

# Aboriginal Australian Autobiographies of Postmemory and Trauma in Wesley Enoch's *Black Medea* and *The 7 Stages of Grieving*<sup>(\*)</sup>

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## Abstract

This paper examines through Marianne Hirsch's theory of postmemory and trauma two performance texts by Aboriginal Australian playwright and theatre director Wesley Enoch. This critical theoretical approach argues that in the absence of reliable historical records, the autobiographical structure of *Black Medea* (2007) and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996) positions them as individual as well as collective postmemory and trauma accounts. The paper further argues that the use of silence, gestures, storytelling, and theatre serve as vital tools for documenting the generational continuum of the traumatic Aborigine experiences and the struggle in dealing with the inherited burden of intergenerational trauma.

**Keywords:** Postmemory and Trauma, Marian Hirsch, Aboriginal, Wesley Enoch, Australian Theatre

المخلص:

السيرة الذاتية لشعوب أستراليا الأصليين المستوحاة من صدماتهم النفسية وذكرياتهم المتأصلة عن أجيالهم الأولى كما تظهر في مسرحيتي "ميديا السوداء" و"مراحل الأسى السبع" للكاتب ويزلي إنوك

يستقصي هذا البحث الأداء النصي للمخرج والكاتب المسرحي الأسترالي الأصلي ويزلي

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إنوك في ضوء نظرية ماريان هرش عن الذكريات المتأصلة والصدمات النفسية. تحتج هذه المقاربة النقدية النظرية بأنه في غياب السجلات التاريخية الموثوقة المصدر فإن بنية السيرة الذاتية المستخدمة في مسرحيتي "ميديا السوداء" و "مراحل الأسى السبع" تضعهما في مصاف القصص - الفردية أو الجماعية - المتعلقة بالصدمات النفسية والذكريات المتأصلة عن الأجيال الأولى. كما يحتج البحث بأن استخدام الصمت و الإيماءات و السرد القصصي وخشبة المسرح قد لعب دوراً محورياً في توثيق المسار المتصل للصدمة النفسية في تجارب الشعوب الأصلية، وتأكيد الصراع الناشئ من التعامل مع العبء المتأصل المتمثل في الصدمة النفسية المنتقلة بين الأجيال.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** الذكريات المتأصلة عن الأجيال الأولى و الصدمات النفسية، ماريان

هرش، الشعوب الأصلية، ويزلي إنوك، المسرح الأسترالي

## Introduction

Aboriginal Australians have been misrepresented by non-Indigenous Australian playwrights throughout the history of Australian theatre. This has often been the material of charged social debate. Non-Indigenous critic Katherine Brisbane (1995) sees that the work of non-Indigenous playwrights representing the suffering meted out to Aborigines at the hands of white Australians is "a well-intentioned attempt to acknowledge injustice." Cultural theorist Marcia Langton (1993), however, from an Aborigine point of view, remarks that non-Indigenous depictions of the Aboriginal experiences are critical in shaping the broad Australian understanding of Aboriginality, particularly that Indigenous performances aim to recount their history, struggles, and grief. These performances offer new perspectives, dispute biased settlers' accounts, and are counter-narratives. The work of Aboriginal playwrights challenges the tradition of "national forgetting" (Haebich 1035) by white Australia and serves to instigate the act or re-remembering (Thomson 2001; Manne 1996). Recently, there has been a flow in works by Indigenous playwrights for Australian theatre. In 1968, the first Aboriginal play was written by Kevin Gilbert *The Cherry Pickers*. The ninety minutes play brutally explores dispossession and desperation through a combination of myths, tribal rituals, jokes, songs and

storytelling. The work is structured around Indigenous Australians who wander the continent in search for seasonal work – cherry picking season. Since then, Aborigine drama performances have become increasingly visible within mainstream Australian theatre reinserting the record of the Indigenous people into canonical Australian history. This shift acknowledges the enduring rejection of traumatic Indigenous experiences by white Australian society; it also commemorates Indigenous continued existence “after nearly two hundred and twenty years of white settlement” (Casey 200).

### Literature Review

Published scholarly articles on Aboriginal Australian drama have focused on highlighting the doll’s revolution, the grief of death in custody, stolen generations, racism, and human rights. Such works include: “The Lost Children of the Empire and the Attempted Aboriginal Genocide” by Pilgrim in 2018; Sharmila’s 2016 “Twinge of Being Stolen in Jane Harrison’s *Stolen*”; “The Black Performance: Traditional and Contemporary Practices of Australian Aboriginal Drama” by Prasenjit Das in 2013; *A Compelling Force: Indigenous Women Playwrights* (2015) by Maryrose Casey; *Stolen Children, Invisible Mothers and Unspeakable Stories: The Experiences of Non-Aboriginal Adoptive and Foster Mothers of Aboriginal Children* (2010) by I “Aboriginal Women’s Staged Autobiography” (2001) a chapter by Helen Thomson in *Siting The Other: Revisions of Marginality in Australian and English-Canadian Drama*; “Genocide, Ethnocide, or Hyperbole? Australia’s ‘Stolen generations’ and Canada’s ‘Hidden Holocaust’” by Innes (2001). More recently, the *Black Drop Effect* (2020) is the most acclaimed Aborigine performance by Yuwaalaraay woman Nardi Simpson.

Despite the existence of published research on Aboriginal works, there is limited scholarly work on Aboriginal theatre. This research will attempt to fill the research gap of international scholarly publication on Aboriginal theatre and playwrights. There is currently no published academic research that applies Marianne Hirsch’s theoretical framework of postmemory and trauma to critically analyse Wesley Enoch’s work.

