

## SURVIVING TRAUMA: NIYI OSUNDARE'S EXPERIENCE IN *CITY WITHOUT PEOPLE*

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### Abstract

This paper examines the representation of trauma in selected poems from *City without People*, a poetry collection by the Nigerian poet-scholar, Niyi Osundare. Drawing on trauma theory, the study explores how Osundare deploys poetry as a therapeutic medium for working through the trauma engendered by Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. The findings reveal that, contrary to the assumptions advanced by some trauma theorists who argue that traumatic experiences are inherently amnesic and unspeakable, Osundare's lived experiences as presented in the collection demonstrate the possibility of remembering and articulating trauma. The study further establishes a connection between the postmemory of slavery and the collective trauma of the Katrina experience within the Black community, showing that such memories can be engaged in a multidirectional manner. The research further demonstrates that the poetry collection offers a quintessential illustration of expressive writing deployed as scriptotherapy.

**Keywords:** Trauma, resilience, Osundare, postmemory, poetry

### Introduction

Niyi Osundare, a renowned Nigerian poet-scholar experienced a devastating and traumatic event in the wake of Hurricane Katrina that flooded the city of New Orleans in 2005, where he is a distinguished professor at the University of New Orleans. As the tide of the unruly waters ascended, Osundare's house became saturated. He and his wife sought refuge in their house's windowless attic where they almost suffocated. It took the serendipitous intervention of a kind neighbour for the couple to escape being drowned. *City without People: The Katrina Poems* is Osundare's poetry collection where he versified the painful experience brought about by Katrina. This study examines how Osundare, a Nigerian writer in the diaspora, represents traumatic experience. It further contends that racism significantly exacerbated the suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina, as experienced by the poet and other Black communities in the United States. The paper also analyses how the poet deploys his craft as a therapeutic medium for negotiating and working through trauma.

Scholars have recognised the potential of expressive art forms such as poetry to enhance mental health. In her seminal book, *Poetry and*

*Story Therapy*, Geri Chavis (2011:11) underscores the power of poetry to positively transform the human psyche through images that poems evoke. She goes ahead to enthuse that expressing ones raw emotion through writing provides the outlet for "reflection" and "putting form to the chaos of raw emotion" (2011:12). Other scholars who have argued in support of the effectiveness of creative writing and other forms of expressive writing to facilitate wellness include Suzette Henke (2000), James Pennebaker (2004), Nicholas Mazza (2017) and Bolton (1999). Henke (2000: xii) posits that reflecting psychological trauma through writing is geared towards therapy. Pennebaker argues that poetry is the most potent genre that can have positive effects on people's health due to the way it expresses "the contradictions inherent in most emotions and experiences" (2004:145). Mazza (2017) equally makes copious references to literature from ancient period to contemporary history that thematise the therapeutic power of poetry.

### Objectives

The objectives of this study are to:

- i. examine the general representation of Hurricane Katrina -induced trauma in

- selected poems in Osundare's collection of poetry;
- ii. explore the speakability and memorability of trauma depicted in selected poems in *City without People*;
  - iii. analyse how racism intensified suffering caused by Hurricane Katrina, as experienced by the poet and other Black communities in the United States;
  - iv. demonstrate how Osundare deploys poetic craft as a therapeutic medium for negotiating and working through trauma.

### Methodology

Poems from Osundare's *City without People* were purposively selected, with particular attention paid to their shared inscriptions of trauma triggered by Hurricane Katrina and to the deployment of imagery, metaphor, and other poetic devices through which trauma is articulated and remembered. Also, poems that represent the resilience and agency manifested by the poet-persona were selected. The selected poems were analysed through close textual reading, with emphasis on how trauma engendered by Katrina is articulated. Furthermore, the analytical framework was guided by Joshua Pederson's (2014) model of trauma theory.

