Black Diggers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TOM WRIGHT

Acclaimed Australian playwright Tom Wright was raised in Melbourne, the capital of Australia's southeastern state of Victoria, where he studied Fine Art and English at university before becoming a full-time actor in the 1990s. Over the next ten years, he gradually shifted from acting to writing, finding his first major success in *This Is a True Story*, a one-man show about an American man on death row that he wrote and performed around the world. Ever since, he has come to be known primarily for his translations and adaptations of older plays, including the works of German playwright Bertolt Brecht (such as *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Baal*, and *The Good Person of Szechuan*), Shakespeare's histories, and numerous works of ancient Greek drama (e.g. *Medea*, *The Trojan Women*, and *The Oresteia*). From 2003 to 2012, he worked as an Artistic Associate and then the Associate Director at the Sydney Theatre Company, and since 2016 he has been an Artistic Associate at Belvoir, another theater company in Sydney.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Black Diggers focuses on the unlikely and largely forgotten intersection of two essential stories in Australian history: Australian forces' participation in World War One and the genocide and legally-sanctioned discrimination against Indigenous Australians by white settlers. World War One started after the assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and retaliation efforts by Austria-Hungary drew virtually all the major European powers into a conflict of unprecedented scale. Still a dominion of the United Kingdom, Australia immediately backed Britain when it declared war on Germany in early August of 1914. Of Australia's population of five million, more than 400,000 Australian men, including at least 1,000 Indigenous Australians, fought in the war; roughly half of them died or were wounded. However, for Australia's Indigenous population, which has lived on the continent for at least 60,000 years, life was something like a state of war for many generations before World War One. When the British began colonizing Australia in 1788, they almost immediately began massacring Indigenous people and appropriating their land, and also brought a number of diseases (including smallpox, influenza, and measles) and drugs like opium and alcohol. Together, these factors decimated Indigenous communities, reducing their population from as many as a million to roughly 50,000 by 1930 and displacing them onto arid, desolate regions of the island. The government pursued its openly genocidal policy toward Aboriginal Australians by depriving them of citizenship and political representation, removing Indigenous children from their parents, and forcing large numbers of Indigenous Australians into institutions (where they were routinely abused) and farm work (where they were often underpaid and unable to leave). Indigenous Australians were not given the right to vote until the 1960s, although that right awarded to Indigenous servicepeople in certain states after World War Two, and Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their families as late as the 1970s. In 2008, the Australian Prime Minister delivered a formal apology to the nation's Indigenous peoples, although the government refused an amendment that would have required compensating Indigenous peoples for the theft of their land and slaughter of their ancestors. In the 21st century, Indigenous Australians continue to suffer from disproportionately high poverty rates, poor living conditions, employment discrimination, and low-quality healthcare when compared with the rest of the nation's population.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Indigenous works play an important and growing role in Australian literary culture, starting with Wiradjuri activist and writer Kevin Gilbert's 1968 classic *The Cherry Pickers*. The first English-language play by an Aboriginal writer and the first major Australian play performed by an all-Aboriginal cast, *The Cherry Pickers* dramatized Gilbert's own teenage years picking fruit and working other itinerant jobs around New South Wales. Other prominent early plays of the genre include Robert J. Merritt's *The Cake Man* (1975) and Bob Maza's *Mereki* (1986) and *The Keepers* (1988). Eva Johnson, a Malak Malak woman from Australia's Northern Territory, has written a number of acclaimed plays, of which her best-known is *Tjindarella* (1984). Plays like Andrea James' *Yanagai! Yanagai!* (2003), about the Yorta Yorta people's attempt to claim their ancestral land in the Australian legal system, and Jane Harrison's *Stolen* (1997), about five Indigenous children forcibly removed from their parents, are now frequently performed and taught in Australian high schools. Wesley Enoch, the Indigenous director of *Black Diggers*, is widely considered one of the contemporary leading voices in Aboriginal theater. He has written award-winning plays including *Black Medea* (2005), an Aboriginal adaptation of the famous Greek tragedy, and *The Story of the Miracles at Cookie's Table* (2005), a story about an Indigenous woman in the 19th century who builds her life as a domestic worker serving white men at a kitchen table made of the tree under which she was born. Author Tom Wright's other works are largely adaptations and translations of older plays, though he is also well-known for two plays dealing with the experiences of death row inmates: *This Is a True Story* (2002)

and *Lorilei: A Meditation on Loss* (2003).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Black Diggers*
- **When Written:** 2014
- **Where Written:** Sydney, Australia
- **When Published:** First performed in 2014
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Theater
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Australia, Europe (France, Belgium, and Germany), the Middle East
- **Climax:** Towards the end of the second act, letters fall from the ceiling and are read aloud by the cast; they are excerpts from Indigenous soldiers' correspondence that recount the government's neglect of their welfare.
- **Antagonist:** Institutionalized racism in Australia, the Australian government, the Central Powers during World War One, shell shock/PTSD
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Personal Connections. Many of the actors in the first productions of *Black Diggers* had personal connections to the history of Indigenous service. One actor realized that significant archival information came from his great-grandfather, and another had five generations of Indigenous servicemen in his family.

Group Effort. The play's creation was a group effort, initiated by the Belgian director of the Sydney Festival (a major yearly arts festival) when he discovered that an Australian Aboriginal soldier was buried in his hometown during World War One. He enlisted a researcher, David Williams, and a director, Wesley Enoch. Writer Tom Wright only joined the team later, which is why Enoch and Williams' writings are included alongside Wright's in the text of the play.

PLOT SUMMARY

Based on real archival accounts, *Black Diggers* tells the complex, intertwining stories of roughly a dozen fictional Aboriginal Australian soldiers during World War One. Rather than present a single, linear narrative, the play uses more than fifty disjointed vignettes, none longer than a few minutes, to emphasize the diversity of Indigenous pathways to, through, and onward past the War, as well as to evoke the sense of shock and disorientation that the War created for Aboriginal soldiers (as well as for the world as a whole). The play, written for "nine male indigenous actors," therefore seeks—in the words of its author, Tom Wright—to offer "a patchwork quilt of the past."

Black Diggers opens with a number of scenes depicting Indigenous life before the war and future Indigenous soldiers' reaction to its outbreak. The audience watches a white Taxidermist save a young boy named Nigel from his parents' fate—murder at the hands of greedy white settlers—in the remote Bellender Ker wilderness of Queensland. But he only does this because Nigel is a "perfect specimen," and indeed he soon shows Nigel around his collection of stuffed apes at the Australian Museum, which illustrates the dominant social attitude toward Aboriginal Australians at the turn of the 20th century: they were seen as sub-humans, unworthy and incapable of appreciating political rights.

Other characters, like friends Harry, Bob, Ern, and Norm, wonder what the War is about and whether they might be able to win recognition as Australians by deciding to fight in it. Initially rejected because only "Substantially European" men are allowed to enlist in the army, Ern, Norm, and Bob run into a Sergeant who shares their skepticism toward this requirement and signs them up. They join the Australian military, although an anonymous radio broadcast confirms that it defines itself as a white institution fighting on white Europeans' behalf against the savage forces of the Ottoman Empire.

As the "black diggers" ship out to Europe and the Middle East, they face both discrimination and acceptance—often reluctant but sometimes enthusiastic—from their white compatriots. One Private threatens Harry for daring to eat lunch with him, but the other white Privates take Harry's side and beat up the racist. Laurie and Nigel both get sent on the most dangerous assignments because they are Indigenous. Ern meets the pub owner's son from his hometown, and when the man realizes Ern is Aboriginal while lighting his pipe, he enthusiastically promises to let Ern "into the front bar." Similarly, Harry becomes friends with a white soldier named Stan. Another soldier, Mick, meets and beats up four black Trinidadian soldiers who ironically call him "Australian nigger."

Meanwhile, the underage Bertie, who lives on his family's traditional land in New South Wales, convinces his mother to forge his birthdate so that he can enlist in the war—even though his grandad reminds him that he will be fighting on behalf of the same country that has oppressed them for generations and will never win the equality he seeks. On the battlefield, Mick, Archie, Ern, and Stan grow increasingly bored and depressed fighting the trench warfare of World War One's Western Front, having moved "seven feet since April" and leaving themselves with nothing to do but play I-Spy.

Soon, the diggers start encountering the severe violence that later scars them for life. Bertie and Tommy watch another Indigenous soldier die and take **a lock of his hair** in hopes of somehow helping his soul return to Australia; soon thereafter, they are buried under the soil by a German bomb, and when they are dug out three days later, they are too traumatized to speak, even though they finally get to return home. One soldier,

Archie, writes a series of progressively despairing **letters** to his Auntie May, at first simply wishing his best to her but later describing in detail the failed suicide attempt of a friend, repeating the gruesome fact that "he hasn't got a face."

In Palestine, Laurie and a British Commander take comfort in the Bible, while in the German Zössen POW camp (designed for nonwhite Allied soldiers), Nigel listens to a German prison guard explain how he is oppressed by Britain and try to convince him to change sides. As he struggles to make sense of his identity as an Australian oppressed by the Australia on whose behalf he is fighting, Nigel meets a German professor who, in a disturbing parallel to his childhood with the Taxidermist, wants to use him as an "anthropological specimen." Norm, Ern, and Bob all end up hospitalized with severe injuries. In the first act's final scene, Archie strangles a German soldier to death—the German's final words are "Black devil … last thing I see."

Act Two of *Black Diggers* is set many years after the war and deals with Indigenous soldiers' experiences returning to both peacetime and a country that staunchly refused to consider them human. An anonymous "bloke with a glass of wine" praises Indigenous servicepeople after World War Two in 1949, "thank[ing] God for the Army" that finally allowed him to realize his potential in the same year that Indigenous servicepeople were first allowed to vote. Back in 1919, as Mick and Archie return home, they hope that "this wasn't for nothing." But it quickly becomes apparent that it was: Archie gets kicked out of a pub on Anzac Day, the national holiday celebrating Australian and New Zealand servicepeople, even though he is wearing his war medals (a manager does later let him back in), and Mick learns at a meeting of the Soldier Settlement Commission that his land in Victoria's Western District is being appropriated by the government and given away to former soldiers—even though he, as an Aboriginal veteran, has no chance of getting such a deal.

Archie returns to work on the old cattle ranch, where conditions for Indigenous workers have only gotten worse and the manager threatens his family's safety when he brings it up. At a fireplace in their hometown of Cherbourg (or Barambah), the mostly-deaf Norm and one-armed Ern lament their fates: as Norm puts it, "they painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat." A minister gives Tommy's eulogy at an empty funeral, revealing that the soldier returned home so traumatized that he became a homeless alcoholic, with nobody learning of his service in the War until after his death. Ern gives away his war medals and Bertie simply passes his days clutching Frank's hair and staring into space.

A number of anonymous letters fall from the ceiling, recounting the government's neglect of Indigenous soldiers' welfare, and the reader learns that Harry, Laurie, and Nigel also go the way of Tommy and Bertie. Harry briefly runs into his old friend Stan while begging on Castlereagh Street in downtown Sydney; Laurie meets a fellow soldier from the Light Horse in the church where he collects hymn books (but denies that he ever fought in the war, then admits that he "think[s] of another world" instead of remembering this one). After the government's 1929 massacre of Indigenous Australians at Coniston, Nigel writes an eloquent letter to a newspaper, whose editors are so fascinated by the fact that a "darkie" can have such "beautiful handwriting" and decide to print his letter only because they are sure nobody will read its content. In the next scene, Nigel drinks while wearing a sign for the show "TARZAN THE APE MAN" in downtown Sydney; he is yet again caught in the Taxidermist's paradox: he is valued only as a spectacle, as proof of the white belief that Indigenous Australians are closer to apes than men. Ern gives a long monologue about the enduring effects of the war, symbolized by the **pieces of bullet shells** that he discovered stuck in his side during World War Two, after he began spontaneously bleeding. In the final scenes, a hymn celebrates God's "ancient sacrifice" and the Australian Prime Minister declares the nation's "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier." But the very last scene again returns to Nigel's story, revealing his new home in 1951: the Callan Park psychiatric hospital, where he refuses to participate in Anzac Day festivities because, as he insists, "I don't belong."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Nigel – The Indigenous soldier whose story opens and closes *Black Diggers*, Nigel grows up in the wilderness of Bellender Ker, Queensland, but his parents are murdered by white settlers and he is only spared because a Taxidermist sees him as a "perfect specimen." The Taxidermist later adopts Nigel as his own son and shows him around the Australian Museum; the Taxidermist is proud of his stuffed apes but unwilling to confront his role in the deaths of Nigel's parents. During the war, Nigel ironically manages to survive a German attack because he is ordered to retrieve a lost telephone on the battlefield. He ends up in the Zössen POW Camp, where he listens to German soldiers' lecture about the evils of British colonialism and talks with Indian soldiers who are both proud of their Britishness and hopeful about kicking the British out of India. As though rehashing the first scene, a German Professor uses Nigel as an "anthropological specimen" at the camp, and Nigel agrees to participate in exchange for better conditions for the Muslim prisoners. After the war, Nigel's eloquent public letter about the Coniston massacre is duly ignored by newspaper editors more interested in his handwriting than his message, and the play reveals that his day job is selling tickets for the show "TARZAN THE APE MAN." Unsurprisingly, after a life of being treated as a subhuman marvel, Nigel ends up alcoholic and insane, and he ends the play in the Callan Park

psychiatric hospital.

Harry – At the beginning of the play, Harry listens to an old Retired Schoolmaster and some of his friends discuss the coming war, but does not seem to pay it much attention. Later, however, he ends up fighting in it. He gets into an argument with a white soldier on his transit over to Europe, but the other white soldiers intervene on Harry's behalf. Later, he and Stan grow close at the battle of Polygon Wood, while another soldier calls Harry "as good as a white man." Both these episodes show how white soldiers have deeply ingrained prejudices but are also able to revise and look past them when fighting alongside their Indigenous countrymen. However, Harry and Stan's final meeting at the end of the play demonstrates how any progress made toward social integration during the war got easily reversed back in segregated Australia: Harry is begging on Castlereagh Street because he is unable to find work, and Stan, who works for the Department of Lands charged with giving Indigenous land to white soldiers, walks by and gives him some cash.

Ern – Ernest Hopkins, called Ern throughout the play, is a friend of Bob and Norm's from Barambah in Queensland. All three sign up for the war together and end up severely injured—Ern loses an arm, a less serious fate than his friends, who lose their eyes and ears. Unlike his Norm and Bob, however, Ern is proud of his sacrifice for "Australia" and is convinced he will be seen as a hero. Back in Barambah (now called Cherbourg), this never happens. Soon, he randomly gives his war medals away to a pharmacist, lamenting that not even his family cares about his service. He gives a long monologue set in 1956, during which he acknowledges that it was unrealistic to hope that people would treat him with respect, but he claims to be happy to have mostly put the war behind him—until World War Two, when he finds 17 old **bullet casings** stuck in his side, a metaphor for the enduring and often hidden trauma of war that "inches its way up" years after the fact. While neither absolutely maimed (like Bob and Norm) nor absolutely traumatized (like Tommy and Bertie), Ern's story shows how it was impossible to fully move on with life as it was before after the war.

Archie – A soldier notable for writing a series of **letters** home to his Auntie May, which track his increasing sense of alienation and shock throughout the war. In the closing scene of the play's first act, Archie kills a German soldier who, in his dying breath, calls Archie a "Black Devil." He grows more disillusioned still after the war, when he is refused access to a bar while wearing his medals on Anzac Day because he is black and then returns to the cattle station Bertha Downs to find that conditions have actually worsened for Indigenous workers. When he mentions that the workers are being mistreated, the manager threatens his family and another worker chastises him for his attitude. Archie's letters to Auntie May reveal the ripple effect of World War One soldiers' trauma on their families and gestures to the primary source material (letters) that remains Australia's only memory of its Indigenous Anzac soldiers. His struggles upon his return show the enormous disconnect between the atmosphere of the Australian military and Australia itself: not only were Indigenous soldiers' contributions seldom recognized (while white soldiers' were valorized), but Indigenous people also remained second-class citizens despite their contributions to Australia.

