

Feeling the Pain Down Memory Lane: On-Going Trauma in Octavia E. Butler's *Kindred*

Zita Rarastesa¹

¹Universitas Sebelas Maret Surakarta, Surakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: sweetesita@gmail.com

This paper attempts to discuss the ongoing Trauma of slavery as the collective Trauma for African American people in the US. It not only investigates the memory of Trauma experienced by the main character, Dana, in the novel *Kindred* but also describes how the author recalls the traumatic event and expresses it in the novel through a series of events the main character encountered. Although the traumatic event itself has long gone in the past, the memory of it still haunts the African American people through what Dana is going through. The narrative technique Butler uses in the novel is intriguing in that she tells the story as some time machine where the main character can go back and forth from the setting of time, the 1970s, to the 19th-century slavery era. Furthermore, Dana experienced a physical injury that was incomprehensible for people in the 1970s to see as a result of the event that happened in the 19th-century slavery era. This incident reflects the way African American people feel about slavery and the aftermath of it in the present. The traumatic event has passed, but the pain stays the same because ongoing racism against African-American people remains. The researcher selected the data from the novel *Kindred* written by Octavia E. Butler in the form of selected scenes with quotations based on trauma theory and the manifestation of traumatic psyche of the characters.

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Introduction

The discussion on trauma in literature has been circulating for some time. What are Trauma Studies? It is a relatively new area in cultural studies that first developed in the 1990s, exploring the impact of the disruptive experience of Trauma on individuals and societies and analyzing its psychological, cultural, and literary significance. The exploration of trauma in literature is not limited to a single author or a specific time period. However, 1990s marked a significant shift in the literary landscape regarding the portrayal and understanding of trauma. During this period, there was an increased focus on trauma as a central theme in literature, particularly in the aftermath of major historical

events such as World War II, the Holocaust, and the Vietnam War. While various authors contributed to the exploration of trauma in literature during the 1990s, one notable figure often associated with this theme is American author Toni Morrison with her novel "Beloved". The novel is often regarded as a seminal work in addressing the legacy of slavery and its traumatic impact on African Americans. The novel delves into the psychological and emotional repercussions of slavery, exploring how trauma can shape individual and collective identities. Trauma studies are based on Freudian studies of Hysteria in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (late 1880s and early 1890s) which later have been developed into an understanding of extreme Trauma that lies beyond the limits of language, fragments, the psyche, and breaks down meaning. Early Freudian theories claim that a traumatic hysteria develops from repressed, earlier experiences of sexual assault. It has been commonly known that Freudian theories consider any trauma one has is always rooted in problems with sexuality. Freud and Breuer (1895) emphasize that the actual event was not traumatic in itself but only in the memory of it or its remembrance. Since the original event continues to inflict harm, talking about the event and recalling it is required to understand the effects of the past and gain freedom from its symptom. Trauma Studies then involve psychological approaches together with poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and other socio-cultural theories.

Using the theories, trauma studies explore how identity and memory are affected by Trauma, the way the individual's conception of the external world and social relationships are defined by Trauma, and how trauma shapes and is shaped by language and representations; the last one is intergenerational transmission of trauma. There are two major kinds of Trauma, namely psychological trauma and cultural and collective trauma. The former is dealing with Trauma that disrupts language, and suffering is unrepresentable. Some consider the view that unrepresentability of suffering is only one of the responses to Trauma and is not its defining feature. The study on psychological trauma began with hysteria and continued to study manifestations like PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), developmental trauma disorder (in children), Trauma-related to war and terrorism. The latter refers to the social processes that occur when groups endure horrible events that forever change their group consciousness and identity, for example, mass genocides like the Holocaust, war. Cultural and Collective Trauma is also explained in Ann Kaplan's *The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, where she analyzed the impact of Trauma on individuals as well as on cultures and nations. Additionally, Michael Rothberg studies Holocaust representations in his book *Traumatic Realism*.

