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## ABSTRACT

Haiti and the Dominican Republic are two countries located on the island of Hispaniola that also share the unfortunate experience of long-lasting dictatorships during the 20<sup>th</sup> century led by the Duvalier regime (father and son) and Rafael Trujillo respectively. While there have been several studies on memory emerging out of dictatorships within the region, comparative studies are few and comparative studies across Francophone and Hispanic contexts are fewer. This research paper explored the presentation of Collective Memory within the narrative spaces of “Bain de lune” by Haitian author Yanick Lahens and “La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao” by Dominican-American author Junot Díaz in an effort to contribute to the regional field of memory studies, narrow the distance in the domain of literary criticism across the three languages and examine the novel as a defense against “forgetting” important but traumatic Collective memories. A review of the relevant theorists on memory studies as well as a careful analysis of the literary techniques used by each author revealed that Collective Memory was employed via three major frameworks of interpretation which were identified as *Mortis memoriam* (in memory of the dead), *Sumus vox mortis* (we are the voice of the dead), and *Extremum vitae spiritum edere* (give up the ghost). This paper study advances cross-cultural memory studies as well as comparative, cross-cultural literary criticism within the region, while presenting the need for more “narrative spaces” as ways of remembrance post-dictatorship in hopes of giving a voice to those upon whom silence was imposed.

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# INTRODUCTION

## Rationale

The study of Collective Memory is an indispensable contemporary tool in efforts to resist the phenomenon that author Guy Beiner calls “social forgetting” that many societies adopt following traumatic events, such as post-dictatorial regimes. This theme aids in legitimising, understanding, and overcoming the shared traumatic memories that emerge from the post-dictatorship experience. The novels “Bain de Lune” and “La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao” were selected because the former is written by a Haitian author and the latter by a Dominican-American author. The geological proximity of Haiti and the Dominican Republic together with their cultural and linguistic differences presented an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the common theme, Collective Memory, emerging out of a similar experience of dictatorship.

## Thesis Statement

To what extent and to what end do the novels “Bain de lune” and “La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao”, serve as narrative spaces allowing for the expression of Collective Memory?

## Parameters

The research paper will focus on the theme of Collective memory in the novels “Bain de lune” by Yanick Lahens and “La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao” by Junot Díaz by examining the socio-historical context each novel is set in and the narrative techniques which were used to develop the theme.

## Aims

This research paper aims to fill not only the void of an underexplored theme in Caribbean literature, but also to contribute to the underdeveloped niche of comparative literary analysis across Francophone Caribbean literature and Spanish-speaking Caribbean literature.

## Objectives

This work will analyse and compare the narrative techniques used in the portrayal of the theme of Collective memory by the respective authors as well as briefly outline and examine the socio-historical context of the novels. This will encourage further cross-cultural literary studies as well as nurture the open discussion that is necessary for post-dictatorial societies to heal and grow.

## Methodology

This Literary study employs a hypothetical and qualitative approach through the use of a combination of secondary sources such as literary and critical essays in English, Spanish and French, and a comparative analysis of the selected texts within the theoretical framework presented in Chapter One.

## CHAPTER ONE

Emerging initially around the 1980's and first advanced by Émile Durkheim and Maurice Halbwachs as part of their studies in contemporary sociology, the term Collective memory, references the shared memories, experiences and knowledge of a social group that also shapes their identity as a collective. Collective memory, it can be said, forms part of a broader group of study of postcolonial literary studies and while, along with trauma theory, it has been an area of growing interest, there remains much to be explored of this concept within the field of literary criticism. Using a combination of the main conceptualizations of Collective memory according to some of its' leading theorists, this literature review will expand to give a broader understanding of the theme before applying this in later Chapters to the selected novels. To this end we will examine the findings of Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann, Steven Stern, and Kelli Lyon Johnson.