Laurie – A soldier who clearly sees the hypocrisy in his treatment during the war. He first jokes about how he is "arriving in boats uninvited on someone's beach," which is exactly what European settlers did before slaughtering his ancestors. Later, he complains that he is constantly sent on dangerous reconnaissance duty, presumably because of his race. He fights in Beersheba with The Light Horse, where he finds common ground with a British captain. Decades later in Australia, however, he works at a church, collecting hymn books, and denies having been in Palestine when another man recognizes him. His recognition of his condition and contradictory confrontations with religious symbolism show that he is both forced to fight for the idea of the Australian nation he cannot bring himself to believe in and permanently excluded from full membership in that nation despite his loyalty.

Mick – Another Aboriginal soldier. Early on, he meets four Trinidadians in Ypres and beats them up after they call him an "Australian Nigger." Later he kills a number of Germans and takes pride in his "warrior blood." Back in Australia, he learns that the Soldier Settlement Commission is giving his family's land away, even though his family was forced onto that land when settlers kicked them off their ancestral land. Meanwhile, he has no chance of getting a settlement through the Commission.

Bertie – An underage soldier who grows up in the wilderness of New South Wales with his mother and grandad. Excited by the opportunity to fight for his country and see a "bigger world," he convinces his mother to forge his date of birth so he can sign up for the army. Later, he witnesses Frank's death alongside Tommy and cuts a **lock of Frank's hair** in the hopes of eventually honoring him properly back home in Australia. He then gets buried alive and, after he is saved, writes a **letter** to his mother, using the metaphor of the **circus show** he was never allowed to attend as a child, in order to get her to reveal his true age and get him discharged. She takes the hint and shows up in Europe only to find Bertie unresponsive and traumatized, a condition he never overcomes back in Australia, where he endlessly stares into space and clutches Frank's hair. His fate shows how the war robbed young soldiers of their adolescence, even when it was sold to them on the promise of adventure and excitement.

Tommy – A soldier who fights with Bertie at Pozieres. They watch another Indigenous soldier, Frank, get shot and **cut a lock of his hair**, knowing they cannot give him a traditional

burial. Later, they both get buried alive for more than three days and return to Australia extremely traumatized. Back home, Tommy ends up a homeless and anonymous drunk, known only as "Tank Stand Tommy." In a later scene, a minister gives his eulogy at a funeral that nobody attends. Tommy's story shows how combat was an often life-shattering experience during World War One, which was only made worse by Australia's failure to provide its Indigenous soldiers with the services they needed to cope with their trauma.

Norm – A friend of Ern and Bob's from Queensland. Lacking opportunities and hoping that their service will make whites see them as equals, they enlist in the Australian military in 1915, although they initially encounter difficulty getting past the requirement that new recruits be "Substantially European." Like both of his friends, he ends up injured after the war: his ears are bandaged up in Abbeville, and in his final scene with Norm, he listens to a hymn about the promised land of Canaan and laments that the glimpse of equality he won during the war was immediately taken back after he returned to Australia. Like Bob, he is cynical after the war, feeling that "Australia" was not worth fighting for

Bob – A friend of Norm and Ern's who enlists in the military alongside them and ends up injured with them in Abbeville. Blinded and with bandages covering his eyes, Bob laments that he has nothing beyond lifelong, backbreaking labor to return to in Australia, a country he fought for but no longer believes in.

Taxidermist – A settler who saves Nigel from being murdered by other white men as a boy, although only because Nigel is a "perfect specimen." In a later scene, it becomes clear that he has raised Nigel as his own son. He shows Nigel around the Australian Museum, telling him about humankind's relationships to the stuffed apes that populate the museum as Nigel asks about his real Aboriginal parents. The Taxidermist refuses to give him any detailed information about his parents' murders at the hands of settlers, and at the end of his scene, he vanishes to leave Nigel alone, under attack by the museum's animals. The Taxidermist demonstrates the colonial obsession with taxonomizing people in the same way as animals, which is based on the assumption, heavily influenced by shoddy interpretations of Darwinian evolution, that humans could be ranked on a continuum from more evolved (which, for white colonists, invariably meant themselves) to less evolved (and therefore closest to apes). While the Taxidermist saves Nigel, then, the play heavily implies that his job is also to use Nigel as a "specimen" to somehow "prove" that Indigenous people are inferior and to justify the colonization of Australia.

A Ghost – Delivers a lengthy, undated monologue in the middle of Act One. He offers a sort of prototypical Aboriginal war story, elaborating on his sense of creeping madness in France and shock at watching his bunkmate get shot in the face and killed. In response, he mercilessly killed the German soldier responsible with his bare hands and was decorated for his efforts.

Bertie's Mom – Although she initially insists that he is making a mistake by trying to enlist in the military, Bertie's mother agrees to forge his birthdate when he insists, but promises him that his time in the war will be like **the circus show** he used to attend as a kid: exciting but not willing to accept Aboriginal people as equals. After he writes her a coded **letter** requesting that she reveal the truth about his age, Bertie's mother comes to retrieve him from Europe, but he is already overcome with shell shock (PTSD) and essentially nonresponsive. Back in Australia, she laments that he is "not coming back from the world of the grown-ups."

Bertie's Grandad – An elderly Aboriginal man who has lived all his life on his family's ancestral land in New South Wales, he encourages his grandson Bertie to remember Indigenous people's long fight against and suffering because of white settler colonialism, and to think twice about fighting in the war on behalf of "Australia," an abstraction created by the white people who have stolen their land. At the end of the story, after Bertie's return home, Grandad reminisces about how beautiful his land used to be, before white settlers destroyed it for irrigation, a metaphor for Bertie's own destruction in the war.

Stan – A white soldier who serves with a number of the Indigenous diggers, including Harry, Mick, Archie, and Ern. On the battlefield at Polygon Wood, Stan and Harry have a heartfelt conversation about how Australia might change after the war. Stan promises Harry that they can "always have a beer together" afterward, underlining Harry's hope for race relations to change in Australia because of Indigenous soldiers' inclusion in the war. More than 30 years later, in 1949, Harry is homeless and begging on Castlereagh Street in downtown Sydney when Stan, now working for the Department of Lands (which was responsible for expropriating Indigenous land and reapportioning it to soldiers), passes by. Remembering their service together, Stan gives Harry some money and laments that their service has been forgotten.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunty May – The recipient of Archie's **letters** from the war, Auntie May represents the too-often invisible ripple effect of soldiers' trauma, which deeply affected their families as well.

Retired Schoolmaster – An "older white bloke with a stick" who berates Harry, Norm, Ern, and Bob about joining the war in order to defend Australia from foreign invaders—utterly missing the irony that, for Indigenous people, this has already come to pass.

Recruiting Sergeant – A sergeant who processes Norm, Ern, and Bob when they sign up for the war. The sergeant looks past a vague, racist law stating only those of "Substantially European" descent may sign up.

German Soldier – A soldier whom Archie strangles to death on

the battlefield. His last words translate to "Black devil. Black devil with white eyes. Black devil … last thing that I see."

German Prison Guard – After Nigel is captured by the Germans, a guard lectures him about colonialism and tries to convince him that he is being oppressed by Britain.

Bloke With a Glass of Wine – An unnamed Indigenous veteran who gives a short monologue in 1949 about how the war gave him a sense of dignity.

Overseer at Bertha Downs Cattle Ranch – The manager of the ranch where Archie works following the war.

TERMS

Abbeville – A town in northern France that served as an important military hospital during World War One, and where **Norm**, **Ern**, and **Bob** recover from their injuries.

Aborigines' Protection Boards Various agencies run by Australia's different states, charged with institutionally regulating Aboriginal Australians' second-class citizen status by removing children from their parents, enforcing slavery, and seizing Indigenous people's land (among other policies).

ADF Australia's military, the Australian Defense Force.

AIF The First Australian Imperial Force, or the Australian force of more than 300,000 men sent to fight in World War One.

Allied Forces – The coalition led by the British Empire, France, and Russia (but also including various other countries) that defeated the Central Powers—Germany, Austria Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria—in World War One.

Amiens – A city in northern France where an important battle near the end of World War One played a significant role in the Allied victory. **Archie** briefly fights there.

ANZAC – The Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, a collection of forces that fought in the Mediterranean (including at Dardanelles) during World War One.

Anzac Day – In Australia and New Zealand, a national holiday honoring military veterans (and, originally and specifically, veterans of the ANZAC in World War One). In a number of scenes in the play, the Indigenous soldiers struggle to win recognition for their service even on Anzac Day, but it is also the only occasion on which they can earn equal treatment to their white compatriots after the war.

Australian Museum, Sydney – The oldest and arguably most famous museum in Australia, which was founded in the early 1800s as the Colonial Museum to valorize the British Empire and advance the project of national territorial expansion by trying to show indigenous culture's continuity with natural history (including animal specimens). In *Black Diggers*, **a taxidermist** working for the museum saves **Nigel** as a specimen after other settlers kill his parents, then appears to adopt him; in another scene, he shows the young Nigel around the museum, telling him about humankind's evolution out of apes, but then disappears as the exhibits attack the boy.

Barambah – The former name of Cherbourg, a settlement where Indigenous people from around Queensland were forced to move, and where **Ern** grew up.

Beersheba, Palestine – An important city in the southern desert of Palestine (now Israel). Its founding is recounted in the Bible, and it was the site of an important World War One battle between British and Ottoman forces. **Laurie**, who fights in this battle, quotes a passage from the Bible in which the prophet Elijah, a wanted man, takes refuge in Beersheba, but begs God for death when he arrives.

Bellender Ker, Queensland – The name of a town, a tall mountain, and a mountain range in the northeast of Australia, in the state of Queensland. This region is the site of the first and historically oldest scene of *Black Diggers*, in which a group of white settlers hoping to take control of the land slaughter all the natives living there—except for the young **Nigel**, who is saved by a **Taxidermist** just before the others are about to murder him.

Boundary Hotel, Brisbane – One of the oldest sites in the city of Brisbane, the capital of Australia's northeastern state of Queensland, the Boundary Hotel is a pub, hotel, and historical monument in continuous operation since 1864. **Norm**, **Bob**, and **Ern** hang out here before the war.

Bullecourt – A village in northern France, near Amiens and Abbeville, that was completely destroyed during World War One. Australian forces led the two Battles of Bullecourt, suffering catastrophic losses. **Nigel** fights at Bullecourt and watches his whole unit die after he is sent out for reconnaissance (because he is the only Aboriginal soldier and reconnaissance is a dangerous mission). He then gets captured by the Germans and taken to the Zössen POW Camp.

Callan Park The historic Callan Park Hospital for the Insane was New South Wales's largest insane asylum. **Nigel** ends up institutionalized there at the very end of the play, after the Australian government and media ignore his eloquent writings on the plight of Indigenous soldiers.

Canaan A region of the Levant where many important events in the Bible took place, and referenced in a hymn sung during *Black Diggers*. Significantly, "Canaanites" refers to the indigenous people of this region, who were ostensibly wiped out by the Israelites (providing a salient parallel to the plight of Indigenous Australians).

Castlereagh Street A major street in downtown Sydney, where **Harry** ends up begging and presumably homeless at the end of the play.

Cherbourg The Indigenous reservation community in Queensland formerly known as Barambah.

Coniston Massacre The 1928 mass murder of as many as 170 Aboriginal Walpiri, Anmatyerre, and Kaytetye people in a sparsely-populated region of central Australia by white settlers and government forces, all of whom were acquitted for the killings. **Nigel** writes a public letter condemning the massacre, but is ignored when newspaper editors are more interested in his florid handwriting than his message.

Dardanelles – A narrow strait in modern-day Turkey, forming the boundary of Europe and Asia, which was a major strategic chokepoint during in World War One. This is where **Laurie** first arrives during the war.

Diggers – A slang term for a soldier from Australia or New Zealand.

Erskineville – A diverse, working-class neighborhood of Sydney, where **Laurie** grows up.

Forest Lodge, Sydney A Sydney neighborhood where **Nigel** writes his letter condemning the Coniston Massacre.

Frying Pan Creek, NSW – A rural, forested region of New South Wales where **Bertie** lives.

Glebe – A suburb of Sydney, where the town hall that opens Act Two takes place.

George Street The busiest and historically most important street in downtown Sydney, where **Nigel** ends up spinning a sign and handing out flyers after the war, despite his attempts to publicly advocate for Indigenous soldiers.

Gwyndir River – A major river in the northern part of New South Wales, in a region traditionally populated by Aboriginal peoples.

Half-Caste An antiquated, derogatory term for people with mixed racial or ethnic descendance, which in Australia specifically referred to people with one Aboriginal and one white parent.

Iron Cove A bay in Sydney.

Jordan River A river in the Levant that marked the boundary of the Holy Land and is cited in a hymn sung by the play's actors.

The Light Horse A number of Australian mounted soldiers who fought on horseback during World War One, especially in the Middle East (including **Laurie**).

Maranoa – A region of southern Queensland, named in the song "Sandy Maranoa" in *Black Diggers*.

Maori – The indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand. In an anonymous letter, a veteran explains that he decided to pass as Maori instead of Aboriginal (because he has a Chinese ancestor) and received less trouble in Australia after the war by doing so.

Messines – In Western Belgium, the site of a major offensive by the British during World War One. **Archie** fights there and kills a German soldier.

Mount Gambier A small city in the state of South Australia, where **Laurie** ends up working in a church after the war.

Murgon A town in Queensland, where **Ern** gives up his war medals.

Murrumbidgee A major river that flows through various Indigenous lands in New South Wales, including the family land to which **Bertie** returns after the war.

New South Wales – Australia's most populous state, located on the island's southeastern corner, which was also the center of its indigenous population before British colonialism.

No Man's Land – During World War One, a term for the area between the two sides' trenches.

Palarver – An Australian slang term, often used to describe something tedious or long-winded. When **Bertie** cites "all that palarver" about Indigenous people being fighters in the past, ironically enough, **his mother** reprimands him, insisting that he should "speak the King's English."

Passchendaele – The location of a major battle led partially by Australian forces, in which **Laurie** participates.

Petrie Terrace – A neighborhood of Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, where **Ern**, **Norm**, and **Bob** first sign up for the military (but are rejected for being Aboriginal).

Picaninny – An archaic, now deeply offensive term for black children (including Aboriginal Australians).

Polygon Wood – The site of a major battle in Western Belgium, near Ypres and Passchendaele. **Harry** fights alongside and meets **Stan** here.

Pozieres – The site of a major World War One battle in France, where Australian troops suffered the heaviest losses of anywhere, and where **Mick** kills a number of German soldiers and **Bertie** and **Tommy** get buried alive for three days under the soil.

PTSD A disorder in people who have experienced traumatic events frequently relive those events and their emotional impact. Although it is a recent technical term, the disorder was first brought to public attention after World War One, when it was commonly referred to as "shell shock," the classic symptoms of which included a blank stare, constant panic, and loss of normal functions (like sleeping, talking, and/or eating). A number of the "black diggers," including **Bertie**, **Tommy**, and **Nigel**, clearly suffered from PTSD or shell shock during and after the War.

Queen Street – The main street in Queensland's capital, Brisbane, and where **Norm**, **Bob**, and **Ern** get their photos taken after enlisting.

Queensland – A large state in northeastern Australia, and home to friends **Norm**, **Bob**, **Ern**.

Red Cross A decorated humanitarian organization dedicated to protecting and providing medical treatment to people in

conflict areas.

RSL The Returned and Services League of Australia, an organization for Australian war veterans that often excluded Indigenous people.