Talking about Trauma and its connection to Literature began with the work of Caruth's (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth (1996) asserts that in present times, Trauma has become universal and bewildering both as an experience and as a subject of study. As a result, our understanding of history also becomes more complex and conflicting. Kali Tal's *World of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Tal, 1996) also pioneered discussion on Trauma and Literature, where she reviewed hundreds of scholarly works and presented interviews with trauma survivors. Postcolonialism and Gender studies are the fields mostly impacted by Trauma Studies.

As previously mentioned, Psychological Trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies (Mambrol, 2018). One article about Trauma in Literature discusses the shared neo-slave narrative which shapes the African American identity in the later generation. In the article, Varsam (2014) explains the effect of history on the present and the continuing legacy of slavery on social ties, identity, and agency as

the focus of both novelists. Varsam contends that the violent legacy of slavery is transformed from a central marker of traumatic memory to a reference point of survival and personal and social renewal. The article illustrates that the pain of slavery in the 19th century remains centuries later in those who belong to the generation who have never experienced slavery and who have been introduced to the idea of slavery only as history.

The focus of trauma study is the formal innovations of texts, both print and media that display insights into how extreme events influence identity, the unconscious, and remembering. Trauma studies were first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian's (Fletcher, 2013) theory to develop a model of trauma that imagines an extreme experience that challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether. This model of trauma indicates that suffering is unrepresentable. Quickly following the traditional model was a more pluralistic model of trauma that suggests the assumed unspeakability of Trauma is one among many responses to an extreme event rather than its defining feature. The idea that a traumatic experience challenges the limits of language, fragments the psyche and even ruptures meaning altogether sets the initial parameters of the field and continues to impact the critical conversation even while alternative approaches displace this notion (Mambrol, 2018). Therefore, this paper attempts to investigate the way Octavia E. Butler, the novelist, depicts the re-memory as the neo-slavery narrative, which could contribute to the trauma healing process through writing about the experience.

Method

Based on Sigmund Freud's theory of Trauma, according to critics like Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004), has been oversimplified and discussed narrowly among scholars in the humanities; for a traumatic event to have a profound impact on someone, s/he must already be repressing and incubating an earlier (childhood) sexual Trauma (Morrisey, 2021). Moreover, Smelser (in Morrisey, 2021) considering the interpretation of Freud's theory limited and inadequate, developed two separate models of Trauma:

One model accounted for adult neuroses due to a traumatic event in the absence of childhood sexual trauma; the other model continued to connect neuroses to a sexual experience in childhood. According to Smelser (in Morrisey, 2021), who is also from the field of sociology, Freud's two-part concept regarding neurosis—that is, an earlier trauma must be (1) repressed and incubated prior to (2) an adult trauma leading to neurosis—has evolved into the contemporary psychoanalytic community's general acceptance that traumatic stress disorders develop in part because of the causal event, but also because there was a context in place that precipitated the event being interpreted as traumatic: "It is part of the human condition that life is a continuous struggle, in the sense that any individual is forever experiencing, defending against, capitalizing on, and coming to terms with both external and internal dangers and threats of danger (47) (Morrisey, 2021)

In addition to the connection between Trauma and Literature, one of the best-known critics who particularly uses psychoanalysis in literary analysis is Caruth, who considers the pairing of psychoanalysis and literary study is a natural one; if Freud turned to Literature to describe a traumatic experience, it is because Literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relations between knowing and not knowing to intersect that the language of Literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. (Unclaimed Experience 3) (Morrisey, 2021)

This paper attempts to investigate the way Octavia E. Butler, the novelist, depicts the re-memory as the neo-slavery narrative, which could contribute to the trauma-healing process through writing about the experience. Ted Morrisey claims that Freud turns to

Literature for there is a causal relationship between the mind of the author and the Literature they produce.