In his book, "La mémoire collective," Maurice Halbwachs put forward his main theories on Collective Memory, which have shaped the field ever since. In this text, he developed his arguments that memory was not a psychological but social act, emphasising that « nos souvenirs demeurent collectifs, et ils nous sont rappelés par les autres, alors même qu'il s'agit d'événements auxquels nous seuls avons été mêlés, et d'objets que nous seuls avons vus ». This undeniably social and communal depiction of memory encompasses how an act so inherently individual in its' actualisation could materialise into a collective act by a group.

Jann Assmann, added to the reflections of Maurice Halbwachs on Collective Memory in his essay, "Communicative and Cultural Memory." While Halbwachs argued that memory was a function of our social life, citing socialization and communication as key elements in the process of memory, he excluded "traditions, transmissions and transferences" as being part of the term Collective Memory. It was in response to this that Assmann sort to coin the term "communicative memory" to differentiate between Halbwachs's understanding of Collective Memory, other elements of "cultural memory" and lastly communicative memory. The latter is the term that refers to "everyday interaction and communication and, for this very reason, has only a limited time depth which normally reaches no farther back than eighty years, the time span of three interacting generations." While communicative memory is in fact a form of Collective memory, this distinction and separation of the term aids in a more precise interpretation of the theme in the novels.

For example, there is evidence of communicative memory in both selected novels. Interestingly, they both span the history of three generations of a family, which is the time span delegated to the continuation of communicative memory according to anthropologist, Jan Vansina. Yanick Lahens references communicative memory various times in the novel, *Bain de Lune*, describing it, the message communicated from one to the other, as a relay that did not weaken binding one story after the other. Similarly, after the murder of the patriarch of the family, Bonal Lafleur, the community pieced together what took place by reassembling the pieces of their narration, "D'autres affirmèrent...quelques-un jurèrent....et chacun de nous en rajouta, en rajouta..." Junot Díaz however, while his novel does span the three generations of which communicative memory is theorised to be transferable, and some of the plot is revealed by a

sharing of one character to another about an historical event, most of these truths are revealed directly through the narrative voice. However, we see the limits of communicative memory within the context of dictatorial regimes and post-dictatorship regimes, whereby individuals are censored or auto-censor themselves and no longer participate in the communal sharing and transmitting of memory. Thereby highlighting a need for more expansive study of the transmission of Collected memory within communities who have experienced erasure, coerced social forgetting and/or censorship.

For the purpose of this research paper, the term Collective Memory was considered within both a familial and national context, as it was found that the shared experiences of the dictatorial and post-dictatorial regimes was responsible for the shaping of a nation's shared identity. In the Introduction to his Trilogy, "The Memory Box of Pinochet's Chile" Steven Stern argued that "the study of memory cannot be disentangled from an account of wider political, economic, and cultural contexts," This reflection becomes significantly pertinent in consideration of the socio-historical context of the respective totalitarian regimes of François Duvalier and Rafael Trujillo in the selected novels for this research paper. Given the history of dictatorships in Latin America, over the past decades there have been several studies dedicated to the study of national memory emerging out of dictatorships that took place in Argentina, Chile, Peru, Nicaragua and others.

However, Kelli Lyon Johnson's article, "Both Sides of the Massacre: Collective Memory and Narrative on Hispaniola." focusses on the island of Hispaniola. The article expands on the theories of both Pierre Nora and Susan Crane; the former who contended that memory has an attachment to the tangible and concrete such as "lieux de mémoire" and the latter who refuted that "collective memory ultimately is located not in sites but in individuals." It is there that Johnson merges these seemingly opposing concepts and advances the notion that the narrative space and Collective Memory are connected. "By locating the collective memory...in the novel, they reconceive collective memory as existing in a shared space (the narrative) and in the individual (the narrator/s)." The metamorphose of the intangible into the tangible, the abstract into concrete creates a "site for memory belonging to the people who suffered under Trujillo's regime." Although this reflection references different authors from that of this study, the reflection is equally appropriate. It is this notion of the narrative form as a shared space allowing for the unravelling of a nation's Collective Memory that this paper seeks to explore.