Wesley Enoch is a prolific contemporary Aboriginal Australian theatre practitioner. Enoch’s work connects Indigenous aesthetics to

everyday Australian life which signals the Aboriginal identity's growth and survival rather than its loss. He ties Aboriginal frameworks to universal non-Indigenous principles. His work reflects his rejection of the constrictive frameworks of objectivity when working with Aboriginal cultural resources, because it signifies a continuation of the colonial practice from which the Indigenous Australians seek to free themselves. The two selected plays for analysis are *Black Medea* which was written and directed by Wesley Enoch, and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* directed by Enoch and written by both Enoch and Deborah Mailman. The performance texts have received numerous successful reviews, all hailing the works as authentic self-representations that have led to a white Australia awakening.

### **Aim of the Paper**

This paper offers a new perspective on two of Wesley Enoch's most acclaimed performance texts: *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996) and *Black Medea* (2007). The paper examines the effects of postmemory trauma on the current generations of Aboriginal Australians through Marianne Hirsch's postmemory and trauma theory as a framework. This critical theoretical approach argues that in the absence of reliable historical records, the autobiographical structure of the performance-texts positions them as individual as well as collective postmemory trauma accounts. The paper further argues that the use of silence, gestures, storytelling, and theatre serve as vital tools for documenting the generational continuum of the traumatic Aborigine experiences and the struggle in dealing with the inherited burden of intergenerational trauma. These Aboriginal performance-texts have claimed success with Aborigine audiences as well as the wider Australian public.

### **Postmemory Trauma: Concept and Definition**

Trauma as a term was first used at the end of the nineteenth century to define "a wounding of the mind" (Wald 93). However, because of the overwhelmingness of the traumatic moment, the traumatic event is often not grasped by the subject. Consequently, "traumatic memory" cannot be recounted orally, it is "encapsulated in the body" as an experience that is not affected by time (Assmann 21). This paper regards trauma as encapsulated in the body of its victims through the generational

continuum. Hence, it is also important to define the relationship between the descendants of trauma survivors and their ancestors.

Marianne Hirsch (2012) labels the relationship which the children of collective trauma survivors have with the memories of past generations as postmemory. Hirsch (2008) defines postmemory as “a consequence of traumatic recall but ... at a generational remove” (106). She explains that postmemory refers to the generations that come after those who had lived and witnessed collective and cultural trauma. Hirsch (1997) further explains that it “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated” (22). Stephen Frosh (2020) also defines postmemory as the way in which “experiences of past generations can come to swamp those of the present, sometimes even standing in for one’s own thoughts and memories” (516). The relationship of present generations with these traumatic experiences of the past comes in the form of memories of stories told by the older generations, images, song or dance. The recollections of the traumatic experiences are so inherent in the lives of postmemory children that they experience what Cathy Caruth (1995) describes as ‘the traumatization of the ones who listen’ (10). In accordance with Caruth’s perspective, Hirsch (2001) further describes postmemory as “the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first” (12). The transfer is intergenerational. Thus, the suffering is transferred as traumatic facts and experiences. Consequently, postmemory children are haunted by their traumatic inheritance.

Marianne Hirsch (2008) further explains that the memories children have of their parents’ experiences are based on “the narratives and images with which they grew up” (Hirsch 9). Building on this notion, trauma has been proven to intrude into the individual’s present. Bohleber (2007) explains that retrieved traumatic memories do not undergo transformation in the present and although they may not form an exact replica of the traumatic experience either as is commonly thought, they are remodeled into action rather than a recollection. Freud (1914) equally stresses that triumph over the traumatic experience happens when the

historical truth of memories are discharged in action - "disposed of through the work of remembering" (153). Freud (1914) further explains that "repressed material is frequently repeated as an act rather than being reproduced as a memory" (150).

Judith Herman (1992) and Caruth (1995) also agree with Bohleber (2007) and Freud (1914) arguing that trauma memory is translated into "bodily memory" (153). As a consequence of the catastrophic event, the sufferer's body becomes "a body of evidence," a "truthful recording of the past" (Wald 97). Hence, the theatre stage is inarguably the most appropriate medium through which Aboriginal Australian postmemory trauma can be documented.

### **Theatre: Staging the Unrepresentable**

Staging suffering, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) is not to say the unsayable, but to say that it cannot be said (69). Accordingly, staging traumatic experiences and grief through performance is one way to deal with individual as well as collective pain. The use of theatre as a medium is key in critical reception; it "is valued for its fictional properties and is conceived as an emotive laboratory for the conception of novel ideas" as well as the exploration of notions that would otherwise be publically attacked (Thurow 149). Theatre is often viewed as a "knowledge-sharing space" (Beckhusen 26), while performances are seen as a skillful art of narrating stories. By choosing theatre to perform past histories, Aboriginal playwrights put those "who don't know it firsthand on an equal footing with those who know it all too well" (Harris 26). It is "a visceral way for every audience member to be made aware of how certain people are treated every day" (26). Brenda Vellino (2017) believes that re-enacting scenes from the past often involves confrontations between the Indigenous subject and the traumatic historical events. Vellino (2017) further explains that this is "necessary medicine for both settler and Indigenous subjects" (92).