### Theoretical framework

#### Joshua Pederson's model of trauma theory

The study draws on insights from trauma theory which shall be engaged in the critical analysis of the psychological wound versified by Osundare. Cathy Caruth, one of the influential trauma theorists was largely influenced by theories of trauma espoused by psychiatrists such as Bessel Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart, assumptions from Freudian psychoanalysis, Holocaust history and her deconstructionist leaning. In her seminal publications, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), she espouses the idea that trauma is an overwhelming experience whose painful nature makes it impossible for the mind to process because it is "an event whose force is marked by lack of registration" (1996:6). For Caruth, the implication

of this is that the victims may become amnesiac immediately after the event. If the memory returns, they are unspeakable and totally leave trauma survivors bereft of any verbal agency. However, she posits that trauma is either beyond depiction and can only be represented through complex literary language: it "must ... be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding" (1996:5). Such literary works are supposed to simulate the elusive nature of trauma through the aesthetics of aporias and gaps. Alan Gibbs (2024:92) observes that "this is a wide-reaching assertion, and one which has had lasting effects on both trauma literature and criticism in the West, imposing formulae that in turn produce a narrow-approved trauma aesthetic". For instance, Laurie Vickroy an adherent of this Caruthian leaning, avers that an "authentic trauma fiction" should employ literary forms and language that adopt the tenets of (post)modernism (2002:21). This prescriptive understanding of trauma appears to be a limiting factor in the representation of trauma and how such literary works are subjected to critical appraisal.

Alan Gibbs (2024:93) also underscores what he calls the "anti-realist" aesthetics of Carruth's "literary language", which is not only prescriptive, but also fails to reflect clinical treatment of trauma. He further argues that while therapy tends to encourage victims to adopt a realist and straightforward narrativisation of their trauma, classical trauma theory discards the realist approach as diminishing the overwhelming traumatic experience. Osundare seems to be conscious of the need to narrate the trauma of Katrina's experience in accessible and straightforward style. He is consistent with his deployment of simple language, devoid of complex literary language that simulates trauma according to Caruth's model. Osundare's accessible style of representing his traumatic memory does not undermine the "sublime" experience of trauma. This will be demonstrated in the section devoted to the analysis of the selected poems.

Joshua Pederson (2014) avers that contrary to Caruth's theory of the amnesiac and

unspeakable nature of trauma, it is describable and memorable. He counters this Caruthian assumption, basing his argument on evidence from science, specifically the one from one of Harvard's foremost psychologists, Richard McNally. In his publication, *Remembering Trauma*, Richard McNally (2003), provides evidence to support victims' ability to remember their traumatic experience and articulate such painful experiences. Based on this clinical evidence, Pederson suggests that literary theory should be amenable to the science of trauma (2014:334). In light of this, he mutes the idea of a revised trauma theory, based on McNally's assumptions. Instead of being obsessed with searching for aporia in literary works, critics should focus on the text itself. According to Pederson, this has the twin advantage of opening up broad expanses of material for interpretation, paying attention to the accessibility of traumatic memory and the possibility that victims could narrate reliable accounts of the trauma (2014: 338). The ability to express such traumatic experiences could give the victim control over the experience, lend agency and chart the course towards recovery. Literary trauma theorists should also seek out evidence of augmented narrative details and also focus on depictions of experiences that are temporarily, physically or ontologically distorted (2014:339). The study aligns with Pederson and McNally's theory that traumatic experiences can be both memorable and speakable. Osundare's ability to articulate his traumatic experience through the versification of *City without People* suggests that trauma is both describable and memorable.

In a position akin to that of Pederson, Sakiru Adebayo (2023) has argued for the significance of the memorialization and articulation of trauma towards working through the experience. In his study of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a fiction of memory, he argues that Adichie is able to work through the generational trauma of the Biafran war through her writing of the novel. His argument also borders on the significance of literary works as sites of memory to counter institutional silence and injustice. Although his focus is on the genre of prose, his insights could also be applied to poetry,

particularly in the aspect where Osundare links the inherited trauma of slavery with the pain occasioned by Katrina.

