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Trauma, Memory, and the Brain: Reading Racial Stress through Neurohumanities in Ijeoma Oluo's Works

Abstract: The current research aims to investigate Ijeoma Oluo's activist discourse through the lens of Neurohumanities. The study focuses on how racial trauma operates as both a social condition and a neurological reality. Drawing on Catherine Malabou's theory of neuroplasticity from *The New Wounded*, the research employs a textual and theoretical analysis of *So You Want to Talk About Race* and *Be a Revolution* to trace the neural and emotional imprints of systemic racism. The analysis discloses that Oluo's portrayals of fatigue, hypervigilance and emotional labour mirror the neurological effects of toxic stress and chronic trauma, illustrating how racism alters fear and memory systems in the brain. At the same time, her emphasis on resilience, empathy, and collective action reflects the brain's capacity for plasticity and repair. The findings demonstrate that Oluo's works bridge the gap between activism and neuroscience, presenting racism not merely as a cultural or political phenomenon but as a neurobiological scar that shapes cognition and affect. This research contributes to Neurohumanities and trauma studies by positioning activism as a form of neural resilience, highlighting how Oluo's writing redefines social justice as both psychological recovery and collective empowerment.

Keywords: Neurohumanities; Racial Trauma; Neuroplasticity; Memory and Stress; Embodied Racism; Affective Neuroscience

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Trauma, Memory, and the Brain: Reading Racial Stress through Neurohumanities in Ijeoma Oluo's Works

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Introduction

The trauma-race-brain intersection is a point of scholarly urgency. It has left legacies that still shape generations and for which scholars have a name: This is structural racism, not simply cultural or political oppression but also embodied and neurobiological. That is what Ijeoma Oluo underscores in *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018) and *Be a Revolution* (2024): that racism exacts not only social and political costs, but incurs psycho-neurological debts. This article addresses these dimensions through Neurohumanities, an interdisciplinary scholarship that combines neuroscience with trauma studies and cultural criticism in order to know how social forces sculpt the brain. The brain is plastic and affected by the environment, as affect theorists and neuroscientists tell us (Malabou 25). In *The New Wounded*, Malabou explores the way trauma affects neural structures leaving behind traces that are biological as much as psychological. Applying this to Oluo's texts, racial trauma becomes a wound that reshapes the subjectivity and neural pathways of fear, vigilance, and memory. Racism is a neurobiological scar – an embodied archive that cannot be disassociated from cultural memory and lived experience (Cénat 680).

The framing matters for two reasons. First, it troubles those analyses of race and trauma that are limited to the cultural or social issue. By focusing on the brain and body, it shows that oppression doesn't just exist in language or culture, it actually gets built into the nervous system. Which means racism deeply affects how people think, feel, and even their overall health. (Van der Kolk 78). Second, by emphasising resiliency and recovery, trauma can damage the brain; the brain has the ability to heal and change through neuroplasticity. Malabou's idea of recovery connects with Oluo's focus on community and activism. Oluo shows that healing does not happen alone, it comes from solidarity, support and collective action. In this case, the same brain that carries wounds can also be reshaped in positive ways when people find strength in community and empowerment. The Neurohumanities thus provides a tool or discipline through which to read Oluo's activist speech. It highlights the brain's vulnerability to and resilience in inequality, reading her texts alongside neuroscience, affect theory, and trauma studies. Oluo's accounts of fatigue, hypervigilance and resilience do not seem like mere metaphors: they literally signify an embodied neurocognitive kind of being produced by racial stress (Malabou 25).

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This article begins with a consideration of the discourse on trauma, memory studies, and neurohumanities in relation to Oluo within this interdisciplinary nexus. It then pivots to Malabou's neuroplasticity as a metaphor for how trauma remakes the brain and culture. Careful readings of So You Want to Talk About Race and Be a Revolution demonstrate how Oluo narrates the neurological aspects of racial trauma while imagining resilience. The essay then closes with a question of the implications of neurohumanities for critical race studies, as Oluo's dual sense-making makes evident that the politics of race can never be separated from the biology of trauma.