In other words, the workings of the mind—perhaps especially the neurotic mind—are reflected in a culture's Literature; by studying the Literature of times past, even past our recording of it, we can come to know the minds of the people who produced that Literature. (Morrisey, 2021)

Furthermore, Morrisey points out the relation between Freud and Literature:

First, Freud suggests a causal relationship between mental state and the sort of narrative that it produces. Second, we can draw conclusions about the mental states of people long dead by analyzing the literary record they left behind. Third, such an analysis can also yield insights into contemporary psychology. Finally, Freud is suggesting that the Literature of the past tells us about the entire cultures and not just the individual authors who produced the works. (Morrisey, 2021)

The novel under discussion is Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred*. By looking at the way, the author is telling the story as a way to remember the collective Trauma of slavery and handling the traumatic experience that reflects the author's idea of the efforts to heal the Trauma. It is an intriguing issue for me since the novel deals with what is called Cultural Trauma. In his book, Ron Eyerman theorizes that:

The "trauma" in question is slavery, not as an institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people. There is a difference between Trauma as it affects individuals and as a cultural process; Trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory. (Eyerman, 2003)

The main character, Dana, lives in the 1970s and does not have first-hand experience with slavery, although she read about it and understood the history of her ancestors in the United States. Since Postcolonial studies are one of the fields that Trauma Studies impact, it requires the concept of the colonizer/colonized to be inserted in the discussion. Mainly, Butler's novel *Kindred* should be treated as postcolonial work despite the resistance of being considered "former colonized" as a country, considering the colonizers stay and own the country in the present. Concerning the history of slavery, initially, African people were forced to be brought to the US as enslaved people and in the country, they were sold as non-human beings; even the enslaved people born in the country could be considered colonized. Sonya Andermahr explains in her article "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: Trauma and Postcolonialism—Introduction" that racism as a result of slavery keeps going on to the present time as Homi Bhabha claims that the impact of colonization does not end when the people become independent; the impact continues.

In particular, the experience of racism does not fit either of the "classical" forms of Trauma

Unlike structural Trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike historical Trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present" ([1], p. 32). Therefore, racially based forms of Trauma historically rooted in the global systems of slavery and colonialism pose a significant challenge to the Eurocentric model of Trauma as a single overwhelming event. (Andermahr, 2015-2016)

The analysis of *Kindred* combines the theories in observing the novel and what is happening in the story. The scenes were selected to support the argument that this novel becomes the way Butler depicts and shows her reader how painful slavery is even from generation to generation; the pain of slavery is not left behind as simply history, but also

racism as the impact of slavery continues inflicting African American people in the US. This novel, in particular, was selected since it contains symbolic evidence for the trauma of slavery and interestingly depicts the trauma in both reality and fantasy, which makes this novel unique. The data were collected based on their connection with the trauma. Any quotations illustrating the evidence of the trauma and behavior that was the manifestation of the traumatic psyche were selected. Furthermore, using the theories the quotations were analyzed and discussed to meet the purpose of the research.

Results and Discussion

The novel begins with a shocking prologue: "I lost an arm on my last trip home. My left arm" (Butler, 2018). Further in the prologue, Dana's white husband, Kevin, said:

Data 1

I said I was in the bedroom when I heard you scream. I ran to the living room to see what was wrong, and I found you struggling to free your arm from what seemed to be a hole in the wall. I went to help you. That was when I realized your arm wasn't just stuck, but that, somehow, it had been crushed right into the wall. (Butler, 2018)

This incident might be, for Dana, as shocking and as real as the death of Trevyon Martin and George Floyd in the 21st-century setting; since Butler creates the reflection of the African American people's Trauma that remains in the contemporary setting, we can have those incidents side by side. Slavery which ended a long time ago still has an impact on today's incidents of racism. The death of Trevyon Martin and George Floyd was proof that African Americans should still be traumatized by slavery, which gave birth to what is known to be "racism" long after slavery was over. The "slave master" mentality in the mind of racist white people continues to the present time, causing black people to keep thinking that they live surrounded by people who consistently find fault with them because of the color of their skin. Slavery does not seem to be a shared history for all Americans, but it is the black people's history to make them aware that the colonization is not over yet. Knowing that it is understandable that the Trauma is still inflicting black people; although they are not chained physically yet, it feels like they are chained culturally and psychologically.

