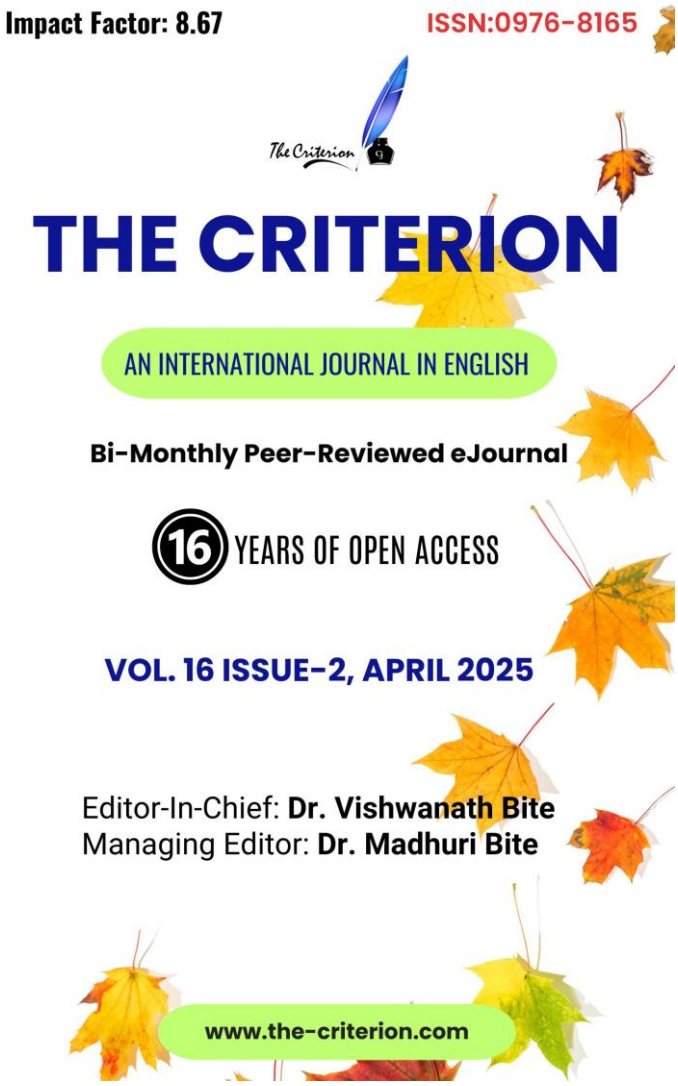

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Intergenerational Trauma and Stolen Generation: Exploring Colonial Legacies in Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* and Tony Birch's *The White Girl*

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Abstract:

This paper examines the representation of intergenerational trauma and the impact of stolen generations in Kim Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* (1999) and Tony Birch's *The White Girl* (2019), two significant works of Australian Indigenous literature. Both novels critically examine the long-lasting effects of colonial assimilation policies that aimed to erase Aboriginal identity, focusing on the psychological and cultural scars carried across generations. In *Benang: From the Heart*, Scott presents Harley Scat's journey of self-discovery as he uncovers the brutal legacy of eugenics and forced assimilation, revealing how state-sanctioned efforts to" breed out the colour" inflicted deep domestic and cultural trauma. In contrast, Tony Birch's *The White Girl* centres on Odette Brown's determination to protect her granddaughter, Sissy, from government authorities during the 1960s, emphasizing the everyday resistance of Indigenous women against systemic oppression. Through fragmented narratives, archival materials, and intimate storytelling, both authors highlight the personal and collective struggles of Aboriginal

families affected by forced removals. This paper argues that Scott and Birch not only document the enduring pain of the Stolen Generations but also emphasize the resilience of Indigenous communities in reclaiming identity, history, and agency in the face of ongoing colonial legacies.

Keywords: Intergenerational Trauma, Aboriginal Identity, Stolen Generation, Emotional Scarring, Historical Violence, Family Relationship.