Soldier Settlement Commission An agency responsible for granting land to returned soldiers in exchange for their service, which plays an important part in Act Two of *Black Diggers*, when **Mick Dempsey** learns that his ancestral lands in the Western District of Victoria are being given away to white veterans, but Aboriginal veterans are virtually blocked from receiving land.

South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission – A commission formed after the end of apartheid (white supremacist rule) in South Africa, aimed to help the nation heal its divisions and create the foundation for a new, inclusive future. The commission's unique structure and focus on restorative justice have turned it into a model for post-conflict restitution programs around the world. The author and first director of *Black Diggers* took the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's four-part conception of truth—as personal, social, forensic, and public—as inspiration for their own search for the truth of Indigenous experiences in World War One, through the archival stories they encountered.

Southern Cross – A bright constellation visible in the Southern Hemisphere, which features on the Australian flag and has held a variety of meanings throughout Australian history: it is of deep religious importance for many of Australia's Indigenous people, was frequently used as a symbol of the fight for Australian independence from the British Empire, and has more recently been used by Australian white nationalists. Accordingly, while standing for the Australian nation, it also shows how the concept of that nation has been built on the backs of Indigenous people and reconceived so as to exclude them. One of the first scenes in *Black Diggers* includes a patriotic war song called "Sons of the Southern Cross."

Torres Strait Islanders A distinctive group of Indigenous people who have lived for millennia on islands in the Torres Strait, the body of water separating Australia from New Guinea.

Villers-Bretonneux – A town in northern France and the site of an important World War One battle, in which many Australian fighters participated. The Australian government contributed to the village's reconstruction after the War, and **Ern** fights there during it.

Western District, Victoria A large, rural area in the southeastern Australian state of Victoria, which was traditionally occupied by Indigenous people, who were slaughtered and evicted en masse during the 19th century. After World War One, a scene in *Black Diggers* shows the Soldier Settlement Commission giving away more Aboriginal land in the Western District (where **Mick Dempsey** lives) to white veterans.

Woolloomooloo – A central, waterfront district of Sydney.

Ypres – A city in northwestern Belgium that played an essential part in the First World War, due to its location along the Germans' planned invasion path into France. The 1917 Third Battle of Ypres extended out to a number of nearby towns, like Messines and Passchendaele, and a number of the play's protagonists fought there.

Zössen POW Camp – A German prisoner of war camp near Berlin, Zössen was especially designated for non-Europeans, including large numbers of soldiers from British colonies. When he is imprisoned there, **Nigel** is forced to listen to a German soldier give a (remarkably astute) speech about the injustice of colonized peoples fighting on behalf of their oppressors.

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.

AUSTRALIAN NATIONHOOD AND INDIGENOUS DISPOSSESSION

Black Diggers tells the tale of a decision at once contradictory and extraordinary: that of thousands of Indigenous Australians to fight in World War I for the same white settler colonial government that massacred them and stole their lands. While the play draws clear parallels between colonialism and the war, it also shows how Indigenous people saw the war as an opportunity to overcome the wounds of colonialism—to join the Australian nation rather than staying irreconcilably "other" to it. In its dozens of vignettes and handful of interwoven plot lines, the play shows how this sacrifice was both utterly rational and deeply ironic, repaid in some limited ways during the war but completely forgotten after the Allies' victory.

The play's Indigenous characters recognize, some openly and some implicitly, that the Australian nation is founded on the theft and plunder of their lands and culture. It is no accident that the first scene depicts a group of white settlers massacring Aboriginal people in Bellender Ker, Queensland in order to take their land. This scene positions the white settlers' genocide of Aboriginal peoples as not only the foundational injustice that sets up Indigenous people's subsequent struggles, but also as the critical moment in the foundation of the Australian nation. In other words, it is impossible to separate Australian national identity from the genocide of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

Some of the play's characters recognize this: when the young soldier Bertie returns after the war, his grandad reminisces endlessly about how his land used to be before Europeans took it. In fact, his traumatic fixation on his land clearly parallels the

veteran diggers' fixation on the war, and Bertie's grandfather promises Bertie that he will never truly find acceptance in Australia—although he also jokes that he does not even know what "Australia" means. At his first battle at the Dardanelles, Laurie sees the irony in "arriving in boats uninvited on someone's beach after his ancestors were decimated by white settlers' analogous violation of Indigenous Australians' sovereignty and humanity. The patriotic songs that punctuate the play, like "Sons of the Southern Cross" and "Tattooed Lady," show how Australian white settlers justify taking land and massacring its inhabitants precisely by constructing a national identity around natural features of the land they expropriated.

Facing exclusion from a nation built without their consent on their land, the Aboriginal Australians in this play see the military as a means to integrate into the nation and an opportunity to shed their "otherness." To an extent, they fulfill this dream *during* the war. Immediately after the initial scene of plunder set in 1884, the play shows a Retired Schoolmaster telling Indigenous characters Harry, Norm, Bob, and Ern about their "duty" to fight in the war and to prevent "Turks" and "Huns" from taking over Europe. While he suggests that they do have a role in defending "their" country (even though the country is built on the theft of their lands), he also imagines the war as a struggle for white racial purity (even though the diggers ultimately end up fighting white Germans). In a scene shortly thereafter, Ern makes the promise of integration through military service (nearly) explicit. He says, "if you can fire a gun and stand in a sun, they might pretend to forget you're…" (he clearly means "forget you're Aboriginal"). In some limited ways, these promises are fulfilled—the diggers are allowed to feel part of the Australian nation for the first time by joining the military, and they are acknowledged as such by their fellow soldiers. A number of white soldiers come to Harry's defense when a white Private starts berating him, for instance, and Ern and Harry both form friendships with white soldiers who promise to treat them as equals after the war.

But, when they return to Australia after the war, the black diggers never win the acceptance they were promised: in fact, they are forced to confront the continuity between the forces they are fighting against and the settler militia forces that stole Australia from them in the first place—and whom they are now fighting *for*. At first, the diggers are technically disqualified from serving in the military because only "Substantially European" people can serve (even though the Recruiting Sergeant easily lets them lie their way past this requirement). Just thereafter, a newscasting voice praises Australian fighters as demonstrating "the greatness of the White Man," ironically valorizing Australia through praise for those who colonized the land, while erasing the people who are actually from Australia. And when he is captured as a Prisoner of War at Zössen, Nigel listens to a German guard lecture about the evils of British colonialism and discusses with three Indian soldiers their need to wage a war against their colonizers. After they sustain injuries, Norm, Bob, and Ern sit in the hospital disillusioned, wondering which "Australia" they were fighting for: their land, or the government that is occupying it. Most starkly, when they return to Australia, the Indigenous soldiers get kicked off their land again to make room for soldier settlements—but never get settlements themselves. When this happens to Mick, another soldier, he realizes that the war "[is] never going to end" for Indigenous Australians.

Ultimately, *Black Diggers* points out not merely the profound injustice in making the victims of colonial aggression in Australia fight against colonial aggression in Europe, or even the way that these people were lured into their service by the false promise of finally becoming seen as full members of the nation built on their own stolen land. It is, more fundamentally and more importantly, also an attempt to rewrite the myth of nationhood—that Australia is a white country built on "empty" land, which sent white soldiers to fight along white Europeans in World War I—by showing how Indigenous Australians continually lived the shadow of this story, suffering immensely in and through the Australian nation's creation and nevertheless fighting valiantly for its interests in the war.

RACISM

The Aboriginal soldiers portrayed in *Black Diggers* suffer discrimination not only from the Australian state—which appropriates their land before and after the war, deprives them of wages and promised veterans' benefits, and denies them respect as the original inhabitants of Australia and dedicated fighters in World War One—but also from other people they encounter, Australians and non-Australians alike, in their everyday lives. This discrimination is founded on an open and flagrant racism that justifies itself through pseudoscience—early anthropological attempts to rank the development of various human "races," which inevitably put whites at the top. This play shows how racist ideology, while founded on supposedly objective science, is also flexible enough to accommodate feelings of equality and camaraderie during the war, and then revert back to square one after the fact, when it was no longer in white Australians' interests to treat Indigenous people (including those who formerly fought by their side) as fully human.

The play shows how racism and discrimination, sanctioned by shoddy science, devastated Indigenous people before the war. Early in the play, many characters seek to escape racism by joining the military. In the play's first scene, a group of settlers nearly kills Nigel, whom they call "a bloody picaninny" and talk about as a subhuman animal. But a Taxidermist decides to save him because he is a "perfect specimen." A later scene shows that the Taxidermist has adopted Nigel as his son—but takes him to a museum to show him apes that are related to humans. When Nigel asks the Taxidermist about his parents, the man

disappears. While science saves Nigel from being murdered, the Taxidermist is also clearly part of the colonial project that would have murdered him, charged with justifying the systematic slaughter and dispossession of Indigenous Australians by scientifically "proving" that they are the closest humans to apes. Nigel must relive this disturbing scene in the German Zössen POW Camp, where a professor asks to use him as an "anthropological specimen," and then at the end of the play, when he (no doubt due to his race) is hired to wear a sign advertising the show "TARZAN THE APE MAN." As scientists turn him into anthropological evidence rather than treating him as a living person, Nigel's humanity, individuality, and dignity—not to mention his welfare—are severely threatened. Nigel's suffering and sense of alienation in Australia are typical of the other diggers' experiences, although these generally come out during flashbacks during the war—such as when Ern recalls that a fellow soldier's father, the owner of his local bar, "took his belt to [Ern's own father] a few times."

While white soldiers do occasionally treat the black diggers as equals during the war, this is not because they have overcome racism, but only because they make exceptions to their usual racism. The moment they put on their uniforms, Norm, Ern, and Bob note that people seem to have "forgotten" that they are Indigenous. And when a white Private is outraged that Harry is allowed to share a meal with him, the other white soldiers come to Harry's aid. But, afterwards, a song announces that "the white man needs us coloured boys now" because "the world's turned upside down." In other words, Indigenous men are only valued because of the temporary, exceptional, "upside down" state of the world at war. But, for the most part, the black diggers continue to face racism and discrimination during their service.

In one scene, white soldiers send Laurie on reconnaissance—a dangerous task to which he has already been disproportionately assigned—because of his "tracking skills" (even though he insists he grew up in a city). Later, a commander sends Nigel to enter the battlefield because he is the "shortest," although ironically he ends up being the only one to survive a German attack. Four Trinidadian soldiers insult Mick for his race, calling him an "Australian nigger," even though they are also black British colonial subjects. And when Archie beats a German soldier to death, he hears the soldier's last words, which translate to "Black devil … last thing I see"; Archie's blackness seems to bother the man more than the fact that he is being killed. Although Indigenous soldiers find their white compatriots reluctantly accepting in Europe, a white soldier reveals their underlying thought pattern to Harry by calling him "as good as a white man," which shows that whites have not learned to see Indigenous Australians as equals, but rather learned to see Aboriginal servicepeople as better than the rest of the Aboriginal population.

After the war, however, the Indigenous veterans face the same racism they lived with before it in Australia and are dismayed to see that their service has not changed anyone's minds. When they meet again after the war, Harry is a beggar, while his former white buddy Stan works for the government department that gives Indigenous people's land to soldiers. Another day, workers try to kick Archie and his friends out of the pub on Anzac Day, and they ultimately do make it inside, but only because they are wearing their war metals. Tommy and Bertie receive no attention for their PTSD, and when Archie tries to stand up for the other Indigenous men working with him on a cattle ranch, the manager overtly threatens his family. As Norm puts it, "[whites] painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat."

Although the Indigenous soldiers profiled in *Black Diggers* sought to fight for a more equal Australia as well as for the Allied forces in World War I, their Indigenous identities were always seen as a troublesome footnote, somehow antithetical to their identities as Australian soldiers. In Europe, therefore, they occasionally and inconsistently found respite from the racism that defined their lives in Australia and continued to do so as soon as they "got off that boat" after the war.

WAR, VIOLENCE, AND SHELL SHOCK

Like many war stories, *Black Diggers* confronts the acts of senseless and extreme violence that forever transform its subjects' lives, leaving them traumatized and stuck in the past once they turn from soldiers into veterans. While World War I was infamous for introducing the world to shell shock—the condition of extreme, prolonged agony now officially known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder—the Indigenous soldiers profiled in this play also had to deal with the Australian government's utter indifference to their suffering and refusal to provide them with any significant opportunities after the war. The combination of the violence they witness in Europe and the lack of opportunities they face at home leaves nearly all of the play's protagonists destitute and unacknowledged by the end of the story.

The play's protagonists witness horrifying, unforgettable violence. In the trench warfare that defined World War I, soldiers often passed months scarcely moving a few feet, which created a deep sense of futility (as weeks of effort could be undone in a matter of minutes and human losses far exceeded territorial gains). During one scene narrated by a ghost, the specter insists that he was "starting to lose it" in fighting for inches of territory. During another scene, Mick, Archie, Ern, and Stan play "I spy" while complaining about how little progress they have made, because there is nothing else to do. In one of his **letters** to Auntie May, Archie writes about an event that haunts him: his fellow soldier attempts suicide (and fails) because of the war's pointlessness. This suicide attempt leaves the man faceless, a detail that symbolizes the anonymity of the suffering during the war and which Archie repeats twice

in his letter, as if he cannot stop reliving the experience. Similarly, the ghost recalls watching his bunkmate get shot and killed, then killing the German responsible. The implication is clear: the violence of the War turned this soldier into an emotional ghost, an empty shell of the man he used to be, in addition to literally killing him.

The war leaves the protagonists with horrible injuries, not only physically but also psychologically. These enduring wounds, in most cases, never heal. Norm, Ern, and Bob are all horribly wounded, respectively losing ears, an arm, and eyes. After they return to Australia, Norm and Ern chat about the lack of respect they received and then the cast sings a musical number, sporting various severe injuries. Bertie and Tommy suffer from perhaps the worst case of shell shock. They are both buried under the dirt for three days, then sent home after they are rescued. Bertie returns to his mother and grandad but is unable to speak or move—he just clutches **Frank's hair**. And Tommy, the audience discovers in his eulogy, returned to Australia to become "Tank Stand Tommy," a mentally ill, alcoholic homeless man living under a water tank, whose war medals were only discovered after his death. Bertie's mother sees her son's pain as representing the loss of his childhood: she says that he is never "coming back from the world of the grown-ups." The text's major symbols—the lock of Frank's hair that Bertie clutches endlessly after he gets dug out of his hole, **the circus** that symbolizes the youth and inclusion in normal Australian life that Bertie remains unable to achieve, and **the bullet casings** that Ern finds in his side years after the war—all represent the enduring pain the "black diggers" live with after the war.

The end of the war exacerbates the soldiers' pain rather than alleviating it: after fighting in order to build a space for themselves in the Australian nation, they end up in the same jobs where they started, facing the same discrimination, and now with their war injuries to boot. Of course, Tommy, Bertie, and Ern's conditions are typical—they reflect not only the pain they all suffered, but also (just as saliently) the fact that they never received any psychological help or financial assistance from the government they risked their lives to defend. Archie ends up working on the same ranch as before the war, under the same horrible conditions. Laurie ends up working in a church, Harry homeless and begging, and Nigel spinning a sign on the street before landing in a psychiatric hospital (which, ironically, is the only help any of them ever receive). Ern gives up his war medals, which will "only get lost," since not even his family cares about them or his service.

Although *Black Diggers* is unique in its focus on the experiences of Indigenous Australian soldiers, it is also a war story that, like so many others, seeks to represent the profound human cost of wars usually learned about in impersonal, statistical terms. And the black diggers' fate is as much a product of the Australian government—its violence towards Indigenous people and refusal to take responsibility for them after sending them into war—as of the unprecedented conditions that made the First World War so deadly and traumatizing for so many.