#### **Niyi Osundare: The poet and his craft**

Niyi Osundare is a Nigerian poet who can be arguably considered as the most popular poet from Nigeria. He has won coveted global literary prizes such as the Commonwealth Poetry Prize, The Noma Award, the Tchicaya UTam'si Award for African Poetry and Fonlon/Nichols Award for Excellence in Literary Creativity. Sule Egya (2017) in his book, *Niyi Osundare: A Literary Biography* enthused the possibility of Osundare clinching the highest global literary prize, the Nobel Literature Prize due to what he called his "bristling lyricism and the breath-taking artistry" in Osundare's poetic oeuvre. According to Aiyejina (1987:35), Egya (2017), Adebisi-Adelabu (2023:5), Osundare's poetic fame is also hinged on the simplicity and accessibility of his deployment of language. *City without People* is one of Osundare's collections of poetry that is largely accessible, despite the atmosphere of pain that pervades the poems.

#### **Analysis**

#### **City without people and multi-directional memory**

In this section, selected poems from Osundare's poetry are closely engaged to explore the inscriptions of trauma in them. One of the factors that aggravated the trauma of Hurricane Katrina is the racist dimension. Some of the literary works on the Katrina experience implicate racism as one of the underlying problems that compounded the anguish of the Blacks when Katrina launched its violent and deadly fangs. These Katrina memorials, including Osundare's Katrina poems could be considered as exemplifications of Rothberg's concept of "multi-directional memory". It is a model "based on recognition of the productive interplay of disparate acts of remembrance and developed in contrast to an understanding of memory as involved in a competition over scarce public resources" (Rothberg 2009:309). Here, Rothberg argues against the idea of conceptualizing collective memory under the logic of scarcity, where the remembrance of one history competes with others

for attention. In this context, Rothberg critiques a situation where the memory of one historical event diminishes the significance of others. Instead of this limitation, he proposes a model that takes into cognizance the interplay between different acts of remembrance, thereby paving the way for a more nuanced understanding of how different histories come to play and influence each other. Rather than engaging in a clash of competing for limited resources, these memories can coexist and deepen our understanding of the past and present.

In relation to the critical analysis of Osundare's work, remembrance of the Katrina experience intersects with the history of slavery. This idea helps to sharpen the critical lens on the analysis of Osundare's poem in order to engage how these two traumatic experiences intersect with each other and gain more understanding regarding how the past history of slavery influences the Katrina experience in the present. It is also significant to note that this position challenges earlier ideas by classical trauma theorists. Rothberg notes that Caruth's argument in her influential publication is not multi-directional in approach because "the model of trauma remains tied to the expectations of a privileged Western world-view and ignores insidious, everyday forms of trauma" (Rothberg, 2009:91). Apart from Osundare's *City without People*, some other literary works that reflect the racist perspective to the Katrina experience include Ward's *Salvage the Bone*, Smith's *Blood Dazzler* and *Zeitoun* by Eggers.

### **Versifying trauma in *City without People***

In *City without People*, Osundare employs vivid imagery, tone, atmosphere and other poetic devices that make it easy for the reader to have a vicarious experience of the Katrina's devastating onslaught. One does not need to search for aporias or gaps that simulate trauma, like the classical trauma theorists prescribe before having access to how the poet articulates the traumatic experience unleashed by Hurricane Katrina.

In "Katrina Anthem", there is a representation of faltering expression that suggests a partial constriction. However, it cannot be regarded as silence that deprives the poet-persona the agency of remembering and articulating the

Katrina trauma. Joshua Pederson (2014) in his revised version of trauma theory underscores the point that although there could be possibility of faltering or failing speech, literature of trauma should not necessarily be a collection of such constrictions, rather one should consider such efforts, "no matter how halting" as an attempt at reconstructing the experience and rehabilitating the survivor. Therefore, when the poet-persona writes;

Kaka Katrina, shameless witch  
Who quenched our lights and swamped  
the switch (P.14)

The seemingly difficulty the poet persona passes through articulating the word Katrina is ultimately geared towards reconstructing and communicating his painful experiences. Despite the initial constriction experienced by the speaker, the subsequent lines of the poem indicate his ability to recall vividly the multilayered traumas Katrina victims suffer. In a voice characterized by mourning and anguish, the persona articulates the painful memory of the flood:

Swollen with filth and fecal froth  
The streets decay from your toxic spell  
Blood on your hand, skulls in your fridge  
In your crowded kitchen a foul fleshfeast  
Fit for the monster and the hellish beast  
(p.14)