Theatre is one of the exceptional places where Indigenous Australians can have control over their own representation. Indigenous theatre companies serve as a forum for Aboriginal playwrights' voices and are an alternative to the pathway of Euro-Australian funded and controlled theatre companies. The three most noted Indigenous theatre

companies in Australia today, which emerged at the end of the 1990s, were Yirra Yaakin, Kooemba Jdarra, and Ilbijerri. They achieved both national and international success and their work focused on addressing both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences. Wesley Enoch's and Deborah Mailman's *The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996) is funded by Aboriginal theatre companies. This play-text, in addition to *Black Medea* (2007), is an enactment of traumatic autobiographical experiences. The grief and suffering of the past generations in these works are reproduced "not as a memory but as an action" (Freud 150) to reassert Aboriginal agency and cultural authority.

Although storytelling is not exclusive just to Aborigines, the tradition of storytelling is one of the most significant tools used to narrate history in colonised societies. Stories of the Aboriginal Australians, according to Enoch (2018), if not told, will be lost. He further elucidates that dramatic storytelling helps explain cultural practices and translates feelings through the meaning of movement. Significantly, storytelling requires little to no additional resources making it an economical tool to utilise on the theatre stage. For Aboriginal Australians retelling autobiographical histories and employing theatrical techniques together serve as effective means to preserve the community's culture and history. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) agree with this view; they point out that the "story-telling tradition transfers easily to the stage since its codes and conventions as a mode of communication are already highly theatrical" (126). Perhaps the most compelling need for Aboriginal Australians to tell their own stories on the theatre stage is the fact that the dominant social culture does not consider their perspective.

### **Personal and Collective Autobiography on Stage**

The autobiographical nature of the performance-texts examined in this paper suggests that the personal record of grief is also collective. The protagonist is situated in a social context that relates to the Aboriginal community, yet at the same time, linked to the world around them. The autobiographical framework lends cultural weight to the histories presented, and audiences witness a shift from the narration of "self histories" to the documentation of past injustices and inherited trauma (Marranca, 86). Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory trauma has

become central in analyzing autobiographies as collective trauma, specifically because it transports the past into the present by placing individual experience as historical accounts elevating literary fiction to the level of public documentation of a race's identity. Aboriginal generational memory was preserved by eyewitnesses. When they passed away, what came into effect is mediated memory and cultural memory. As a result the autobiographical works of Aboriginal playwrights are culturally coded; the nation's collective memory is permeated with a semiotic system of ideas. At the same time, the use of an autobiographical framework in performance texts can be viewed as an act of self-assertion and preservation of Aboriginal identity. A similar view is advocated by Jane Flax (1993) who believes that autobiographies can be appropriated to challenge power structures. Similarly, Kathy Ferguson (1993) underscores that it can be used to counter political, linguistic, and social constraints. The implication here is that the performance-texts mobilise Aboriginals forward to act as Indigenous subjects rather than objects of colonial white Australian history. Accordingly, this paper argues that postmemory trauma descendants situate themselves in the world by retelling and re-enacting their ancestral stories: "I speak therefore I am" (Marranca 85). Their autobiographies are testimonies of truth since they believe that to remain silent is to obliterate the past from the living present. The autobiographies are individual and collective intergenerational trauma stories that must be told because the origin of their story is its absence from recorded Australian history.

### **Setting the Context of Aboriginal Australians**

*The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996), is a production of Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts. The contemporary performance text appropriates traditional storytelling reflecting the Murri culture of integrating art forms. Murri culture, according to Enoch (1996) is dynamic; this is reflected in his exploration of form, which is considered to be a continuity of the Aboriginal Australian culture and necessary for the development of a unique modern Australian identity as the world changes around them. Through the traditional role of the storyteller, *The 7 Stages of Grieving* tracks the life of an Aboriginal woman who represents "Everywoman" (Enoch 15). The play-text is considered as an expression of collective postmemory grieving: "We cry together, we



laugh together and we tell our stories” (15). The autobiographical nature of the performance chronicles the grief in her life, which is also an exploration of the “political history of Indigenous Australia” (15). Primarily created for Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal Australian audiences, the performance-text creates a sense of acknowledgment of the traumatic experiences inherited and the shared history of grief.

*Black Medea* by Wesley Enoch, staged by Sydney Theatre in 2000, is an adaptation of Euripides’ classic Greek drama *Medea*. Intertextuality is used by Enoch in this play to reconstruct Aboriginal subjectivity where the present representation stems from the past. It further illuminates the connections which this current performance text has to past representations highlighting the centrality and universality of the theme. According to Leah E. White (2001), “intertextuality provides a backdrop upon which a performance of fragmented identity may be presented” (81). While the Aboriginal Australian identity may not necessarily be fragmented, it has certainly suffered mal-representation. The distinctiveness of Enoch’s adaptation lies in the collective Aboriginal codes used in the production of the performance. *Black Medea*, is a reflection of the changing world and the pressures faced by the postmemory children of trauma survivors of Aboriginal descent. It documents their unsuccessful life battles with modern-day Australia as they bear the burden of their inheritance of trauma. The adaptation is used to reflect the theme of inherited violence and the refusal of the modern Aboriginal female, black Medea, to pass the burden of this trauma to her son. The classic framework re-affirms that stories need to be told and re-enacted because “there is something in the nature of dramatic presentation that makes it an attractive repository for the recirculation of cultural memory” (Carlson 8).