Intergenerational trauma refers to the transmission of trauma that is being passed down from one generation to the next. This type of trauma occurs when the repercussions of distressing experiences such as abuse, violence, war, genocide, colonization, or natural disasters affect families and communities, thereby impacting future generations. Intergenerational trauma represents a significant burden for many individuals and communities in Australia, illustrating the psychological and physiological effects that can span several generations. While anyone can experience intergenerational trauma, it is particularly pronounced among Indigenous peoples mostly those affected by the Stolen Generation. The profound effects of intergenerational trauma and the tragic legacy of the Stolen Generations are prominent themes in Indigenous Australian literature. Understanding the concept of intergenerational trauma can be challenging. Primarily, it affects the children, grandchildren, and subsequent generations of the Stolen Generations, influencing the well-being of future generations through the struggles and sufferings of their predecessors. Policies aimed at the protection of Aboriginal people, which resulted in the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families and the erosion of their cultural identity, have inflicted intergenerational trauma on Indigenous Australians.

Parents who have experienced trauma may struggle to manage everyday stress and pressure, which can hinder their children from learning how to cope with stress themselves. Parents with post-traumatic stress disorder may find it challenging to model independence, self-soothing techniques, and emotional regulation. As a result, their children may feel unbalanced when

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faced with adversity in their own lives. The persistent experience of pain is at the core of intergenerational trauma.

The term "Stolen Generations" refers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in Australia who were forcibly removed from their families by government officials, churches, and welfare organizations from the late 19th century until the 1970s. These children were placed in institutions or foster homes with the intent of assimilating them into white Australian society. This tragic period in Australia's history has had severe consequences for Indigenous communities, resulting in intergenerational trauma, cultural disconnection, and ongoing socio-economic challenges.

The Stolen Generation represent a profoundly painful chapter in Australia's history, leaving lasting impacts on Indigenous communities. Although there have been acknowledgements and government initiatives aimed at addressing this historical injustice, the repercussions of forced removals continue to affect many Indigenous Australians today. Genuine reconciliation requires ongoing efforts in education, policy reform, and enhanced support for Indigenous self-determination to heal the scars of the past and create a more equitable future. The narrative of the Stolen Generations is not merely a dark chapter in Australian history; it remains a contemporary reality that demands reflection, accountability, and action. By acknowledging past wrongs and striving for meaningful change, Australia can move towards an inclusive and equitable society that fully respects and celebrates Indigenous cultures and identities.

In Australian literature, the exploration of intergenerational trauma is a central theme in the works of authors such as Kim Scott and Tony Birch. This article argues that both Scott and Birch utilize the theme of intergenerational trauma to critique the enduring impact of colonization on Aboriginal Australians, illustrating how colonial violence, forced assimilation, and cultural erasure continue to resonate in the lives of their characters across generations. Intergenerational trauma is a focal point in two significant works: *Benang: From the Heart* by

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Kim Scott and *The White Girl* by Tony Birch. Both novels offer complex and nuanced representations of the trauma experienced by one generation and its effects on future generations. *Benang From the Heart* and *The White Girl* provide profound insights into the lasting consequences of government policies. While Scott's *Benang: From the Heart* explores the intricate connections between personal identity, cultural loss, and healing, Birch's *The White Girl* addresses the horrific outcomes of racist violence and displacement. Through these narratives, Scott and Birch encourage readers to perceive trauma in addiction as an individual experience but as a collective burden passed down through generations.

The theoretical concepts of intergenerational trauma and post-colonial theory are essential for understanding the profound effects of colonialism on Indigenous peoples, particularly in the context of Aboriginal Australians. These concepts elucidate how trauma resulting from violence, cultural erasure, and forced assimilation has been transmitted across generations, affecting the identities, relationships, and futures of descendants. Works like *Benang: From the Heart* and *The White Girl* also highlight the persistence of this trauma but also offer insights into how memory, storytelling, and cultural reclamation serve as tools for healing and resistance in post-colonial societies. These literary works invite readers to engage with the complex legacies of colonization, encouraging recognition, reconciliation, and ultimately the recovery of Indigenous identity and sovereignty.