The study of Collective Memory is as vast and varied as the world's population. With consideration of the social nature of memory, according to Halbwachs, within the context of societies whose history of dictatorship has limited their capacity for communicative memory, this paper will explore the presentation of Collective Memory via the narrative space of novels "Bain de Lune" by Yanick Lahens and "La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao" by Junot Díaz.

## CHAPTER TWO

This Chapter aims to analyse the presentation of the theme of Collective Memory within the selected texts, “Bain de Lune” by Yanick Lahens and “La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao” by Junot Díaz. The analysis will entail a brief orientation into the plots and historical context of each respective novel, followed by a discussion of the dominant literary techniques used to develop the theme namely, narrative voice, flashbacks and narrative style, parallel storylines and agency.

It is indispensable to the analysis of the texts that the historical context be taken into consideration. The first novel, “Bain de Lune” is written by Haitian author Yanick Lahens. The novel is set in the rural villages of Haiti during 1960 just as the regime of François Duvalier was being moulded into the dictatorship that ravaged the island for the duration of the reign of “Papa Doc” and later that of his son, totalling some 29 years of dictatorship before Jean-Claude Duvalier was overthrown. The plot opens with a lost Cétoute Olmène Thérèse, who reflects on the life of her ancestors two generations before, specifically that of her grandmother Olmène who as a young peasant girl was impregnated by the village Don and later forced to flee her village after the Don commits a murder. The novel follows the breakdown of her family structure as the Duvalier regime descends the country into years of weaponised trauma and the Tonton Macoute, special military arm of Duvalier carded with the sole purpose of suppressing opposition and maintaining his power, welcomes her brothers into their ranks. After the fall of the regime Tertulien who had aligned himself with the regime escapes into the Dominican Republic and Cétoute eventually is able to return to Anse Bleue after encountering Tertulien’s grandson.

On the other hand, Junot Díaz’s novel, “La breve y maravillosa vida de Óscar Wao” is set on the other side of Haiti, in the Dominican Republic and interchanges between the small town Baní in the Dominican Republic and the United States. The plot follows the journey of the siblings Óscar and Lola in the United States while simultaneously recounting the history of their mother and her parents. The novel flashbacks as far back as 1944 to recount the great fall of their once wealthy, esteemed maternal grandparents and how, Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molino, dictator between 1930 until his assassination in 1961, had been directly and indirectly responsible for the loss of all their wealth, the death of their parents and the inherent aggressive violence of their mother. The plot then traces Óscar’s journey, subsequent affair with a prostitute after returning to the Dominican Republic and untimely death after one of her jealous clients murder him. During his time on the island Óscar was able to assemble parts of his family’s history and his writings are turned into a novel by the narrator, Yunior, and given to his niece.

One of the major points of comparison of these texts and one that renders them distinct within their genres is the use of the narrative voice. In the case of Yanick Lahens she selected three narrators; that of a first-person narrator Cétoute Olmène Thérèse, written in italics and who opens the novel, that of the principal third-person omniscient narrator and lastly that of the first-person collective narrator, “we”. Lahens employs a fluidity during the novel between the third-person omniscient observer and the first-person plural narrator, “we”, while the narration of Cétoute indicates that there is a break in the flashback and the narration has returned to present-day events.

The narrative voice “we” sometimes represents the Lafleur family, ancestors of Cétoute, and on other occasions represents the men and women of the village Anse Bleue where the family originated. This fluid narrative voice resonates with the theory of James E. Young of memory’s fragmented, disjointed yet “collected” nature. Additionally, the use of the “nous” or “we” narrator serves to unify seemingly separate storylines into one common Memory bank of the community Anse Bleue and other villages.