### **Postmemory Trauma in *The 7 Stages of Grieving***

Stephen Frosh (2020) in ‘Postmemory and Possession’ is in accordance with Marianne Hirsch’s (2008) notion of postmemory and trauma which emphasises the link between the present and the past when presenting experiences of past generational suffering. However, his opinion is slightly different with regards to the fickleness of the past. According to Frosh (2020) “The past is very much present, we are

connected in a 'hyper' way with it; but it is also elusive and untrustworthy, continually reinvented in the light of the present, yet also somehow formative and unendingly creative in its effects" (516). Both Hirsch's (2008) and Frosh's (2020) notions on the relationship between the past and the present in relation to presenting past generational injustices apply to Enoch's work. Wesley Enoch's performance texts under study rely on the re-enactment of past injustices that have neither been grieved for nor remedied, and hence repeatedly return to haunt the present Aboriginal generation and no doubt will continue to haunt the future ones. This section focuses on how postmemory trauma features in the two plays selected for study.

*The 7 Stages of Grieving* (1996) is made up of twenty-three short scenes and fragments of song chants about the familial and cultural loss incurred through past injustices. The Aboriginal female protagonist, Deborah Mailman, using the framework of autobiography, adopts both a personal and a documentary narrative style to weave fragments of past histories and personal stories into a nomadic performance. The past generational trauma staged in this play as put by Frosh (2020) is bursting into the present. Helen Gilbert (1998) describes the performance as a "panoramic view of Aboriginal life" (92). The constructed autobiography has a metonymic relationship to the stories of others in the community. This encourages audiences to connect through the different scenes with the theme of grief and trauma.

The Prologue opens with the metaphorical image of a suspended block of melting ice dripping on red earth, a grave. The scene is broken by faint crying that grows louder into a wail emerging from the Aboriginal woman. The staged grief is an invitation to grieve publicly and to exorcise pain. As the darkness subsides, the words "Grieving, Sorrow, Loss, Death, Pain, Distress, Lament, Mourn, Emptiness, Despair...Desolate" are projected on to a screen and on the body of the Aboriginal woman culminating with the words "I feel...Nothing" (Enoch and Mailman 41). Deborah Mailman becomes an involuntarily participant in the trauma that is inscribed on her body. The words connect the audience to her emotional state "without having to say how or why" (Edwards and Kosky 11). The letter Z is projected on her bare skin. To evade the letter, she wipes away with her hands and removes her clothes.

This is a “highly theatrical and politically powerful expression of the forceful imposition of English language on indigenous culture” (11). Her body is used as the primary site of memory and a bridge to the past. It is also a sign that “people of color have entered the public space in body only” (Griffiths 7). Alternatively, it can be argued that Enoch is revising history by giving agency to the Aboriginal female body. The singled out words projected on Mailman denote postmemory, their repetition however, offers an opportunity for something novel to occur; despite the intrusive ghosts of the past on her body, there is an insinuation that it is the present day Aborigines who may be able to lay these ghosts of trauma to rest.

Embers of eucalyptus leaves and a song initiate the grieving on the stage. Helena Grehan (2001) explains that this is a ritual of purification staged to appeal to the elders for permission to share the trauma stories (109). The song is in the Kamilaroi language to assert Aboriginal identity. John Gasperoni (1996) explains however, that song, from a psychological Lacanian perspective, is representative of the *unconscious* when presented “as a babbling play of sound... [that] emerges from the mouth, ... a song in a language one doesn’t know” (92). It can be argued that by depicting the song in the Kamilaroi language, Enoch, intended to reference Aboriginal traditions as well as theatrically emphasise the psychological impact of historical trauma. It can be further argued that descendants of trauma survivors, as well as white Australian audiences would likely not be familiar with the ancestral language, and hence the Aboriginal song technique would be representative of the incomprehensible unconscious. At the same time, an Aboriginal song significantly highlights the schism between Aborigines and white Australia subverting the colonial to the position of the Other. The first scenes of the play, establish fundamental Aboriginal cultural elements that serve as departing points from which the protagonist, a postmemory trauma child, begins to “act out” and work through the traumatic memories of the nation (Wald 98). The Aborigine female protagonist negotiates the past through the present by appealing to the knowledge of Aboriginal audiences; however, for non-Aboriginal audiences, the lack of knowledge creates an experience that is “exotic” (Smith 42) and foreign. Displacement on the theatre stage is transferred to the witnessing

audience in order to reconstruct the Aboriginal identity and heal years of dispossession.

The play shifts to a funeral scene dotted with traditions, it also stages the relationship between the living and the dead. Deborah Mailman is depicted reflecting on the photographs of the deceased. Hirsch (2008) emphasizes in her work the reliance of the generation of postmemory on photographs as a “primary medium of transgenerational transmission of trauma” (1) however traumatic they may be. According to Frosh (2020) photographs are used by postmemory trauma generations “to shake up the frozen repetitions that constitute the postmemory experience” (518). In this scene, photographs of the dead “with an unspoken gesture” are removed from the wall and pushed into a suitcase (Enoch and Mailman 46). The suitcase is tucked under an old stereo “Safe from inquisitive hands or an accidental glance” (46). Examined through the theoretical framework of postmemory and trauma, this scene denotes a symbolic burial of past generations both physically and psychologically, Hirsch (2012) explains “To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one’s birth or one’s consciousness, is to risk having one’s own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors” (5). The risk of being overshadowed by the past is signified in the depiction of the suitcase that is hidden under a stereo a device that gives voice often to the voiceless. The theatrical use of gesture and silence on the stage is profound; according to Lyn Gardner (2010) “Nothing much is happening, and yet the audience is entirely gripped; it feels like a sacred moment.” Silence, is often used in moments of intense drama that needs to be experienced (Rolfe 394-395) creating what Arthur Symons (2013) calls “thinking overheard” (200). The audience has direct visual access to sub-textual communication. The implication of this lies in the fact that it is the body that speaks to audiences because, according to Rolfe (1969), the “body cannot lie” (394). The traumatic memory is performed through testimony of the body. Black bodies are on the theatre stage conveying the horrors of past trauma and fragments of history to an audience that has avoided confronting it. An act that is remarkably powerful and emancipating. Cathy Caruth (1995) believes that “the delay or incompleteness in knowing, or even in seeing, an overwhelming occurrence