HISTORY, MEMORY, AND THE ARCHIVE

One motivation behind the initial production of *Black Diggers* was the necessity of publicly honoring a previously forgotten group of men who played a central role in both Indigenous Australian history and the Australian military effort in World War I. But, of necessity, the play was borne of an anonymous and fragmented archive full of salient vignettes but few complete stories. While the play's fragmented format honors this source—it offers dozens of short scenes in less than two hours—playwright Tom Wright's decision to turn fragments into full characters represents the same kind of transformation he hopes to effect in the public eye: the development of a coherent narrative about the forgotten soldiers he portrays, as well as a recognition of the very importance of bearing witness. Accordingly, through its form and its use of the same kind of documents it is based on as narrative tropes, *Black Diggers* continually comments on its origin and project, portraying the process of forgetting that the play itself is designed to undo.

The play seeks to correct and rewrite Australian history by centering Indigenous experiences and honoring the black diggers in a way the Australian government never did. In his introduction to the text, director Wesley Enoch argues that the play is a means of translating oral history—alive but limited to immediate family settings—and forgotten stories embedded in archives into public history that can bear on Australia as a whole. In turning his research into stories, Tom Wright combined various fragments of stories he encountered into a handful of characters that Enoch describes as "archetypal character journeys." Because Indigenous soldiers' experiences were mediated through the anonymity and unreliability of an archive, Wright decides to get at the deep truth of personal experience by foregoing the surface-level truth of individuals' identities. At the end of the play, the playwright includes a **letter** from an Indigenous Colonel whose ancestors also served in the Australian Army and who sees the work as "a powerful medium toward recognition and reconciliation" and deems it a much-needed corrective to the erasure of Indigenous soldiers' efforts. When the Retired Schoolmaster asks if they are planning to fight in the war, Harry and his friends' response is lukewarm and confused: in a scene just thereafter, Harry insists that "no-one knows what it's all about." One of his friends gives a meticulous, historically accurate description of the war's origins, but Harry repeats his claim that nobody can explain the war. This refusal to acknowledge the obvious truth points to how truths are forgotten and eroded throughout history, which ends up repeating them, and subtly points to the play's purpose. During a burial scene, the soldiers sing a song, "Our

God, Our Help in Ages Past," which is precisely about this issue: the way history's lessons are forgotten as "the flood" of time and experience makes "the busy tribes" lose track of their roots.

The text also uses anonymity and documentary evidence as tropes, commenting on its own process of creation and pointing to the Indigenous invisibility it hopes to remedy both in and beyond the context of the First World War. One of the play's longest scenes is an undated monologue narrated by a ghost who watched his bunkmate get shot in the face by a German soldier. The anonymous nature of the scene shows both how soldiers shared the experience of confronting horrific violence and how they were rendered invisible by that violence; in particular, it points to the way so many Indigenous soldiers both remained anonymous and were buried on the spot in Europe when killed, without the proper recognition and ceremonies at home.

Another scene shows the Australian Prime Minister inaugurating the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, which points to both the anonymity of the people turned into characters in the play and the way Indigenous military histories have remained unknown and been lost through assimilation into national myths about the Australian military. Similarly, many of the play's central characters—like Nigel and Tommy—end up anonymous and forgotten by their country, which foreshadows Indigenous soldiers' treatment in the century to follow. And yet another scene has the actors read disjointed excerpts from a series of anonymous letters, directly mirroring the archival material out of which this play was written. The named characters are also known to their families only through letters—Archie repeatedly writes letters to his Auntie May, and when Bertie wants his family to get him discharged, he has to put his request obliquely in writing by referring his mother to **the circus show** she talked about to represent his youth and hope to earn the same opportunities as whites.

While *Black Diggers* does not purport to tell any true stories, its fragments are expressly designed to get at a deep collective truth, not only about the Indigenous Australian experience of World War I, but also about the consequences of losing track of history and necessity of bearing witness for a nation that continues, to various extents, to forget its Indigenous people in the same way as it did in the war's aftermath.

SYMBOLS

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

BERTIE'S CIRCUS SHOW

When Bertie asks his mother to forge his birthdate so that he can appear old enough to sign up for the military, she reluctantly agrees only after comparing the war and the world to the circus show he always tried to attend as a child (but was never allowed to see because of Australia's racism). Later, after he is buried alive under the soil with Tommy, Bertie writes home to ask his mother to reveal his real birthdate—but he is not allowed to say this literally because outgoing mail is censored; instead he writes about being "in the Show" and finally understanding "what the grown-up world is like."

While Bertie's mother sees his exclusion from the circus show as symbolizing his inevitable exclusion from white-run Australian society, Bertie inverts this meaning. He says in his **letter** that he is now in the show to indicate his inclusion in the white world only insofar as he shares the horrific trauma his fellow white soldiers also experience. An exciting spectacle associated with childhood, the circus show actually symbolizes Bertie's *loss of childhood*, showing that the seeming excitement and fanfare of the war were actually cover for profound cruelty. In short, the inversion of the meaning of the circus show demonstrates how the meaning of the war itself was inverted, turned from an opportunity for men to prove themselves, see the world, and win glory into a site of horrific trauma.

THE LOCK OF FRANK'S HAIR

In 1916 at the battle of Pozieres, Bertie and Tommy watch another Indigenous soldier, Frank, die on the battlefield. They are unable to understand his last words and worry that his soul will get "stuck" in Europe and be unable to return to Australia if they cannot obtain the right plants for an Aboriginal funeral ceremony. Of course, they will not be able to get those plants, so they let the medic take the body away and instead take a lock of Frank's hair. Later, both Bertie and Tommy are buried under the dirt and go home with severe trauma; back at home in New South Wales, Bertie passes his days motionless, staring into space, clinging to the lock of Frank's hair.

When Bertie and Tommy first cut the hair from Frank's body, it symbolizes indigenous displacement: the irony of dying in Europe, the land of their colonizers, and the impossibility of following tradition as the world has grown interconnected and violent. The lock is a last-ditch attempt to make a genuine burial for Frank possible in the future, a symbol of the traditions that indigenous people remember but are unable to practice. When Bertie brings it home, it symbolizes not only his memory of Frank, the only soldier he watched die who looked like him, but also his own inability to go back and recover his childhood and traditional connection to Australia, which now for him stands only for the horrors of war.

ERN'S BULLET SHARDS

In a long monologue set in 1956 near the end of the

play, Ern explained that he returned to Australia and overcame much of his trauma from the war until World War Two, when his side started "oozing that lovely rich black blood" and he soon discovered a number of old bullet shards stuck deep inside. They came out slowly, over years, and he gave them to his grandchildren as gifts. This monologue uses physical injury as a metaphor for the long-term, gradual suffering of trauma, even if one represses it immediately upon arriving home; this is a commentary not only on the individual experience of war, but also on the way it is passed on to family (as Ern gives the bullet shards out as a reminder of his sacrifice) and society as a whole. In this latter sense, it is a commentary on the play itself, which seeks to dig up the buried relics of a collective injury that was never acknowledged in the war's own aftermath. It is also a commentary on the uses of history—there is no doubt that the shards come out during World War Two because that is when the lessons of World War One become salient, and that this play in turn hopes to inform the future of Indigenous politics and Indigenous literature alike in Australia.

LETTERS

Letters appear frequently throughout *Black Diggers*, from Archie's periodic writings for Auntie May, to the scene in the second act when a number of anonymous letters fall from the sky, to Bertie's coded letter asking his mother to help him get discharged, to Nigel's letter condemning the Coinston massacre. In all these cases, the letters point to the simultaneous intimacy and distance of the soldiers' relationships with their families, administrative sources of power, and the future. As the only form of communication back home from the battlefield, letters represent soldiers' enduring connections to their families and rich, private emotional lives even when halfway across the earth from their loved ones. And yet, as Bertie's **circus show** metaphor demonstrates, these letters were also censored, which points to the sense in which letters mediate between the soldiers and the state power that both oppresses them in Australia and allows them to serve in the military in Europe. This modern state structure, in which literacy and formality are prerequisites to be taken seriously by those in power, also demonstrates how Aboriginal Australians were systematically excluded from recognition as full human beings—for instance, the newspaper editors expect that Indigenous people will not write in about the Coinston massacre, and then when Nigel does, they are so impressed by his literacy that their story becomes about his handwriting.

Finally, the predominance of letters in *Black Diggers* is also a continual nod to the play's own circumstances of production: it was constructed out of anonymous archives, which researchers stumbled upon like anonymous letters falling out of the sky. There is at once an unbridgeable distance—in terms of soldiers' identities and full experiences—and an undeniable intimacy to the anonymity of letters. This is, in turn, why the play is structured as it is, with a number of short, pointed scenes that underline the emotional impact of the war as much as the anonymity of its soldiers.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Playlab edition of *Black Diggers* published in 2015.

Foreword Quotes

One purpose of Indigenous theatre is to write onto the public record neglected or forgotten stories.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Wesley Enoch, the Indigenous director of *Black Diggers* who played a crucial part in the play's conception in addition to its execution, opens his Foreword to the script with this statement about the work's fundamental motivation. In order to supplement the dominant narrative about the Australian military as a white institution and World War One as a conflict fought exclusively by white soldiers, *Black Diggers* tells the stories of Australia's roughly 1000 Indigenous World War One soldiers. So far, the story of World War One's Indigenous soldiers has been preserved in two primary forms: it has been passed down in families and hidden in archives. But the Australian public's failure to take stock of Indigenous war history belies a more general refusal to take Indigenous stories and experiences seriously, and so *Black Diggers* aims to address these related problems together by turning a forgotten tale into a public one.

In post apartheid South Africa during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission there was a four-part definition of truth:

- Personal truth — the thing you believe to be true
- Social truth — what a group believe to be true through discussion and debate
- Forensic truth — the truth that can be proven through science and records
- Public truth — the value of telling the truth for the greater good

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

In his Foreword to *Black Diggers*, director Wesley Enoch uses this four-part definition of truth to help elaborate on the play's goals. It is relevant that he cites the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the body responsible for holding accountable and granting amnesty to individuals who committed crimes against humanity under the era of apartheid (white supremacist rule) and during the violent period that saw apartheid's end, because it shows that Australia's horrible mistreatment of its Indigenous people and state-enforced racist policies fit within a historical precedent and can only be truly addressed if the government acknowledges, confronts, and attempts to make amends for them.

Black Diggers does successfully elaborate all four kinds of truths with regards to Indigenous Australian World War One veterans. First, it foregrounds personal truths by following the stories of individual soldiers, whose experiences are drawn from real archival evidence. Secondly, it acknowledges the collective history of Indigenous Australia—social truth—by emphasizing the role of former state policies and men's military service in Indigenous Australians' collective self-image. Thirdly, it uses forensic methods—the archive itself—as the basis for its stories, and even comments on this evidence by repeatedly using letters as a trope in the play. And finally, the front and back matter itself elaborates the importance of speaking Indigenous soldiers' truth for the public, which also arises in smaller moments during the play, like when Bertie's grandfather tells the story of his land or Nigel writes a political appeal to a newspaper.

Act One Quotes

❝ Full-blood, too. Unusual. Perfect specimen. And if I'd been only five minutes later … it's all chance, and fate. *[To the baby]* Look at you. Back from the dead, if only you knew it.

Related Characters: Taxidermist (speaker), Nigel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In the opening scene of *Black Diggers*, a Taxidermist saves Nigel from sure death after a group of whites, clearing the remote region of Bellender Ker for settlement, slaughter the Indigenous people who live there, including Nigel's parents. Even more disturbingly, the Taxidermist is traveling with them, and he only saves Nigel because he is a "perfect specimen." The audience is meant to feel ambiguous about this act—while Nigel has been brought "back from the dead," it is not because the Taxidermist sees anything inherently wrong with massacring other human beings, but rather because he sees Nigel as a potential spectacle, a body that can be displayed and analyzed for whites' benefits. His attitude toward Nigel is much like the settlers' attitude toward Indigenous land: they are both considered empty, valueless vessels to be "conquered" (for science and for profit) by whites. Nigel ends up living through this kind of treatment over and over, which ultimately leaves him in a mental hospital at the end of the play.

❝ RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER: Think about what it might mean, if swathes of Mahommedan Turks or creeping armies of sausage-breathed Huns over-ran our country, imposing their foreign ways, interfering with our women. Imagine the horrors of what it would be like if we were to lose, and you wake up one morning and find us all under occupation.

HARRY: Yeah. Imagine.

They laugh. The old bloke moves on muttering under his breath. They join him, mimicking him at first, but one of them has a bass-drum, their parade of mimicry becomes a rallying march.

Related Characters: Retired Schoolmaster, Harry (speaker), Bob, Ern, Norm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

When a Retired Schoolmaster berates Harry, Norm, Ern, and Bob about joining the war, he seems to completely miss the irony in threatening Indigenous men that their land will be devastated by foreign invaders—this has already happened, and was continuing to happen, in Australia. Like many Australians as the time, the schoolmaster portrays the war as a means of defending white nobility and purity, which exposes both the racist underpinnings of Australian nationalism and his complete inability to imagine the boys'

relationship to their land.

And yet the stage directions after the characters' dialogue point to the ambivalent and nearly accidental way in which so many of the black diggers ended up in the military. At first, they mock the Retired Schoolmaster, as they clearly recognize the exaggerations and distortions in his picture of events. Later, however, this turns into a military march, as though they inadvertently slip from recognizing the war as ridiculous to wholeheartedly supporting it.

NIGEL: Father, what happened to my aborigine parents?

TAXIDERMIST: You know that, little man. They died.

NIGEL: How did they die?

TAXIDERMIST: I'll tell you one day. Look, a chimpanzee. They are our closest relatives.

NIGEL: Why not now?

TAXIDERMIST: Because you're not ready yet.

NIGEL: Ready for what?

TAXIDERMIST: The world—the bigger, grown-up world—is a complicated, difficult place. You should enjoy every moment of your childhood. Plenty of time for truth later.

Related Characters: Nigel, Taxidermist (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19-20

Explanation and Analysis

When the Taxidermist takes Nigel to the Australian Museum in Sydney, the audience realizes that he has adopted the boy as his own son after saving him in the wilderness of Bellender Ker. However, their relationship remains uncomfortably underlined by the Taxidermist's motives; in this scene, the audience learns more about the Taxidermist's work and its role in the colonial project. Namely, he seems involved in 19th and 20th century colonial science's dedicated attempt to demonstrate that white people were more racially advanced by evaluating various human racial groups on a continuum from less evolved (closest to apes) to most evolved (Europeans, with their supposedly unique "civilization"). This pseudoscience, long since discredited, was an attempt to legitimize the racist assumptions that allowed whites to steal nonwhites' territory and systematically exploit their labor. And so, while the Taxidermist has saved Nigel from death, it becomes clear in this passage that he is not willing to own up to his own contributions to the system that would have made Nigel's death perfectly justifiable and legitimate in the eyes of the state. Again, in his final line here, his stance is ambiguous: while he wants to protect Nigel from the truth in order to save the boy's feelings, he also wants to save face for himself rather than admit that he watched Nigel's parents' murder with indifference.

ERN: Soldiers. If you can fire a gun and stand in the sun, they might pretend to forget you're …

NORM: What??

Related Characters: Norm, Ern (speaker), Bob

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In 1916, Norm, Ern, and Bob have signed up for the military (although the play does not recount their difficulty doing so until after this scene). Here, they wonder whether they will be able to have access to their pay or whether, like almost all Aboriginal assets, this pay will be appropriated by the Aborigines' Protection Boards that are ostensibly tasked with promoting Aboriginal Australians' interests (but, in reality, mostly serve to prevent them from advancing in society and challenging whites' power in that society). Realizing that, for the first time, they might be seen as full individuals rather than savages to be managed by the state, the men take their hopes a step further: perhaps others "might even pretend to forget" about their race.