While Junot Díaz did engage a fluid narrative perspective in his novel which aided in the development of the theme Collective Memory, it differed in style to that of Lahens. Although he, unlike Lahens who separated the third-person narration and first-person narration by chapters, changed from a third-person omniscient narrator to a first-person narrator within the same chapter, it was not replicated throughout the novel. One occasion of such a transition was that of the flashback of the beginnings of the changing relationship between the main character Lola and her mother: “Y es en ese cuarto de baño donde todo empieza. Donde tú comienzas.” The events that followed were told from Lola’s perspective “Una muchacha punk. En eso me convertí.” Apart from this instance, Díaz’s novel is narrated by a third-person omniscient narrator given from the perspective of Yunior, Óscar’s college roommate. This choice of narrative voice allows insight into three generations of the family, delving into the experiences of Óscar’s mother and his grandparents. It is through this technique that we learn of his grandparents and mother’s encounters with the Trujillo dictatorship, encompassing the intertwining storylines and thereby shared Collective memory of the family, community and the generation that lived those experiences.

Additionally, another literary technique that allowed the development of the theme Collective Memory, was that of the fluidity of time in the narrative style facilitated by the use of flashbacks. Both of the novels begin with flashbacks, and the rest of the narration is characterised by a fluid spatio-temporality that interchanges between the narration of present-day and flashbacks into the history of one or two generations prior. Neither of the novels is narrated chronologically but rather the narration mirrors the way in which memories are often fragmented, dispersed and non-linear. The flashbacks also allow for both the recounting of the experiences during the respective dictatorial regimes and contrast, highlighted by the comparison of the past and present demonstrating the drastic changes that the imposition of such regimes would have provoked.

Comparably, the use of parallel storylines is another essential tool in the development of the theme of Collective Memory. In the style of a Fresco painting, Lahens and Díaz create hybrid plots, amalgamations of the memories and experiences of three generations of a family but also three generations of a nation. In the case of “Bain de Lune”, the parallel storylines allow for a subtler introduction into the evils of the Duvalier dictatorship. The multiplicity of storylines allows for a foreshadowing of events and comparisons of parallel characters, each preparing the reader for an even greater evil following that of its predecessor. One such example is that of Anastase Mésidor, whose extortion of the villagers and suspected murder of countryman Bonal Lafleur gives way to the greater evil of his son Tertulien Mésidor, whose exploitation of the countrymen includes both murder, unbridled domination and an amorío with a 16 year old peasant girl, and finally Tertulien gives way to the greatest evil of all, “l’homme qui portait un chapeau noir et d’épaisses

lunettes” who was none other than François Duvalier, president and dictator of Haiti between 1957 until his death in 1971. These multiple storylines paralleling each other reduce a nation’s traumatic, overwhelming Collective memory of dictatorship into digestible micro-narratives that make it easier for these memories to be processed. José Espericueta in his essay, “Fukú y el legado poscolonial de Occidente en La Maravillosa vida breve de Óscar Wao,” further describes Díaz’s narrative style as “una narrativa paralela en notas al pie que interrumpen la historia familiar. Estas notas universalizan el relato familiar y lo transforman en una experiencia colectiva de colonialismo y explotación que data de 1492” which references his unique style of a dual narration both in the body of the text as well as the narrator’s thoughts, often pertinent historical context, placed in footnotes of the text.

With consideration of the influence of power structures and institutions on the shaping of official memory and therefore Collective Memory, Lahens and Díaz offer this theme and their novels as a form of agency. In this regard it is important to consider the protagonists, the use of the style of narrative voice and who the authors selected as the narrative perspective. Lahens’ novel is set in Anse Bleue and Ti Pistache, rural villages of Haiti, far away from the capital, as well as Díaz’s novel begins in Baní, a respectable southern town, quiet but not well integrated with Afro-Dominicans. This focuses the novels on socio-economic parts of the nation that can often be forgotten or neglected in the media or historical records. Furthermore, Lahens empowers these villagers, whether individually as Cétoute Olmène Thérèse or collectively as a group, with the role of the narrative perspective and 16-year-old peasant girl Olmène Dorival as the protagonist. Meanwhile Díaz selects a young, socially awkward Dominican American Óscar, who contradicts so many seemingly characteristic traits of Dominican men that his heritage is not accepted by his peers as his protagonist. Díaz then places Yuniór as the narrative voice, whose apathy towards his roommate Óscar, slowly turns into sympathy and eventually into a sort of friendship. These insights into often overlooked, marginalised communities within society, whether rural villages, Afro-latino communities, women and children or immigrants allows for opportunities of agency and empowerment. Óscar we see, grows, and matures and finds his identity by connecting to his family’s history in the Dominican Republic. Meanwhile his sister Lola, charts her own path and rebels against her mother in the pursuit of her own self-realisation. Lahens gives voice and agency to peasants who previously would have been dismissed, forgotten, or erased by the wealthy leaders of the country. The authors, in using these narrative techniques have included the poor and economically vulnerable within the broader framework of the nations’ Collective Memory by giving them the voice to recount their memories and experiences.