Benang: From the Heart is a significant work by Australian Aboriginal writer Kim Scott. This semi-autobiographical novel earned the Miles Franklin Award, one of the most prestigious literary accolades in Australia, released in 1999. In this narrative, Kim Scott delves into the experiences of modern Indigenous Australians and highlights the dynamics between Indigenous and White populations. *Benang: From the Heart* by Kim Scott is a profound exploration of intergenerational trauma, particularly within Australian colonial history and its impact on Indigenous communities. The novel delves into the emotional, psychological, and

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cultural consequences of colonial violence, focusing on the forced assimilation policies that aimed to" breed out" Aboriginal identity. Colonial violence and its legacy in the novel center around Harley Scat, the protagonist and the first "successful" product of a government assimilation program. Through Harley's quest to uncover his family's suppressed history, *Benang: From the Heart* reveals the deep scars left by colonial policies that sought to erase Aboriginal culture and identity. The trauma experienced by previous generations, primarily through dispossession, forced removal, and cultural erasure, cascades down to Harley, who grapples with a fractured sense of self and belonging.

Benang: From the Heart by Kim Scott, Harley's painful awareness that his identity is not just a matter of family heritage but is determined by harmful colonial practices aimed at diminishing Indigenous identities. When Harley reflects, "much effort had gone into arriving at me," he acknowledges that his existence resulted from a calculated assimilation process, particularly the eugenic policies meant to" breed out the colour" from Aboriginal families in Australia. His grandfather, heavily invested in these practices, did not see Harley as a grandson but rather as a successful representation of this racist ideology. The phrase "a long and considered process" emphasizes the intentional and systematic nature of this situation. This was no random occurrence; it was a structured initiative to erase Indigenous identities across generations by promoting lighter-skinned descendants who could eventually integrate into white society. For Harley, this understanding is disturbing. Rather than feeling connected to his lineage, he perceives himself as a product of an experiment, lacking a genuine link to his heritage. The term conclusion is particularly unsettling, implying that, in his grandfather's mind, Harley symbolizes the final phase in a process aimed at eliminating Aboriginal bloodlines. Nonetheless, this moment also serves as a pivotal awakening for Harley. It ignites his quest to reclaim his identity, explore the concealed stories of his family, and challenge the veritable erasure his existence was meant to represent. This quote powerfully conveys the emotional and

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psychological toll of intergenerational trauma, illustrating how one's sense of self can be moulded by oppressive systems instead of organic family connections. "I understood that much effort had gone into arriving at me. At someone like me. I was intended as a product of a long and considered process which my grandfather had brought to a conclusion". (p.28). In Benang*: From the Heart*, a powerful critique of Australian colonial history, emphasizes the deep and lasting scars foisted by colonial violence on Aboriginal communities.

The novel exposes the systematic oppression, cultural erasure, and psychological harm caused by assimilation policies, particularly those aimed at creating a" whiter" Australia through eugenics and forced assimilation. Institutionalized racism and the ideology of breeding out represents some of the most confronting aspects of colonial violence in *Benang: From the Heart,* is the government's attempt to breed out the colour from Aboriginal people. This policy, rooted in scientific racism and eugenics, aimed to eradicate Aboriginal identity through controlled reproduction and forced assimilation. Harley Scat, the novel's narrator, is presented as the first" successful" product of this policy, a "white" man devoid of his Aboriginal roots. His very existence becomes a symbol of colonial violence, where his body carries the legacy of attempts to erase his cultural identity.

Benang: From the Heart, emphasizes the intentional erasure and alteration of Indigenous histories and identities through colonial actions, particularly concerning the preservation (or destruction) of historical documents. "Searching the archives, I have come across photographs of ancestors which have been withdrawn from collections, presumably because evidence of a too-dark baby has embarrassed some descendant or other." (p.97). When Harley states, I have come across photographs of ancestors which have been withdrawn from collections, and he reveals how family narratives have been selectively modified to obscure Indigenous ties. These images, once included in public or family archives, have been removed presumably because evidence of a too-dark baby has embarrassed some descendant or other. It underscores the