Involving time travel, *Kindred* has been categorized as science fiction which Butler herself denied in her interview:

Data 2

BUTLER: Kindred is fantasy. I mean, literally, it is fantasy. There's no science in Kindred. I mean, if I was told that something was science fiction, I would expect to find something dealing with science in it. For instance, Wild Seed is more science fiction than most people realize. The main character is dealing with medical science, but she just doesn't know how to talk about it. With Kindred, there's absolutely no science involved. Not even the time travel. I don't use a time machine or anything like that. Time travel is just a device for getting the character back to confront where she came from. (Kenan, 1991)

This time travel is the way Butler gives her character to go back to the very incident that leaves a scar on the later generation of African American people. This time travel is the collective memory the African American people gained from the history of slavery. The explanation Kevin gave the police about how Dana lost her arm was the most possible to get accepted in the present time. As the pain of the memory of a traumatic experience

comes from the experience that has already passed when it is articulated, it is not easily accepted.

The discussion in this paper involves several aspects of Trauma in psychological theories, which are then found in the scenes of this novel.

First of all, Butler depicts the involuntary remembrance of the traumatic event experienced by the survivor of Trauma by having the main character, Dana, magically transported from 1976 to the 1800s. Confused about what had happened to her, she felt sick and disoriented since she was unpacking the boxes in her new apartment with her husband when suddenly the sight of her apartment floor and the bookshelf became blurry, even though she could still see her husband approaching her asking her if she was all right then everything vanished. All of a sudden, she appeared in an open space under a tree, and she heard someone screaming, asking for help in the river:

Data 3

I heard him move toward me and saw a blur of gray pants and a blue shirt.

Then, just before he would have touched me, he vanished.

The house, the books, everything vanished. Suddenly, I was outdoors,

kneeling on the ground beneath trees. I was in a green place. I was at the edge of the woods. Before me, I was a wide tranquil river, and near the middle of that river was a child splashing, screaming.

Drowning! (Butler, 2018, p. 6)

The above incident is the first time Dana was transported to the 1800s Antebellum South, which then was followed by a series of incidents to go back and forth from the present to the past and vice versa. The boy who was drowning turned out to be Dana's great, great, great grandfather named Rufus Weylin. One significant thing to observe here is the moments when Dana got transported. The transport happened every time Rufus's life was in danger, then Dana was summoned to the 1800s, while whenever she was in danger in the 1800s setting, she was suddenly transported back to the 1970s. This leads to the next aspect of the trauma discussion.

The second aspect of Trauma is fear or threat, which Jacek Debiec explains as the trigger of the memory of the traumatic experience:

Data 4

Conscious memories of Trauma are encoded by various sites in the brain which process different aspects of experience. Explicit memories of Trauma reflect the terror of the original experience and may be less organized than memories acquired under less stressful conditions. Typically they're more vivid, more intense, and more persistent. (Debiec, 2018)

Further, Debiec theorizes that when a trauma survivor is faced with something that reminds her/him of the traumatic experience, the spontaneous reaction is defensive. Defense responses are controlled by neural systems that human beings have inherited from our distant evolutionary ancestors. (Debiec, 2018). Interestingly enough, Butler has a way of describing how Dana feared for her life when she was not where she belonged.

In the novel, we can find that kind of threat when Dana was summoned to 1800s Maryland as Rufus' life was in danger. He was drowning. Whereas Dana suddenly vanished from the 1800s setting when Rufus' father, Mr. Weylin, pointed a gun at Dana, thinking she was hurting his son and wife:

Data 5

I heard a metallic click, and I froze, thinking I was going to be shot for saving the boy's life. I was going to die.

I tried to speak, but my voice was suddenly gone. I felt sick and dizzy. My vision blurred so badly I could not distinguish the gun or the face of the man behind it. I heard the woman speak sharply, but I was too far gone into sickness and panic to understand what she said.

Then the man, the woman, the boy, the gun all vanished. (Butler, 2018, p. 8)

It seems that fear plays a significant role in transporting Dana. The fear caused by involuntary memory that Butler makes so literal in this novel by transporting Dana goes back and forth between slavery and the post-slavery era. In real life, the incidents with Trayvon Martin and George Floyd remind African Americans that the fear is real, although slavery was over long time ago. The history of slavery produces racism toward black people. They may not be chained and whipped anymore, but the legacy of prejudice that leads to racism keeps in the mind of white people. The memory of slavery that the current generation of black people did not have first-hand experience is vividly sensed and visible in their everyday life. Even after Dana returned to her apartment, she was shaken by the experience that felt like a dream. It was so horrible and felt so real that both Dana and Kevin hoped that it was only a dream.