Yet there are two key qualifiers in Ern's hope: first, he does not quite say the missing word—"Aboriginal," "Indigenous," or "black"—and his hesitation suggests both an uncertainty about whether whites will truly overcome their racism and an uneasiness about defining himself in the same way that white settlers define him. Secondly, he only thinks whites "might *pretend to* forget," emphasizing the fact that they can never truly erase their race and foreshadowing the way in which whites only make occasional and fleeting exceptions to racist norms for Indigenous soldiers.

I'm sorry, son, I have no idea what to do with this. With you. Wait here.

He goes and talks to a superior. There is much consulting of books and disagreements until a half dozen men are all scratching their heads and carrying on.

Anyone have the slightest idea what "Substantially European" means?

Related Characters: Recruiting Sergeant (speaker), Bob, Ern, Norm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

When Norm, Bob, and Ern first try to sign up for the military, they are summarily rejected because they are Aboriginal: officially, only people of "Substantially European" descent are allowed to enlist. Later, however, they return to another recruitment center and try again, and the Recruiting Sergeant sees through the law just as they do: not only is "Substantially European" a vague and meaningless term, but the racist ideology that Australia is a white nation actually works against it in a time of war, when it can continue using the Indigenous population it has always exploited as soldiers so long as it is willing to slightly loosen its rigid racial concept of the nation. The Recruiting Sergeant and his office's failed attempts to pin down the concept of "Substantially European" reflect the arbitrariness in racism's attempt to reduce the complexity of inheritance and identity to simple categories.

It needed to be seen; these extraordinary specimens, these gallant figures, resolute as they were silhouetted against a foreign sky, they had the toughness, the ingenuity of the land of their birth. They had come to the other side of the globe to defend noble ideals; to protect motherhood, the safety of law, the sanctity of liberty, to fight for their King and all His Majesty carries … truly, from some confused, even shambolic frontier, the Australian has arrived. Fair, clear of eye, the finest of the British race cast anew under a southern sun. These boys are us, those that remain; those that returned. The greatness of the White Man, rendered greater still by peril, fighting not just for God and Empire, but to define what it is to be a man, an Australian man, in this our young Commonwealth …

Related Characters: Ern, Bob, Norm

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In the scene immediately after Norm, Bob, and Ern finally manage to sign up for the military, an old-timey radio announcer gives this speech, valorizing Australian soldiers and revealing the values that underlie the Australian war effort. The voice sees the soldiers' positive traits as both inherited from "the land of their birth" and the product of their whiteness; needless to say, Aboriginals who have a true, intergenerational connection to Australian land do not count. Indeed, the speech implies that Australians are so valiant precisely because they have managed to conquer Indigenous land (the "shambolic frontier") and so demonstrated "the greatness of the White Man" precisely by continuing to fight for white supremacy around the globe. It is this ideology of war and nation, still prominent in Australia (if worded more carefully), that *Black Diggers* seeks to disrupt, but that the play's characters also have to struggle against throughout their lives.

Listen to us and you shall hear, news that's been coming for a hundred years: Since Captain Cook, and many more, you've never seen the like before.

The white man needs us coloured boys now
Here in the shit every face is brown
You see the world's turned upside down
See the world's turned upside down.
Fellers — You see the world's turned upside down
See the world's turned upside down

Related Characters: Harry

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

After he deploys out from Australia, Harry meets a belligerent, racist soldier named Jim on their ship heading for Europe. Jim berates Harry, claiming that it is a disgrace for blacks to be allowed to eat at the same table as whites and yelling that "the world's turned upside down" before assaulting him. Fortunately, the other white soldiers on the ship come to Harry's aid, beating Jim up first, and Harry affirms that "the world's turned upside down" before this

song plays and is sung by the whole cast.

The world being turned upside down is a salient metaphor for the kind of shift that Indigenous soldiers saw during the war: as the song recounts, they were appreciated and needed by their country for the first time, but only because of their willingness to die for it. United against the constant threat of death and violence, Australian soldiers could not afford to worry about racism, and so the temporary exception created by the war allowed Indigenous soldiers their first taste of equality—although it was short lived, as the world turned back right side up after the war's end.

VOICE IN THE DARK: Have we ever met?

ERN: Passed in the road. Your old man took his belt to mine a few times, when he went for a drink.

VOICE IN THE DARK: Why would he do that?

Related Characters: Ern (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

As they chat at nighttime, Ern and a white soldier reveal they are from the same town. But, because it is dark, the white soldier does not know that Ern is Aboriginal. In their mutual blindness, they have a heartfelt conversation as equals, but it is clear that this is only because the white soldier never imagines that Ern might be black. Beyond attesting to the severe discrimination and violence Indigenous people faced from whites (in addition to the state), this quote shows that the power dynamics surrounding the two soldiers'—the fact that the white soldier's father used to beat Ern's for trying to enter a bar—are temporarily suspended by the war. Of course, the white soldier realizes that Ern is black when he lights up his pipe, and at first he is unsure how to react. This passage shows that racism is purely skin-deep—that is, that racists' attempts to justify their beliefs through science or social analysis are merely excuses for discrimination based on sight.

Australia. Never heard of it.

Related Characters: Bertie's Grandad (speaker), Bertie's Mom, Bertie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

When Bertie declares his intention to go to war for his country, Australia, his grandad—who has been living on their land his whole life and watched much of the process of colonization play out—retorts with this line. His (and some of the Indigenous soldiers') rejection of the legitimacy of "Australia" is powerful because it demonstrates an entirely different way to think about people's relationship to land, beyond the conventional idea of ownership and national sovereignty that became virtually universal in the 20th century. For him, the land is the land, and "Australia" is the construct of white invaders who wrongly claim that land. Bertie's grandad offers a potent reminder that the nation-state should not be taken for granted as a mode of social organization, and that the Australian nation-state is fundamentally grounded in the destruction of Indigenous peoples and theft of their land.

HARRY: If you blokes have a beer with me then that's a start.

STAN: What are you on about? We'd always have a beer with you.

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER: You're as good as a white man, Harry.

Related Characters: Stan, Harry (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

When Harry begins to befriend white soldiers at the Battle of Polygon Wood, the group's conversation ends with these lines that foreshadow the role of racism in the diggers' fate after the war and point to the particular, partial way in which they were sometimes accepted as equals during the war. Harry's request shows how progress toward racial equality must be founded on goodwill and personal connections—not only is the best way to dispel racist beliefs by simply learning to see the people one hates as human through personal connections, but different groups' eagerness to interact can create a powerful stance against racism in society at large.

At the same time, this is never a foregone conclusion. While Stan seems enthusiastic about befriending Harry, a scene near the end of the play reveals that mere goodwill is not enough when people do not make an active effort to step out of their racial comfort zones: when they recognize one another in the street during this later scene, their conversation is tense and the distance between them is unbridgeable, largely owing to the contrast between Stan's wealth of opportunities after the war and Harry's utter lack of them.

Finally, and most significantly, the "First White Soldier" shows the underlying issue with many white soldiers' camaraderie with their black compatriots: they were not revising their racist beliefs by realizing that Indigenous people were just like them; rather, they were making exceptions to their racist beliefs for a few individuals they encountered, imagining black soldiers as unlike the rest of their (inferior) race. Accordingly, while this passage demonstrates the power of personal connections to overturn racial hierarchies, it also points to the necessity of connecting personal relationships to the social forces—segregation, inequality, and discriminatory policy—that make those relationships radical in the first place.

❝ Seriously, this has gone for years and it could go for years. We lose a few mates, they lose a few, the whistle blows, we gain another cricket pitch worth of Belgium, the horn blows, they chase us out. But most of the time we sit here and we sing our songs. And they sit over there and sing theirs. And everyone, everyone hates the whole bloody stunt.

Related Characters: Ern (speaker), Stan, Archie, Mick

Related Themes:

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

As they sit in a trench playing "I Spy," Mick, Archie, Ern, and Stan begin to realize how much the reality of the war differs from their expectations, and especially how completely futile the whole endeavor seems from the perspective of the battlefield. Although they know that much of the world, major powers and major powers' colonies alike, sees their fate as the most important question of their day, on the front lines virtually nothing happens, any progress feels meaningless, and it grows unclear why it matters whether one side or the other wins. Beyond confusing and meaningless, the war is, most importantly, *boring*—and this fact contributes significantly to the distress of the soldiers who fail to make it out in one piece (whether physically or psychologically). In other words, as they grow bored and lose their sense of purpose in fighting the war, the diggers begin to see its violence as not only regrettable, but also completely pointless, unnecessary, and even random.

❝ Your folks do something, over in the West? *[BERTIE shrugs]* I wouldn't know where to begin. His you know, his soul will be stuck here. You know what I mean. With all these trees, they will grow here one day all these—what do you call them? Elms and oaks and all that. And all these hedges and the flowers and we don't know the names of any of them. And when they burn the smoke is different and will lead him a different way.

Related Characters: Bertie (speaker), Tommy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 44

Explanation and Analysis

When fellow Indigenous soldier Frank dies at the Battle of Pozieres, Bertie and Tommy are both astonished to see a corpse that looks like them for the first time and completely unsure how to properly honor their fallen compatriot. They discuss traditional Aboriginal beliefs about death, noting that the fate of someone's soul is intimately tied to the place where they die and the funeral ceremonies performed for them. Yet, in Europe, they are completely stuck: white soldiers do not understand or respect their traditions, and they do not have the proper materials to give Frank the kind of funeral that would ensure his soul could get back to Australia.

In focusing on the differences between the land in Australia and Europe, they highlight the particular connection to land that differentiates Aboriginal claims to ownership over Australia with white ones, as well as implicitly criticizing this white view of land as property to be owned and exploited, rather than a complex and living organism that ought to live in some sort of synergy with humans.

Unable to give Frank a proper burial, Bertie and Tommy cut off and take home a lock of his hair, which comes to symbolize their hope to properly honor him but also the impossibility of ever doing so (as well as their hope of

reigniting lost Indigenous traditions).

> And the worst of it is that Ollie is still alive, he's in the hospital and he hasn't got a face but he's alive Aunty May. But he hasn't got a face Aunty May, he hasn't got a face.

Related Characters: Archie (speaker), Aunty May

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 52

Explanation and Analysis

In his second letter to his Auntie May, Archie tells the story of their family friend Ollie Thomas, who simply sat down on a bench with some other soldiers and "shot himself in the face" in a suicide attempt. Like all his letters, the one in this scene points to soldiers' immense distance from home but continued, intimate relationships with family members who love them and share in their suffering—both these dimensions also reflect the role of letters and related documentary evidence in this play's production (although they crossed enormous gaps of space and time, they brought poignant, personal, emotionally infectious stories).

Ollie's suicide attempt, of course, points to the intensity of the trauma suffered by World War One soldiers charged to inflict and suffer violence with no clear reason. In repeating the seemingly unfathomable fact that a man he has known since childhood is now faceless, Archie reveals both an increasing inability to process the violence of the war and a repetitious dwelling on the suffering he witnessed, of the sort that can easily progress into the flashbacks of shell shock (now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder).

> You must all see now, having been captured, that you have been used and abused. You are victims of your oppressive masters, who brutally seized your lands and took from you your birthrights. You are little more than slaves until you rise up and throw off the shackles of your British masters. The time for being lickspittles has ended, this war and the inevitable defeat of Great Britain has washed it all away. The question is, who will acknowledge they have been made fools, have been kept children, have accepted their own slavery? It is Time to fight, to fight against your oppressors, for a free India, for free Africa…

Related Characters: German Prison Guard (speaker), Nigel

Related Themes:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

After he is sent on a dangerous mission because he is "shortest" (although clearly, in reality, because of his race), Nigel returns to learn that his entire unit has been killed by the Germans. He gets captured and taken to the historically unique Zössen POW Camp, the German camp designed for nonwhite soldiers from colonized territories. At Zössen, he is forced to listen to a German soldier pontificate about the evils of colonialism.

The most disturbing part of this German's lecture is that, although it is by the diggers' enemies (and really designed to get soldiers to switch sides), it is in all respects historically accurate and looks much like the rhetoric of revolution movements some decades later in the colonized world. Of course, the Germans are trying to redirect and take advantage of the revolutionary impulse that later proved instrumental to the freedom of so many colonized people, and they conveniently forget that the Central Powers are empires of their own, seeking to expand their territory. However, the fact that the Germans can legitimately condemn the Allies' colonialism shows the moral ambiguity of colonized soldiers' position in the war: there is oppression, blood, and injustice on all sides, and it is difficult to find the moral willpower to fight against all of it.

> Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer teufel mit weiße Augen. Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer … letzte, was ich sehe.

Related Characters: German Soldier (speaker), Archie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

As he strangles a German soldier to death, Archie hears the man's last words, which translate to: "Black devil. Black devil with white eyes. Black devil. Black … the last thing I see." Beyond depicting the personal dimension of cruelty and violence that is often missed when talking about war in terms of statistics and generalizations, this closing scene to Act One also shows that the racism faced by Indigenous servicemen was not a uniquely Australian phenomenon. Indeed, if the allies and the enemy can agree on anything, it

is their view of nonwhites as subhuman; in his dying breath, the German soldier fixates completely on Archie's race, as though Archie's blackness is more frightening than the man's own imminent death.

Act Two Quotes

It might have passed some of the less observant of you, but I happen to be aboriginal. My ancestors came up from Mackey river way. And I'm proud of it. But I have to say, thank God for the Army. Thank God for the uniform and the chance to serve. Because when I was a whippersnapper and first joined up I was just another woebegone failure. And in the army, you earn your way. You take on dignity. A dignity perhaps that no-one was going to let you have back home. But in the service, you are forged into something … not white, you're not erased of your past, but it's … it's … incorporated into who you are, and you realize — maybe in those hideous moments in hell on earth, maybe on parade, maybe with mates, I don't know — you realize, "I belong." And I came back, and like you gentlemen I found myself identifying with Australia. It wasn't for *them* or about *them*. It was for me too.

Related Characters: Bloke With a Glass of Wine (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66-67

Explanation and Analysis

In the first scene of Act Two, the narrative of *Black Diggers* jumps forward more than 30 years, to this speech by an unnamed Indigenous veteran after World War Two. This year, 1949, is also when the Australian government first gives Indigenous people the right to vote—but only Indigenous veterans, and all other Aboriginal people remain disenfranchised for 13 more years, until 1962.

This speaker's deep gratitude contrasts strongly with the experiences of the World War One soldiers profiled in *Black Diggers*; while this might simply be because this man is so grateful for the vote, more likely, this speech is meant to be an idealized and exaggerated version of what the diggers might have felt had everything gone right during the war, of the gratitude they would have developed for an Australia that truly treated them as equals and gave them meaning through combat. Like this speaker, the soldiers profiled in this play found that the Army strongly and centrally shaped their identity—but, of course, their experience was opposite: instead of giving them dignity, strength, and belonging, the war gave them a sense of disillusionment and futility about their efforts. While it may have momentarily shown them what racial equality would look like, they quickly lost any prospect of fulfilling that promise and (as the remainder of Act Two shows) ended up more desperate after than the war than they started before it.

For you the war's over. What's starting to dawn on me is that, for us, it's never going to end.

Related Characters: Mick (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

After the war, veteran Mick goes to a public meeting of the Soldier Settlement Commission, the agency responsible for allotting land to World War One veterans, in the Western District of Victoria, where he lives. Instead of collecting a settlement like many of the returning white soldiers, Mick watches his *own* land—arid, fruitless land onto which his family was forced after they were driven out of their native territory—get appropriated by the government and given away to other soldiers. Although he and the farmers with him insist that the land is useless and that Mick is a war hero, the bureaucrat in charge of apportioning the land argues vaguely that "new techniques" will improve the land (although the farmers currently living there will have no access to it) and claims to know nothing about Mick's service in the war.