Literature Review

Scholars have long studied the links between trauma, memory, and race in psychology and cultural studies, but only recently have these ideas been connected to the brain itself. To situate Oluo's works in this context, four areas are important: trauma and cultural memory, Neurohumanities, racial trauma in neuroscience, and resilience through activism and community care. Trauma and Cultural Memory: Thinkers like Caruth and Felman & Laub argue that trauma disrupts memory and identity, surfacing as symptoms rather than stories. Cultural trauma theory (Alexander et al. 15) expands this to whole communities, showing how slavery and systemic racism shape identities across generations.

Trauma Theory and Cultural Memory: Trauma studies, as pioneered by Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and Jeffrey Alexander, emphasise the disruptive impact of traumatic events on memory and subjectivity. Caruth argues that trauma resists integration into narrative memory, surfacing instead as belated symptoms and affective disturbances. In this sense, trauma is both a psychic and cultural wound that unsettles temporal continuity and personal identity. Felman and Laub, particularly in Testimony: Crises of Witnessing, highlight how trauma demands collective witnessing in order to be articulated, thereby situating memory as a site of both rupture and social responsibility.

Cultural trauma theorists extend these insights to collective experiences of violence, suggesting that racial oppression, slavery, and systemic discrimination must be considered as ongoing forms of trauma that shape identity across generations (Alexander et al 25). This framework is crucial for analysing racial trauma in Oluo's work, since she foregrounds how systemic racism is not episodic but enduring, embedding itself in cultural memory and individual lives.

Racial Trauma and Neuroscience: Recent research has increasingly documented the neurological consequences of racism. (Pieterse et al. 208) define complex racial trauma (CRT) as the cumulative effect of repeated exposure to racism, noting its similarities to complex post-traumatic stress disorder. Similarly, Williams et al. (242) highlight how vigilance and hypervigilance in response to racism predict heightened rates of depression and anxiety among adolescents. These studies show that racial stress cannot be dismissed as minor; it produces symptoms consistent with recognised trauma disorders.

Neuroscience research supports these findings by linking racial discrimination to changes in brain structure and function. For instance, Hanna demonstrates that racism-related stress alters the interoceptive network and white-matter microstructure in Black women, indicating the biological embedding of discrimination. (MacIntyre et al. 35) further show that racial stress disrupts fear circuits in the amygdala and hippocampus, reshaping memory processing and increasing susceptibility to anxiety disorders. Racial trauma symptoms are prevalent among Black postgraduate students in the UK, confirming that institutional racism leaves measurable psychological scars. Moreover, policy-focused studies argue that systemic safety threats in Black communities perpetuate a chronic state of unsafety, which functions as a neurological stressor with generational effects. This growing body of evidence underscores the neurobiological reality of racism, aligning with Oluo's insistence that racial oppression is more than a social or political construct: it is lived in the body, written into the brain, and reproduced through systemic violence.

Neurohumanities and Neuroplasticity: This field bridges neuroscience and the humanities. Malabou shows that trauma reshapes the brain's pathways, creating "new wounded" identities. Scholars like Pitts-Taylor highlight how these brain changes are tied to inequality. Oluo's writing reflects this, as she portrays fatigue, vigilance, and exhaustion as racialised, bodily conditions. Racial Trauma and Neuroscience: Studies reveal racism leaves measurable changes in the brain and body. Research shows links between racial stress and depression, anxiety, and altered brain structures (Cénat 680) Other studies confirm racism creates lasting psychological and neurological scars in schools, workplaces, and communities.

Resilience and Community: Trauma research also emphasises healing. (Van der Kolk 56) and others show resilience comes through connection, social support, and activism. Black communities often use collective practices, spirituality, and activism as healing tools (Watson-Singleton et al. 563). Oluo echoes this by framing activism as not only political but also neurological care reshaping the brain toward recovery and joy (Fredrickson 12).

Theoretical Framework

Malabou's Neuroplasticity and *The New Wounded*

Catherine Malabou's concept of neuroplasticity highlights the brain's capacity to be permanently reshaped by trauma, producing what she calls the "new wounded" (Malabou 25). These are individuals whose very subjectivity is altered not merely by psychological disturbances but by material reconfigurations of neural pathways. Such a framework resonates strongly with Ijeoma Oluo's depictions of racial oppression, where she foregrounds the embodied consequences of systemic racism rather than treating it as a purely discursive or symbolic injury.

