The 7 Stages of Grieving

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WESLEY ENOCH AND DEBORAH MAILMAN

Wesley Enoch is a playwright, theater artist, and director of Aboriginal Nunukul and Aboriginal Nguri heritage. In 1994, Enoch rose to prominence as the Artistic Director of the Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts company. There, he directed several of his own works—including the wildly popular *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, which he co-wrote with Deborah Mailman and which went on to tour the London International Festival of Theatre, as well as venues across Melbourne, Tasmania, Adelaide, and Sydney. Enoch has worked as a director for Queensland Theatre Company, Sydney Theatre Company, and the Ilbijerri Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Theatre Cooperative, among numerous other Australian theatrical collectives and companies. Enoch's career has been devoted to directing both contemporary and classic works, many of which focus on Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander, or First Nations, experiences. Deborah Mailman is an actor and theater artist of Aboriginal Bidjara Nation and Maori heritage. After graduating with a degree in drama from Queensland University of Technology Academy of the Arts in the early 1990s, she has been active in theater, television, and film. Mailman was the first indigenous Australian actress to win the Australian Film Institute Award for Best Actress in a Leading Role (for her performance in *Radiance*, a feature film adapted from a play by Louis Nowra), and her long career has encompassed classical roles, such as Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew* and Rosalind in *As You Like It*, as well as contemporary, experimental, and devised productions.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 7 Stages of Grieving first premiered in 1995, a time of economic and social difficulty in Australia. In 1991, Australia's parliament passed the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act—a piece of legislation meant to promote the idea of Reconciliation, or a strengthening of relationships between white Australians and the indigenous peoples throughout the country. The legislation, meant to be hopeful and reparative, inflamed controversy and doubt throughout Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander communities. Prime Minister Paul Keating made a speech in December of 1992 to celebrate 1993 as the International Year of the World's Indigenous People. In this speech, he plainly acknowledged white Australia's failure in its treatment of its indigenous peoples and stated that for Australia to resign itself to such failure would be "morally indefensible." The speech—which recognized and spoke aloud the truth of colonialism's ravages on the indigenous community in the form of murder, discrimination, dispossession, and more—was seen as groundbreaking in many ways. It is clear from *7 Stages'* tone, themes, and content, however, that the idea of true reconciliation—which the Woman refers to as "wreck con silly nation"—caused many Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people even more pain. The play makes transparent Enoch and Mailman's frustrations with the idea that Reconciliation's goals, while noble, will ever be possible for a people who have been disenfranchised, dispirited, and structurally disadvantaged by colonialist oppression and violence for over two centuries.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander theater artists have contributed their stories and voices to the landscape of contemporary Australian drama, creating work that explores grief, trauma, and struggle alongside pride, resilience, and the hope for a more just society. Among these artists are Eva Johnson (*When I Die You'll All Stop Laughing* and *Murras*), Kevin Gilbert (*The Cherry Pickers*), and Jimmy Chi (*Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road*). Outside of the theater, several contemporary novels and memoirs seek to explore First Nations peoples' identities and struggles. *Swallow the Air* by Tara June Winch and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* by Doris Pilkington explore the violence, racism, and institutional cruelty to which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been subjected since the arrival of white English settlers in 1788—and how centuries of oppression, subjugation, and trauma have forever changed First Nations communities across the land now known as Australia.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The 7 Stages of Grieving
- **When Written:** Early 1990s
- **Where Written:** Brisbane
- **Literary Period:** Experimental theater
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Australia
- **Climax:** In a moment of catharsis, the Woman scatters the contents of the suitcase, then carefully repacks it and sets it at the audience's feet.
- **Antagonist:** Colonialist oppression; generational trauma; the idea of Reconciliation
- **Point of View:** Dramatic

EXTRA CREDIT

Frequent Collaborators. Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman are two artists who have enjoyed a lengthy and fruitful artistic relationship over the years, collaborating on many groundbreaking works that have achieved international recognition. In addition to *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, Mailman and Enoch have worked together on theatrical productions of *Radiance* by Louis Nowra and *The Sapphires* by Tony Briggs. Mailman went on to star in the film versions of both plays in 1998 and 2013 respectively, receiving recognition in the category of Best Leading Movie Actress from the Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Awards for both.

PLOT SUMMARY

In *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, an unnamed Aboriginal woman referenced only as "the Woman" takes the audience through a series of twenty-three short vignettes about the difficulties, sorrows, and stages of grief that are part of the modern Aboriginal experience. The performance space is a black stage covered in piles of **red earth** and ringed by a white border, above which a rapidly melting **block of ice** is suspended. As the Woman moves around the stage, projections appear across the stage of images from the Woman's past, words relating to grief, and the Woman's innermost thoughts.

The play's first scene shows the Woman sobbing out of grief and conducting a purification ritual with eucalypt leaves. She sings a song in her people's Gamilaraay language before telling the story of her grandmother's death. Through traditional song and dance, the Woman's family worked through their grief over Nana together. The Woman brings out a **suitcase** which she explains is filled with photographs of family members who have passed away—she recalls the day her parents removed all the pictures of Nana from the walls of their living room and placed them in the suitcase. The Woman reveals how concerned she is about her father's death—though he's young, his health is poor, and she's prematurely grieving his loss.

Next, the Woman moves through a series of scenes which explore her own identity as a Murri woman and the devastating effects of colonialist violence that reverberate through her everyday life. The Woman imagines a version of 1788—the year white settlers first arrived from England—in which she is able to tell the colonists to turn around and go home. She relays a trip to the shopping mall to buy a dress during which she is racially profiled and made to feel unwelcome even in a public space. She tells the story of her Aunty Grace's return from England for Nana's funeral—and the outpouring of visceral grief Aunty Grace felt toward the end of her trip. Though many in the family see Aunty Grace's having married a British man and moved to England as a betrayal, Aunty Grace's pain and sorrow are just as palpable as anyone else's in the family. The Woman moves on to tell the story of Daniel Yocke, a young Aboriginal man who became the victim of police brutality while out with a group of friends in a local Brisbane park, and the resulting peaceful march through the streets of Brisbane in protest of his unjust death. Though white people ridiculed and heavily policed the march, she and her people were able to come together to grieve the loss of one of their own.

Towards the end of the play, the Woman continues to delve into the structural, institutional racism that Aboriginal peoples experience and the gulf between white and Aboriginal experiences of Australian life. In a rapid succession of scenes, the Woman illustrates how the pressure to assimilate combines with cycles of poverty, incarceration, substance abuse, and depression to threaten indigenous communities. The Woman presents to the audience a "Gallery of Sorrow" depicting the stages of Aboriginal History: Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-determination, and Reconciliation. The woman covers herself in traditional paint and scatters images of her family, previously held in the suitcase, all over the stage. She then delivers an indictment of the idea of Reconciliation. The words "wreck," "con," "silly," and "nation" are projected onto the stage, revealing the Woman's contempt for the whole notion of Reconciliation, which many of her people, having been denied any semblance of an education due to structural racism and inequality, cannot even spell. The Woman addresses the audience directly, telling them that she fears her heart is "hardening" as a result of the endless, unbearable grief she has felt over the years for herself, her family, and her people. After repacking the suitcase and setting it down in front of the audience, the Woman steps backward into a pool of light and announces that she feels "nothing."

CHARACTERS

The Woman – The Woman (who is of Aboriginal heritage and belongs to the Murri people) is the central character of the play and the only character on stage throughout the entirety of the one-woman show. Over the course of the play, as the Woman shares with the audience stories of trouble, grief, loss, and—in spite of everything—pride and resilience, she paints a uniquely personal picture of the emotional and structural challenges of contemporary Aboriginal life. The Woman is the creation of Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman, who co-wrote *The 7 Stages of Grieving* together and used their own experiences to flesh out the Woman's story. As the Woman battles personal grief—the mourning of her grandmother's death, fear for her father's health and her brother's well-being, and a complicated relationship with a distant aunt called Aunty Grace—she also struggles deeply with the social, economic, and political challenges of living in a country which harbors racist, colonialist prejudices against its indigenous people. The woman's small personal acts of pride and resilience, such as declaring her love for her black skin, meet with larger, communal acts of resistance, such as attending a march in protest of the unfair

death of Daniel Yocke, a young Aboriginal man who died in police custody in Brisbane. These many stories weave together to create a portrait of grief's unstable, unpredictable nature. Though the process of grieving is said to encompass seven distinct stages, the Woman shows how the world of grief is messier than that. For Australia's First Nations people especially, the Woman suggests, it is impossible to ever finish grieving all that has been lost due to the ravages of colonialism and racism—lands, traditions, and languages have all been decimated and dashed, never to be restored or regained. The Woman's desire for change brushes up against her contempt for the concept of Reconciliation, or a repairing of relationships between white Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. By the end of the play, the Woman's complicated journey through grief has hardened her heart—and she must make a choice whether to pursue her desire to "feel nothing" or whether to bear the heavy, unhappy burden of her people's collective suffering.

Aunty Grace – Aunty Grace is the Woman's aunt. Aunty Grace, who moved to England long ago after marrying an Englishman, has not seen her family in years and she is one of the only members of the Woman's family whose photograph has ended up in the **suitcase** before her death. This symbolizes that, while Aunty Grace is still alive, she is dead to her family. Aunty Grace's betrayal in moving away is a pain that the Woman feels palpably. When Aunty Grace comes home for Nana's funeral, she doesn't shed a tear during the entire month-long ritual mourning period. On the day she is to return to England, however, Aunty Grace asks the Woman to drive her to the cemetery before taking her to the airport. There, at her mother's grave, Aunty Grace breaks down in grief and despair, scattering the contents of her suitcase onto the **red earth** surrounding the fresh grave. Aunty Grace's story is brief, taking up only one scene of the play—yet the stunning, intense emotion behind her short visit is hugely important to the Woman's story. Aunty Grace's grief not only for her mother's death but also for the life, the people, and the community she herself has left behind and abandoned is intense and overwhelming. Aunty Grace's grief, like the Woman's, does not move through the clear, sequential, prescribed stages—instead, it shows up in strange ways and at inopportune moments, consuming everything in its path.

Daniel Yocke – Daniel Yocke was a real-life Aboriginal dancer who died in police custody in 1993 after being racially profiled and arrested by Brisbane police while out drinking with a group of friends. The Woman invokes the story of Daniel Yocke's death—and the outpouring of public grief and rage that followed—in order to show how, even when tragedy strikes the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their collective pain is not taken seriously. While the grief felt in the wake of Yocke's death unites the Woman with hundreds of members of her community as she takes part in a march through Brisbane, the fact that Yocke died alone and most likely afraid cannot be erased. Yocke's death—and the white Australian public's indifference to it—is a microcosm of the indifference and apathy that is shown to the First Nations people of Australia on a daily basis. By invoking the tragedy of Yocke's death, the Woman gives voice not just to her grief but also to her anger about the continual slights and injustices that she and her people must suffer as a result of colonialist oppression and structural racism.

The Woman's Grandmother/Nana – The Woman's grandmother, whom she calls Nana, is deceased at the start of the play. As the Woman tells the story of her family's coming together after Nana's funeral to collectively mourn, she paints a portrait of the ways in which Aboriginal families and communities care for one another and comfort each other in times of great sorrow. The Woman's grandmother is an important figure not just in her own life, but also in all her family members' lives and the lives of many in their larger community, as is clear when four hundred people show up to Nana's funeral. Nana's death is an important story for the Woman to share, because with every elder who dies within the Woman's community, a piece of Aboriginal history, heritage, and tradition dies along with them. This continual loss reverberates throughout the play as the Woman grapples with how much has been taken from her people through the ravages of colonialism—and with how there is still so much more to be lost.