... remains, in its insistent return, absolutely true to the event” (5). The funeral scene ends with the words “Everything has its time...” (Enoch and Mailman 46). Trapped in a liminal space, the Aboriginal female body on the Australian theatre stage is able to say ‘we are here’ yet ironically, trapped between past and present.

This scene *Nana’s Story* is the first section of the autobiography where Mailman openly grieves the loss of ancestral heritage: “My grandmother would tell stories ... of her life, our traditions, our heritage from her now gone. I resent that” (45). In the same scene, Mailman describes the family grieving: “four hundred people turned up to the service. ... we were all gathered around the grave a song caught on ... the words of which were unrecognizable” (45). The funeral scene is not in congruence with modern-day Australia, neighbours capture the communal exhibition of trauma on video camera. The parallel life patterns portrayed by Enoch in this scene depict the challenge of assimilation into mainstream society and heighten the trauma of displacement of present-day Aboriginals. The sanctity of the dead revered inside the house is juxtaposed against the anachronism of the outside scene being documented on camera.

Section 9 of the play is an autobiographical narrative, a personalised recollection of ancestral trauma. Mailman recounts the trauma of European invasion and settlement on Indigenous land and the attempt to wipe out Aboriginal ancestry. Poised between oppression and colonisation, she narrates: “Without warning... One took a handful of my hair ... . Another washed his face in my blood.... My children, were stolen away ...Told not to speak, not to dance. ...not to do what we have always done” (Enoch and Mailman 51). As Hirsch (2012) points out: “These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present” (5). The scene is coded with messages and leads audiences to inquire: who are the invaders?; is the house metaphorical? The answers are open ended leaving us with the conclusion that invasion has many facades. This section also sets the social and historical context for the following traumatic event; the arrival of the First Fleet. The year 1788 is projected on the stage, with a defiant arm, Mailman gestures to Captain Cook to turn back his ship: “Yeah, you with that hat! You can’t park

here, eh! You're taking up the whole bloody harbour! Just get in your boat and go. Go on, go on get!" (Enoch and Mailman 52). Melissa Lucashenko (2020) views this scene as comic and describes it as "a hand grenade of humour erupts in the middle of everything." This paper argues however, that while the scene may have underlying comic tones it is primarily a subtle re-negotiation of power given by Enoch to the Aboriginal woman to usher away the First Fleet from the shores of Sydney Harbour. The reversal of the power structure is coded in the hand gesture and the few words given to the protagonist to show dissent. The traumatic event is reduced to a hand gesture because the gravity defies narrative reconstruction and exceeds comprehension by the present day Aboriginals.

Documentation of unmourned injustices takes on a different form in Scene 14. The illustration of the Musgrave Park peaceful march is represented through the rocking body of the woman on the stage to the rhythm of the protesters: "'Defiant Aboriginal March' 'Aboriginal March, Traffic Stopper ... We're not fighting, we're grieving... in silence... 6,000 people ... but we're not yelling, we're not fighting. We're grieving'" (60-61). The scene, according to Stephenson (2017) "characterizes the play's central attitude towards storytelling ... which employs a marked theatricality to translate that affective power of 'response-ability' generated by a survivor-storyteller" (45). Beyond Stephenson's words, there is much to unpack in this brief scene. Six thousand people grieving publicly in silence; the silence here followed by ellipsis is a sign "that something remains to be phrased, something which is not determined" (Lyotard, *Differend*, 57). The protesters are followed by surveillance TV helicopters, this is an image that brings to the forefront the term initiated within the framework of postmemory by Stephen Frosh (2020) as hyper-connectivity to define the relationship between the children of intergenerational trauma and those who came before them. He likens the relationship to technology which has made it possible to virtually communicate nonstop across space and time regardless of one's wish to communicate or not. The discomfort of being immersed in continuous communication across time and space, according to Frosh (2020) has led to the feeling of anxiety by present day Aboriginals who are constantly under the omnipresent watchful eyes that

follow them everywhere. Present day Aboriginals are scrutinized as they seek social acceptability, recognition, jobs or presenting their stories on the theatre stage. Enoch understands this phenomenon. Postmemory is further presented on the stage as a physical image that can be witnessed by the audience. The rocking body on the stage of the Aboriginal woman, Deborah Mailman, is the link between the protestors on the march (later generations) and the ancestors who came before. The connection between them is mediated by the act of protest and the emotional grief deeply felt. Hirsch's theory of postmemory (2012) rests on the notion that the experiences of trauma were transmitted so deeply that they have come to be experienced by the present generation themselves. Her notion though is based on interconnectivity rather than what Frosh (2020) has termed as hyper-connectivity. Hyper-connectivity is according to Frosh (2020) being in constant communication, surveillance and scrutiny with the past as an affordance which disrupts the present. Hirsch's interconnectivity defines the un-willful repetition of the past into the living present.