In *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018), Oluo describes the "constant fatigue" and "exhaustion" that many people of colour carry, not because of isolated incidents, but due to the Constant racism (Oluo 165). This match aligns with Malabou's view that trauma changes how people think and feel, leaving lasting effects that can't always be solved just by talking about them. Oluo also explains how people of colour are always alert and cautious in white spaces, which connects with brain studies showing that trauma makes certain brain areas stay on high alert.

Moreover, Oluo draws attention to hyper-awareness in daily interactions, noting that racialised individuals are often "always scanning, always calculating" in predominantly white spaces (Oluo 172). This mirrors neuroscientific studies of trauma that show the amygdala and hippocampus becoming hypersensitized under chronic stress. Malabou's theory offers a philosophical bridge here: racism is not just an external pressure but an internal reconstitution of neural life, where survival requires constant readiness, thereby creating a new form of subjectivity that is inseparable from the wound.

In *Be a Revolution* (2024), Oluo expands this account by linking injury with the potential for transformation. While she does not deny the neurological scars of oppression, she emphasises that collective care and activism can create conditions for "joy, healing, and solidarity" that counterbalance fatigue (Oluo 214). This is where Malabou's neuroplasticity gains a political dimension: the same brain that absorbs harm also retains the capacity for regeneration. Oluo's insistence on activism as a site of renewal demonstrates that plasticity is not only the mark of damage but also of possibility, where new pathways of empowerment and resilience can be cultivated.

Taken together, Malabou's theory and Oluo's testimony demonstrate that racial trauma should be read as both neurological and political. The "new wounded" of racial oppression are not passive victims but dynamic subjects whose neural, emotional, and social lives testify to both the depth of harm and the capacity for reconfiguration. Oluo's works thus give lived voice and political urgency to Malabou's theoretical claim that trauma inscribes itself in the brain, making visible the embodied costs of racism while also gesturing toward pathways of repair.

Affective Neuroscience: Fear, Memory, and Stress: To complement Malabou's philosophical account, affective neuroscience provides empirical insights into how trauma affects brain function. Neuroscientists such as Joseph LeDoux and Bessel (Van der Kolk 55) have shown that trauma reorganises the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex regions responsible for fear response, memory consolidation, and executive regulation. Trauma heightens amygdala activation, producing hypervigilance and exaggerated fear responses, while impairing hippocampal functioning, which undermines coherent memory formation.

Recent studies on racial trauma extend these findings. (Williams et al. 242) demonstrate that adolescents exposed to racial discrimination show elevated vigilance and depressive symptoms, correlating with stress-related neural dysregulation. Similarly, Hanna reports that Black women

experiencing racism exhibit altered interoceptive network activity, suggesting that discrimination is embodied as a disruption of internal bodily awareness. These findings underscore Oluo's descriptions of racial stress as exhausting and ever-present: they reflect not only metaphorical fatigue but also measurable neurobiological strain.

By integrating affective neuroscience, this article situates Oluo's accounts of fatigue and emotional labour as indicators of neurological processes. When Oluo writes about the constant demand to educate others about race or to anticipate microaggressions, these experiences can be understood as chronic activation of fear circuits, producing both cognitive and affective consequences.

Methodology

The research employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology to analyse Ijeoma Oluo's activist discourse through the lens of Neurohumanities. The study's primary aim is to articulate the lived realities of racial trauma in a way that resonates with Catherine Malabou's theory of neuroplasticity and her concept of the "New Wounded". The methodology centres on close reading as the core analytical method, applied to Oluo's key works: *So You Want to Talk About Race* (2018) and *Be a Revolution* (2024). This textual analysis focuses on passages and metaphors detailing the embodied consequences of systemic racism, specifically examining Oluo's descriptions of fatigue and vigilance (e.g., being "always scanning, always calculating") to identify how racism imprints on neural and emotional structures. Furthermore, the close reading targets Oluo's emphasis on collective action, care, and solidarity to explore the regenerative potential of neuroplasticity. This textual analysis is integrated with theoretical concepts from affective neuroscience, trauma studies, and Malabou's framework, allowing the research to conceptualise racism as a neurobiological scar and activism as a form of neural resilience. The methodology thus serves to bridge critical race studies and neuroscience, defining social justice as both psychological recovery and collective empowerment