The Woman's Father – The Woman mentions her father only in passing, yet it is clear that she has a great deal of concern for him. Though the Woman's father is not an old man (he's 45), the Woman is worried about his declining health. She has started to prematurely grieve his death even though he is still alive. The Woman's father, then, becomes an indicator of how health issues and premature mortality disproportionately affect Australia's First Nations communities due to structural racism and inequality, as well as cycles of poverty, depression, abuse, and illness.

The Woman's Brother – The Woman's brother, like her father, is only mentioned briefly—yet the struggles that the Woman describes him as facing are potent, painful, and revealing. The Woman's brother is, at just twenty-one, a young and healthy man—yet after he gets in trouble with a racist police officer and resists arrest, he finds himself suddenly trapped in a cycle of alcoholism, depression, and continued legal trouble. The Woman uses her brother's story to illustrate how structurally racist systems create indigenous suffering amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

TERMS

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples/First Nations

Peoples – These are the preferred terms for referring to Australia's indigenous people. The text of the play refers to "Aboriginal culture" and names its main character as "an Aboriginal Woman," but the term Aboriginal excludes Torres Straits Islander people, which is a distinct group, and vice versa. "First Nations Peoples" is a term that has gained popularity in recent years to signal that both groups are the sovereign, original inhabitants of the land now known as Australia. Because the terms Aboriginal, indigenous Australian, and Torres Strait Islander do not account for an individual's specific heritage, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander use local terms to describe their particular region.

Murri – The Murri (sometimes spelled "Murrie") are the indigenous people of Queensland and parts of New South Wales.

Gamilaraay/Kamilaroi – Gamilaraay (sometimes spelled "Kamilaroi") is an endangered language spoken by some Aboriginal people native to southeast Australia, including the Murri people. Many Gamilaraay words appear throughout *The 7 Stages of Grieving*.

Reconciliation – In Australia, Reconciliation refers to the attempt to ease tensions between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Australians descended from settlers and colonists. The process of Reconciliation is, in theory, aimed at promoting truth, justice, forgiveness, and healing of the intense disparities in income, education, and quality of life between First Nations People and white Australians who have benefited from generations of settler colonialism and white supremacy. In the play, **the Woman** scoffs at the idea that Reconciliation could ever be possible in a country where the very people for whom Reconciliation is meant have not even been given the education needed to spell or read the word itself. Reconciliation is a well-intended concept, but in practice, it is fraught and unspeakably difficult to take the large-scale actions that would actually be needed to repair hundreds of years of oppression, murder, and inequality.

Watchhouse – Watchhouse is an Australian term for police station.

Kooemba Jdarra – The Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performance Arts is the theatrical company which first mounted *The 7 Stages of Grieving*.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

COLONIALISM AND OPPRESSION

In Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman's *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, Australia's colonial history hovers over everything. As the action unfolds, the play's lone character, an Aboriginal woman known only as "the Woman," shares her experiences of grief and sorrow, evoking the violence and oppression that white settlers and their descendants have inflicted on Australia's indigenous populations for centuries. Throughout the play, Enoch and Mailman show that the experience of suffering from colonialism and oppression is pervasive in modern indigenous life, since Australia's prevailing culture is built on white supremacy.

Enoch and Mailman's collaborative work draws on both of their real-life experiences, painting a portrait of what it's like to live under an oppressive, colonial system. Through the Woman's experiences, they show that Australia's colonial history is inseparable from its fractured present—this history is unavoidable in day-to-day life, especially for First Nations people. About midway through the play, a pair of scenes reflect on the colonial violence that is a part of both the Woman's story and her family's history. In "Invasion Poem," the Woman recounts a story (which may be her own or may be the story of a family member) who suffered a brutal beating and rape in her own home at the hands of "strangers" who were "offering gifts" and "demand[ing] respect." The story is both realistic and allegorical—this incident of invasive violence evokes all of the other instances of violence and cruelty committed by the white "invaders" and their descendants over the years. Then, in the following scene (entitled "1788"), the Woman confronts the first English ships to arrive on Australian shores, telling them that there's no room in the harbor—they must turn around and leave. Taken together, the first scene depicts the brutal reality of ongoing colonial violence, and the second scene depicts a wishful counterfactual in which the Woman is able to stop all this pain and violence before it starts by simply sending the invaders away when they arrive. This shows the fervent wish of First Nations peoples to retroactively protect their lands, families, and traditions from colonialism, which has forever transformed their homelands and their ways of life (and whose legacy continues to brutalize them in the present).

The play also depicts how colonialism and oppression affect daily life for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by telling the story of Daniel Yocke. Yocke was a young Aboriginal man who was racially profiled, accosted, and arrested by Brisbane police while out drinking in a park with some friends. The man died in police custody—and although the Woman does not state his cause of death, it is clear that the police have violently killed him. As the woman describes Yocke's death and the resulting protest march that took place weeks later, it becomes clear how racism and violent oppression affect not just individuals like Yocke, but also entire indigenous

communities. White people ridicule the march protesting Yocke's death, they heavily police it, and they interpret indigenous grief as aggression; all of this shows the many insidious forms of racist oppression—emotional and physical—that affect indigenous communities.

After demonstrating how omnipresent and devastating colonial violence is in Aboriginal life, the play grapples with the future by tackling Reconciliation, a movement in Australia meant to repair relationships between white Australians and First Nations people. While the intentions of this movement—to stop the racism and violence that harm Aboriginal communities in Australia—are clearly good, the Woman points out the absurdity of the notion that such a fraught and exploitative relationship can ever be repaired. First, she ridicules the name "Reconciliation," as the indigenous peoples that Reconciliation supposedly aims to benefit have, in many cases, been denied the education needed to even spell the word. Then, by dividing the word "reconciliation" into the four smaller words ("wreck," "con," "silly," and "nation"), the Woman points out the "silly" nature of such a mission. A nation that has conned itself into thinking the "wreck[age]" of colonialism can be repaired is, according to the Woman, unforgivably ignorant of the sheer scale of what would be needed to begin amending its legacy of violence, racism, and genocide. In this way, the play suggests that the good intentions and symbolic gestures of Reconciliation are far too little to address the colonial oppression and violence that has, for centuries, ravaged Aboriginal life.

Ultimately, Enoch and Mailman use the story of the Woman to show how central the evils of colonialism are to the contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experience. By focusing on one woman's specific struggles, the playwrights invoke a pain that many First Nations peoples share. Since this pain is so overwhelming and the colonial culture that creates it is so pervasive, the play suggests that there isn't much hope for true equality or meaningful reconciliation.

MEMORY AND FAMILY TRAUMA

Throughout *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, the Woman tells stories of how the various members of her family have been affected by trauma. This trauma has its roots in Australia's colonial history and the ongoing subjugation of its indigenous peoples. The Woman's stories highlight cyclical issues of poverty, isolation, violence, and shame that affect generation after generation of her family, and she explores how collective memory—while a source of joy and resilience—can also be a burden, since remembering her family's history involves grappling with extreme suffering. Overall, the play shows that one legacy of colonialism is inherited trauma: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families pass down their experiences of suffering, which can magnify the trauma of the present, creating a vicious cycle of pain.

Throughout the play, Enoch and Mailman explore the complexity of family memories. This first occurs when the Woman tells the story of her grandmother's passing. The Woman, her family, and their community are devastated by this loss, in part because they'll miss Nana and in part because they mourn the memories of their community's history that have been lost with her. They value these memories because they help keep traditions alive and anchor their identities in the stories of generations past, but such memories are undeniably also painful and difficult to carry because of the profound suffering they entail.

This duality between the joy and pain of memory is clearest in the symbol of the family's **suitcase**, which holds photographs of all of the members of their family who have either died or become estranged. On the one hand, putting mementoes of the dead safely in the suitcase helps preserve their memories and importance—but, on the other hand, the suitcase has become so physically heavy with the memories of the dead that it becomes difficult to carry. Family memory, then, becomes both a burden and a source of joy: a way of keeping a connection with ancestors, but also a mandate to carry memories of suffering that are often too heavy to bear. In the end, after packing and unpacking this suitcase several times—symbolizing the Woman's difficult choice about whether to try to escape bad memories or preserve her connection to her heritage—the Woman chooses to free her family members' memories from the suitcase in which they've been kept for so long, attempting to free herself from the family's devastating history of trauma, poverty, and violence. While this is perhaps hopeful, it's a horrific choice that itself demonstrates the violence of colonialism: colonizers have inflicted so much suffering on generations of the Woman's family that she evidently believes that remaining connected to her heritage requires too much suffering to be worthwhile.

While the symbol of the suitcase embodies the traumas of the family's past, their current suffering reflects the trauma of their present. The Woman uses stories about her father, her brother, and her Aunty Grace to demonstrate how her family, unable or unwilling to cope with their grief, tries (and fails) to outrun cycles of pain and loss. First, the Woman describes her fears about her father's death. Though he's only forty-five, the Woman implies that his health is so poor that he will soon die. This illuminates how a life of poverty and suffering takes a physical toll and robs indigenous peoples of years of their lives. Next, the Woman tells the story of her Aunty Grace—a woman who married a white Englishman and moved to London. Aunty Grace's family believes that she betrayed them by leaving and assimilating into the colonial society responsible for so much of their people's suffering. Aunty Grace, meanwhile, seeks to remove herself from her family and her home country in order to escape the cycles of grief and suffering in which she was raised, suggesting that perhaps she tragically saw no other

escape from trauma than to physical leave her family behind. Finally, the Woman tells the story of her brother, a young man who's recently gotten in minor trouble with the law. For some people, a court summons and a small fine would not derail her life, but for her brother, this leads to a cycle of fear, shame, financial hardship, and substance abuse that he seems unable to escape. He perhaps feels that trauma and pain are inescapable, and so he decides to submit to his difficult circumstances rather than try to escape.

By the end of the play, the Woman has no answers to the problem of the generational trauma that the Aboriginal and Torres Straits Islander people of Australia experience—all she knows is that somehow these cycles must be broken. Otherwise, as Enoch and Mailman show, grief for the loss of land, of family, and of tradition has the power to overwhelm a life, trapping present and future generations in the same patterns of sorrow and struggle.

FEELING VS. NUMBNESS

Throughout the one-woman show *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, the Woman reshuffles the traditionally-defined seven stages of grief: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance. Rather than moving forward through these stages in a linear manner, the Woman vacillates between them—and though she ultimately seems to arrive at a kind of acceptance, that acceptance is not defined by peace, but rather by numbness. "I feel nothing," the Woman says at the end of the play, as a beam of bright light covers her. Through this, Enoch and Mailman suggest that, for people affected by generational trauma, colonial violence, and structural oppression, grieving is not a straightforward process. Instead, the process of grief is a constant struggle between feeling and numbness, a wavering between confronting pain and dissociating from it.

Throughout the play, the Woman experiences tremendous grief, but her grief is never a linear progression through the seven identified stages. Instead, she moves between intense emotion and utter numbness, with numbness often taking over when her emotions become too much to bear. In this way, the play shows how endless, circular, and messy the process of grieving truly is. In the play's second scene, for example, the Woman struggles to process her grief, sobbing in the darkness until her cries become unbearably loud. As the lights go up, images of mourning, sorrow, and grief are projected around the stage until, at last, they go blank—the projection spaces are then replaced with the words "I feel… Nothing." This shows the audience both the intensity of the woman's grief and how quickly her emotions can change, as she cycles quickly between sorrow and numbness and then back to sorrow again (which happens in the very next scene, when she sings about the heavy sensation of weeping). These rapid shifts between deep feeling and no feeling characterize the Woman's emotional journey for the remainder of the play, showing how the path through grief is not a straight line—instead, moving through grief is an endless push and pull between different states of being, feeling, and reacting.