The poet-persona's recall of the Katrina trauma and the articulation of the same in explicit language rather than in fragmented or elusive form, challenge the Caruthian model which assumes that painful memories, such as the ones inflicted by Katrina are intrinsically unspeakable or fragmented. The representation in these lines validates Pederson's revision of trauma theory, where he emphasizes paying attention to the text itself, rather than gaps, while engaging with trauma in literature (2014:338). Also, despite the initial difficulty the narrator experiences in the articulation of trauma, the deployment of imagery that describe the suffering that appears unspeakable supports Pederson's argument that "traumatic memory is often multisensory; victims may record not only visual cues, but aural, olfactory, tactile, and gustatory ones as well" (2014:339). Therefore, the expressions, "swollen

with filth”, “fecal froth”, “streets decay”, and “foul fleshfeast” deployed in the lines are non-verbal cues that articulate the poet-persona’s deep-seated trauma. Also, the use of personification to humanize Katrina in “blood on your hand” and “skulls in your fridge” draws attention to the severity of the trauma victims experience as a result of the massive death engendered by the disaster. Through this articulation and memorialization done with “augmented details”, the persona is able to ventilate his psychological disequilibrium, an act that attempts to work through the trauma engendered by the devastation of Katrina.

“Mares of Night” is another poem that represents nightmare as one of the symptoms of trauma the poet-persona experienced. The title of the poem plays on the word nightmare. According to the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder (DSM -5), “recurrent distressing dreams in which the content and/ or effect of the dream are related to the traumatic event(s)” (2013:271) is one of the diagnostic criteria for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder as a result of exposure to traumatic events like Hurricane Katrina. The poet-persona uses vivid imagery and personification to articulate how some of the losses he suffered haunt him through nightmares, he writes:

Always, they come at night  
When darkness walks the streets...  
Effigies of remembered texts  
Bounteously bound  
Now bloated like abandoned corpses  
Pages which once smiled  
At my probing eyes  
Glued shut by dull, illiterate mold  
Metaphors dance limbless...  
They come, always, at night...  
The mares gallop at night  
Laden with bloated losses. ( P.60)

The lines above are raw emotional articulation of the trauma of loss. This is particularly painful because a number of irrecoverable ideas and artistic materials that contributed to the poet’s artistic career were consumed by the flood. It is these heavy losses that return in the form of nightmare to haunt the poet. The adverbial

“always” repeated in the lines of the poem is also worth paying close attention to. This could be interpreted as a form of repetition compulsion. This usually involves survivors of traumatic events unconsciously reenacting the experience through outlets such as traumatic nightmares as experienced by Osundare. Ernest Hartman, a psychoanalyst and sleep specialist avers that some nightmares incorporating trauma are experienced by almost every traumatized individual. He notes that such dreams dealing with trauma could continue for a few days or weeks in some individuals, while for others there could be recurrence for many years; in both cases, the repetitive post-traumatic nightmares are a hallmark of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (2001 :100-101).

Whether Osundare’s bouts of nightmares fall into the first or second category in terms of duration is uncertain, what is doubtless, however, is that the loss to Katrina triggered the “mares of night”. The repetitive cycle of the nightmares could be functional after all, as Ganteau (2020: 132) observes because the repetition and protraction are the main ingredients of “working through” trauma. Osundare’s ability to recall and articulate these traumatic losses validate McNally and Pederson’s contention that traumatic memories can be memorialized and expressed. The lines depart from Caruth’s (1996) theory, where textual lacunae and aporia are assumed to be evidence of trauma’s lack of registration in the memory and unspeakability. The poem is also crafted with multisensory imagery that foregrounds the lived experiences of survivors like Osundare who suffered from different forms of losses in the wake of the Katrina disaster.

