly* ends. The past remains as fully entrenched in the future as it does in the present, demonstrated in the appearance of Lola's daughter as the "next generation" at the conclusion of the novel. Importantly, as well, the circularity of time and the persistence of the native land upon the present are framed within a mythical context: "But on a string around her neck: three azabaches: the one that Oscar wore as a baby, the one that Lola wore as a baby, and the one that Beli was given by La Inca upon reaching Sanctuary. Powerful elder magic. Three barrier shields against the Eye. Backed by a six-mile plinth of prayer" (329). Isis, Lola's daughter, is protected not only by "magic," but distinctively "*elder*" magic; she is tied to her family's inheritance even before "the Circle... fail[s]." The mythology of the Dominican Republic entrenches her within that very diasporic history, signaling, one final time, the ways in which diasporic trauma and fantasy need one another to survive.

## Conclusion

Diasporic trauma is a complicated experience, and as such its renderings in literature and theory are equally so. *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* demonstrates how there is rarely one clear-cut way to represent the Caribbean diaspora, and emphasizes the importance of privileging what Brah terms “a *confluence of narratives*” (183). It is impossible, however, to fully unravel the import of trauma to *Oscar Wao* without considering the recent controversy surrounding its author. In 2017, Ronan Farrow published a piece in *The New Yorker* exposing Harvey Weinstein’s history of sexual abuse, spanning from the 1990s to 2015. In the aftermath, Alyssa Milano tweeted asking women who had also experienced sexual abuse in some way to tweet “#MeToo,” inadvertently popularizing a movement started by Tarana Burke in 2006 to support survivors of and to end sexual violence. Following the Weinstein allegations, women came forward in droves, and men in power from the entertainment industry, athletics, and in politics were faced with newfound retaliation to decades of misconduct.

In April of 2018, Junot Díaz published his own article in *The New Yorker*, entitled “The Silence: The Legacy of Childhood Trauma.” In it, Díaz addresses an unnamed person from a book signing in Amherst, years before: “I assumed you were going to ask me to read a manuscript or help you find an agent, but instead you asked me about the sexual abuse alluded to in my books. You asked, quietly, if it had happened to me.” He goes on:

I know this is years too late, but I’m sorry I didn’t answer you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth. I’m sorry for you, and I’m sorry for me. We both could have used that truth, I’m thinking. It could have saved me (and maybe you) from so much. But I was afraid. I’m still afraid – my fear like continents and the ocean between – but I’m going to speak anyway, because, as Audre Lord has taught us, my silence will not protect me... **Yes, it happened to me.** (emphasis added)

Díaz's own experience with sexual violence occurred when he was eight years old. Repeatedly raped "[b]y a grownup that [he] truly trusted," his adolescence was marred by trauma and his refusal to get "any kind of help, any kind of therapy" or even to tell anyone of what he experienced. He turned to alcohol and drugs, to women, to anything that would allow him to remain "behind the mask" and in denial of his childhood abuse.

Díaz's story is important to an excavation of trauma in *Oscar Wao* not only because he is the text's author. Throughout the essay, Díaz establishes *Oscar Wao* as the consequence of his sexual abuse, as a form of autobiographical reckoning (or an imagining of "what could have been"). There is a piece of himself injected into each and every character: like Yuniór, Lola, and Oscar his alma mater is also Rutgers; like Oscar, he fell for women headfirst and unflaggingly to the point of attempting suicide after a rejection; but like Yuniór, he was unable to truly form an intimate bond, remain faithful, or be honest. He writes that in *Oscar Wao*, "I gave my narrator, Yuniór, a love supreme named Lola, because in my real life I had a love supreme named Y—." As Yuniór and Lola fell apart, however, so did Díaz and Y—. He quotes a section from *Oscar Wao*:

Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that we would be in bed together like the old times, with the fan on, the smoke from our weed drifting above us, and I'd finally try to say the words that could have saved us.