In addition to showing that grief is nonlinear, the play explores the burdensome nature of grief. The **suitcase**— where the family stores mementoes of the dead—embodies the weight of grief. Throughout the play, the Woman relays stories of losing family members to death, alcoholism, and vicious cycles of poverty and incarceration—griefs that wind up, symbolically, in her suitcase. However, she can't continue to carry the suitcase forever, since the grief it contains becomes too much to bear. By the end of the play, the Woman expresses to the audience the fear that her heart is "hardening" to not just the suffering of others, but to her own grief as well. Because of this, she symbolically abandons her suitcase at the audience's feet before declaring she feels "nothing," showing her choice not to continue to carry around her pain. The fact that the Woman ends the play by stating that she "feel[s] nothing" suggests that she either wants or needs to distract or sever herself from the burdens of grief, generational trauma, and colonial oppression that have defined her life. This speaks to Enoch and Mailman's central point about grief: that the notion of grief being a linear process of moving through seven discrete stages and then feeling healed is not realistic for people facing such profound and burdensome grief. For people like the Woman, grief doesn't necessarily end in healing—in fact, it doesn't necessarily end at all.

ABORIGINAL IDENTITY, PRIDE, AND RESILIENCE

Throughout *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, as the Woman investigates trauma, grief, and the ravages of colonialism, she also highlights her own journey toward self-love. The play's experimental vignettes explore what it means to take pride in oneself and one's heritage in spite of structural, institutional racism and the hopelessness it can create. Ultimately, Enoch and Mailman suggest that pride and resilience in the face of impossible circumstances are vitally important to individual and communal resistance.

Throughout the play, Enoch and Mailman use one Aboriginal woman's journey to demonstrate the complexities of contemporary Aboriginal identity. While the Woman takes pride in her heritage and in her people's history, she also finds herself devastated by all they have lost and furious at all they have been forced to endure. Rather than give into despair or hopelessness, the Woman instead expresses determination to rise above the social, political, and economic inequality that surrounds her. When the audience first meets the Woman, she weeps in darkness alone on stage—but then as the lights come up, she performs a purification ritual using eucalypt leaves in order to connect with her ancestors. This demonstrates that,

even in the depths of one's sorrow, there is hope, light, and a sense of grounding to be found in tradition, ritual, and communal identity.

As the play continues, the Woman goes on to share intimate stories about how her family uses ritual, tradition, and pride in their shared identity to cope with profound losses. When the Woman's grandmother dies, for instance, generations of her family come together to live near one another for a period of communal mourning. As the Woman's family grieves, they find relief in ritual dances and performances. Though so much of their collective history has been stripped away, the Woman's family bands together to resist the pull of despair and isolation. Instead, they choose to turn to the safe harbor of ritual, identity, and tradition in the midst of their grief. As the Woman turns to sacred traditions both alone and with family, she underscores the importance of remembering the past, even when doing so is painful or difficult. Even when performed in private, traditional ritual, dance, and other expressions of mourning or celebration create a sense of shared experience. This sense of shared history, shared pain, and shared purpose is vitally important to a community that has been decimated by the violent forces of colonialism and racism.

Despite the joy and connection that the Woman's culture brings her, her indigenous identity also brings suffering, particularly because of the racism she experiences. In the scene "Murri Gets a Dress," the Woman—a member of the Murri people—describes the unique challenges she faces on a simple trip to the mall to buy a dress. She is racially profiled in the store, given cruel looks in the elevator, and followed to her car by mall security. On the road home, when her car breaks down, no one will stop to help her. In spite of the struggles she faces on a simple day of shopping, the Woman takes pride in her new dress—and, the following morning upon waking, she looks in the mirror and declares aloud her gratitude for her black skin. As she calls out the word "NUNNA" (which means "me" in Gamilaraay), the Woman demonstrates that—in spite of the horrible racism she has just experienced—she still insists on loving herself. Her refusal to reject her identity or wish she were different is crucial; without loving herself, she wouldn't be able to go on.

In addition to showing how pride in indigenous identity helps the Woman personally, the play shows how important pride and solidarity are to Australia's First Nations communities more largely. In the scene "March," the Woman describes the intense scrutiny that accompanies a peaceful march in Brisbane to protest the death of Daniel Yocke, an Aboriginal man who was brutalized by police. In spite of the presence of police helicopters and reporters who characterize the march as "defiant" and inconvenient, the Woman sees the mass grieving that takes place amongst her people at the Brisbane watchhouse as beautiful and necessary. This scene is a culmination of the theme of Aboriginal identity, pride, and resilience, as it shows how Aboriginal communities can come together, supporting and loving one another (even in the depths of terror and grief) and making a public, unignorable statement of solidarity against racism and abuse.

While some parts of Aboriginal peoples' cultures will never be restored—and while this knowledge can take a terrible toll on communities and contribute to cycles of generational trauma—Enoch and Mailman's play suggests that, with pride and resilience, communities and individuals alike will grow stronger. Resisting the social injustices, economic disadvantages, and structural inequalities that are byproducts of Australia's colonial history is difficult work—but as the Woman demonstrates, self-love and solidarity are important tools of progress and endurance.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE SUITCASE

The central symbol in *The 7 Stages of Grieving* is a suitcase, which symbolizes the weight of grief. As the play's central character, the Woman, shares stories about personal, political, and communal grief, she moves back and forth between states of intense pain and eerie numbness. Her suitcase is the object most associated with this difficulty in processing her grief. The suitcase—which belongs to the Woman's whole family—is filled with photographs of family members who have either died or become estranged; each time the family loses someone, they immediately place all their photographs of that person inside the suitcase, which marks the beginning of their grieving process. On the one hand, putting the photographs into the suitcase makes grieving more manageable. It's a concrete step in the grieving process that acknowledges loss and safeguards cherished memories. In fact, the symbolism is somewhat literal here: by putting the pictures into a suitcase—the very function of which is to make carrying its contents easier—the family is making it easier to carry their grief. Nonetheless, that grief is still heavy—and sometimes it's too heavy to bear. Midway through the play, for instance, the Woman recalls when her Aunty Grace, upon visiting her recently deceased mother's grave, dragged her suitcase out of the car and scattered its contents across the cemetery, symbolizing that her grief had become too much to carry. Likewise, as the Woman interacts with her family's suitcase, she sometimes carries it easily and other times finds it too much to bear. At various points in the play, she buries the suitcase in the red earth, moves it from place to place across the stage, unpacks it, repacks it, and, at last, lays it at the feet of the audience before stepping away from it and declaring that she

feels "nothing." The suitcase, then, is the battleground for the Woman's struggle between facing her pain and surrendering to numbness—carrying the suitcase indicates living with pain, and emptying or burying the suitcase symbolizes the state of numbness that the Woman experiences when she can no longer face her suffering. At the end of the action, the Woman is still messily moving through the many stages of grieving, attempting to wrangle the many layers of her sorrow, her family's struggles, and her people's pain.

THE ICE BLOCK

The ice block, which hovers over the stage suspended by "seven strong ropes," is a symbol of the vulnerability of Aboriginal communities in modern-day Australia. At the beginning of the play, a full block of ice hangs above the stage underneath hot stage lights. That block remains onstage, melting, throughout the action of the play, which describes the horrific suffering that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced at the hands of colonialism and white supremacy. As the Woman describes the horrors that she, her family, and her community has faced, the ice block continues to melt before the audience's eyes. In this way, the suffering that the Woman describes connects visually to the way that the ice corrodes under the hot lights, which represent racism, poverty, abuse, and inequality—forces that slowly but surely melt Aboriginal communities down to fractions of their former selves.

It's also worth noting the seven ropes that hold the ice above the stage. The number seven evokes the titular seven stages of grieving: shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance. It's complex that the block of ice (which represents indigenous communities) is held up with ropes that symbolize grief; perhaps this suggests that shared grief is part of what holds indigenous communities together, but perhaps, since the ropes hold the ice closer to the harsh stage lights, the stage setup is a visual metaphor for the way in which shared grief among indigenous communities intensifies the trauma and suffering of their day-to-day lives. In other words, it's possible to read the fact that the ropes speed the melting by holding the ice closer to the lights as a metaphor for the way in which grief makes the effects of racism, poverty, and other suffering even more destructive and traumatic. Over the course of the play, the ice block melts onto the red earth below—red earth that is primarily the grave of the Woman's grandmother. The ice melting directly onto a grave again offers a sense of urgency: the grief and suffering that melt the life and culture of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples literally lead to death.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Bloomsbury edition of *Contemporary Australian Plays* published in 2015.

Scene 1: Prologue Quotes

A large block of ice is suspended by seven strong ropes. It is melting, dripping on to a freshly turned grave of red earth. The performance area is covered in a thin layer of black powder framed by a scrape of white.

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 277

Explanation and Analysis

In the first scene of *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, the stage sits blank except for a few objects. The stage directions quoted here describe the way the scene should be set, with several important symbols foreshadowing the themes and ideas the play is about to explore. The ice block suspended from the ceiling represents the vulnerability of contemporary indigenous communities. Throughout the play, as the Woman describes the brutality of racism and the horrific legacy of colonialism, the audience watches the block of ice gradually melt under the hot stage lights. The lights, then, evoke the way that racism, poverty, violence, and other forms of oppression relentlessly destroy indigenous communities.

The ice block is also suspended by seven "strong" ropes—the number seven, of course, associates the ropes with the titular seven stages of grieving. It's a complicated visual metaphor to have the ice block (representing indigenous communities) suspended by ropes that symbolize grief. On the one hand, the grief is strong enough to hold the block of ice in the air above the grave on the floor of the stage—perhaps, then, shared grief is keeping indigenous communities together, helping them share their burdens and not collapse into the grave below. On the other hand, the ropes hold the block of ice closer to the stage lights, which destroy the ice over the course of the play. In this sense, grief seems to speed up the process by which racism, poverty, and other forms of oppression (symbolized by the lights) destroy indigenous communities. Grief, in other words, seems to magnify the effect of other traumas, making daily suffering more difficult to bear.

In addition to being a grave throughout the play, the red earth below the ice block is a visual representation of the lands that Australia's indigenous people, or First Nations peoples, have lost to the ravages of colonialism. The stage, bordered by a "scrape of white," represents the ways in which whiteness encircles and encroaches upon blackness in modern-day Australia. Even in contemporary times, the ravages of colonialism are as insidious and dangerous as ever.

Scene 2: Sobbing Quotes

Grief
Grieving
Sorrow
Loss
Death
Pain
Distress
Lament
Mourn
Emptiness
Despair
Lonely
Regret
Misfortune
Guilt
Passion
Love
Absence
Desolate
Nothing
Nothing
I feel... Nothing

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, a series of words related to grief are projected onto blank spaces around the stage. Although the Woman does not speak these words aloud, the audience gets the sense that they are coming from within her—that the projections are a reflection of the emotions with which she's grappling as she prepares to tell her story through a series of experimental vignettes. As the words flash across the projection screens, the emotions behind them strain and swell before slowly devolving into "absence," "desolate," and "nothing." The words "I feel... Nothing" flash across the stage as the culmination of all the words that have come before. This scene is intensely symbolic, demonstrating one of the play's central themes: the constant struggle between feeling pain and becoming numb to pain. The Woman, as this scene forecasts, will often feel overwhelming emotions (such as love, pride, sorrow, and loss)—yet the threat of growing numb to the magnitude of her and her peoples' experiences, good and bad, is always present. The words that are projected onstage in this scene don't strictly follow any order, nor do they directly correlate with the seven stages of grieving. This scene demonstrates the disordered, messy ways in which grief infiltrates a life.