Enoch has reconstituted the traumatic experience in this play from fragments of memory, stories and half created mental suggestions. The profundity of the play lies in the message that the present Aboriginal Australian generation is not passive. His contribution both as an Aborigine and as a playwright to the healing of past trauma for present day Australians is this enactment of protesting, marching, and grieving on the theatre stage represented by an Aboriginal female protagonist, symbolic for all Aboriginal women as the keepers of knowledge. His play is an imaginative investment and not simply a recall of generational trauma. Moreover, this paper argues that the theatrical depictions on the stage by Enoch present the opposite of what is usually claimed about the traumatic experience being replicated precisely. Enoch proves that the theatre stage is capable through gestures, codes, imagination and symbolic form to overcome the fixidness of the intergenerational traumatic experience and offer audiences the fantasy of witnessing trauma being healed. *The 7 Stages of Grieving* advocates for a morally accountable audience "performative witness" to use Stephenson's words (45). The play by reconstructing the real through imagination strives to re-enact the protagonist's postmemory trauma and present Australia's national heritage of unacknowledged suffering of others for a possible

national reconciliation.

### **Postmemory Trauma in *Black Medea***

Enoch in *Black Medea* (2007) uses similar theatrical techniques to immerse audiences in Aboriginal experiences and hold them as witnesses to the effects of postmemory trauma on modern-day Aboriginals in Australia. Section One of the play opens with Jason distracted by his thoughts and the howling of the wind:

JASON (to the wind): .....just shut the fuck up

MEDEA: Shhhhh.

A loud SILENCE

...PAUSE (3)

The first impression is that the modern Aboriginal male is disassociating himself from the wind, a symbol of ancestral wisdom. Silence and pauses are blended in specific points throughout the play to indicate intense conflict between black Medea and Jason as husband and wife. The use of silence and autobiographical storytelling keeps the two main characters at a threshold between postmemory trauma and present-day trauma. Silence is a lack of discourse as well as a temporal cessation of conflict throughout this play. The use of ellipsis is a portrayal of a drama that does not dramatise anything. According to Bonnie Maranca (1979), this technique undermines the dramatisation of conflict on the theatre stage in order to put emphasis on “turning ... to a drama which is not based on conflict” (88). Enoch’s intention to pause conflict on stage in *Black Medea* is a signifier for possible reconciliation. This paper argues that Enoch’s use of autobiographical storytelling and silence are a tribute to the Aboriginal stagecraft of “laying down parallel lines of narration” (Maranca 89). Aboriginal staging considers all theatrical space semantic and combines non-verbal devices with monologues. The significance of the non-verbals is that they enable the contextual reading of theatrical signs and also function “as repositories of cultural memory” (Stavrinou 107). The lack of sound in Enoch’s *Black Medea* at certain moments is intended to make the least sound central, the sound of the wind and the words of the Chorus. At the same time, the monologues “function as mediators of the unconscious”(107). According to Jacques



Lacan (1977), “the unconscious is the discourse of the Other” (39). *Black Medea*’s autobiographical narratives attempt to fill the blank spaces of history with words to counteract the deliberate erasure of Australia’s collective memory.

The device of the Chorus in this performance text is the Aboriginal Storyteller. The Chorus addresses the audience with: “But tonight you’re witness, judge and jury.....and we are the storytellers. It’s one person’s story but somehow it’s about everyone” (Enoch, *Black Medea*, 8). Bellamy (2016) points out that the play’s message is that the ghost of trauma affects the descendants of trauma survivors. Frosh (2020) and Hirsch (2012) both endorse Bellamy (2016) in suggesting that there are dangers to present day Aboriginal descendants in being overtaken by past trauma and their stories will not be distinguished from those of the previous generations. Frosh (2020) explains that “these ‘past’ events will continue into the present in a debilitating or overly constraining way” (518). Accordingly, Aboriginal Australians need to engage with past histories not only to grieve the ungrieved but to react to the destructive impact of the knowledge which they carry. The Chorus warns that: “This story.....It’s like one of them stories you never what to tell ...It’s like that story that gets whispered in the corner cause no-one wants to come out with it” (Enoch 8). The staging of postmemory trauma in *Black Medea* is “a meta-experience of the experience” (Stephenson 45). It emphasises “the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first” (Hirsch 2008,12). This paper argues that the same notions of interconnectivity and hyper-connectivity are explored by Enoch in this performance text although the depiction is different from the way it was depicted by Enoch in *The 7 Stages of Grieving*.

The fragmented collage of modern Aboriginal family life created by Enoch in *Black Medea* revisits Euripides’s 2500 years old horror story of Medea murdering her son. Enoch’s female protagonist black Medea has a fall-out with her husband Jason for his incapacity to secure their financial needs and his refusal to borrow money from his father to pay for shoes for their son to go to school. Black Medea threatens to take away their son and leave. The Aboriginal female protagonist murders her son and leaves. She fulfills her own prophecy leaving us with the