Conclusion

This study has argued that Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race* and *Be a Revolution* illustrate the neurobiological dimensions of racial trauma. By applying Catherine Malabou's theory of neuroplasticity alongside affective neuroscience and critical race theory, the analysis reveals that racism is both a cultural wound and a neurological scar. Oluo's depictions of fatigue, vigilance, and memory demonstrate how trauma is inscribed in the brain, while her emphasis on resilience and community action highlights the potential for neural reconfiguration.

The key contribution of this research lies in demonstrating how neurohumanities can bridge the gap between critical race studies and neuroscience. Oluo's works exemplify the "new wounded" shaped by systemic oppression but also point toward pathways of healing through activism and solidarity. In this way, her activist discourse offers a model of "neural activism," where political resistance becomes a practice of resilience and neurological survival simultaneously.

Oluo's works provide critical evidence for the Embodied Cost of Trauma, detailing how fatigue, hypervigilance, and emotional labour are narrative proof that chronic racial stress is inscribed in the brain, aligning with Malabou's theory that trauma reorganises neural structures, creating the "new wounded" shaped by systemic oppression. Conversely, her focus on Activism as Neural Resilience—emphasising resilience, empathy, and collective action—expands Malabou's framework by highlighting the brain's capacity for plasticity and repair, positioning solidarity as a force that fosters new pathways toward healing and empowerment. This dual focus allows Oluo's writings to successfully establish a Neurohumanities Bridge, presenting racism as a neurobiological scar that shapes cognition and affect, and offering a model of "neural activism" where political resistance becomes a simultaneous practice of resilience and neurological survival. Ultimately, this analysis underscores that dismantling systemic oppression is a crucial matter of justice and neural health.

Future scholarship could expand this framework by applying neurohumanities to other activist writers and by investigating the intersections of trauma, embodiment, and memory across different marginalised communities. Ultimately, Oluo's writings remind us that racism is not only a matter of justice but also of neural health that dismantling systemic oppression is to reconfigure not only our culture but also our brains.

Findings and Discussion:

The analysis of Ijeoma Oluo's *So You Want to Talk About Race* and *Be a Revolution* through the lens of neurohumanities yields several important findings about the relationship between racial trauma, memory, and the brain. These findings contribute to the ongoing dialogue between critical race studies and neuroscience, demonstrating that trauma must be understood as both cultural and neurobiological. Racism as Neurobiological scar Catherine Malabou's concept of the "new wounded" emphasises that trauma leaves an indelible mark on the neurological and affective structures of individuals, creating subjectivities reorganised by injury (Malabou 25). While Malabou's work is largely situated in the philosophical exploration of brain damage and trauma, Ijeoma Oluo's writings make this theoretical insight palpable by grounding it in the lived realities of systemic racism. By drawing on the embodied experiences of racial oppression, Oluo extends Malabou's framework beyond the clinic into the domain of social justice, revealing how racism functions as a neurological as well as a political injury. One of Oluo's most compelling contributions lies in her articulation of the everyday weight of racial trauma.