Scene 3: Purification Quotes

The Woman lights up a wad of eucalypt leaves and watches them burn. She blows out the flame and as the embers smoke she sings a song for the spirits of those that have gone before her and asks permission to tell the story of her grief.

Related Characters: The Woman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 278

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly after her intensely emotional appearance in the previous scene, the Woman reappears to engage in a calming, cleansing ritual. As the Woman lights the ritual leaves and sings to the "spirits of those that have gone before her," she engages with her past, expresses faith in her people's traditions, and demonstrates her intense respect for her ancestors. The story of the Woman's grief, this scene shows, will entail not only stories of her own experiences, but also the experiences of those who have passed on recently and long ago. By expressing her intention to faithfully share those stories with the audience, the Woman demonstrates pride in her heritage, resilience in the face of uncertainty and pain, and respect and care for the generational traumas that have come to visit her family and her people more largely. The Woman knows that she is treading into painful, delicate territory, yet she is committed to serving her people and her heritage by bringing to light

the reality of Aboriginal experience.

Scene 4: Nana's Story Quotes

I miss my grandmother. She took so many stories with her to the grave. Stories of her life, our traditions, our heritage from her now gone. I resent that.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Woman's Grandmother/Nana

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief quotation, the Woman discusses her feelings in the wake of her grandmother's death. For the Woman and her family, who belong to the Murri people, grieving the death of an elder entails more than just sorrow for the loss of a life. For the Woman and her people, death of an elder means death of that person's stories, knowledge, and traditions, since they have experiences and knowledge that they could not or did not pass on. The Woman is saddened by her grandmother's death, but she is also resentful of the fact that, for her and her people, the death of any member of their community represents a potentially devastating loss of knowledge. It's also possible that the woman's resentment here is something of a screen for her grief—it's perhaps easier to process her resentment that her grandmother's stories are gone than it is to process her grief that her grandmother herself is gone. Regardless, even though the Woman knows that her people are resilient and united by their traditions and shared heritage, it's still difficult to confront the loss of an elder, both personally and culturally.

Scene 5: Photograph Story Quotes

But this suitcase, which resides under the old stereo tightly fastened, lies flat on the floor comfortably out of reach. Safe from inquisitive hands or an accidental glance. In the suitcase lies the photos of those who are dead, the nameless ones. With an unspoken gesture we remove the photo of my nana from her commanding position on the wall and quietly slip her beneath the walnut finish. And without a sound push her into the shadow.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Woman's Grandmother/Nana

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Woman explains a ritual that she and her parents share: they keep family photographs on the wall of their living room, but when a person in their family dies, they remove the photos of that person and place them in a suitcase beneath the stereo. This ritual is emblematic of the tug-of-war between feeling and numbness. As the death of a family member or elder also means the death of that person's cultural knowledge and history, it's doubly tragic every time the Woman loses someone. Rather than confront and process the immense grief of such a death, the Woman and her family remove the pictures, symbolically putting their grief away and locking it away in a suitcase, making that grief easier to carry. Throughout the play, the Woman will continue to struggle with the tension between the desire to lock her emotions away and the natural process of moving forward through grief, hard as it may be. The suitcase will serve as a recurring symbol of the compulsion to lock one's feelings up due to the weight of grief.

Scene 6: Story of a Father Quotes

The Woman walks over to the grave and embraces the block of ice. Springing away, she turns to the audience and clutches her breast.

THE WOMAN: Oh my sousou.

The Woman sits on the edge of the grave.

I'm trying to deal with Dad's death. He hasn't died yet, but the time is coming soon when he'll be taken away.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Woman's Father

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Woman uses the ice block to underscore her premature fear of her father's death. The ice block,

which has been steadily melting beneath the stage lights over the course of the play (and which will continue to melt down as the action continues), serves as a symbol of the constant erosion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' communities. The Woman's fear of her father's death—which is, considering his relative youth, startling—speaks to the instability and uncertainty that is often a feature of First Nations people's lives. Because of institutional racism—and Australia's legacy of colonialism, genocide, and other forms of racism—the Woman and countless others like her live in anticipation of the very worst. This passage connects the symbol of the ice block with the Woman's fear of her father's death—both of which cause a painful ache in her breast, or her "sousou," as she considers the mortality not just of her family members, but also of her people's sense of tradition and solidarity.

Scene 9: Invasion Poem Quotes

They come in the front door
Smiling
Offering gifts.
I invited them in, they demanded respect.
They sat in my father's seat
And talked to me of things that made no sense.
I nodded. Listened. Gave them my ear
As I was always taught to.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 283

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Woman performs "Invasion Poem"—an abstract spoken word piece that may be drawn from the Woman's personal experience, from stories passed down to her by the women in her family, or from some combination of the two. The Woman describes receiving a visit from strangers who smile and offer gifts to her—yet they demand respect, take over the house, and soon begin physically assaulting the Woman, separating her from her children and beating her with a stick to silence her. In addition to being a description of a realistic event, this scene is also allegorical, alluding to what happened when the colonists came to Australia and destroyed the societies of First Nations peoples. In this way, the men represent white colonists who came to Australia and betrayed the indigenous peoples living there, and the Woman represents those indigenous communities. So, through this lens, this scene is both an evocation of the particular vulnerability of indigenous women to violence (especially sexual violence), and a broader allegory of the exploitative relationship between white colonists and indigenous peoples over several centuries.

It's worth remembering this passage later on in the play when the Woman expresses her frustration with Reconciliation (the Australian government's attempt to broker peace and understanding between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians). From the Woman's perspective, the relationship between her community and colonizers has, for centuries, been one of unrelenting violence, betrayal, and exploitation. Because of this, well-meaning rhetoric from the Australian government isn't nearly enough to ease the suffering of her community, which makes Reconciliation a failure.

Scene 10: 1788 Quotes

The date 1788 appears.

Hey, you! Yeah, you with that hat! You can't park there! You're taking up the whole harbour! Go on, get!

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 284

Explanation and Analysis

This passage (which is the entirety of Scene 10) follows a scene in which the Woman describes being raped by white men who invade her house, an allegory of white colonizers invading Aboriginal lands and destroying their communities. In this very brief scene, the Woman imagines that it is 1788, the year in which English colonists first arrived in Australia, and she tells the white English colonizers wearing silly hats to turn around and head home. The scene is a moment of comic relief following the devastating previous scene, yet it also represents an earnest longing for a version of the world in which the English never arrived in the land now known as Australia. Since this scene immediately follows the allegory of the British rape of indigenous communities, this scene is clearly expressing a wish that the British really had been turned away immediately, which would have changed history, eliminating all the violence and destruction to which the Woman and her people have been subjected in the centuries that followed. The Woman also uses her wishful banishment of the English colonists to declare her resistance to the "space" they have come to take up,

acknowledging that their presence has crowded out her own community. This underscores how important resistance to colonialism has become to her and her people.

Scene 11: Murri Gets a Dress Quotes

❝ Thinking that tomorrow will be a better day, I go to bed. Kicking that sniffer dog out. Still with the sound of sirens in my head. Snuggling up to my doona and pillow. Morning comes, I wake up, looking in the mirror. Nice hair, beautiful black skin, white shiny teeth. I'M STILL BLACK! NUNNA!

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 285

Explanation and Analysis

This passage, taken from the final moments of Scene 11, concludes a scene in which the Woman recounts the harassment and prejudice she faces during an ordinary trip to the shopping mall. In spite of the racial profiling she experiences at a department store and the cruelty she faces when her car breaks down on the way home, the Woman continues to repeat throughout the scene a variation of the refrain "nice hair, beautiful back skin, white shiny teeth." In the scene's final lines, the Woman describes waking up the morning after her harrowing trip to the mall and declaring proudly that she is "still black." Even with the sound of police sirens ringing in her ears and memories of the "sniffer dog" that followed her through the mall, the Woman rejoices in her identity. No measure of racism can make her wish that she were different.

As she proudly declares "NUNNA!," the Gamilaraay word for "me," it is clear that no matter the challenges the Woman faces, she uses pride in her identity as a form of resistance against the racism she often faces. The Woman views her Aboriginal identity and her connection to her people as a kind of protective shield against society's attempts to both repress and oppress her. The Woman is "still" black in spite of society's attempts to force her to assimilate and to make her feel shame for being herself. Rather than cave to these cruel, unjust pressures, the Woman doubles down on her pride in the color of her skin, the language of her people, and her culture's resilience in the face of centuries of oppression. The Woman's proud, unapologetic declaration at the end of this scene confirms her unwavering pride in both her individual and cultural identity.

Scene 12: Aunty Grace Quotes

❝ I never saw her cry the whole time she was with us.

Dad said she was stuck-up and wasn't really family. She married this Englishman after World War II. There was a photo of her on a ship waving with this white fella, his arm around her. For some reason she didn't stay, which in my family is strange.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Woman's Grandmother/Nana, The Woman's Father, Aunty Grace

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 286

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Woman describes meeting her Aunty Grace for the first time. Aunty Grace, who lives abroad, returns home when her mother (the Woman's grandmother) dies. Aunty Grace is "strange" to the Woman—she is unemotional, which contrasts with the Woman's family's intense grief, and she is different from the rest of her family because of her marriage to a white man. One thing to notice here is that the Woman says there *was* a photo of Aunty Grace—the past tense hints at the fact that pictures of Aunty Grace have been stuffed away in the suitcase that is normally meant to store photos of the dead. So the family does not simply consider Aunty Grace "strange" for leaving—she's estranged from them and essentially considered dead.

Aunty Grace's estrangement shows how seriously the family takes their shared heritage and responsibility to one another. They find Aunty Grace's behavior to be a betrayal, perhaps because they see Aunty Grace as having chosen to assimilate to British culture. This, of course, is especially difficult for the family because the British colonized Australia, so British people have been responsible for generations of their suffering, and now a British man has taken Aunty Grace away. It seems that they feel that Aunty Grace has rejected the family and their way of life, which is already under threat, so her departure undermines the solidarity and pride that keep indigenous communities together.

As the Woman gets to know her distant aunt, though, it becomes clear that colonialism and oppression have affected her in more ways than first meet the eye. The Woman's family doesn't consider Aunty Grace's reasons for leaving, but it seems that Aunty Grace left Australia in an attempt to escape the pain, suffering, and generational trauma that defined her upbringing. In this light, it's possible to interpret her choice to live in England as a parallel to the

numbness that the Woman periodically feels—both are a way to escape impossible amounts of grief and pain.