agonising question: is Enoch's black Medea an abused woman pushed to her limits or a madwoman? From an Aboriginal Australian perspective, black Medea's mad act is a forced response when read against the Aboriginal Australian historical context. According to Chloe Hendrickson (2017), the protagonist is "obligated to choose between assimilating into white, colonial Australia and abandoning any effort to survive as an Indigenous Australian in the modern world" (46-47). Struggling to assimilate into neo-colonial Australia is traumatic. As a child of postmemory trauma, she demonstrates to audiences the long-standing destructive impact of the colonial government and policies on survivor generations. Her trauma is both personal and communal. Black Medea as a protagonist represents the past, present and future. Enoch creates her as the embodiment of postmemory allowing her to take ownership of the trauma, to create an active relationship between "the children and the previous generation, [but] not one in which this relationship is solely that of subservience, of being trapped by what has already happened" (LaCapra 2001). Black Medea frees herself from the bondage of past trauma and the anxiety which hinges over her life. Her decision to stop the cycle of violence by murdering her son is significant on a number of levels: it puts an end to the inherited trauma by future generations; it exposes the weakness of the Aboriginal male in neocolonial Australia and brings the focus on domestic violence and gender oppression. She is at the heart of both an individual and communal trauma; she deals with the "intersectional oppression" of racism inherited from the past and gender oppression experienced in the present (Hendrickson 51). Black Medea's infanticide is an act of resistance; by stopping the vicious cycle of violence, she inhibits future abuse that may have been committed by her son. Her trauma lies in the knowledge that she is the descendant of abused foremothers and abusive forefathers. While this act is heroic from an Aboriginal standpoint, it can still be argued that this is a murderous act. Charbonneau et al. (2014) argue that "this woman is fighting intergenerational colonialism" (168). Marie Ashe (1995) disputes the viciousness of the act and black Medea's state of mind by pointing out that "caring for children is never easy, being poor makes it harder; experiencing racism makes it harder;...and experiencing the fear of violence within one's own household makes it harder still" (149). Postmemory theorist Frosh (2020) argues that the

agitation felt by present day Aboriginal Australians requires a response and accordingly, black Medea's response examined under this theoretical lens, is justified (515). Although she does not sever the link between her and her ancestral heritage, she severs the connection between the future generations and the interconnection with the past generations. Aboriginal audiences "truly understand because they have shared experiences" (Charbonneau et al.166). There is no roadmap to help black Medea deal with the burden of inherited trauma and modern-day trauma; she makes a better life for the next generation by breaking the cycle of abuse. According to Hirsch (2001), she develops "an ethical relation to the oppressed or persecuted other" (10). Charbonneau et al. (2014) clarifies that "Breaking cycles within the family can mean re-connecting with teachings, traditions, and community" (170). Black Medea actively engages with the past; the infanticide is an acknowledgment of "trauma in the body" the act is both a symbolic gesture and physical evidence to ending the pain of future generations (Woolfrok 33). The interconnectedness has been dismantled by black Medea. In *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, the female Aboriginal protagonist serves as the link between present, past and future generations without severing any connections. In contrast, black Medea is a representation of this interconnectedness but has the autonomy to break the link because the past can also be "elusive and untrustworthy" (Frosh 516). The active presence of the past is embodied in these two female protagonists and the difference between them as postmemory children of trauma is symbolic of the connections with past generations and the ability of this hyper connection to reinvent itself in light of the present.

Jason's disempowerment and emasculation as an Aboriginal male protagonist are depicted through the repeated scenes of domestic violence:

JASON: Go back to your family.

MEDEA: And tell them you didn't want me... (Enoch, *Black Medea*, 19)

...

JASON: Go back where you belong

...

JASON: ...If you take the fucken boy, I'll track you down to the ends of the earth and beat your fucken brains out.....go to bed (28).

The recurring use of ellipsis is telling. Theorist and literary critic Shoshana Felman (2002) observes that silence is the “essence of oppression and traumatization” (22). In contrast, Julia Emberley (2014) sees silence as “a form of resistance and a means to escape the psychic pain of a silence that prohibits putting into language the experience of trauma” (39). The ellipsis or pauses are a sign of repression, they are used by Enoch as “a productive space to create a new language in which to give expression to previously unrecognized violence” (Emberley 40). The use of silence signifies the limited options for resistance to oppression available to Aborigines. The heritage of trauma is too great a burden for Jason to carry; it is signified by a suitcase. In Section Four of the play, Medea tells Jason, “we don't have to talk about it, we can forget about it, we can forget the whole thing....” (Enoch 22). The suitcase stands for “the relationship of the second generation to the experiences of the first” (Hirsch 12). Enoch and Mailman use the same symbolic image in *The 7 Stages of Grieving*. Grehan (2001) argues that “the use of the suitcase as a performative device denot[es] transition and memory” (119). The link between the images can be denoted in the reference to dealing with past trauma. The difference however, is that the first image stands for the baggage inherited and, in the latter, a powerful symbol of reclamation of what has been lost as well as a strong symbol for the link between the dead and the living.

In the scene *Medea's Dream*, black Medea speaks to the audience: “I had a dream ... In this dream my mother's standing there ... Beside her stands my grandmother. ... Behind her another woman, looking at me, I can see my reflection in her eyes” (Enoch 10). This powerful image of interconnectivity characterises her grandmothers' traumas and black Medea's postmemory characterized by her personal experiences. Hirsch (2001) points out that the experiences of the trauma survivor parents as narratives for children of postmemory are often so monumental that they “constitute memories of their own right” (9). Enoch's black Medea is symbolic of Aboriginal women's resistance to the constant onslaught of discrimination by both white and black patriarchy. The protagonist's autobiographical narration on the stage further aims to re-assert the

importance of women and mothers in Indigenous communities. Charbonneau et al. (2014) explains that Indigenous women act as guiding lights and “work at making life better for the next generation by breaking cycles of abuse, ... and teaching empowering and self-sustaining ways of being” (170). *Medea Curses* is a powerful monologue: “I will separate your bones and speak your name, and force your spirit to wander aimless without a home” (Enoch 28). The incantation signifies strong ties to the Aboriginal culture or what Caroline Rody (2001) describes as a bridging of the temporal and psychic distance between the ancestors and the postmemory trauma survivor child. Medea carries with her the history of her people and the scene is a reference to the “Indigenous women’s role as keepers of knowledge and transmitters of culture, language and traditions” (165). It is here that black Medea demonstrates interconnectivity rather than a hyper-connection to the past. However, Indigenous mothers have been the target of the colonial Australian state and have suffered the cumulative side effect of colonisation. Indigenous mothers have had their children taken away from them *en masse* and placed in welfare homes by the government.