The poet-persona establishes the link between racism and the pain brought about by Katrina. This is done by striking a connection between the traumatic experience of slavery and Hurricane Katrina. By articulating the trauma of slavery in *City without People*, Osundare evokes what scholars refer to as “postmemory” (Hirsch,2008, Adebayo,2023). This type of memory is transgenerational and it describes the structures of experience that ensure the continuity of the past in the present. Postmemory is also

characterized by the transmission of traumatic experiences from an earlier generation to their descendants. The transmission does not take place through direct communication but could manifest through narratives and attitudes that the next generation internalizes. “The generation after” usually interact with these inherited memories creatively and emotionally often leading to affects that make it appear as if they had first-hand experience of the trauma themselves. In the context of Osundare’s poetry, there is an active engagement with the postmemory of the trauma of transatlantic slavery and the Katrina experience. The poet-persona argues that there is a shadow of the slave trade era in the Katrina experience, particularly because of the aggravated pain of the Black community. Here, Hurricane Katrina activates the cultural memory of Atlantic slavery, foregrounding how racialized traumatization persists. The poem’s speaker therefore draws on communal memorial resources to articulate collective suffering in a manner that resonates with Adebisi-Adelabu’s position that writers’ ingenious deployment of available communal resources to champion the course of their societies delineate them as committed artists. In the poem, titled “Path of Thunder” which is reminiscent of Christopher Okigbo’s prophetic versification of the pre-traumatic experience of the Nigerian Civil War, the poet-persona writes:

Same old route  
Same old wind  
From Africa  
West and Wild

Howling through canefields  
And cotton-bales white with Negro sweat  
A boiling ocean unleashes its fury  
It bottom heavy with nameless bones  
So many tales yet untold  
Inhabit the lips of these unruly winds  
(p.20)

The above lines capture the brutal and inhumane experience of enslaved Africans and how they were transported in a barbaric manner to the Americas. The poet-persona argues that the path taken by the slaves is the “same old route” the victims of Katrina’s horror passed through. The

“route” is a metaphor of the traumatic link between the past and the present. The postmemory of slavery enables a better understanding and contextualization of the suffering of the Blacks as a result of Hurricane Katrina. The motif of what can be called “hydro-trauma” is foregrounded in the poem, such that one could visualize and connect the havoc water wreaked during the slavery history and the Katrina period. A harrowing instance is the grisly Zong Massacre of 1781, where the crew of the British slave ship, Zong threw overboard more than one hundred and thirty African captives when the ship’s supply started getting decimated on the way to Jamaica (Kaleena, 2023, n.p.). Another similar event was the unpleasant experience during the Igbo Landing of 1803, when seventy-five Igbo and other West African captives from modern-day Nigeria drowned themselves to avoid being enslaved (Kaleena, 2023, n.p.). These are few examples of how the traumata of the past continue in the present. In the lines “A boiling ocean unleashes its fury “// It bottom heavy with nameless bones”, the visual imagery of a very high tidal movement and a personified water filled with fury connect the middle passage experience and that of Katrina. The reference to “nameless bones” evokes the erased identities of transported African slaves whose bodies sank into the ocean and into oblivion. It points to individuals who never received justice for the brutality and dehumanization they experienced. Juxtaposing the traumatic memory of slavery with the experiences of Black communities during Hurricane Katrina enables multidirectional thinking.

As Michael Rothberg reminds us, multidirectional memory “draws attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance” (2009:11). Like the “nameless bones” whose identities and memories were submerged during the era of slavery, many Black victims of Hurricane Katrina remain unacknowledged, their suffering unrecorded and their losses insufficiently accounted for. The Atlantic Ocean (Middle Passage) and the floodwaters of New Orleans therefore serve as transhistorical memory sites and mnemonic conduits that carry historical trauma

across time. Also, slavery's memory helps us to interpret Katrina as not just a natural disaster but a continuation of racialized neglect. According to Rothberg, these multidirectional acts of remembrance have the potential to constitute "a spur to unexpected acts of empathy and solidarity" and they also provide the basis "on which people construct and act upon visions of justice" (2009:19). In this light, Osundare's poem, therefore becomes an outlet for foregrounding justice for the Black people who have suffered from untold injustices across different historical periods. In the line, "so many tales yet untold", the poet-persona hints at the prospect of uncovering different layers of suffering experienced by people of color in the past and contemporary times. By un-muting these age-long silence foisted by institutions and perpetrators, the poem's focus is in tandem with the ethical ambition of trauma studies to enhance justice, recovery and transformation.