> I drive Aunty Grace out to the cemetery on our way to the airport. She doesn't have much luggage, there is plenty of room but no one from the family comes to see her off. I wait in the car while she goes out to the freshly turned soil of Nana's grave. She is there for such a long time, I think we are going to be late. Finally she returns to the car, opens the back door and removes a suitcase. She opens it and proceeds to throw the contents all over the ground, everything. [...] Crying, at last, crying.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Woman's Grandmother/Nana, Aunty Grace

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 286-287

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, as the Woman describes her and her Aunty Grace's emotional visit to the cemetery where Nana was recently buried, the Woman begins to understand her aunt's pain. The Woman drives Aunty Grace to the airport on the day of her departure because no one else in the family will see her off—they all feel betrayed by Aunty Grace's marriage to a white Englishman and her decision to live her life in England, the homeland of the colonizers who destroyed their lands and culture. However, as Aunty Grace risks missing her flight back to England in order to grieve her mother, she demonstrates that she still feels conflicted about leaving and perhaps harbors regret over the choices that have pulled her so far away from her family both physically and emotionally.

As Aunty Grace, pushed to the brink of her suffering, retrieves her suitcase and scatters its contents all over the ground, she allows herself the first emotional release of her entire trip. Aunty Grace hasn't cried at any other point in her visit, yet now, she succumbs to feeling and rejects the numbness that has characterized her response to her mother's death. In choosing to scatter the contents of her suitcase over the ground, Aunty Grace expresses the conflict she feels about having created a life so far away from the physical and emotional terrain of her youth and her people's homeland

Aunty Grace's choice to scatter the contents of her suitcase also foreshadows a similar interaction the Woman will have with her own suitcase later on the in the play. The suitcase that the Woman carries comes from her parents' home and has long been used as a repository for photographs of family members who have died or become estranged. By placing in parallel the Woman's and Aunty Grace's scattering of suitcases, Enoch and Mailman suggest that an essential "stage of grieving" is release and catharsis. Aunty Grace and the Woman both have their breaking points—in recalling bearing witness to Aunty Grace's breaking point, the Woman foreshadows her own.

Scene 13: Mugshot Quotes

> The ambulance got there and they had to pump needles into him, they were pounding his chest, giving mouth-to-mouth, whilst the others stood back and watched. They took him to the Royal Brisbane Hospital, pounding and pushing his limp body.

The Woman returns to the written word.

The resuscitation attempts were unsuccessful and at 7.13 p.m. he was pronounced dead.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), Daniel Yocke

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout Scene 13—a scene in which the Woman relays the story of Daniel Yocke, an Aboriginal man who died in police custody in 1993—the Woman has been delivering her lines in the formal, stilted, emotionless manner of a court report. In this passage, though, she breaks from that clinical form of expression to convey some of her grief at Yocke's death, before returning finally to the form of the court report to relay, coldly, that he died. The Woman's emotionless, formal delivery throughout the scene is significant both in the larger context of the play and in the context of this passage in particular. Colonial oppression in contemporary Australia often takes the form of repression, which encourages indigenous peoples to detach from or ignore the horrors of racism and police brutality. However, in reading the official report—which omits the horror of Yocke's experience and fails to place responsibility for his death on the police who brutalized him—the woman shows how incomplete and profane the "official narrative" of colonialism is.

When the Woman breaks with her predetermined script and begins animating Yocke's story with more humane,

lively language, she is, in a sense, speaking out against what she's reading. Her need to rebel against the official narrative and inject her own emotion and narrative is, in a way, parallel to her struggle throughout the play between expressing emotion and repressing it, thereby going numb. In this scene, emotion, anger, and empathy win out—perhaps because she feels that she owes it to Yocke not to censor or tame his pain. It's also possible to read the Woman's previous detachment and lack of emotion as a satire of the way the news media relays stories of Aboriginal suffering—yet her indignance and anger is so overwhelming that she cannot keep up the charade.

Scene 14: March Quotes

"Defiant Aboriginal March'
'Aboriginal March, Traffic Stopper'

No one said that about the fucken Santa Parade the week before!

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Woman describes participating in a parade of First Nations peoples through the streets of Brisbane in protest of the unjust death of Daniel Yocke, an Aboriginal man who died in police custody in 1993. The Woman reports the headlines from the news outlets that covered the march—headlines that refer to the march as "defiant" or inconvenient, classifying it as a needless "traffic stopper" that interferes with the status quo. In contrast, these news outlets did not find the Santa Parade to be inconvenient or defiant—presumably, the media treated that parade as a charming and essential part of culture. In this way, the woman illustrates how white Christian culture—the culture of colonizers, which brings the Santa Parade—is broadly celebrated, whereas First Nations peoples protesting for basic rights are misunderstood and mistreated in the press. For Aboriginal peoples like the Woman, their every action is subject to scrutiny by white colonizers—even as they attempt to highlight the injustices, inequities, and cruelties to which they are subjected.

The Woman's language in this passage indicates how angry she is about the inequalities that she and her people are forced to face in every aspect of their lives. Her use of a curse word as she invokes the "Santa Parade" of the week before—a white, colonialist, Christian event which went off without a hitch—demonstrates her fury at how her people's public mourning is seen as inconvenient while a celebratory event for white people is seen as a necessity. In highlighting the ways in which white Australia refuses to take the suffering of First Nations peoples seriously, the Woman indicts the oppressive forces of colonialism which, after two centuries, continue to police, judge, and control her people.

Scene 15: Bargaining Quotes

The sound of hammering. The Woman slams a nail through two pieces of wood. She stands and carries the wooden cross over to the grave. As she drives it into the red earth, the words 'FOR SALE' are revealed.

What is it worth?

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Although this scene is simple, there are many layers of meaning behind its action. By building a cross, the Woman is invoking Christianity—the religion of the colonizers who overtook her people's land, murdered countless First Nations peoples, and instituted a system of white Christian colonial rule built to structurally exclude the people it colonized. The tenets of Christianity are, in theory, love, equity, kindness, and generosity—but, as the Woman points out, colonizers have used Christianity as a weapon rather than a roadmap for how to be good to others. The Woman points out the hypocrisy of those who pay lip service to Christian values while in reality using the religion to justify their cruelest actions.

Here, the red earth is a symbol of indigenous people's sacred lands, and planting a cross on it is a potent visual representation of all the physical, emotional, and cultural losses her people have suffered as a result of colonialism. She is showing how her people's sacred lands mean nothing to the colonizers who bought them, traded them, and sold them amongst themselves while murdering and oppressing the land's indigenous inhabitants. The Woman plants the cross in the grave meant to represent her Nana's final resting place, demonstrating how thoughtlessly white Christian colonizers co-opt sacred places with no thought to their meaning or value to indigenous peoples. The Woman's vague question, "What is it worth," asks the

audience to confront how ridiculous it is to place monetary value on something as sacred as a gravesite or ancestral lands. What a place is "worth" to a white colonist stands in stark contrast to the emotional, spiritual, and cultural worth that First Nations peoples find in their homelands.

Scene 16: Home Story Quotes

The Woman gathers up the smaller piles and relocates them on the white fringing that defines the black performing area.

Now imagine when the children are taken away from this. Are you with me?

The Woman flays her arm through the remaining large pile and circle, destroying it.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 292

Explanation and Analysis

At the conclusion of this scene, entitled "Home Story," the Woman finishes a long and complicated demonstration of her people's complex traditions and social systems. She has gone deep into the demonstration for the audience while admitting to them that even she finds some aspects of her people's heritage and customs esoteric or hard to understand. By showing how delicate and intricate these systems are, the Woman hammers home her point that when "children are taken away" from their homes or their families or find themselves emotionally removed from their heritage, they are utterly lost.

By dashing the piles of earth that she has been using to illustrate her story—while leaving others intact but on the fringe "white" spaces onstage—the Woman visually represents how huge swaths of history and tradition are wiped out by colonialism's attempts to encourage assimilation while stripping indigenous peoples of their lands, their communities, and their sense of pride in their identities. Not only does colonialism wreak emotional havoc on young indigenous peoples by alienating them from their families' histories and their own individual senses of pride—it also contributes to the erosion of traditions, languages, and rituals that are ancient and vital. The Woman uses the image of the red earth, a visual representation of her people's myriad physical, emotional, and cultural losses, to illustrate how structural racism and the ravages of colonialism continue, even in modern times, to "destroy" indigenous people and their communities.

Scene 17: Story of a Brother Quotes

This is how it starts. This is how it starts, the cycle. The cycle. [...]

You see. . .
No matter how clean our clothes are,
No matter how tidy we keep our house,
Or how well we speak the language,
How promptly we pay our bills,
How hard we work,
How often we pray,
No matter how much we smile and nod,
We are black, and we are here, and that will never change.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker), The Woman's Brother

Related Themes:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Woman tells the audience about her brother's recent struggles with the law. The Woman fears that her brother—who is now due in court for a petty charge fueled by racism—is about to slip into an unending cycle of depression, substance abuse, poverty, and violence. In this passage, The Woman, makes clear that she doesn't blame her brother for falling victim to this slippery slope—instead, she blames structural racism across Australia. After relaying her brother's story, the Woman widens her scope and attempts to make the audience see why such "cycle[s]" disproportionately entrap indigenous peoples within them. The Woman despairs that no matter how fervently she, her brother, and their people more largely attempt to assimilate and to operate efficiently and enthusiastically within the very systems which judge, profile, and shortchange them, they will never be seen as anything other than "black." The Woman cannot change the color of her skin, nor can she change her heritage, nor can she change the systems that demonize her for both. This scene is full of despair as the Woman, able to see clearly the cycles and systems that hold people like her brother hostage, recognizes that things may never really change for the better. The Woman states her belief that just being "here" makes her people vulnerable to the scrutiny and judgement of white Australian society, implying that the cycles that entrap vulnerable people like her brother remove First Nations peoples from larger society and keep them relegated to the shadows.

Scene 19: Suitcase Opening Quotes

The Woman paints herself as if preparing for war. Though her movements are restricted her voice assails the audience with a sense of all-encompassing sorrow. She takes the suitcase, opens it, throwing the red earth and family photos it contains all over the floor. The Woman grieves over the photographs.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

In this brief scene, the Woman's actions and gestures speak to the depths of her anger, her grief, and her fear. When the Woman paints herself in traditional paint "as if preparing for war," Mailman and Enoch show how, for countless Aboriginal people, the struggle to resist giving into one's grief is an ongoing war. The Woman's sorrow is uncontainable at this point in the play, as evidenced by her reckless and almost rageful treatment of the suitcase and its symbolic contents. The photographs and the red earth inside are potent visual reminders of all the Woman—and her people more largely—have lost over the years: lands, families, traditions, and knowledge. The Woman's treatment of these things demonstrates that, while she longs to grieve them and give them her attention, she simultaneously wishes she could cast them aside and forget the pain they continue to cause her. The Woman's struggle throughout the play has been the battle between feeling and numbness—here, she surrenders entirely to her feeling in one stunning moment of catharsis, yet in the scenes to come, she will continue to skeptically weigh the pain of emotion versus the benefits of numbness and detachment. The opening of the suitcase allows the Woman to confront her grief and free herself, at least for a moment, from its heavy burden—but whether she will choose the pain of actively grieving her losses over the return to the heavy numbness of denial remains to be seen.

Scene 21: Everything Has Its Time Quotes

Wreck, Con, Silly, Nation.

Some of the people I talk to would write it like this.
What does it mean when some people can't even read or write the word?

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, the Woman grapples with the futility and insufficiency of the concept of Reconciliation. Reconciliation is a contemporary movement in Australian society meant to repair relations between white Australians and Australia's indigenous peoples. Though initiated in the early 1990s in good faith, the idea of Reconciliation remains controversial. White Australia must ask itself if they can ever atone for the evils of colonialism, the brutality and genocide perpetrated against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the inequalities in contemporary Australian society. First Nations peoples must reckon with a futile attempt on the part of the government to repair the immense damage and irretrievable losses that colonialism has wrought upon their communities for over two hundred years.