The traumatic implications of the Stolen Generation can be fully explored in the play *Stolen* directed by Enoch and written by Jane Harrison. *Black Medea* and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* however, make reference to the trauma of the Stolen Generation in brief scenes. Enoch’s performance texts explicitly refer to the intergenerational trauma of separating mothers from their children. Gabriela Notaras (2000) believes that reference is made in the play-texts to the Stolen Generations to “demonstrate the ongoing physical and psychological impact of this policy on generations of Aboriginal people”. In “Storying The Untold” (2014), Indigenous women disclose that “Child welfare systems are given the privilege and responsibility of raising children, and all too often they fail in the task, tearing apart families, and leaving children vulnerable to abuse” (173). In *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, Deborah Mailman, on the stage, with one swift gesture of her hand, wipes away mounds of sand representing the wiping away of her Aboriginal family lineage and the destruction that befell the Stolen Generations. The silent gesture speaks volumes of the permanent damage imposed on postmemory children in their adulthood because of the failed assimilation

process in mainstream Australian society. *Black Medea* as a protagonist, on the other hand, stands for every Aboriginal mother who has lost a child. She also stands for the image of the dysfunctional Indigenous mother often depicted in mainstream Australian history. At the end of the play-text, *black Medea* transforms into the wind and disappears; the mystical disappearance incorporates fantastic means to overcome the temporal and geographical distance between her and her Aboriginal ancestors. Caroline Rody (2001) defines the mystical disappearance as “traveling through time to recover the mother of history” (3).

### Conclusion

Postmemory trauma in the performance texts under study is presented as a blend of historical facts and personal archives. Individual and collective pain is dramatised by Enoch with the aim to create the shared space that would allow both Indigenous and non-Aboriginal audiences to witness and acknowledge that which cannot be said, the pain of others. Witnessing the pain which was deliberately obliterated from national historical records ultimately aims to heal trauma and melt the ice around the hearts for what Deborah Mailman ironically calls on the stage *Wreck-con-silly-nation: reconciliation*.

Mariam Haughton (2018) explains that staging trauma requires confronting intense personal experiences dominated by posttraumatic memories because trauma cannot be healed unless it is acknowledged. *Black Medea* and *The 7 Stages of Grieving* are non-linear narratives. Haughton (2018) points out that “linearity and logic do not hold court in the study of traumatic experience” (5). Both dramatic works repeat themes and re-present them. The repetition using images, projections, bodies, gestures, silence, distortions and hallucinations all signify an encounter with trauma. The blend of silence, gestures, and storytelling in these performances document past realities of trauma and violence, which are contingent elements of Indigenous life. The storytelling enables Aboriginal people “to stand in dignity, voice their sorrow and anger, and be listened to with respect” (Canada 368). What is shared with the public is a repertoire of memories and “shards of traumatic histories” worthy of the attention of a global audience (Haughton 2).

Marian Hirsch's theory of postmemory trauma has provided an

appropriate framework for analyzing Aboriginal Australian historical traumatic experiences. More significantly, the critical analysis has revealed the extent of suffering suppressed intergenerationally because of “the originary trauma” (Haughton 6). This paper argues that recounting autobiographical testimonies of colonial and postcolonial trauma through storytelling and theatre representation makes a significant shift in understanding Australian history and challenges the presuppositions underlying white Australian testimonial studies.

The performance texts examined in this paper are proof that the power of a story lies in telling the story about the story. These autobiographical accounts adopt documentary realism as a mimetic technique; they retell momentous traumatic events through drama. This technique is one of the strongest modes to communicate truths and prompt an ethical responsibility from audience witnesses as opposed to mere aesthetic appreciation. Moreover, the autobiographical set up reinforces the notion that the past is always mediated through the present challenging the idea that history is closed or, that truth is immutable.

Theatre may not be the only place in which trauma surrounding national narratives has been expressed in creative form; nor is an autobiographical framework the only mode in which histories have been shared, challenged or subverted. Autobiographical performance-texts and theatre performances as testimonial modalities, however, do appear to be the forms best designed to contain all of the generational pressures of the past and the postmemory trauma of present generations.

This paper focused on the use of silence, gestures and storytelling in an autobiographical form in Aboriginal Australian performance texts *The 7 Stages of Grieving* and *Black Medea* in order to highlight the impact of postmemory trauma on children of survivor generations in modern-day Australia. These performances were designed for national airing and communal grieving. Enoch is not a playwright working in a vacuum, but rather, along with Deborah Mailman, they are part of a large number of contemporary playwrights returning to Aboriginal history, both cultural and theatrical for inspiration and for ways to express trauma carried forward through creative practices. At the same time, their work opposes imperialist modernity as they present it through a more critical

lens and write their plays from a position that is not one of ignorance. These performance-texts respond to the present trauma of Aboriginal Australians through the lens of the past and through the tactical use of autobiography, silence, gestures and storytelling.

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