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shame and stigma that colonial society placed on Aboriginal heritage, where having visibly Indigenous family members was deemed unsavoury or something to concealed. The phrase "too dark baby serves as a representation of what colonial narratives sought to eradicate the undeniable presence of Indigenous lineage. The willingness of descendants to withdraw these photos demonstrates the persistent pressure to align with whiteness and distance themselves from Aboriginal identity, thus perpetuating ongoing cycles of denial and disconnection. This act of erasure is not merely but systemic, reflecting larger historical attempts to exclude Indigenous individuals from official records, where their existence was either obscured or manipulated to fit colonial interests. Harley's discovery of these concealed or censored photographs represents a crucial step toward reclaiming his family's history. It sheds light on how truths have been interred and reinforces the novel's core theme, the struggle to reconstruct a fractured identity in the face of systemic efforts to erase it. Ultimately, the quote highlights the profound scars of intergenerational trauma, where even tangible evidence of existence, such as a photograph, becomes a source of shame and suppression under the burdens of colonial legacies.

Harley's grandfather, Ern Scat, embodies colonial ideology. As a government agent and proponent of the assimilation project, Ern documents his family's genealogy with clinical detachment, treating people as subjects in a eugenic experiment. Although his work set in a frame as scientific and progressive, it is profoundly violent, severing individuals from their heritage and reducing them to mere data in a project of cultural genocide. The cultural erasure and psychological fragmentation depicted in *Benang: From the Heart* extends beyond physical acts to encompass the systematic erasure of Aboriginal culture, language, and history.

"As reluctant as I am to face it, I may be the successful end of a long line of failures.

Or is it the other way around? So..So, by way of introduction, here *I* come:

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> The first white man born." Breeding Up. In the third or fourth generation, no sign of native origin is
>
> apparent. The repetition of the boarding school process and careful breeding … after two or three
>
> generations, the advance should be so great that families should be live like the rest of the community". (p26)

The quote from *Benang: From the Heart* by Kim Scott is delivered by the main character, Harley Scat, as he contemplates his complex identity shaped by colonial assimilation tactics. When Harley remarks, as hesitant as I am to confront it, I could be the fortunate conclusion of a long series of failures. Alternatively perhaps it is the other way around; that he grapples with the painful irony of being perceived as a governmental scheme aimed at erasing Aboriginal identity. In this context, "fortunate" suggests that the assimilation process has succeeded as he has light skin and appears white. However, from both cultural and personal perspectives, this realization signifies a failure as it indicates the loss of Indigenous roots. The phrase "the first white man born" carries significant irony. Harley is not the first white man; rather, within the narrative of his family, he is the first to appear entirely integrated into white society, seemingly devoid of visible Aboriginal identity. This narrative illustrates the colonial goal of wiping out Indigenous identity through regulated breeding and cultural disconnections. However, Harley's awareness challenges this supposed "success." His ability to recognize and question his identity, and his capacity to trace his family's history of resistance and endurance counters the colonial objective of erasure. Through this reflection, Kim Scott critiques the harsh legacy of assimilation policies while underscoring the resilience of Indigenous identity, even amid systematic efforts to obliterate it.

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Harley's disconnection from his Noongar roots reflects the psychological impact of cultural erasure. He grows surrounded by silences, half-truths, and distorted histories, contributing to a fractured sense of the self. The novel emphasizes how this cultural dislocation manifests as a form of internalized violence. Harley grapples with identity confusion and a profound sense of loss as he uncovers the hidden stories of his ancestors, narratives deliberately suppressed to conform to the colonial narrative. Scott also depicts the land as both a witness and victim of colonial violence. In Noongar culture, land is not merely a physical but a living entity intricately connected to identity and spirituality. Consequently, the colonial seizure of land represents not only economic exploitation but also a profound spiritual violation. Through vivid imagery, Scott illustrates how the land has been scarred by colonization, fences, roads, and towns replacing the natural landscape mirroring the way Aboriginal histories have been obscured by colonial narratives. Nevertheless, the land also emerges as a site of resilience, preserving the memories that Harley tries to reconnect with during his journey of self-discovery.