In this passage, the Woman herself seems contemptuous of the idea of Reconciliation—when the people that Reconciliation claims to benefit can't even spell the word "Reconciliation" itself, there is an inherent failure in the government's promises. By choosing four smaller words which embody the futility of Reconciliation—the "wreck" it will be in practice, the "con" of the "silly" idea that reparations are even possible, and the broken, unjust "nation" which still revolves around white supremacy—the Woman attempts to express the depths of her contempt for and anger with the failures of the Australian government.

Scene 22: Plea Quotes

You know there has always been this grieving,
Grieving for our land, our families.
Our cultures that have been denied us.
But we have been taught to cry quietly
Where only our eyes betray us with tears.
But now, we can no longer wait,
I am scared my heart is hardening.
I fear I can no longer grieve
I am so full and know my capacity for grief

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Woman speaks poetically and sadly as she describes the continual grieving that has been with her people for centuries. Since the arrival of white colonists and settlers, First Nations people have found themselves steeped in grief for all that has been taken away from them—yet they must "cry quietly," since announcing their grief, pain, and anger publicly leads to apathy or ridicule at best and, at worst, violence and brutality. There has been so much that the Woman and her people have been "denied"—and they can't even mourn their losses.

This scene is entitled "Plea"—and the Woman's titular plea to the audience is one for their attention and their empathy. The Woman needs others to see how urgent the issues facing her community are. Her people "can no longer wait" for change, yet amongst them, many hearts are "hardening" as a result of the trauma, grief, and pain that define so many of their lives. The Woman fears that, in the absence of an outlet for mourning, grieving, or coping, her people will become numb to their own painful history. The Woman herself feels that her grief has reached "capacity"—she fears that she can no longer do justice to the act of grieving, and she feels a deep measure of guilt about that fact. This passage suggests that, while the Woman does not want to choose numbness, she ultimately has no choice—there is no more room for the sorrow and emotion that fill her.

❝ *The Woman places the suitcase down at the feet of the audience.*

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Scene 22, the penultimate scene in *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, the Woman sets down and walks away from her suitcase, a central symbol of the emotional baggage associated with grief. This marks the Woman's arrival at an endpoint in her continual struggle between emotion and numbness.

The suitcase, a symbol of the difficulty of carrying personal and collective grief, has been with the Woman for much of the play. It's been filled with images of her family members who have passed away, with clumps of the red earth (symbolizing Australia's First Nations people's loss of lands and traditions), and with the flawed, impossible idea of Reconciliation. The Woman's constant unpacking and repacking of the suitcase has suggested that, no matter how present she is for her grief and how much she expresses her emotions, there will always be more "baggage" to deal with. The Woman will never be finished unpacking and repacking her suitcase, struggling to contain the things that pain her, even as she knows that she'll always carry them in some form. After delivering a monologue in which she describes her sadness at the "hardening" of her heart, the Woman leaves her suitcase with the audience, signaling a shifting of responsibility: everyone bearing witness to the Woman's pain also has a responsibility to carry it, particularly by trying to change the racism and oppression that caused her grief in the first place. While the Woman has carried her suitcase alone for much of the play—and struggled to carry it because of its weight—perhaps the audience, by sharing her burden, can help lessen her grief.

Scene 23: Relief Quotes

❝ *The Woman walks into a pool of light. She stands, face uplifted, as if in gentle rain.*

THE WOMAN: Nothing

Nothing

Nothing

I feel Nothing

The Woman finally leaves.

Related Characters: The Woman (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 297

Explanation and Analysis

In the final moments of *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, the Woman steps away from the suitcase she has set at the feet of the audience and walks into a "pool of light" awaiting her on stage. After tilting her head up in a gentle, accepting posture, the Woman repeats the word "nothing" three times before declaring that she feels nothing and leaving the stage. The play's final lines are devastating, revealing the Woman's utterly blank response to all the suffering and grieving she has done onstage in real time over the course of the play. The ending can be read in two different ways, each of which suggests a different motivation behind the

Woman's surrender to "nothing[ness.]"

In the first reading, the Woman willfully decides to stop feeling the intense grief that she has felt throughout the play as she's relayed stories from her personal life, her family history, and her people's traditions. She decides that feeling nothing is better than feeling the immensity of her own pain and she retreats into blankness. This positions the Woman's absence of emotion as a conscious choice that she has made to protect herself—temporarily or permanently—from the emotional ravages of her experiences with racism and colonialism. The Woman has, throughout the play, relived her worst fears and most painful experiences—now, she feels that she must detach herself from them after such a sustained period of intense emotion.

In the second possible reading, the Woman feels "nothing" through no will or fault of her own: she has simply reached a point of resigned acceptance in her own grieving process, having undergone an involuntarily "hardening" of the heart and mind. This positions the Woman's retreat into numbness as an unstoppable yet tragic consequence of colonialism's endless onslaught of physical and emotional violence. The Woman may not want to "feel Nothing," but the unending burdens she carries require her to detach herself from her experiences from the sake of her own sanity.

No matter the reason behind the Woman's painful declaration, what is clear is that, in the ongoing battle between feeling versus numbness, the Woman has, for the moment, surrendered to the draw of feeling nothing at all rather than everything at once. The scene is titled "Relief," yet as the Woman delivers the play's final lines, she seems to feel an absence of emotion rather than the presence of any actual kind of release, liberation, or healing, suggesting that her journey through grief is not necessarily restorative or even over.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

SCENE 1: PROLOGUE

On a blank stage, a large **block of ice** hangs suspended from the ceiling by seven ropes. It melts onto the ground, which is covered by red earth and conceals a fresh grave. The performance area is covered in black powder and framed by a white border. There are several surfaces for projections. Projected onto one of them is a note from Kooemba Jdarra, the company which originally staged the play. It warns that the material to follow depicts the names and visual representations of recently dead Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The message promises that proper respect will be shown to the memories of these individuals.

At the start of the play, the audience looks out on a stage empty of people but full of potent visual metaphors and symbols. The block of ice suspended by seven ropes (ropes that symbolize the seven stages of grief) will melt over the course of the play as the hot stage lights burn down onto it. The block of ice, then, will emerge as one of the play's central symbols: the ice represents indigenous communities and the hot stage lights represent the destructive forces of racism, poverty, violence, etc. The gradual melting of the ice under the stage lights shows how indigenous lives and communities erode due to white supremacy and the legacy of colonialism.

SCENE 2: SOBBING

In the darkness, there is the sound of a person crying. As the sobs grow louder, the lights come up to reveal an Aboriginal Woman grieving alone. Words having to deal with grief, sorrow, death, mourning, and hopelessness are projected in swift succession on the projection spaces across the stage. At last, the evocative words are replaced with the word "nothing" and the phrase "I feel…. Nothing".

The introduction of the play's main character—the Woman—shows that she is mired in grief. As the Woman vacillates between intense, overwhelming feeling and a clear desire for numbness and relief from her pain, Mailman and Enoch begin to explore the human capacity for so much grieving and feeling. Throughout the play, the Woman will not proceed through the stages of grief—shock, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, testing, and acceptance—in any linear order. Instead, she will vacillate between these stages and others as she grapples with the temptation to sever herself from her feelings altogether and surrender to numbness.

SCENE 3: PURIFICATION

The Woman lights eucalypt leaves on fire and watches them burn, then blows out the flame. As the embers smoke, she sings a song in the Gamilaraay (sometimes spelled Kamilaroi) language for the spirits of those she has lost, asking for their permission to tell the tale of her sorrow. The words of the song translate roughly to a kind of prayer for cleanliness and a lament about the heaviness of the Woman's weeping.

The Woman's purification ritual demonstrates her desire to pull herself together and climb up out of her sorrow in order to tell the stories of her family and her people. Storytelling is the only way the Woman knows how to make sense of her grief or to do justice to her family. In spite of the heaviness of her pain, the Woman knows that she has a responsibility to her people and to herself to soldier on in the face of sorrow.

SCENE 4: NANA'S STORY

The performance space is suddenly flooded with color, light, and sound. As the Woman tells her story, the sounds of family, birds, and American country music can be heard. The woman describes returning home for the funeral of her God-fearing sixty-two-year-old grandmother, to which she and all her cousins wore bright floral dresses—"the only thing black at a funeral," they believed, "should be the colour of your skin."

As the Woman begins her performance in earnest, reaching into the past in order to share with the audience her experiences and struggles, she decides to start with a family story that illustrates the resilience of her kin and their people more largely. In the face of grief, they try to let in light and levity and stand tall.

The mourning rites and rituals, the Woman recalls, lasted a month. Her whole extended family, which is nearly fifty people, lived close together in a group of five houses, coming together each day for meals to celebrate the life and mourn the passing of their matriarch—a woman who feared hospitals, policemen, and the government. The Woman remembers her grandmother as someone who loved storytelling and singing—especially country music like the song "Delta Dawn." Four hundred people, the Woman says, attended her grandmother's funeral—so many that they couldn't all fit in the church and were forced to sit in the shade outside listening.

As the Woman tells of how well-attended Nana's funeral was—and how her death inspired togetherness, unity, and even a kind of happiness amongst the members of her extended family—it becomes clear that in times of sorrow and grief, pride in one's identity and traditions becomes a way to stay resilient. To devote a whole month to collective mourning also shows how important grief and community are in this setting. This passage shows how, while sometimes grief can tear people apart, it can also bring them closer together, which evokes the symbolism of the block of ice held by seven ropes next to hot lights. The ropes—symbolizing grief—simultaneously hold the ice together (symbolizing how grief can bring indigenous peoples closer) and make the ice more vulnerable to melting under the lights (symbolizing how grief can intensify other forms of suffering).

Though the Woman's family's time of mourning was a sorrowful one, it also allowed for moments of great joy. After each meal, the boys in the family would "paint up and dance," or don traditional clothing and body paint and perform Aboriginal songs and dances. The girls of the family would sometimes participate and put on their own shows while nearby neighbors looked on.

The Woman provides more examples of how, even in the midst of great sadness, her family's collective pride in their identity, history, and traditions allowed them to navigate their grief and even feel moments of hope and happiness.

The Woman says she misses her grandmother intensely, and she resents that stories of her grandmother's life, traditions, and heritage have now gone with her to her grave. The Woman, alone on stage, sings the opening lines of "Delta Dawn"—lines which speak of going to a "mansion in the sky."

The Woman knows that while the loss of her grandmother is personal, it is also much larger than that—with each elderly member of the community who dies, some of the old stories and traditions die with them. The Woman's grief, then, is not just for herself and her family—it is for her people and the entire Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, whose histories are being eroded. This is yet another instance in which the Woman's individual grief is disorganized or disordered by her larger existential grief for the losses her people have suffered over the years.

SCENE 5: PHOTOGRAPH STORY

On the empty stage, there are sounds of a chair scraping across the floor and a clock ticking. The projection spaces fill with images of an open **suitcase** full of family photographs, slowly zooming in on the details in the pictures. The Woman describes the suitcase, which remains stowed under the old stereo in the front room of her parents' house. The room is full of photographs and memorabilia such as trophies and pennants—it is a monument to the family's good times. The suitcase contains the pictures of the dead and nameless. It sits safely out of reach beneath the stereo. On the day of the Woman's grandmother's death, she and her parents remove their pictures of her from the wall and place them into the suitcase, pushing her out of sight.