A similar postmemory of transatlantic slavery is in the poem, *A Short Essay on Drowning* in Gbenga Adeoba's collection of poetry titled, *Exodus*. The poem versifies the Zong Massacre earlier discussed.

... he would start in the space of time  
with a glide, yielding us to the  
many scenes of rust;  
each sigh, a resurrection  
of unspeakable things.  
And he surely does it well  
leading us, in that pitch of memory,  
into the deep of each moment.  
Now, he is speaking of Zong,  
The memories, its handlers as well,  
that voyage across the Atlantic,  
Fom Accra to Black River,  
Jamaica, circa 1781...(p.28)

Despite what presents as an unspeakable and constricted attitude as a result of the trauma of the Zong massacre, the poet-persona is able to excavate the buried memories of this macabre experience in a very articulate manner. These pathos of poetic expressions and aquatic metaphors by Osundare and Adeoba function as postmemory of slavery that bring the past to the present.

In "The City", Osundare articulates the

chasm between the people and the government who are supposed to alleviate the pains of the disaster by providing emergency response and safety nests. While the people are "many, many miles below government care", a timely and responsive government's intervention would have reduced the communal trauma. The flooding and submerging of the city are expressed in the poem thus; "the city is 8 feet below sea level". Still on the argument that Osundare's reflection in the poem could be considered as a work of postmemory that links the experience of slavery with Katrina's trauma, Gbogi's interpretation of the poem connects with this study's position. He notes that: "the poet technically historicizes the sea here, using it doubly to evoke the topographical make-up of New Orleans, on the one hand and the violent accents of slavery that continue to define the city, on the other" (2024). The water motif again links the hydro-trauma of the past with the present.

"Postmortem" is a poem that evokes the memory of Black people who lost their lives in the traumatic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Here, the poet-persona, in accordance with Pederson's theory of trauma's memorability and speakability, recounts both the individual and collective suffering experienced by the Black community as a result of Katrina. The articulated traumatic memories include those of Lakeisha's grandmother who drowns "in her wheel chair"/ Narita's baby who dies when "the lake stole him from his cot", and the discovery of the skull of a Black male subject, who is "aged about 70" (p.38). The poetic character Lakeisha is depicted as a survivor of Hurricane Katrina, and the subtle presence of "lake", a body of water, within her name conveys a form of onomastic symbolism. In a Katrina poem where water serves as the agent of trauma, this linkage foregrounds a symbolic fusion between the survivor and the flood. Also, since the name Lakeisha is commonly associated with African Americans, it extends beyond the individual to suggest the collective trauma experienced by the Black community. Although the Black male subject figure referenced in the poem may be long deceased and therefore unable to experience trauma, imagining the trauma

inflicted on his loved ones by the grisly death described in the poem enables a fuller appreciation of the magnitude of suffering endured by the Black community. Through the articulation of these painful memories, the poem resists societal amnesia and prevents the experiences of Black people from being consigned to oblivion. It is important to note that, despite the different dimension of deep-seated trauma that devastate Black people, the poet-persona demonstrates strength and resilience when he declares, “Hope, thin-bodied/ Is bent/ Never broken” (p.38).

### **Stanzas of strength: The poetic path to resilience and recovery**

In his prefatory note to the collection of poetry, Osundare states unequivocally that “Katrina’s devastation is the type that cut straight to the bone, necessitating a testimony that transcends “trivial versification and verbal placebos”. This framing foregrounds one of the poet-persona’s cardinal visions: writing as a form of therapy. Given that a placebo is a pharmacological substance commonly used to provide psychological relief, Osundare suggests that expressive writing capable of such therapeutic work must rise above triviality. Consequently, articulating Katrina’s trauma through poetry functions as a strategy for working through the catastrophe’s devastation.