This episode shows how, while veterans' service is the ostensible basis for the land awards they receive, this logic does not apply to Indigenous veterans, who are relegated to their old status and continually seen by the government as noncitizens and subhuman. The government uses the war as an excuse to continue its old policy of summarily and unjustly seizing Indigenous land, and Mick sees that this is, in concrete terms, a policy of endless war against the nation's original inhabitants. This, then, is the crucial difference between white and Indigenous veterans: the former get to enjoy the fruits of peace, while the latter shift to fighting a different kind of war against the institutions that they used to be defending.

> You listen to me and you listen to me nice and close. I don't give a rat's arse where you've been and what you've done. I don't give a fuck what happened on the other side of the world. I don't care for your airs and graces. As far as I'm concerned you're still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told. Ever since you came home you've been the worst kind of black, an uppity one. I suggest you get on with the job at hand and stop being a troublemaker. Or things might get tough for people you care about. Jesus, now you've gone and got me angry. Who put these bloody ideas in your head?

Related Characters: Overseer at Bertha Downs Cattle Ranch (speaker), Mick , Archie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

After he returns home from the war, Archie goes back to his job performing hard labor at a rural cattle ranch. Having seen the world and the morally outrageous violence that surrounded him in the war, he decides to say something about the ranch's abusive policies towards its Indigenous workers, who are simply left to live on the streets when they can no longer work. This is the overseer's response, and it demonstrates not only how the war itself does nothing to ameliorate racism, but also how threatening Archie's willingness to claim his rights is to the overseer whose profits depend on preventing his workers from fighting their exploitation. The promise Archie makes with Mick before getting off their boat back in Australia—that "this wasn't for nothing"—appears unfortunately broken.

> You know, even when the fires had been through, the little green shoots came up everywhere. Little tiny tender shoots, up from the bones. But that's all lost now.

Related Characters: Bertie's Grandad (speaker), Bertie

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85

Explanation and Analysis

After Bertie returns home to Australia—virtually catatonic, unable to speak, move, or do anything but clutch Frank's hair—his mother laments that she has lost him forever and his grandad remembers how the land used to be before the government's irrigation destroyed it. Before, periodic fires used to cleanse the land and create the conditions for new life to grow; now, the land is always the same. This transformation in the land—which is stolen, destroyed, and paralyzed—is a clear metaphor for Bertie's transformation through the war, which he imagined would allow him to grow and pursue a better life after the war but instead left him unable to do anything at all. While Bertie's grandad points to the need for "tiny tender shoots"—renewed life—he has no faith that it will come now—to Bertie—after the war.

> REPORTER: Surely the letter's point is about the massacre up in the Territory?
>
> EDITOR: No-one's interested in payback in the back of Bourke. An Aborigine who can write like this is a much better story. He must be doing all right for himself, mustn't he?

Related Characters: Nigel

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

After the Coniston Massacre—the 1928 state-sanctioned murder of at least 100 innocent Indigenous people by settlers and government forces—Nigel writes a fiery and brilliant letter to the editor of the local newspaper, condemning the massacre and hoping to provoke a public outcry. When the newspaper staff receives the letter, they are so fascinated by the quality of Nigel's handwriting—which proves his level of education and contradicts their expectations about Indigenous people's subhumanity. For the first time, then, Nigel is considered exceptional because he *breaks* rather than *exemplifies* stereotypes about Indigenous people; and yet he is still reduced to a spectacle, his humanity is still denied, and his genuine efforts to make a difference backfire. Indeed, if the editors hope to publish an article about an Aboriginal man with beautiful handwriting, its purpose is likely to show that those who claim Aboriginal people are deprived of proper services are incorrect.

> Tarzan. At the *Empire*. Tarzan, man of the apes. The ape man. Tarzan. Ape. Man. Lowland Gorilla. From Zanzibar. Ape. Man.
>
> *He stops, has a surreptitious swig from a bottle. Stands still, watching people rush past him.*
>
> Sorry Dad.

Related Characters: Nigel (speaker), Taxidermist

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

In the disturbing scene just after Nigel writes his letter to the editor, he walks down Sydney's busiest street—George Street—wearing a sign that advertises the show "TARZAN THE APE MAN." The implication is clear: because whites, following racist science, think Aboriginal people are evolutionary somewhere between apes and full men, Nigel looks like an "ape man" and is a perfect advertisement for a show about such a figure.

This recalls all the other examples throughout the text when others treat him only in terms of his appearance, regardless of his desires or efforts—like when the Taxidermist (the "Dad" to whom he apologizes) saves him from death in Bellender Ker, the professor at the Zössen Camp is delighted to meet him, or the newspaper staff is entranced by his handwriting. Nigel's slurred line of dialogue also refers back to his visit to the Australian Museum with the Taxidermist, who showed him the Lowland Gorilla from Zanzibar.

> I reached round and felt just here under that scar and yep it was oozing that lovely rich black blood you know not the fairy light stuff close to the surface skin blood no this was that dark dark blood that comes from deep and has been there for ages, you know? […] You see, when there's been a war there's metal everywhere, just tons of it and it gets buried in the mud and the dirt and it gets forgotten.

Related Characters: Ern (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

During a lengthy monologue set in the 1950s, Ern recalls moving on with his life after World War One, only to discover his old wounds beginning to bleed during World War Two and start finding old bullet shards buried in his side. As he pulls them out gradually, he begins to realize for the first time how deeply the war has impacted him psychologically as well as physically. He decides to give the 17 shards he finds in his side to his grandchildren—they serve as reminders not to forget his service or the war, many years after he has already given away his war medals in desperation upon realizing that they meant nothing to his family.

Ern's speech emphasizes the long-lasting damage caused by war and the role of storytelling and remembrance in both alleviating that damage and passing on valuable lessons about striving, danger, and loss. In this sense, he points directly to two of the main purposes of *Black Diggers*: to unearth and honor the stories of Indigenous soldiers for the War's 100th anniversary, and to recognize the deep, enduring impact of war—both Australia's lengthy war against its Indigenous people and its effort in World War One—on contemporary reality in Australia.

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.

FOREWORD

Wesley Enoch, director of the first production of *Black Diggers*, writes that Indigenous theatre's purpose is to turn private stories passed down orally into public records of a people's history. Despite their lack of political rights, Enoch explains, Indigenous men signed up in droves to fight for Australia in World War One. Their motives were varied, but they were treated as equals in the Australian Imperial Force and "forged bonds [with whites] that would sow the seeds of the modern reconciliation movement."

In introducing the motivations behind creating Black Diggers, *Enoch, the Indigenous director who started formulating the project long before playwright Tom Wright signed on, shows that the play is part of an effort at redressing the erasure of Aboriginal people from Australian history, which was also one of Aboriginal soldiers' motives in signing up for the war.*

In their extensive research, Enoch and author Tom Wright took after the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission's "four-part definition of truth," encompassing personal, social, forensic, and public experiences and interests. Their play is an attempt to honor Indigenous World War One soldiers by translating real-life histories they encountered in archives into a number of fragmented "archetypal character journeys." They ended up with 60 scenes organized into five sections: Indigenous experiences before Australian nationhood, Indigenous men's enlistment in the war, their experiences in the war, their return to Australia, and the legacy they have left behind. Enoch describes the "great honour" he felt to be included in the project and encourages readers to send in any records or information they have about Indigenous service in World War One.

In refusing to reduce the Indigenous war experience to one definite truth, Wright and Enoch created a fragmented play to highlight the diversity and anonymity of the archive from which they drew their material. The four "truths" they seek also reflect four parallel goals for the play: to narrate personal histories, show the social dynamics of Indigenous life in the war, offer a historically accurate account, and address gaps in popular understanding for the sake of the public good. Black Diggers *is part of an ongoing project to develop a more in-depth history of Indigenous soldiers in the war, rather than a mere standalone project, which is why Enoch asks for further material that his audience may encounter.*

INTRODUCTION

The author, Tom Wright, opens his introduction by mentioning the "fraught exercise" of writing about history—"*whose* history […] and who *owns* it?" are perennial considerations, especially for this project, which combines "big national myths and profound moments in Indigenous experience." Wright explains that he had to write the play in six months and start with an enormous volume of already-compiled research that pointed to the wide variety of Indigenous war experiences, which are impossible to reduce to any single story. While he has decided to avoid real names, he has taken all his scenes from "genuine moments" in order to present "a patchwork quilt of the past" and represent the psychological effects of shellshock.

Because conventional Australian history is "owned" by the white colonizers who have founded the Australian state on native land, Wright sees his play as a historiographical intervention, a way of showing Australians a side of their history they are seldom taught in school, and whose exclusion meaningfully blinds them to the injustices and inequities that continue to structure Australian society. But the history he narrates is as much a specifically Indigenous history as it is a history pertaining to Australians as a whole, for their historical oppression of Aboriginal peoples gives the white Australian community a responsibility to aid in the quest for justice in the present.

Before the action begins, the book notes that the play is meant to be performed by "nine male indigenous actors."

It is crucial that the play is specifically written for Indigenous actors, furthering Indigenous theatre's quest to promote justice and equality through expanding access to the sphere of cultural representations.

ACT ONE

It is the year 1887 in Bellender Ker, Queensland. A group of white settlers are, by force, clearing an area of natives. Thinking everyone has been killed or driven away, they are dismayed to stumble upon a baby, "a bloody picaninny," whose mother they have already killed. One settler proposes leaving it for "the dogs" as the group compares the baby to an animal. Another settler nearly shoots it, until a Taxidermist comes along and stops them. The Taxidermist picks up the baby, describes it as a "perfect specimen," tells the child it is lucky to be "back from the dead," and sings it a hymn, which closes the scene as the other men "reassemble" themselves.

The opening scene of Black Diggers *narrates the foundational event—the largely forgotten and downplayed genocide of Aboriginal Australians—that is fundamental to both the founding of the Australian state (through the conquering and expansion of land) and the history of Indigenous Australians, whose contemporary struggles are a result of colonization's legacy. While the Taxidermist saves the child in this scene, he is not necessarily more sympathetic or less bloodthirsty than the other settlers; he only saves the child for being a physical curiosity, worth displaying in a museum or zoo because he exemplifies the "character" of Aboriginal Australians, whom scientists at this point in history believed could be demonstrated as less evolved than white people.*


In 1914, "Somewhere on the Gwyndir," a stick-carrying white Retired Schoolmaster tells a group of boys—Harry and his mates Norm, Bob, and Ern—about the "quiet war" that "could easily threaten all that is right, and true, and valuable to us all" happening in Europe. He implores them to think about their "duties" and fear "swathes of Mahommedan Turks or creeping armies of sausage-breathed Huns" occupying Australia. The boys laugh, but soon join the Retired Schoolmaster in a song, "Sons of the Southern Cross." The song's lyrics name icons of Australian nature and announce to "our brothers" that Australians will "be there" in the war. Though they at first join in jest, the boys' "parade of mimicry becomes a rallying march."

The Retired Schoolmaster's speech is ironic both because the war is being fought on the other side of the world (and so Australia is only relevant because of its status as a British colony) and because he seems to forget that Australia itself was "founded" by "swathes" of foreign invaders. Clearly, when he refers to "us all" he is only thinking about white people, which shows how Indigenous people are erased from ideas of Australian identity even while they are still being massacred on Australian land. At the same time, white Australian nationalism is happy to claim indigenous land itself as a source of pride and identity, as the lyrics of "Sons of the Southern Cross" demonstrate. The boys' mimicry—whether this symbolizes mocking or an attempt at fitting in—quickly turns them into soldiers, as though they, too, choose to forget the hypocrisies in the Schoolmaster's view.


Later, in same group of boys, Harry asks his friends why some seen people ("they") are going to fight in the Army, then insists that "no-one knows what it's all about." One of his mates explains the factors leading up to the war in scrupulous detail, citing "the culmination of structural problems in continental Europe that have been festering for over four decades," but after a pause Harry repeats that "no-one knows what it's about." The boys then "become stuffed primates in a nineteenth-century museum."

After Harry hears a detailed explanation of the war's causes, it becomes clear that he is simply uninterested in understanding the conflict in which he will eventually fight. In fact, he is willfully denying the war's futility. Harry's friend's explanation shows that the war is just a result of seemingly arbitrary alliances and systemic problems that have no identifiable culprit. They seek to make the war mean something else, something more, at least for themselves.

The scene shifts to 1895, when the Taxidermist takes a boy, Nigel, through Sydney's Australian Museum, showing him the exhibits of stuffed animals (really the play's actors). When Nigel asks whether the lowland gorilla is a man, the Taxidermist explains that humans are related to the animal. Nigel asks if he is related to the Taxidermist, and the Taxidermist calls himself Nigel's father, then explains how people and apes evolved out of monkeys. Nigel then asks, "what happened to my aborigine parents?" The Taxidermist says they died, but refuses to explain how, "because you're not ready yet." He wants Nigel to enjoy his childhood rather than dealing with "the complicated, difficult" adult world. When Nigel asks if his parents were killed, the Taxidermist admits that they were. Nigel then asks if they were scared, but the Taxidermist has "vanished." The exhibits attack Nigel, who runs away.

It quickly becomes clear in this scene that Nigel was the boy from the play's opening scene, and that the Taxidermist has adopted him as his own son after saving him from the other white settlers. Although he does not explicitly say that his interest in Indigenous peoples is connected to his interest in apes, it is clear that his job involves proving nonwhite people less "evolved"—since, as a matter of historical fact, this was one of colonial anthropologists' main goals. Just as the play stops short of explicitly stating this, the Taxidermist stops short of explicitly telling Nigel his role in the boy's parents' murder. When the exhibits attack Nigel, this represents the onslaught of racism, the sense of siege he feels at understanding that the world sees him as closer to an ape than a man.

In the year 1916, Norm, Bob, and Ern are in Brisbane's Boundary Hotel wondering about what will happen to their "army pay," and whether it will "go to the protector" (that is, the government agencies that run Aboriginal people's lives). Ern suggests that they will get to keep their own wages, since "if you can fire a gun and stand in a sun, they might pretend to forget you're …" Norm interrupts him: "What??"

In the first half of the 20th century, Aboriginal Protection Boards in Australia's various states were charged with forcibly assimilating Indigenous Australians into a white way of life—this is the "protector" to whom the soldiers refer, and it functioned much more to prevent Indigenous people from winning autonomous control over their lives and property than to help them improve their quality of life. Ern is clearly implying that "they might pretend to forget you're Aboriginal." *But the notion that whites would only* "pretend to *forget" shows that the diggers are already suspicious about whether any advancements they achieve would be permanent.*


Flashing back to 1915 in Petrie Terrace, nineteen-year old Ern—full name Ernest Hopkins—goes to sign up for the Army. Upon learning Ern was born in Barambah, however, the Recruiting Corporal shouts that "you can't come in here" because "you're not a citizen." He gives Ern a form calling him of "Deficient Physique" due to his "Strongly Aboriginal Appearance." On the street, Norm reveals that his own form says "Flat feet (Aboriginal)," and Bob that his says "No White Parentage."

Barambah, Ern's hometown, was created as a segregated reservation for Aboriginal Australians in 1900. While Aboriginal Australians were subject to restrictive government policies, they were not even considered citizens, and the officers' conflation of the men's Aboriginal descent with "deficient physique[s]" of various sorts shows how (across multiple dimensions) political rights, now-discredited anthropological ideas of human "evolution," and the ability to fight in World War One were considered inextricably tied.


Ern, Norm, and Bob go to another recruiting hall in order to "do it different this time." A number of officials debate and consult books to figure out "what 'Substantially European' means" and "how dark" the boys can be if they want to enlist. The boys give fake names, then the same fake address and birthday. The Recruiting Sergeant decides they can be "Substantially European" because "your father was white, wasn't he?" A doctor examines Ern and the clerk writes down "Very strongly aboriginal in type." Laughing, the boys put on ill-fitting military uniforms.