This scene introduces the central symbol of the suitcase. As the suitcase contains pictures of the dead, it becomes a repository for the grief that the Woman and her family feel. The suitcase makes that grief easier to carry (putting the pictures away is a concrete step for processing grief and it keeps those memories both safe and out of sight), but the suitcase also—with each added death—becomes heavier and more difficult to bear. This scene also hints at the community's constant collective grief. The fact that they have a designated process (putting pictures in the suitcase) for dealing with loss shows that they've had to grapple with how best to tolerate their ongoing grief. Aboriginal communities like the Woman's are in a constant state of grief for the lands, traditions, cultures, and people that have been lost, which leads to rituals like these.

SCENE 6: STORY OF A FATHER

The Woman approaches the grave, embraces the **block of ice**, then turns to the audience and clutches her chest. She complains of pain in her breast. She sits at the edge of the grave and talks to the audience. She is trying to deal with her father's death. Though he isn't dead yet, she feels he'll soon be taken away. At only forty-five, he is already in and out of the hospital frequently. When the Woman thinks of her father alone in the dark, she finds herself crying until she is numb. She is grateful for knowing she'll never have to live through the things her father has—yet she feels selfish in that gratitude. The Woman finds comfort, when thinking about death, in the realization that everyone and everything dies. The Woman walks offstage.

The Woman's preemptive grief over her father's loss is tied inextricably with the symbol of the melting block of ice. The Woman feels that, for her father, time is running out. As she embraces the block—an object whose melting reminds her of how steadily her community is being eroded by the forces of racism, poverty, and colonization—she feels pained and frightened. This scene is emblematic of the ways in which the Woman feels the effects of the seven stages of grief, but not necessarily in a linear order. She is grieving her father's death before it has even happened—even as she struggles against numbness in other areas of her emotional life.

SCENE 7: FAMILY GATHERING

The images from the **suitcase** are projected on the projection spaces around the stage like portraits hanging in an art gallery.

This brief interlude pays homage to those who, like Nana, have died and taken a piece of history and tradition along with them.

SCENE 8: BLACK SKIN GIRL

The Woman dances around and sings with a childlike, carefree attitude. The letters of the alphabet begin appearing on her dress. At first, the Woman is delighted, but soon she becomes desperate to evade them. She removes her dress to reveal that the letter Z has appeared on her chest. The Woman sings a song in Gamilaraay, repeating the words "black skin girl" and a refrain which loosely translates to celebrating becoming strong within her own skin.

This symbolic scene demonstrates how the Woman seeks to disassociate herself from the language of her white colonialist oppressors and celebrate her own identity.

SCENE 9: INVASION POEM

The sounds of a chair scraping and a clock ticking can be heard once again. The Woman delivers an abstract spoken poem describing strangers who come in the front door of her house offering gifts and demanding respect. They sit in her father's seat and talk to her. Though the things they say make no sense, she nods and listens as she has been taught to do. Then, without warning, the strangers take a handful of her hair and begin beating and, the poem implies, raping her. Her children are wrenched away from her, the protests of her ancestors are silenced, and her people are forbidden from speaking, dancing, and doing the things they've always done. The Woman is pained and sleepless even in the midst of a sacred landscape. She retrieves her dress and puts it back on.

In this scene, the Woman begins to blur the line between personal experience and inherited, generational trauma. The language of "Invasion Poem" is vague enough that it's possible that the Woman is speaking of a personal experience, yet it's also a possibility that she's relaying a story that belongs to another female member of her extended family, or a story that belongs to her community more broadly (the story of the white colonial invasion of indigenous society and land). The poem examines colonial violence and its devastating consequences on indigenous people and families—a universal truth regardless of the specifics of the poem's details, to whom these events happened, or when.

SCENE 10: 1788

The date 1788 is projected onto the stage. The Woman comes out on stage and calls out to "you with that hat," telling the unseen individual that they are taking up the whole harbor and must leave.

This brief (and slightly comic) scene demonstrates the Woman's wish that she could travel back in time and stop white settlers from ever arriving in her ancestors' homeland. It is a small but potent act of resistance.

SCENE 11: MURRI GETS A DRESS

The Woman delivers a monologue in the style of a stand-up comedy routine. She describes waking up in the morning and, as if for the first time, realizing that she is black. She describes the "special treatment" she receives as a black woman, such as being followed around in department stores and harassed with racial slurs. As the Woman describes a trip to a shopping mall, she recounts the harassment she faces in each location: in the shop, in the elevator, in the parking lot, and even on the road far from the mall when her car breaks down. No one, she says, ever stops to help her when she's in need. The only times people pay attention to her are when they are suspicious of her.

The Woman chooses a stand-up-style delivery for this scene perhaps in order to blunt the pain of relaying such a frustrating story about the prejudice and dehumanization that she and other members of her community face every day. The Woman is frustrated but unsurprised by the fact that she's racially profiled in the mall yet ignored on the road after car trouble. By delivering this story from a comedic perspective, the Woman can point out how cruel and arbitrary racism is while maintaining an emotional distance from the difficult things she's discussing.

The Woman describes arriving home at long last after receiving an escort home from "policem[e]n, firem[e]n, army, [and the] fucken UN." Once the Woman is back from the shopping mall and wearing her "deadly" beautiful new dress, her Auntie admires her new outfit. The Woman goes to sleep that night with the sounds of the sirens of police cars in her ears and the images of police sniffer dogs in her head. The next morning, when she wakes up, she looks in the mirror again and rejoices in the fact that she is still black. "NUNNA," she shouts, which is the Gamilaraay word for "me."

After invoking a fantastical and allegorical scene in which she receives an army escort home ("escort" being a way of sarcastically describing racial profiling and a threatening police presence), the Woman closes the story on a slightly happier note. Even though she acknowledges that there are others just like her who are facing racism, profiling, and violence each day, the Woman knows that the first step in resistance is pride and acceptance of one's identity. Just loving herself is an act of resistance—and a stepping stone to collective action against the prejudice and racism of a society built on colonialism and white supremacy.

SCENE 12: AUNTY GRACE

The Woman digs up the grave, pulling the suitcase out of it. She opens it up and looks out at the audience. She describes the return of her Aunty Grace for her grandmother's funeral. The Woman only ever knew Aunty Grace through the pictures of her in the **suitcase**. Though she is alive, Aunty Grace's pictures were hidden away in the suitcase rather than displayed with the other pictures of the rest of the family. When Aunty Grace arrives for the funeral, she stays in a hotel rather than with the rest of the family.

Aunty Grace is one of the rare members of the family whose pictures are in the suitcase before her death—this symbolizes that, while she's still living, she's dead to her family. Aunty Grace is clearly disconnected from the rest of her family and community and untethered from their experiences, good and bad.

Aunty Grace has lived in London for almost fifty years. No one in the Woman's family ever talked to her about Aunty Grace growing up, and the Woman is surprised when Aunty Grace seems to know everyone in the family, even those she hasn't met, by name. The Woman's father tells her that Aunty Grace is not really part of the family—she moved away and became haughty after marrying an Englishman. The Woman's grandmother often talked resentfully about Aunty Grace's departure.

It is clear that Aunty Grace's marriage to an Englishman (an emotional abandonment) and her move to England (a physical abandonment) have taken their toll on the Woman's family. The Woman's father and grandmother always saw Aunty Grace as insufficiently proud of or devoted to her heritage. This marriage is perhaps even more loaded since the British colonized Australia in the first place, and now the family seems to think that Aunty identifies more with the British than with the indigenous community she comes from.

On the day of Aunty Grace's departure, the Woman drives her to the airport. On the way, the Woman stops at the cemetery so that Aunty Grace can look at the fresh soil of Nana's grave. Aunty Grace stands by the grave for a long while, then returns to the car, retrieves her **suitcase**, opens it up, and strews its contents all over the ground. She drags the empty suitcase back to the grave, sits down, and begins to cry for the first time since she has been visiting. The Woman fills her own suitcase with red earth, then she places the filled suitcase on top of the grave.

In this passage, Aunty Grace—an outsider who seemed to have severed her connections, emotional and physical, to her past—reveals herself to be in a great deal of grief and pain. Though Aunty Grace may have tried to numb herself to the suffering of her family and her people by removing herself from them, upon her return, she cannot detach herself any longer. Instead, she surrenders to her pain. The Woman symbolically fills the suitcase—an object which belongs simultaneously to her, her parents, and her Aunty Grace—with red earth to indicate her willingness to bear the suffering of her family alone.

SCENE 13: MUGSHOT

The Woman delivers a long, emotionless monologue in the style of a court report. She describes an incident which takes place on November 7th, 1993, when a group of nine young Aboriginal men go out together in Southbank, a populous area of Brisbane. One of the men, Daniel Yocke, gets into an altercation with an unknown person. The group heads for another neighborhood, where they purchase alcohol and drink together in a public space called Musgrave Park. Two constables patrolling the area allegedly receive reports of the group being rowdy or even "abusive." When the men leave the park and split up into smaller groups, the constables follow the largest group to another nearby park. The constables call for backup, and two more officers arrive.

In this scene, the Woman uses a real-life story of racial profiling and police brutality to illustrate the racism, prejudice, and structural inequality that her people must face on a daily basis. She chooses the style of a court report to relay the story of Daniel Yocke, just as she used the style of a stand-up comedy routine to relay her own story of racial profiling. Only by distancing herself from the material can the woman divorce herself enough from her grief and rage to deliver the facts—the emotional truth of the cruelty her people face is too much to bear otherwise.

As the group of Aboriginal men enter the park, the officers follow them. At this point in the story, the Woman stops abruptly and looks out at the audience for a moment before continuing with her report. As the group in the park disperses and runs from the constables, the police arrest Yocke and drive him to a nearby hostel, where they engage in a struggle with a group of youths. The Woman finally breaks down, crying out that Yocke was called "Boonie," a racial slur used against Aboriginal Australians and Pacific Islanders. The woman quickly reels herself in and continues her report.

As the Woman continues telling Yocke's story, she finds herself breaking as she gets to the most difficult, emotional parts of it. While the Woman has employed emotional distancing measures to tell the stories she needs to tell, she ultimately finds that she cannot hide her grief and pain, even though she hasn't told the most difficult part yet.

Other officers arrive on the scene, patrolling the area for any other "offenders." The police car carrying Yocke leaves the hostel and arrives at the Brisbane City Watchhouse (or police station). Upon Yocke's arrival, he is in bad shape. The guards at the watchhouse soon notice he has no pulse and call an ambulance. When the ambulance arrives, the paramedics attempt to resuscitate him, then they take him to the Royal Brisbane Hospital where he is pronounced dead.

As the Woman concludes her story, she pulls herself together and delivers its tragic ending in the flat, disconnected monotone she originally adopted. The Woman is determined to share with the audience the hard facts of Yocke's story, highlighting the apathy and brutality with which he had to contend in his final moments.

SCENE 14: MARCH

The Woman stands tall, rocking her body along with the pace of a march. A call goes out in the wake of Yocke's death for a peaceful march in Musgrave Park one morning. Thousands participate—they are not fighting, the Woman says, but grieving. She describes being in the crowd of people marching in silence. Her father, her grandmother, and her brothers and sisters are with her as helicopters circle overhead. Whenever anyone feels like fighting or yelling, the Woman says, they should instead grab that anger in their hand and hold up their grief to the world.