In “Solace”, the poet-persona reflects on the Katrina experience and views the event from a brighter and optimistic perspective:

We lost our house  
But not our home  
We lost our books  
But not our brains...  
I regret our loss  
I celebrate our LIFE (P.68)

These lines evoke individual and communal resilience in the face of the havoc wrought by the flood. The poem exemplifies what scholars describe as expressive writing, a form of writing that has been shown to have therapeutic value (Pennebaker, 2004). This form of writing is deliberately structured to enable victims of trauma and other forms of psychological disequilibrium to articulate their pain; with the ultimate goal of

promoting mental wellness. Boosting of the immune system ( Koschwanez et.al, 2013, Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glasser & Glasser 1998, Lumley, et al.2011) and positive long-term mood changes (Lepore 1997) are some other derivable benefits that expressive writing can offer. Moreover, studies by Koenig et al. (2024) and Adebisi-Adelabu (2024) demonstrate that positive emotional resources exemplified by the poet-persona equip subjects to cope with the traumatic distress engendered by catastrophes such as Hurricane Katrina. The speaker’s ability to memorialize and articulate his experiences confers agency and resilience, which enable him to “celebrate our LIFE” despite the enormity of traumatic loss. He is therefore not constrained by the victimhood and belatedness emphasized in Caruthian trauma theory; rather, his disposition supports Pederson’s position that unremembered and unspeakable trauma, “steals agency from the survivor” (2014:338).

Also, in “Enia Lasoo Mi”- People Are My Clothes and Katrina Will Not Have The Last Word”, Osundare gives the reader insights into the psychological recovery he made as a result of people’s generosity and concern for the well-being of his family. In a tone that sharply contrasts with the mournful one in the poems earlier discussed, the poet-persona in the following lines aptly foregrounds his path to recovery and healing against the odds of Katrina:

I donned my new garments  
With grateful pride, thumping my  
Well-clad nose at Katrina’s stripping catastrophe  
Babatunde’s bundle came  
From Ontario rio rio  
That generous city where once I swam  
In the lake of books and rainbow shoals...(p.77)

Here, In the midst of Katrina’s “stripping catastrophe”, Osundare finds joy in the gifts of clothes from his friends, a support that fosters his agency and resilience against the challenges posed by Katrina’s trauma. His ability to articulate this transformative path through writing validates Subrata Barman’s argument that the “act of writing is an essential tool of resistance and resilience for processing trauma and negotiating identity” (2025: 183). While trauma inherently alters identity,

Osundare, through the sublimation of his pain in writing, is able to process the psychic pain inflicted by Hurricane Katrina and actively negotiate his sense of self.

The poet-persona's response resonates with the principles of logotherapy, particularly as articulated in studies of how African women in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* employ meaning-making practices to work through the trauma of sex trafficking (Akinpelu, 2024). Osundare transforms the loss of his books to the flood into a moment of imaginative recuperation as expressed here: "...Ontario// that generous city where I once swam// In the lake of books and rainbow shoals". Rather than remaining immersed in the traumatic memory, he takes a positive, nostalgic detour. He vehemently insists that he will not be drowned by the psychological wound wrought by Katrina. This disposition resonates with Adebisi-Adelabu's (2020) position that poet-patriots, like Osundare, embody a constructive optimism regarding the potential for positive change. In the second poem cited above, he deliberately deploys the refrain "Katrina Will Not Have The Last Word". This repetition is significant, as it functions as a deliberate strategy for ventilating deep-seated trauma and underscores the transformative power of writing as an act of resistance through which the poet reclaims agency and cultivates resilience as a

survivor.

### Conclusion

This study has critically examined the ways in which Niyi Osundare processes the trauma engendered by Hurricane Katrina in *City without People*. It demonstrates that Osundare's poetry foregrounds the accessibility of memory and the articulation of trauma, thereby departing from the Caruthian emphasis on belatedness, unspeakability, and the erosion of agency. In doing so, the study contributes to trauma theory by showing how survivors' experiences may be meaningfully represented and interpreted even under catastrophic conditions such as Hurricane Katrina.

Furthermore, the study interrogates the connection between the postmemory of slavery's anguish and the Katrina experience, illustrating how the trauma of Black communities can be engaged in a multidirectional manner across historical and cultural contexts. This multidirectional engagement expands prevailing understandings of trauma as neither temporally sealed nor historically isolated. Finally, the study highlights the negotiation of resilience and the therapeutic potential of expressive writing, as depicted in the selected poems, demonstrating how poetry functions not only as a site of trauma representation but also as a medium for working through pain.

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