Despite the official rules against Indigenous men enlisting, the Recruiting Sergeant, like the boys themselves, clearly understands that these rules are a farce. More interested in finding manpower for the war than enforcing the government's desire for racial purity, the Sergeant shows that racism is ultimately up to individuals to enforce and offers hope that the Army might include the Aboriginal soldiers in a way Australian society does not.

It is 1915. A "voice from an old wireless" praises "extraordinary specimens" for their "toughness" and "the ingenuity of the land of their birth." These "specimens" are white Australians fighting in Europe, "the finest of the British race cast anew under a southern sun." They display "the greatness of the White Man" and fight to define Australian identity on the global stage.

The radio transmission expresses the racial ideology of the Australian nation, which conceives itself as great because *it is white and Australian territory as great* because *white people live there. At the same time, the language of "extraordinary specimen" recalls the Taxidermist calling Nigel a "perfect specimen" in the opening scene and reiterates how racism reduces people's humanity to their physical characteristics.*

Ern, Norm, and Bob pose on Queen Street for a photo, joking that their families and friends "back home" will not believe they are fighting in the military, or else think they are police. They also note that people have started treating them differently since they put on the uniforms, "like they've forgotten you're —"

Because authority has always persecuted and oppressed Aboriginal people, something seems inherently contradictory about Aboriginal men in official uniforms. But, again, Ern, Norm, and Bob stop short of uttering the word "Aboriginal," as though avoiding naming their curse.

In the military in 1915, about to cross into France, Archie writes a **letter** to his Aunty May under lamplight. He hopes her well and affirms that he is praying and thinking of her.

Archie's letters to Auntie May remind the audience that the soldiers' struggles also impacted their families, and also echo the archival basis of the play (letters and records from Indigenous soldiers).

At the Dardanelles in 1915, on a boat approaching a beach amidst exploding shells, officials cower and prepare for the worst while a soldier named Laurie laughs, wondering "what the old folks would say" about "arriving in boats uninvited on someone's beach." He prays earnestly as the sounds of war grow louder.

The war arrives in shocking fashion, likely to shock the audience just as it does Laurie. His comment about "the old folks" points to the irony in invading another land after Australia was devastated by foreign (European) invaders.

In the Indian Ocean in 1916, an "Aggressive Private" named Jim takes issue with Harry's presence during mealtime on a military ship. Harry insists "the world's turned upside down," and Jim agrees that it is "upside down when a coon thinks it's all right" to share space, food, and utensils with a white man. Jim threatens Harry louder and louder; the other soldiers beat Jim up, and after the confrontation Harry reports that Jim is saying, "the world turned upside fucking down." The aptly-named song "The World's Turned Upside Down" plays, announcing that "the white man needs us coloured boys now" because "the world's turned upside down."

Jim and Harry both seem to see that the exceptional circumstances of the War have forced Australia to temporarily suspend its racism—of course, their attitudes toward this fact are opposite, and the song reflects the temporariness and conditionality of this shift. The fact that the other white soldiers come to Harry's aid is good evidence that individual racism might be less rigid and more open to transformation through experience than institutional discrimination.

In a No Man's Land foxhole at Passchendaele in 1917, a light sweeps past the characters, who fall to the ground. Two white soldiers accost Laurie, arguing that he should know where the light came from because "you have tracking skills [...] you fellers all have a fifth sense or something." Laurie insists that he "grew up in bloody Erskineville!" and the others ask why he kept getting sent "on recky" (reconnaissance). Laurie responds that he might have "better camouflage in the dark."

Looking for a reason to avoid dangerous reconnaissance duty, the white soldiers find a racist joke about Laurie's Indigenous heritage convenient, revealing their misconception that Aboriginal Australians live traditional lifestyles in the countryside, even though they have been forced into sedentary, urban settlements by the Australian colonial government.

At a battle in Bullecourt in 1917, having lost his unit, Nigel hides out with a different one. The soldiers are surprised to see he is black; they introduce themselves, reveal that one of their nicknames is "Darky," and joke that they will have to "reconsider his name" because of their "recent reinforcements."

Although the soldiers greet Nigel cordially, they also clearly see his race before considering anything else about him, and do not seem to understand how offensive the term "Darky" is.

Soldiers sing a song called Sandy Maranoa, about riding horses to watch cattle and returning home to Australia.

Again, Australian national pride is based on praise for the land, although this time for the way the land has been transformed (into cattle ranches) by white settlers.

On the battlefield in Villers-Bretonneux in 1918, a "voice in the dark" announces he "love[s] that song" and is from Australia. Ern says he is, too, and they discover they are from the same place. The man is from the pub owner's family, and Ern explains that they have "passed in the road" before, when "your old man took his belt to mine a few times." The other soldier asks, "why would he do that?" before seeing Ern's face while lighting his pipe and realizes that Ern is Aboriginal. He promises that "if we both get home, you'll be walking into the front bar, mate."

The other soldier learns what he basically shares with Ern only before recognizing their racial difference; because he has already acknowledged Ern as an equal, now he must confront not only Australia's violence toward Indigenous people but also his father's personal role in perpetuating it. Still, the audience is left to wonder whether this exchange might have been possible if it had not started in the dark.

At Ypres in 1917, "*Four West Indian ammunition haulers go past*" and aboriginal soldier Mick wonders who they might be. The other soldiers joke that he "thought [he was] the only coloured bloke in Flanders" and suggest he chat with the men. But one of the four Trinidadians asks Mick, "What are you staring at, Australian nigger?" and another joins in in insulting him, saying that "them Australian niggers, live on the creek bank, never wash." Mick punches all four of the Trinidadians.

While the Trinidadians are also black British subjects, they recognize that colonialism defines blackness as inhumanity and use this against Mick. Racism is not only about whites' violence against blacks, but also about the internalized sense of inferiority that people of color and those living in colonies develop through their interactions with power. Ultimately, in this case, racism pits minority groups against each other rather than allowing them to see their shared interests (in the War, or in fighting racism).

Still in Bullecourt in 1917, Nigel gets sent to crawl into the battlefield and retrieve a telephone because his superior insists he is the shortest. He goes, but when he returns, all of his fellow soldiers are dead. The Germans come out, shocked, and ask, "Was auf der Erde bist du?" ("What on Earth are you?")

Ironically, the dangerous assignment Nigel receives because of his superior officer's racism ends up saving his life. And yet, when he confronts the German soldier, his race clearly remains at the front of the man's mind.

Back in Australia two years earlier, at Frying Pan Creek in New South Wales, a woman is working with her son Bertie, who asks her to lie and say he was born in 1898, which would be easy because "there are no other records, no-one would know." She asks why, and he says she will "get [him] out of [her] hair," but she insists that he is only "a boy" and is wrong to expect "that they'll make life easy for you" in the military, or that he'll suddenly become a white man.

Bertie, like Norm, Ern, and Bob, sees joining the military as a way to escape the incredibly restricted life afforded to a young indigenous man like him in Australia. For his mother, the War is an extension of the government's past exploitative policies toward Indigenous people, just another way to take advantage of their labor power. The lack of records about Bertie's birth—which recalls Ern, Norm, and Bob signing up for the military even though they were not "Substantially European"—shows both the government's inability to fully control Aboriginal life (despite its attempts) and Indigenous people's power to use this fact for their own freedom and benefit.

Bertie's Grandad enters, and Bertie's mom explains the situation. Grandad notes that they've "been fighting for country for a long time." Bertie worries about the Germans invading Australia and Grandad explains that the British have fenced in their land. Bertie claims that the war is about "a bigger world" but Grandad wonders why Bertie cares so much about a "bigger world" that never cared about him. Bertie insists that Indigenous people used to be fighters and "all that palarver"—his mother objects to the word "palarver," asking him to "speak the King's English." Bertie wants to fight "for Australia," but his mother and Grandad jokingly wonder what "Australia" is.

Bertie's Grandad, who has spent his whole life watching the Australian government dispossess native Australian people, sees joining the military as a form of treason against Bertie's true "nation." And yet Bertie's family clearly has an ambivalent relationship to Australia and Australianness—while they insist it is not their country, Bertie's mom chastises him for not speaking the colonizer's grammatically correct English.

Bertie's mother agrees to forge Bertie's birthdate, but warns her son that—just like when, as a child, he and his sister would go to **the circus show** and never get in, the world will never accept him. Bertie is excited at the thought the that Indigenous people are being included for the first time, but Grandad thinks that he is going to be used and his mother promises that "there' no fancy land at the end" of the war. She claims she has "already lost [Bertie]," but has no choice but to write the **letter**. She hopes "someone decent [will] look out for [him]," but Grandad laughs that Bertie will end up "lick[ing … the] same boots that have kicked us for years." Bertie apologizes but promises to "stay standing."

Unlike the other diggers, Bertie enters the war with an explicit warning about the true likelihood of his achieving the inclusion he seeks; his circus show represents not the war itself (in which he will be included), but the possible equal world that lies beyond it. Agreeing to sign the letter is as much an act of desperation for Bertie's mother as joining the military is an act of desperation for him. In despairing that she has "lost" him, she points forward to the next section of the play, which begins to confront the impacts of the war's violence on the diggers.

At the 1917 battle of Polygon Wood, three white soldiers, one of whom is named Stan, ask Harry what he will do after the war, and he says he "can't even imagine what it will look like" and simply "hope[s] that it's changed." They ask what he means, and he explains that them getting a drink together would be "a start." Stan says they would "always have a beer with you," and another tells Harry he is "as good as a white man."

Harry, like Bertie, hopes that fighting the war might do something to meaningfully change Australia as a whole, perhaps by providing positive examples of Indigenous people and paving the way for civil rights struggles. While Stan's optimism suggests that he might become an ally in the fight for racial equality, the other soldier's suggestion that Harry is "as good as a white man" suggests that they have not banished their racism, but merely made an exception for Harry, whom they consider better than the rest of his race.

In a trench on the outskirts of a battlefield in 1917, Mick, Archie, Ern, and Stan play "I spy" to pass the time. Ern notes that they have "moved seven feet since April," and they all contemplate the war's pointlessness and seeming lack of progress. Archie declares it a stalemate and marvels that "the world's gonna have to organize itself around us."

One of World War One's most grueling aspects was its reliance on trench warfare, which made gaining territory immensely difficult (as soldiers hiding in trenches were much better shielded than soldiers exposed on the battlefield) and slowed down the pace of war (as sides would be stuck in the same trenches for weeks at a time). This added to the sense of futility that the diggers are experiencing here; it leads them to begin questioning their motivations for fighting in the first place, although Archie recognizes here that their efforts have consequential impacts for the rest of the world.

At the battle of Pozieres in 1916, Bertie and Tommy fail to understand the last words of another soldier, Frank. They wonder how to properly honor him, as the only other Indigenous soldiers, and how to make sure his soul does not get "stuck" on the battlefield. Bertie is confused and worries that, if they used nearby European plants in a funeral ceremony, they would make the wrong kind of smoke and "lead him a different way." When the man holding the stretcher asks, "what's this aborigine mumbo-jumbo," Bertie notes that Frank is the first of the hundreds of dead people he has seen "who looks like me." Knowing that Frank "can't get buried in this dirt" but unsure what to do, Bertie and Tommy cut **a lock of Frank's hair** for later, and then say the Lord's prayer.

When dealing with Frank's death, Bertie and Tommy grapple with the implications of leaving their native territory, but also of being treated more equitably in foreign territory than they are by Australians at home. Despite their youth and interest in the broader world, Bertie and Tommy are still intimately connected to Indigenous religion. In saving the lock of Frank's hair, they open the possibility for properly honoring him later while also pointing out the sense in which their traditions are forcibly "on hold" for the future, as much because of Australian colonialism as because of the war.

In an undated scene, a ghost gives a monologue, explaining that he and his brothers, like his father, spent their lives moving around following work, until "the big event sort of fell on top of us." In France, he felt like he was "starting to lose it" from pointlessly fighting for scraps of land that did not seem to matter to anyone, while constantly dodging bullets.

This ghost has little definite explanation for his decision to join the military—it simply became the best option in a horrible situation, and then proved itself just as futile and repetitive as work at home.

Once, a bullet hit the ghost-narrator's bunkmate in the face, killing the man. The narrator ran over and grabbed the German who took the shot, grabbed him around the throat, then "just squeezed his eyes out of his skull" before moving on, as everyone had to. Back in his trench, he remembered being home in Australia and his father saying that sometimes "you just find yourself in the slot." He got a war medal for that assault, maybe "only aborigine to get one," and his fellow soldiers immediately admired him. But then, the next day, he got blown up and killed, suddenly and randomly. His fellow black soldiers will carry his story home, but he is "moving in my own way [...] here til everyone's forgotten everything that happened and the dirt can go back to being just dirt."

The narrator is proud to win his fellow soldiers' respect because it signifies that they might look past his skin color; and yet he recognizes that his act was both an act of horrific violence and precisely a response to such an act. The soldier's sudden change in fortunes—from watching his bunkmate's murder to winning his compatriots' acclaim to abruptly dying—mirrors the unpredictability and futility of fighting the war, the sense of nihilism that overcomes people who lose the capacity to emotionally respond to life and death. His faith that other Aboriginal soldiers will transmit his story demonstrates the importance of archives and the use of them made by stories like Black Diggers.

Back at the battle of Pozieres, Mick approaches five surrendering Germans but kills them all when one "ducks to pick something up." He proudly counts that he has killed ten people, "ten little sauerkrauts all in a row." He attributes this to his Indigenous "warrior blood" but another soldier asks what his ancestors' fighting ability won them.

Compared to the ghost's reaction in the previous scene, Mick takes an even more extreme and unsettling pride in killing during the war, which further shows how combat erodes the soldiers' normal capacities for empathy. He eagerly claims the racial trope of "warrior blood" but then is forced to confront the contradiction between such narratives about Indigenous people and the actual facts of Australian history.

The same scene cuts to Bertie and Tommy "in a hole somewhere." Bertie announces that he is only 15 and "shouldn't be here." Tommy tells him to calm down, Bertie insists they are getting caught and repeats his age, and Tommy reveals that he is "not much older" himself. After another explosion, both Tommy and Bertie are trapped under the soil. They cry out for one another, or anyone at all, but are both stuck and believe the other has been killed.

On the other side of the violence, Bertie and Tommy teeter on the edge between life and death, and only now recognize the profound loss that Bertie's mother long feared—that they might never even reach adulthood.

During a burial in the battlefield, Archie shuts his eyes as other soldiers sing "Our God, Our Help in Ages Past," a song about "the flood" carrying forth "the busy tribes," meaning people and their history. The song proclaims that people forget their history and ends with a prayer to God for protection and eternal life.

This song clearly serves as a metaphor for the flow of Indigenous history, which has left Aboriginal people disconnected from their past and also left contemporary Australians without an understanding of Indigenous history.


In another **letter** to Aunty May sometime in 1917, Archie writes that a friend of their family, Ollie Thomas, "shot himself in the face" in a suicide attempt. He fell, not screaming but "making these sounds like a kitten." And he survived, which is "the worst of it." "He hasn't got a face," Archie repeats at the end of the letter.

Archie's message, in both form and content, demonstrates the beginnings of shell shock: not only does Ollie Thomas's suicide attempt reflect his sense of absolute despair in the war (and presumable sense that he could not escape it), but Archie's repetition at the end of the letter also suggests that he is becoming stuck in his memories of violence.

On the war's eastern front, "the day before the attack of Beersheba" in Palestine, Laurie and a British Captain take turns quoting the Bible verses in which the prophet Elijah flees to Beersheba, then asks God for death. They wonder whether Jesus might have been in the same place where they are. The captain mistakes Laurie for Indian and apologizes. They hope they will "see each other in Jerusalem" and take turns quoting verses about the end times.