As the Woman describes attending the march in protest of Daniel Yocke's death, she speaks of a feeling of solidarity and communal, collective grief which she has rarely known outside of her family. As the Woman describes having members of her family there with her, she may be speaking literally or symbolically: her actual family many not be with her, but in the presence of her community and her people, she feels surrounded by those who share her feelings, her experiences, and her grief.

The Woman describes the news reports about the march. The news called the gathering a "Defiant Aboriginal March" and a "Traffic Stopper." No one, she says, reported such things about a "Santa Parade" that took place the week before. The Woman and her people, she states, come from a long tradition of storytelling. She hates that these are the ways their stories are told.

Though the march is cathartic and necessary for the Aboriginal community, the Woman shows how white Australians perceive demonstrations of Aboriginal suffering and discontent as inconvenient and annoying. It's noteworthy that she draws attention to the narratives that white people construct about her community, rejecting those narratives and telling her own story (through the play) instead.

The gathering continues on to the police watchhouse nearby, where the crowd stands quietly for a time before beginning to sing, dance, play instruments, and release ritual smoke. Six thousand people pound the road together in rhythm, but they are not fighting, the Woman says—they are grieving. As police whistles ring out, the Woman raises her arms defiantly. Contradicting her earlier claim that she and her people are "not fighting," the Woman states that she and her people spend most of their lives doing just that.

The Woman knows that, just as Daniel Yocke was racially profiled, her people at the march will also have their actions seen as suspect or agitated. She insists, however, that public grief is not a fight or a provocation—it is often the only justice available.

SCENE 15: BARGAINING

The Woman hammers two pieces of wood together into a cross, drags it over to the grave, and sticks it into the red earth. The cross has the words "FOR SALE" written on it. The Woman turns to the audience and asks plainly, "What is it worth?"

This symbolic scene suggests that white, Christian, colonialist society has no regard for the actual worth of Aboriginal lands, Aboriginal experiences, or Aboriginal peoples.

SCENE 16: HOME STORY

The Woman makes a pile on the ground using red earth from the grave. She tells a story to the audience in the way it was told to her long ago. The Woman warns the audience that the story is complicated—she may get some things wrong but she is going to do her best. The pile of earth, she says, is the land, which is the spirit and the core of everything. She makes a circle around the pile—this circle, she says, represents culture, family, tradition, and song and dance. The story, the Woman warns, is about to get more complicated.

The Woman attempts to explain her people's history and traditions using the red earth that covers the stage as a visual aid. The red earth functions as a visual metaphor—a stand-in for the lands, cultures, and traditions which have been taken from First Nations people since the arrival of white colonists in 1788.

The Woman makes eight smaller piles around the central pile. Because her people have been told they must marry within their "own skin," marriage becomes complicated. She cannot marry from her own pile of brothers and sisters, but she can marry from another pile of cousins. The woman admits that her logic is growing complicated and she continues working to explain whom she can and cannot marry within her people's matrilineal society—but she ends up confusing even herself at times.

The Woman shows how complex systems of family, solidarity, and relationships have been devastated by colonialism. Not only are there far fewer First Nations people due to the ravages of colonialism, but people like the Woman can barely even understand their own history and traditions.

At last, the Woman gathers up the smaller piles and puts them on the white border of the black performance area. She asks the audience to imagine what happens when the children are "taken away from this." She dashes the remaining large pile of red earth, destroying it.

The Woman uses a violent scattering of red earth to demonstrate what happens to indigenous communities over time as a result of colonization, assimilation, structural inequality, and the willful numbness required to cope with colonialist violence. The breakdown of a common history, set of rules, and a family lineage are all consequences of colonization.

SCENE 17: STORY OF A BROTHER

The Woman comes forward to tell a story about her twenty-one-year-old brother. One night, she says, he and his friends are walking along a public mall, drunk. One of the brother's friends is wanted in connection with a crime, and soon police descend on the group to take the young man away. The Woman's brother, who is not the smartest, but who has an intense sense of justice, protests against the arrest by pushing the police officer, who is a young woman. The female cop pushes the Woman's brother to the ground. He is later charged with assault and obstructing justice.

By relaying the story of her brother's struggles with the law shortly after relaying Daniel Yocke's fatal experience with police brutality, the Woman shows how cycles of fear, violence, and uncertainty reverberate throughout her community. She tries to convey the depth of the fear she feels when she considers that her brother could, just by being in the wrong place at the wrong time, become yet another casualty of fatal colonialist violence.

For most people, the Woman explains, such a charge wouldn't be a serious thing—nor would the $250 fine accompanying it or the two-month probation period. Her brother, though, feels such intense shame about the arrest and its consequences that he becomes depressed. He spends all his time at home, loses his job, and can't pay his fine. He goes to court once again for evading the fine, and, because he can't get government assistance, he starts accepting money from his parents, which makes him even more ashamed. The brother begins going out and getting drunk more—he breaks his probation and incurs another fine. This, the Woman says, his how "the cycle" starts.

As the Woman talks about the fallout of her brother's run-in with the law, she communicates to the audience how insidious cycles of crime, poverty, depression, and substance abuse weave their ways into indigenous communities. The Woman knows that she and her family have only limited recourse against the structural racism and injustice that is ingrained into larger Australian society—getting caught in cycles like these is dangerous for anyone, but especially so for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Woman declares that, for her people, no matter how clean, tidy, or compliant they are, no matter how well they speak the language of their oppressors or how promptly they pay their bills or how hard they work at their jobs or how friendly they are, the fact that they are black will never change. Her brother, she says, has another court date in two weeks—no one knows what will happen to him in the end.

The Woman knows that the deck is stacked against her, her family, and her people in general. She has little faith in the racist systems to which they are beholden. In this moment, she can't muster any resistance, detachment, or real hope—all she feels is fear and disappointment.

SCENE 18: GALLERY OF SORROW

A collection of images is projected on the projection spaces across the stage. The images depict the phases of Aboriginal History: Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self-determination, and, finally, Reconciliation.

The Woman relays Aboriginal history as she knows it: a time of Dreaming (or creation), a time of invasion and fear, a time of genocide and loss, a time of protection (in which Aboriginal people attempted to keep themselves safe from worse harm), a time of assimilation (in which colonists forcibly encouraged indigenous people to abandon their traditions, beliefs, and families), a time of self-determination (in which Aboriginal people reclaimed what they could of their histories, traditions, and communities), and a time of Reconciliation between white Australians and Aboriginal people, which is still to come but which may not, as the Woman will go on to explore, even be possible. These seven phases mirror the seven stages of grief—and, in numbering the phases of Aboriginal history in a measure equal to the stages of grieving, the Woman suggests that, just as Aboriginal people's grief is too immense to follow any order or logic, Aboriginal history itself is similarly in a stage of constant flux. Genocide is not strictly in the past—the effects of genocide are still rippling through Aboriginal communities today. Reconciliation is not necessarily in the future—the time for reconciliation, as the woman will later suggest, may have already come and gone.

SCENE 19: SUITCASE OPENING

The Woman paints herself in traditional paint as if she is preparing for war. She makes an indefinable noise of great sorrow. She opens the **suitcase**, scattering the earth and the photos inside all over the floor. She grieves for the photographs, then leaves the stage. Images of family and landscape are projected onto the walls as loud music fills the theater.

As the Woman opens up the suitcase and scatters its contents across the stage, she attempts to unburden herself of the painful losses she has suffered. Because the suitcase is full of photographs of family members and elders who have died, the Woman's emptying the suitcase illustrates the central conundrum she faces: to constantly grieve her many losses is too much to bear—yet to forget them altogether is unbearable in a different way, as it represents a disconnection from her culture, her family, and indeed herself. Her actions, combined with her ritual application of war paint, demonstrate that she is constantly at war with the temptation to give in to sorrow—or, conversely, to numbness.

SCENE 20: WRECK / CON / SILLY / NATION POEM

The Woman, fresh and clean and stripped of paint, returns to the stage. The words *wreck*, *con*, *silly*, and *nation* are projected around the stage—each word is written in a childlike script. The woman delivers an abstract poem in which she describes a wreck on arrival, a changing nation, a con, silly pride for sale, and a nation that knows her identity. She finishes the poem with an image of sun, land, and people traveling.

The abstract poem the Woman shares in this scene breaks down the word "Reconciliation"—the Australian movement to repair relations between white Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people—and points out the ridiculousness of the concept by mocking the four smaller words that "reconciliation" breaks down into (wreck, con, silly, nation). Colonialism is a "con," the woman asserts, which has "wreck[ed]" her people's land. The "silly" pride of colonists and a "nation" built for only a select few are subjects of the Woman's contempt—yet as the scene closes, she chooses to invoke some pleasant images which speak to a hope she still harbors in spite of everything.

SCENE 21: EVERYTHING HAS ITS TIME

The Woman addresses the audience. She speaks the words *wreck*, *con*, *silly*, and *nation* aloud, stating that many people she knows would write the word like this. What does the word mean, she asks, when people can't read or write it? The word RECONCILIATION is projected on the stage, replacing the four smaller words. Reconciliation, she says, shouldn't be something one reads or writes, but something one does.

The Woman uses this scene to point out the fundamental flaws in the concept of Reconciliation. When the people that the process of reconciliation are supposed to help can't even spell the word itself, the Woman suggests, the system and the nation espousing such a plan are too broken to possibly deliver on their promises.

The Woman looks around the performing area, declaring it a mess. She picks up the **suitcase**. She packs the word RECONCILIATION into it and locks it. "Everything," she says, "has its time," repeating the phrase twice.

The Woman packs the word Reconciliation into the suitcase, which is where her family puts mementoes of people who are dead. This symbolically suggests that the whole idea of Reconciliation may also be dead; she and her people are not yet—and may never be—ready for Reconciliation. Though the Woman places the idea of Reconciliation in the suitcase to deal with later, inside the case it will only become a heavy burden she must bear.

SCENE 22: PLEA

The Woman approaches the audience, carrying her **suitcase** with her. She tells them that there has always been a grieving amongst her people—for their land, their families, and the cultures they have been denied. In spite of their grief, she says, they have been taught to cry quietly. She is frightened, she says, that her heart is hardening after so many years of grieving in this way. All she can do now is perform and tell stories: her own stories and the stories of her people. The Woman puts the suitcase down in front of the audience.

In this scene, the Woman is honest with the audience about her emotions. She knows that she is slowly becoming desensitized to her own pain, not to mention the suffering of her family and her people more widely. Performing and storytelling is all she has left—but, as she has shown throughout the course of the play, even that is too much to bear sometimes. By setting her suitcase at the audience's feet, the Woman declares her intention to allow the numbness to take over. The Woman acknowledges that, while her people have been grieving for a long time, their grief has not been encouraged—or even permitted—to follow the neat, orderly stages of grief that others experience. Her people are not afforded such a luxury—they have no guidance through their intense, existential grief, and must move through it, messily and unevenly, on their own.

SCENE 23: RELIEF

The Woman walks into a pool of light, leaving her **suitcase** behind. She stands with her face turned toward the light. She repeats the word "nothing" three times before declaring that she feels nothing and exiting the stage at last.

In the final moments of the play, as the woman abandons her "baggage" and declares that she feels nothing, she symbolically divorces herself from her grief and suffering. The Woman's choice is a painful one in and of itself—and yet, after showing the audience all she's been forced to bear, she can hardly be blamed for what can be seen as either willful self-preservation or involuntary desensitization. Although this scene is titled "relief," as the Woman symbolically abandons the burden of her grief, she doesn't state that she feels better. What she actually feels is nothing at all—she experiences the absence of emotion rather than the presence of healing.

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