Another insidious form of colonial violence depicted in *Benang: From the Heart* is the enforced silence surrounding Aboriginal history and trauma. Families pressure to conceal their original heritage while the government records erasing or sanitizing acts of brutality. Harley's journey involved breaking this silence by delving into official documents, family narratives, and buried memories to reconstruct a history that intended to be forgotten. The legacy of colonial violence in *Benang: From the Heart* not confined to the past; it reverberates through generations, shaping identities and relationships. Harley's fragmented identity and emotional struggles reflect the psychological scars of this history. However, the novel also suggests pathways to healing through storytelling, cultural reconnection, and acknowledgement of historical truth. Kim Scott positions storytelling as an act of resistance and recovery. By reclaiming his family's

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history, Harley reclaimed his cultural identity, challenging the colonial narrative that sought to erase it.

Benang: From the Heart by Kim Scott emphasizes the assimilationist policies imposed on Indigenous Australians, particularly through government actions such as forced removals and the efforts to "breed out" Aboriginal identity. It illustrates a colonial mindset aimed at erasing Indigenous culture and heritage through systemic measures, including the placement of Indigenous children in boarding schools and the implementation of policies designed to dilute Aboriginal bloodlines over generations. The phrase "no sign of native origin is apparent" signifies a harsh ideal rendering Indigenous identity invisible within a few generations. By referencing "careful breeding "and reiterating assimilationist tactics, it underscores the intentional drive to merge Indigenous individuals into white society not by eliminating cultural and racial distinctions. This quote exemplifies the Stolen Generations and serves as a profoundly unsettling reminder of the cold bureaucratic mindset that dehumanizes Indigenous peoples. *Benang: From the Heart* reveals the emotional and cultural damage inflicted by these policies, amplifying the voices of those who marginalized by them. Scott explores the impact on both personal and community levels, demonstrating how the wounds of history continue to influence the present.

Tony Birch's *The White Girl*, released in 2019, received the Miles Franklin Award, marking Tony Birch's fourth novel. This narrative provides a unique perspective on intergenerational trauma, emphasizing the significance of family healing. The bond between Odette Brown, a dark-skinned woman, and her light-skinned granddaughter, Sissy, exemplifies the strength of love and familial ties within Aboriginal cultures. Odette's fierce protectiveness toward Sissy underscores the enduring familial connections that help mitigate the trauma of their shared history. Set in mid-20th-century Australia, *The White Girl* explores the effects of oppressive legislation that impacts Aboriginal communities, particularly concerning the removal of

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children. Despite her traumatic past, Odette is resolute in her commitment to protect her granddaughter, symbolizing the resilience of Indigenous women in the face of systemic oppression. Birch's storytelling highlights the significant emotional and physical scars left by trauma while examining the societal dynamics that shape personal narratives. The protagonist's struggle to shield her granddaughter from the family's traumatic past illustrates how mothers often carry the burden of injustices to protect the next generation. The novel argues that while sympathetic actions are essential, they do little to dismantle entrenched systems of racism.

"Odette never forgot her father's words: Them whitefellas, they can never touch the stars, no matter how clever they think they are." In The *White Girl*, Odette's father's statement, "Them white fellas, they never touch the stars, no matter how clever they suppose they are," conveys significant symbolic meaning deeply rooted in Indigenous perspectives on connection, culture, and resilience. Here, the "stars" symbolize profound and elusive concepts: spiritual insight, a deep connection to the land, ancestral wisdom, and aspects of cultural identity central to Aboriginal worldviews. For Indigenous people, stars signify continuity, guidance, and a timeless relationship with ancestors and creative narratives. When Odette's father insists that "white fellas can never touch the stars," he acknowledges that regardless of technological progress, power, or the efforts to dominate or erase Indigenous cultures, there are aspects of Aboriginal identity and spirituality that remain beyond their reach. No level of control, policymaking, or intellectual ambition can sever the deeply rooted connections that Aboriginal people have with their culture and land. The phrase "no matter how clever they think they are" also critiques the arrogance embedded in colonial attitudes-the belief that scientific knowledge, legal frameworks, or policies of assimilation hold superiority over Indigenous ways of understanding. It underscores the colonial mindset that seeks to dominate and categorize everything while failing to grasp the intangible, sacred aspects of Aboriginal existence. For Odette, recalling her father's words became an act of defiance and optimism. It reinforces the

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notion that while colonial systems may strive to suppress or erase Indigenous identities, they cannot truly overcome the spirit, wisdom, or cultural richness that flows through generations. Intergenerational trauma not only carries the burden of past injustices but also encompasses the cultural wisdom and survival tactics inherited from ancestors.