Data 6

Rufus and his parents had still not quite settled back and became the 'dream' Kevin wanted them to be. They stayed with me, shadowy and threatening. They made their own limbo and held me in it. I had been afraid that the dizziness might come back while I was in the shower, afraid that I would fall and crack my skull against the tile or that I would go back to that river, wherever it was, and find myself standing naked among strangers. Or would I appear somewhere else naked and totally vulnerable? (Butler, 2018, p. 12)

The scene above clearly shows the impact of Trauma on a person's life. A trauma survivor is trapped in the past when the traumatic incident happened. The reaction may be unconscious, as stated by Debiec:

Data 7

When people talk about memories, most of the time, we refer to conscious or explicit memories. However, the brain is capable of encoding distinct memories in parallel for the same event – some of them explicit and some implicit or unconscious. (Debiec, 2018)

In his experiment, Debiec found that the unconscious memory and the survivor's spontaneous reaction to it support survival. He gave an example of a child; when seeing a fast-approaching truck, she would instantly be reminded of the truck that hit her on her bike in the past. Therefore, the feeling that arises from this is called stimulus in the form of a truck approaching so fast, causing a reaction of the heart to race and skin to sweat. Researchers believe traumatic memories are a kind of conditioned threat response (Debiec, 2018). Now, what Dana felt after the first transport to the past is the fear that she might go back to the past again and scared of the possibility of not being able to come back. Feeling helpless and out of control is one of the effects of Trauma. Dana might not have the direct experience of slavery because she belongs to some generations after the

generations of her ancestors. However, it was the fear both in Dana's and Rufus' minds that triggered the transport, which in real life it is the memory of the traumatic event that was triggered by the fear of the trauma survivor.

Further to the physical reaction of the trauma survivor, in *Kindred*, since the story is told from Dana's point of view, the readers cannot only see how scared Dana was during the incidents in the 1800s setting but also experience the way Dana was trying to manage her nerve and control her fear hoping she could be in control of the unfamiliar situation to change the past. One more effect of the Trauma that is obviously seen is feeling helpless and vulnerable:

Data 8

"You're just scaring yourself."

"No!" I turned to glare at him, and he looked so worried I turned away again. I wondered bitterly whether he was worried about my vanishing again or worried about my sanity. I still didn't think he believed my story. "Maybe you're right," I said. "I hope you are. Maybe I'm just like a victim of robbery or rape or something – a victim who survives but who doesn't feel safe anymore." I shrugged. "I don't have a name for the thing that happened to me, but I don't feel safe anymore." (Butler, 2018, p. 11)

Without the physical reaction, traumatic remembrance will be hard to accept for outsiders. For the trauma survivor themselves, the remembrance feels real, yet for others looks like a hallucination. In *Kindred*, it was Kevin who found it hard to believe Dana's story, although he witnessed Dana vanish and then appear in a different part of the room in their apartment, soaked and muddy. This leads to another aspect of Trauma, which is the trust issue. Usually, it is extremely difficult for trauma survivor to share their traumatic experience with other people—outsiders. In Dana's case, it is even more complicated since Kevin, her husband, is white, something that was unacceptable in the 1800s. Butler admitted in the interview that she wanted to make Dana's life more complicated by giving her a white husband. The only "appropriate" relationship between a white man and a black woman in the 1800s was between a master and his female slave.

This issue of in/appropriateness happened as well when Dana was transported the second time when Rufus was several years older than the Rufus, whom Dana saved from drowning. The second transport is when Rufus burns the curtain of the bedroom, and Dana appears in the bedroom because Rufus starts to be in danger of the fire he caused himself. In the middle of the conversation, Rufus was telling Dana about his father, who whipped him for stealing a dollar of his father's money—the whip that was usually used to whip "nigger." When Rufus said the word "nigger" the N-word that is forbidden to call black people, there in the 1800s setting, the word was commonly used to call the slaves. Dana had the opportunity to really experience how the word "nigger" became insulting centuries later. She found it extremely difficult to hear. Moreover, looking at Rufus' confused facial expression wondering why Dana was upset by him calling his father's slaves "nigger":

Data 9

"She said I was what?" I asked.