She observes in *So You Want to Talk About Race* that people of colour experience a "constant fatigue" and "exhaustion" not because of one singular traumatic event, but due to the repetitive, unrelenting encounters with racism (Oluo 165). Here, fatigue is not a metaphor but an embodied reality, a state of depletion produced by the continuous activation of stress responses. Malabou's notion that trauma reshapes neural architecture provides a critical lens to interpret this description: racism triggers repeated neurological stress, reconfiguring pathways of vigilance, fear, and emotional regulation. Oluo's testimony bridges philosophy and lived experience, showing that the "new wounded" are not only those struck by singular events but also those enduring the accumulative violence of systemic oppression. In another instance, Oluo remarks that racialised individuals are "always scanning, always calculating" in predominantly white spaces (Oluo 172). This persistent hyper-awareness underscores the way racism trains the brain into heightened states of vigilance. Neuroscientific research confirms this, showing how chronic trauma sensitises the amygdala and disrupts memory processing in the hippocampus (Williams et al. 242) When read through Malabou's philosophical framework, Oluo's words reveal how racism forces the body into modes of survival that alter subjectivity itself. The "new wounded" of racial oppression are not only socially marginalised but neurologically reorganised by the anticipation of harm. Yet, Oluo refuses to present racialised people as merely passive victims of trauma. In *Be a Revolution*, she insists that activism, care, and solidarity serve as counterforces to exhaustion. "The work of justice must also be the work of joy and connection," she writes, highlighting how collective struggle generates conditions for renewal (Oluo 214). This perspective expands Malabou's theory by foregrounding the political dimension of neuroplasticity: if trauma can rewire the brain in damaging ways, then community and activism can foster new pathways that support resilience and empowerment. In this sense, Oluo reframes neuroplasticity not only as a marker of injury but also as a site of possibility, where new subjectivities are cultivated through collective action.

Resilience as Neural and Cultural Plasticity

The intersection of fatigue and resilience in Oluo's writings opens new insights into the politics of trauma. Fatigue, as she describes, is not an individual weakness but a structural condition imposed by racism. By making visible this embodied cost, Oluo shifts the responsibility away from individuals and onto oppressive systems. At the same time, her insistence on community care underscores that resilience is not a purely personal achievement but a shared practice. This dual focus echoes Malabou's claim that trauma creates new modes of being; however, where Malabou stresses the imprint of injury, Oluo expands the frame to show how collective practices can redirect neuroplasticity toward healing.

Importantly, Oluo's emphasis on activism as a form of care challenges dominant models of trauma recovery that prioritise private, individualised healing. She suggests that social transformation itself is therapeutic, not just at the level of emotion but also at the level of the brain. Research in positive

psychology and trauma studies supports this, showing that joy, connection, and solidarity stimulate neural plasticity and foster (Fredrickson 10). In this light, Oluo's insistence on joy as part of justice work is not simply rhetorical but neurobiological. Her writing therefore adds a crucial dimension to Malabou's theory by demonstrating that political struggle is also a site of neural reorganisation.

Another critical dimension of Oluo's contribution lies in her attention to intergenerational impact. She notes that systemic racism embeds itself not only in individuals but also in communities across time, shaping the lives of future generations (Oluo). This resonates with cultural trauma theorists who argue that historical violence leaves enduring imprints on collective identity (Alexander et al. 15). When paired with Malabou's theory, this suggests that trauma's neurological imprint is not limited to the present moment but may be transmitted through cultural memory and embodied practices. Oluo thus extends the discussion of the "new wounded" into a broader social and temporal context, where trauma is both individually embodied and collectively inherited.

Finally, Oluo's works foreground the paradox of vulnerability and strength. While racial trauma manifests as exhaustion, vigilance, and injury, her writings also highlight the possibility of transformation. This tension reflects the dual nature of neuroplasticity: the brain's openness to injury is also its openness to renewal. By emphasising the transformative potential of activism, Oluo points toward a model of healing that is both neurological and political. Her works thus not only give narrative voice to the "new wounded" but also chart pathways of becoming otherwise.

In sum, Malabou's concept of neuroplasticity and Oluo's testimony together illuminate the profound ways in which racial trauma shapes subjectivity. Oluo's descriptions of fatigue and hypervigilance exemplify the neurological reconfiguration that Malabou theorises, while her emphasis on activism and joy expands the possibilities of neuroplasticity into the political realm. The discussion underscores that the effects of racism are not merely symbolic or discursive but materially inscribed in the brain, and that recovery cannot be separated from collective practices of justice and care. By bridging philosophy, literature, and lived experience, this analysis situates Oluo's writings as both a record of injury and a blueprint for resilience, offering a richer understanding of the politics of trauma in the contemporary moment.

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