Birch's *The White Girl* also explores the concept of intergenerational trauma, particularly in the context of the Stolen Generations, while addressing themes of resilience, agency, motherly love, loss, and disconnection. The novel provides a more personal examination of intergenerational trauma through the experiences of Odette Brown and her granddaughter Sissy. It illustrates the persistent fear and sorrow associated with the Stolen Generation. Odette, an Aboriginal woman residing in a racially divided town, is resolute in her sweats to shield Sissy from the authorities who seek to take her away. The looming threat of child removal serves as a powerful symbol of the lasting effects of colonial policy. For Odette, this threat is deeply personal: her daughter Lila has already vanished, and she dreads the possibility that Sissy could meet the same fate. This anxiety mirrors the shared intergenerational trauma experienced by Aboriginal families, who have systemically target by government measures meant to dismantle their kinship networks. "She was about to touch one of the large wooden wheels of the coach when a more sinister image flashed before her—a coach full of children being driven away from the mission, crying for their mothers. Odette turned her back on the carriage."(p12). The profound psychological wounds inflicted by the traumatic events of the Stolen Generation, during which Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families. Odette, seeing the carriage evokes a haunting recollection of the enforced separations. The image of crying children being removed from the mission and yearning for their mothers highlights not only the historical truth but also the collective and personal trauma that Aboriginal communities have endured over time. Odette's instinctive decision to turn away from the carriage, signifies both her emotional suffering and desire to protect, particularly

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regarding her granddaughter, Sissy, who is determined to keep away from a similar fate. This moment emphasizes the persistent anxiety and vigilance that Aboriginal families have to adopt, aware that authorities can snatch their children at any moment. It also reinforces the theme of intergenerational trauma in the narrative, revealing how the echoes of past injustices continue to impact the present, shaping Odette's choices and deepening her scepticism towards systems that have historically inflicted harm on her community.

When comparing the two novels, *Benang: From the Heart* and *The White Girl* explore the themes of loss and disconnection from different perspectives. In *Benang: From the Heart*, Harley's sense of disconnection is internal, stemming from his estrangement from cultural identity. Conversely, *The White Girl* emphasizes the external dangers faced by Aboriginal families and highlights the constant threat of separation. Together, these studies illuminate the complex nature of intergenerational trauma. Loss, reclamation, and resistance are vital themes in both novels. In *Benang: From the Heart*, Harley's journey to reclaim his family's past becomes an act of defiance against the forces intent to erase it. Similarly, in *The White Girl*, Odette's commitment to safeguarding Sissy represents a subtle yet profound act of resistance.

These two stories highlight the resilience of Indigenous communities and their determination not to be defined solely by their trauma. By contrast, Birch employs a linear narrative in *The White Girl* to convey the immediacy and urgency of Odette's challenges. Both techniques illustrate the capacity of stories to contest prevailing narratives and to affirm Indigenous identities. *Benang: From the Heart*, which thoroughly investigates historical trauma from a multi-generational perspective, *The White Girl* presents intergenerational trauma as a contemporary issue. Odette concern for Sissy well-being directly stems from the Stolen Generations, illustrating how systemic racism continues to influence Indigenous lives. Birch's narrative is intensely personal, emphasizing the determination and resilience of Aboriginal women as they strive to maintain family unity amidst oppressive practices and laws. Both

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studies examined the complex relationship between intergenerational trauma and acts of resistance. In both texts, control over intergenerational trauma is achieved through resistance, the reclamation of history, and the power of storytelling. They emphasize that healing from colonial violence involves confronting the past and nurturing cultural identity for future generations.

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