The task of portraying the Collective Memory of a family or a nation is by no means simple as the endeavour to weave together the multiple threads of memory requires great courage, particularly within the context of post-dictatorship. Yanick Lahens and Junot Díaz undertook this task with the aid of their narrative strategies, allowing the characters as well as the readers to connect the storylines in the construction of the broader image of a shared Collective Memory.

## CHAPTER THREE

After having assessed the presentation of the theme of Collective Memory in the selected texts and having completed a comparative analysis of the literary techniques used to develop the theme by the respective authors, this chapter seeks to synthesise the broad theme of Collective Memory by using three frameworks of interpretation: *Mortis memoriam*, *Sumus vox mortis*, and *Extremum vitae spiritum edere*. These modes of interpretation allow for the two selected novels to be understood within the broader context of literature and the body of works dedicated to the study of this theme.

It was found that both the Haitian author, Yanick Lahens, as well as the Dominican-American author Junot Díaz developed the theme of Collective Memory through similar perspectives. The first of these perspectives that will be discussed in this chapter will be referred to as *Mortis memoriam*, which is a Latin expression meaning “in memory of the dead”. The careful study of the texts revealed that each author, within their respective socio-historical contexts, attempted to pay homage to and keep the memory of a forgotten group alive, for which Collective Memory was used as a tool. After the Perejil massacre, there was little physical commemoration in Haiti as no graves or memorial plaques were erected at the sites. Haitian author Edwidge Danticat expounds this particular way of remembrance by saying that “because of the lack of sites or commemoration in Haiti, we ourselves are the museums” which resonates with the theory of Susan Crane discussed in Chapter 1 that “collective memory ultimately is located not in sites but in individuals.” Ultimately however, the narrator author thereby transforms the novel into a site of memory. In his article “J’oublie, je me souviens, je rêve,” Maximilien Laroche examines the “apparent incoherencies of recalling the forgotten and remembered in the collective practices of Haitians.” He advances the paradox that « C’est donc dans le même espace que s’effectuent le geste d’oublier et celui de se souvenir. Là où est l’absence, là aussi se trouve la présence », that forgetting as it may appear can be an act of remembrance.

Examples of Collective Memory being used as a means of *Mortis memoriam* can be found throughout the novels. One such instance is the quote “se suponía que el gobierno iba a erigir una placa en memoria a los muertos de la cárcel de Nigua pero jamás lo hizo,” which references the anonymity and oblivion into which the victims of the notorious political prison, Nigua, fell into during and after the dictatorship of Trujillo. After enduring unimaginable forms of torture, the bodies of the prisoners were discarded into unmarked graves, taken to a garbage incinerator nearby or fed to the sharks in the Caribbean Sea near Caleta or Boca Chica. By including them in his text, Díaz honours the memory of the thousands of anonymous prisoners and that of their surviving families.