"Just a strange nigger. She and Daddy both knew they hadn't seen you before."

"That was a hell of a thing for her to say right after she saw me save her son's life." Rufus frowned. "Why?" I stared at him.

"What's wrong?" he asked. "Why are you mad?"

"Your mother always calls black people niggers, Rufe?"

"Sure, except when she has company. Why not?" (Butler, 2018, p. 19)

*"Yeah. The kind he whips niggers and horses with."
That stopped me for a moment. "The kind he whips...who?" He
looked at me warily. "I wasn't talking about you."
I brushed that aside. "Say blacks anyway. But ...your father whips black people?"
(Butler, 2018, p. 21)*

The more Dana knew about her ancestors, the more difficult it was to swallow. She felt conflicted by the fact that her great-great-grandfather was a slave owner who was used to whipping niggers, black people, and her people. She also struggled with trust issues here since the situation was complicated. The dynamic of the white/black relationship in the 1800s, which is significantly different from that in the 1970s setting where Dana came from, made her think that she was not prepared for this kind of thing. Something she only read in the history book then she was experiencing. Besides the conflicted feeling about her great great grandfather, she later on in the story went through what slaves experienced--the pain of the whip, the insult, the helpless feeling, confined without hope of being set free from the slaves' master.

The series of incidents Dana went through reflects the process of remembrance where the survivor feels both psychological and physical pain when they go back to the past when the traumatic incident happened. Primarily when a survivor deals with a first-hand traumatic incident, all of the feelings, including the fear, will be the same. It happens because the memory in the brain is triggered, and the brain associates it with the incident that happened in the past. It is like a stimulus that when something reminds the trauma survivor of anything related to the specific traumatic incident, the memory in the brain is triggered. In Debiec's experiment, it was like a dog that produced saliva every time it heard a bell ring to signal that it was time to eat. Something expected is about to happen (Debiec, 2018). This kind of reaction is reflected in *Kindred* by having Dana involuntarily pulled to the Antebellum South in the 1800s to feel the pain of slavery so that it feels natural for the readers as well. The pain is inevitable during the remembrance of the traumatic incident. The pain of slavery then is not something Dana could simply imagine when she read a history book about the traumatic historical incident her ancestors went through. It was not only a dream and hallucination for Dana and Kevin but also became a nightmare where they have to survive to be able to come back to their reality -the 1970s setting the time they really belong.

Referring back to the prologue of the novel, when Dana loses her arm, Butler wants her readers to understand not only the pain of slavery but also the state of mind of the enslaved people who experienced slavery in the 19th century. The dilemma Dana was struggling with led her to kill Rufus, who then refused to let go of Dana's arm. Consequently, when Dana was transported back to 1976 in her apartment, her hand was stuck in the wall while the rest of her body safely appeared as it was meant to be. This loss of Dana's arm reflects the psychosomatic effect of a trauma clinically.

Conclusion

Reading *Kindred* gives the readers both nightmare and painful experiences of slavery. Butler lays out the history of slavery before the readers' eyes to witness and realize that the legacy of something as horrible as slavery continues inflicting black people in the

United States. Positioning, in this case, becomes problematic when faced with the sins of white people in the past, and for those who are living today, it is almost impossible to ignore when the legacy is visible. It is fair to say that slavery as an institution may no longer exist, but the legacy of it in the form of prejudice toward black people continues to dwell in the white people's minds. Furthermore, with Kevin as one of the protagonists in the novel, Butler seems to want to communicate with the white readers to experience how it feels to be enslaved and realize how it also feels to have the privilege of being white.

Finally, by writing about slavery, it is expected that what was previously unspeakable in the past can in some way relieve the Trauma, although it may never heal. At least by sharing through narration like this, we can still hope that one day there will never be any more Travon Martin or George Floyd, so the threat that triggers the historical Trauma will slowly vanish. A research could be conducted to further investigate how this collective trauma might be able to heal other than through narrative.

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