But before I can shape the vowels I wake up. My face is wet, and that's how you know it's never going to come true.

Never, ever. (Díaz 327)

The silence between Yuniór and Lola – the three words that he needed to say to keep them together – signifies the same silence Díaz experiences throughout his life. It is heavily implied that Yuniór, too, was the victim of childhood sexual abuse; although Díaz envisioned Yuniór as "a young Dominican man who, unlike me, had been only a little molested." Regardless, the

implication of sexual trauma at play here is juxtaposed directly alongside the overt sexual abuses experienced by both Lola and Beli within the novel. “Afro-Latinx brothers are viewed by society as always already sexual perils,” Díaz notes, therefore blinding society to the fact “that Afro-Latinx brothers are often sexually *imperiled*.” The three words Yunió needed to say, if interpreted as the same three words Díaz wished he could have verbalized, would be an admittance of his abuse; stating his truth would have allowed for healing and perhaps even for love.

But Díaz’s story was not limited merely to his own pain. Within the essay, he notes that as he was struggling to come to terms with his abuse, he was also “hurting other people in the process.” Not long after *The New Yorker* published the piece, several women came forward to accuse Díaz of sexual misconduct of his own: Zinzi Clemmons, a writer, posted on Twitter, explaining that as a graduate student at Columbia University, she invited Díaz “to speak to a workshop,” which “he used... as an opportunity to corner and forcibly kiss” her; Alisa Valdes discussed her own experiences of mistreatment by Díaz, and said that “she was castigated after she spoke out more than 10 years ago” regarding it in a blog post which has since been deleted (Phillips). Many argued that Díaz’s decision to publish his story of sexual abuse was a way to “get ahead” of the controversy and “explain” the misconduct allegations he anticipated; MIT, where Díaz is a professor, conducted an investigation and cleared Díaz to continue teaching.

This is the risk involved working with a text the other of which is very much alive. In the aftermath of his essay and the ensuing controversies, the question becomes: how can this novel continue to be taught in a way that separates the art from the artist, without ignoring the realities of these accusations? *Oscar Wao* is a text that deals head-on with the ramifications of repeated sexual abuse, of traumas both personal and global, and of the ways in which diasporic

subjectivity frames those experiences in a very specific way. To completely erase its presence from discussions of the Caribbean diaspora, trauma, and sexual abuse is not necessarily useful; however, it is also impossible to ignore the tangible pain and anguish Díaz caused for many women, both voiced and voiceless. In order to talk about trauma in *Oscar Wao*, even within a large-scale context as this project does, it is necessary to contextualize the novel's origins and its author's history.

The importance of *Oscar Wao* as a text about trauma, Dominican masculinity, diaspora, and intimacy will continue to be seen. It remains, despite Díaz's personal controversies, a transcendent novel that provides a stellar framework for unraveling these interlocking narratives. "[L]iterature is," as Aarthi Vadde posits, "an overlooked venue for responding to the presuppositions that would relegate internationalism and global justice... to the realm of illusory pursuits" (3); that is, literature provides a foundation from which tangible social and political inquiries can and should be made. Vadde also notes that "chimeras of *literary* form," or texts that defy categorization, "are particularly useful for drawing out the artificiality and contingency of *communal* forms, and for making them more susceptible to rethinking within an incompletely knowable global landscape" (7). *Oscar Wao* does very precise and important work in this regard, for just as Díaz asserts that an interrogation of the Caribbean diaspora requires a reliance on fantasy, the text's usefulness in excavating contemporary political and social landscapes does, as well. The primacy of trauma both within the text and in Díaz's own life renders *Oscar Wao* as pertinent today as it was at its publication. As our world transforms, a continuous interrogation of the novel's relevance will remain necessary, and perhaps will proliferate new stories as Caribbean diasporic experience "is lived and re-lived, produced, reproduced and transformed through individual as well as collective memory and re-memory" (183). Nothing ever truly ends.

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