Similarly, the second interpretative framework through which the theme of Collective Memory is examined in the texts will be referred to as *Sumus vox mortis* which is another Latin expression meaning, “we are the voice of the dead”. One of the secondary themes in the novels is that of auto censorship and silence as evidenced by examples such as Ermancia, a character in Lahens’ novel, who “voulait même pas prononcer le nom de cette partie de l’île” after having escaped the Perejil massacre and quotes from Díaz’s novel such as “Cuando la familia habla del

asunto- que sería más o menos nunca- “. These examples demonstrate not only the auto censorship that the characters experienced but the ways in which the authors use the theme of Collective Memory, the shared experiences of their respective societies, as a method of vocalising truths. This insight becomes particularly pertinent in consideration of the events referenced, such as the Perejil massacre of 1937 alluded to in both novels, which were under-represented by historians and journalists largely due to censorship, ignorance, lost data or systematic erasure by the perpetrators. Judith Herman in her book “Trauma and Recovery” speaks of the need to help the “victim” to speak the horrifying truth of her past- to speak of the unspeakable.”. This research paper advances Collective Memory within the two novels not only as a significant method of vocalising painful pasts (by the author/narrators), or giving a voice to the censored but also giving a voice to the dead victims of the dictatorship, whose stories may never be heard due to the limitations of historians, scholars and journalists.

Additionally, this framework, *Sumus vox mortis*, also examines Collective memory in literature as a means of holding perpetrators accountable for human rights violations by recording and archiving their deeds through narrative testimony. Lahens’ novel describes how the Duvalier’s regime ambushed the capital city in September 1963, but “jamais ces événements ne firent la une des journaux,” indicating how these events would go undocumented. In this regard, it can be said that these novels form part of the sub-genre of testimonial literature whereby subjectivity and historical data combine as the author employs “records to construct fiction that addresses the past and opens up new perspectives.” According to the article, “Archival operations in post-dictatorship novels: memory and Chilean human rights records,” the value of testimony, in this instance the testimonial narrative, transcends that of the narrator and even that of the facts as its’ close relation to the judicial process transforms it “into an element of proof.”

Finally, the third perspective identified in both texts regarding the interpretation of the theme of Collective Memory will be referred to as *Extremum vitae spiritum edere*, a Latin expression which means “give up the ghost.” In the introduction to his trilogy, “The Memory Box of Pinochet’s Chile” Steve J. Stern references the “Chilean version of struggles over collective memory” by which Chileans “attempted to understand.... meaning of a great and unfinished trauma and its ethical and political implications.” This final perspective deals with the lingering effects or “ghosts” of the dictatorship experience and the ways in which Collective Memory can be used as a tool to help societies heal and progress by “giving up the ghost”. Judith Herman is among several theorists that have advanced the view that narratives of traumatic events and memories may have a “recuperative” and “empowering” quality, by which according to Smith and Watson, memory becomes a form of agency. Out of the context of societies that previously would have been forced into censorship, silence, and forgetfulness as a means of survival, the novels of Lahens and Díaz offer memory, collective memory, as an act of catharsis, defiance, and empowerment.

*Mortis memoriam*, *Sumus vox mortis*, and *Extremum vitae spiritum edere* are essentially mere frameworks of interpretation of the broader theme of Collective Memory. As we have seen, none of the elements of the narrative space can be examined without consideration of the other as they all work in tandem. The responsibility of protecting and transmitting a community’s memory

was once upon a time charged to the African griots. Now it is the contemporary authors like Lahens and Díaz who have undertaken the duty of preserving and articulating the Collective Memory.

## CONCLUSION

It was found that while the narrative spaces of the selected novels were used by the authors to explore Collective Memory during and post-dictatorship, the opportunities for communicative memory within the texts were limited due largely to censorship and auto-censorship within the novels' contexts. Furthermore, it was found to be true that the study of Collective Memory could not be removed from its political, historical and social context. However, each society's relationship and approach toward memory proved to be unique. In the case of Haiti it was found that their method of resemblance resembled that of an embodiment of memory in the human person as expressed by Susan Crane and reaffirmed by Edwidge Danticat. Moreover it was found that regardless of the social context and approach towards Collective Memory, the narrative form proved to be an effective medium for the depiction of Collective Memory in tangible means. The authors, it was found examined Collective Memory using three major interpretative frameworks; *Mortis memoriam* (in memory of the dead), *Sumus vox mortis* (we are the voice of the dead), and *Extremum vitae spiritum edere* (give up the ghost).

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