Although they share Bible verses that literally cite Beersheba, their desire to meet in Jerusalem suggests that Laurie and the Captain have no interest in dying like Elijah. Jerusalem also stands metaphorically for both the promised land and a return home, suggesting that they hope they can make it out of the war (or perhaps into heaven) and pointing to the quest to fulfill the promise of an equal Australia.


In Germany's Zössen POW Camp in 1917, Nigel is imprisoned alongside three Indians and forced to listen to a German prison guard explain how they "are victims of [their] oppressive masters," who colonized their land then made them fight in the war. The guard encourages them to fight colonialism and sees the War as a means to free British colonies.

The Zössen Camp is unique because it was specifically designed for nonwhite soldiers, i.e. colonial subjects. As such, the German guard has a legitimate point about these soldiers' exploitation by their countries—although, of course, the Central Powers' own imperialism in Europe makes his argument hypocritical.

One of the Indians explains to Nigel that they have to sit there all day and listen to these discourses, which are aimed at encouraging them to take up arms against their fellow Allied soldiers. The Indian finds this ridiculous, because "we are all British, are we not?" Their camp is the one "for all non-white prisoners," but everyone thinks Nigel is African, and he says he has not "seen an Aussie since I was captured." The same Indian compares Nigel's invisible Australianness to their own invisible Britishness. Another Indian suggests that, while the Indians eventually will overcome their Britishness, Nigel "will always be Australian." The other Indians accuse this Indian of adopting the German guard's ideas, and they begin arguing about how their cultural traditions are disrespected when they are given pork. Nigel says he "should be with my mates," and the Indians explain that they "are [his] comrades now."

The Indian soldiers manage to see themselves as both British and Indian, whereas Nigel feels excluded from both dimensions of Australianness—he cannot fit into white Australian society, and his traditional Aboriginal culture is being systematically destroyed at the same time. Whereas the Indians outnumber the British and can see their independence on the horizon, Indigenous Australians have little chance to do this and will be forced to assimilate. Indeed, his invisibility in the prison camp parallels his invisibility in Australia itself.

In a field hospital in 1917, a "strangely stiff and unemotional" Bertie dictates a **letter** to his mother, telling her to reveal his true age and get him sent home. But the Medical Orderly taking dictation does not write this down and instead insists Bertie "cover" the real meaning he wants to express by dressing it up in seemingly positive language. Instead, Bertie writes that he is "in the **Show**" that they had discussed before he left, that he now sees "what the grown-up world is like."

Bertie, apparently having recovered from being buried alive, has clearly changed and begun showing the classic signs of shell shock. The need to "cover" his intentions in the letter shows how the military's censorship might have impacted families' real access to their sons' experiences in the war. It also comments on the unknowability of the truth behind the letters that the play's author, director, and researchers used to develop it. Whereas his mother promised that he would never get into the "show," Bertie says that he has entered the "show" in order to signify that he has been shocked into the adult world where the rest of the soldiers (and his family) live.

A year later in the same hospital, which turns out to be the famous one in Abbeville, Norm has bandages on his ears and Bob on his eyes, while Ern is wearing a sling for his arm. Ern says the others' injuries are their "ticket home." The deafened Norm hears a "poem" and starts reciting it. Bob cries, but Ern says he will be seen as a hero back home. Bob replies that he is destined to labor, blind, for "the rest of [his] life." Ern insists that they have fought for Australia, but Norm and Bob do not believe in "Australia." Ern hopes Australia is "more than just a word" because of their sacrifices for it, and Bob wonders how much it will have changed. Norm says that, while "maybe the folks will be different [...] the land stays the same." He knows from seeing "lots of change," but misses Bob's response: "for those who are there to see it."

Norm, Bob, and Ern, who joined the military together as buddies in Queensland, now leave it together with life-changing injuries and newfound tensions among them. As they lose faith in not only their personal goals (improving their lot in life) but also the war's goals more broadly (defending "Australia"), they recognize the deep tragedy of their own situation: they, like their ancestors, have been injured by the Australian state without sympathy or recompense.

Back at the Zössen POW Camp in 1917, a German Professor approaches Nigel and explains he is collecting "anthropological specimens" for his records in order to "draw an enormous map of the human species." Nigel is happy to help the Professor improve his data on Australians, and the Professor is happy that the war "led you to me." Nigel asks, on behalf of the Muslim prisoners, "if we could find a way to exclude pork" from their diet. The Professor agrees to "see what can be done" before marveling at Nigel's seemingly unique appearance.

The professor's hope for "specimens" turns this scene into a sinister recreation of the play's opening scene, in which the Taxidermist saved Nigel only because of his exotic appearance. Again, Nigel is reduced to scientific data and, although treated better than his fellow Aboriginal people, still completely defined by his race. It becomes clear that the Germans and the Australians, while at war, share a basic outlook on the value of different human lives.

It is 1916 and Tommy finally gets pulled out of "his living grave," then begins to cry. The other men say he "should be thankful" and compare him to Lazarus, for he has survived underground for a long time and "the bombardment stopped" three days before. When they cannot scrape any more mud off him, they laugh and offer him a cigarette that he can neither hold nor light.

After days trapped alone underground, Tommy's tangible emotional transformation vividly portrays the life-eroding impact of the War's violence; in shock, he is unable to celebrate his freedom.

Somewhere near Amiens in 1918, Archie writes to Aunty May, asking about the meaning of a specific quote from the Biblical gospel of John: "And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."

No longer expressing his own views in his letters, Archie seems only to be seeking a sense of good and evil in the world, which no longer seems to make space for the former.

Sometime in 1917, an officer tells Bertie that his "true date of birth has been ascertained" and he is set to be discharged back to Australia. He says Bertie seems unhappy but should see that he has "been snatched from the jaws of death." He asks if Bertie has anything to say, but Bertie is "unable to speak."

Although Bertie's plea for a discharge was successful, like Tommy, he loses all emotional responsiveness and seems to have grown cut off from the world. This again reveals the war's lasting traumatic effects on soldiers.

Soldiers sing a song, calling Lazarus to "come forth" because "the Lord is calling [him]" to "Rise Up," and declaring he should not "be ashamed [...] when Jesus calls [his] name." The song repeats.

The allusion to Lazarus rising from the dead refers as much to Bertie and Tommy rising from being buried alive as to the possibility of salvation more generally, in terms of religion as much as postwar politics.

In Messines in 1917, Archie fights a German soldier with bayonets. Archie gets stabbed, but then manages to get his opponent on the ground and stab him instead. As he slowly dies, the German soldier says, "Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer teufuel mit weiße Augen. Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer ... letzte, was ich sehe."

The soldier's last words translate to, "Black devil. Black devil with white eyes. Black devil ... last thing that I see." Even in death, he remains fixated on Archie's race above all else, and this foreshadows the second half of the play—no matter what, even in the most extreme circumstances, nothing seems to get people to look past Indigenous veterans' race.


ACT TWO

In the Sydney suburb of Glebe, after World War Two in 1949, a "bloke with a glass of wine" gives a speech he admits he was not expecting to give to a large assembly. He sees "some justice in the world" but also the "weariness" of the young people who "talk about imperialism and foreign wars and about being lied to." He considers them "ingrates" and wishes he could teach them "what it was like [...] in a living hell" during the war. The man, who is Aboriginal, "thank[s] God for the Army." He was "just another woebegone failure" when he joined, but the army gave him "dignity," allowed him to make sense of his past and find a feeling of belonging in and loyalty to Australia. While the war was "the worst thing on earth," it also "made me, and it made us, for better or worse." He offers a toast.

As Act Two opens thirty years after of Act One. World War Two is not the only important historical event that has changed Aboriginal Australians' fates: in this same year, Indigenous veterans (but not other Indigenous people) were given the right to vote. The "bloke with a glass of wine" seems to be parroting a cliched and conventional patriotic narrative about gaining recognition through service—his experience is precisely what World War One's black diggers were hoping for (but, as the audience soon learns, never managed to accomplish).


Soldiers sing a song about paying to see a "fair tattooed lady." The song describes her tattoos, which are national symbols of Australia ranging from "the words 'Great ANZAC corps'" to "an emu and a fucking kangaroo." The song's lyrics end with, "but what we liked best was across her chest, my home in Woollomooloo."

Again, Australian identity becomes articulated through the valorization of national symbols, which are mostly natural, but now include ANZAC, the corps of Australian World War One fighters who are now part of a nationalist canon. Of course, this is combined with the image of the nation as a woman, drawing a parallel from the male perspective between love for land and love for women.

In 1919, getting off their ship back home in Australia, Mick jokes that "they really rolled out the red carpet" but Archie tells him to take it easy. They shake hands and decide to agree "this wasn't for nothing," then promise to "make sure things don't go back to the way they were."

Upon their return, Archie and Mick are no longer confident in the war's capacity to change their place in Australian society. Their personal agreement is a means of treating one another with dignity when they have no guarantee that their nation will do so.

Laurie leaves camp, having been decommissioned. Laurie's friend is surprised to see that he is "back from the dead." As he begins to tell his story, Bertie's mom rushes into the scene and embraces Bertie, telling him how happy she is to see him and chastising him for falling out of touch. She explains her long journey and the family's troubles at home—but Bertie says nothing and follows her away "stiffly, almost marching."

Although Bertie's mother has traveled halfway across the world to see him and is delighted that he is simply alive, he remains completely incapable of a normal emotional response, as though he has been paralyzed by the war. His marching away suggests that he has gotten stuck in the war, unable to give up military ways of doing things even on his way out of the military.

In a pub on Anzac Day in 1932, a pub worker kicks Archie and another digger out, even though they are dressed formally and even wearing their war medals, which the worker thinks might be fake. Archie explains that they want to honor their "mates who didn't come back" and insists that they fought side by side "blokes like you" in Europe—but the worker, who also fought in the war, says he "never saw any men like you over there." An RSL secretary tells the worker to let them in, "and anyone else with medals and rosemary," because "we don't see the skin, we see the service." The bar's manager agrees, and the secretary decides to buy Archie a drink.

This episode recalls Ern's meeting with the son of his town's barman, in which the white soldier promised Ern that he would always be invited into the bar. Unsurprisingly, this scene suggests that that was a false and unlikely promise, with not even the proof of Archie's service initially sufficing to win him access to the bar. While the secretary luckily intervenes, the message is still clear: only military people, if anyone, will see the Indigenous veterans as equals—and even then, military people are likely simply making exceptions to their usual racism, rather than using their experience fighting aside Aboriginal men to question their racism altogether.

At a public meeting in the Western District of Victoria in 1922, a worker from the Soldier Settlement Commission explains to three farmers that the government is appropriating some of their land to give to soldiers. The farmers protest that, beyond being unjust, the land is barely productive. Still, the bureaucrat says that the soldiers will have "new techniques, fertilisers and so on…" The farmers ask if they will get to use "these new techniques," but the public servant refers them to "a different department." They have no right to appeal the decision, he explains.

This meeting shows both how the colonial expropriation of Indigenous land—including, here, land granted to Indigenous people after the theft of their original land—*continued after (and was even justified by) World War One. The absurdity of the white settlers' government bureaucracy is on full display here, with the man in charge of delivering land reduced to a single function and therefore charged with enforcing racist policy, regardless of his personal beliefs.*


Mick Dempsey asks if he has a right to some of this land, which his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather farmed. The public servant tells him he has to apply for land, and the farmers announce that Mick is "a serious war hero." Mick asks if other aboriginal servicemen have been awarded land settlements, but the public servant claims it is "not [his] department." The farmers note that the land being given away is "rocky outcrops" and "swamps," where nothing can grow.

Beyond simply taking Indigenous land for white soldiers, the government even takes what is rightfully Indigenous soldiers' land—because they are excluded from the legal regime of land ownership to begin with (and therefore their de facto *possession of land is never recognized as legal). Even though the land is useless and the farmers foreground Mick's time fighting for Australia, the bureaucrat has no power to do anything but follow orders; there is no question that official channels will eventually ignore Mick.*


Mick gives a speech, recalling his four years in the war, watching his friends die, and thinking, "you're finally fighting to protect what's yours." They are in an Indigenous town, one created when whites forced Aboriginal people to migrate. And now that he has returned from the war to his land, the government is taking his land away with "a stroke of the pen." Whereas for white Australians "the war's over," Mick insists, for Indigenous people "it's never going to end."

Mick realizes that conflating the two Australias—his traditional relationship to the land and the nation built upon it—was a mistake because the latter is permanently dedicated to eradicating the former. If joining the war effort was an attempt at achieving rights by appeasing the state, it is now clear that the only way to truly do so is to confront the state.

In 1920, at a cattle ranch called Bertha Downs, Archie wears a coat in the rain while the farm overseer takes shelter on the verandah. Archie points out that men who can no longer work there end up homeless, and that the women do not get compensated. The overseer says he does not care about Archie's time in the war and complains that he has been "the worst kind of black, an uppity one," since returning home. The manager insists Archie work and shut up, then threatens Archie's family and blames him for "[getting] me angry."

While the war built up Archie's confidence to speak out against injustice, it did nothing to make the system more responsive to him; his strength and sense of responsibility toward the other workers become seen as liabilities. In a sense, whites are invested in turning Indigenous people into the morally and culturally underdeveloped people they already believe them to be, in order to justify exploiting their labor as their "protector."


After the overseer leaves, Archie complains to his friend, who wants to stay out of the argument and tells Archie he has changed. Another worker, an "old hand," claims Archie thinks he's "better than [the rest of] us" and suggests he leave. Archie laments that he "thought things would change after the War," and the "old hand" says that Archie is "the only thing that's changed round here."

Just as the Trinidadians insulted Mick for the skin color they share, Archie's coworkers put him down because they see him as both in competition with them and likely to provoke the overseer's irrational wrath at them all. Accordingly, they defend the overseer from whom they stand to gain more in the short term, instead of pursuing their long-term interests in finding more just work opportunities.

In 1939, at the Queensland reservation called Cherbourg where they grew up (back when it was called Barambah), Ern and Norm sit by a fire. Ern complains that his remaining arm has started to shake. Yelling into Norm's one good ear, he speaks of his nightmares and the way everyday events in Australia remind him of the war, like when watching a raven kill a lamb reminds him of a man named Pat Daffy dying. Ern leaves, and Norm listens to an old hymn about looking to Canaan from the Jordan River, before pontificating about how nobody cared about color in the war, "and when they called me mate they meant it." When he got back to Australia, he foolishly thought relations between whites and Indigenous people would be better. But "they painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat," and he no longer understands what he was fighting for—he "won something over there" but "lost it back here."

Ern and Norm end up precisely where they started—the only thing that has changed is their injuries, both physical and psychological, because of the War. It has become impossible for them to understand their lives except through the lens of the war, although it means opposite things to both of them (demonstrating the variety of Indigenous war experiences): Ern remains fixated on the war's pain and violence, Norm on its momentary promise of racial equality. Norm, however, also sees that these two temporary conditions are related: whites treated Indigenous soldiers as equal only because all faced the same threat of a sudden, violent death.


Each with a different disability, the cast members sing the hymn Norm was listening to, "On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand." Looking across to Canaan, "where my possessions lie," they sing, "I am bound for the promised land."

The soldiers' purported faith in the "promised land" appears either stubborn or so improbable as to be ironic; they could be seen as talking about heaven or parodying their earlier faith that the war would improve their fates in Australia.

In 1935, a minister stands before the grave of a pauper, completely alone. He delivers a eulogy to the man, "Tank Stand Tommy," whose real name nobody knows. People only knew the homeless Tommy for sleeping under his tank, drinking and swearing, smelling horrible and crying loudly in public. People did not know about his war service—after his death, three medals were discovered among his few possessions, and it turned out he spent three days buried alive in Pozieres. "Acquainted with death," it made sense that he could not "sleep within walls" after returning to Australia. The minister throws dirt on the coffin and leaves.

As this scene progresses, the audience gradually learns that "Tank Stand Tommy" is the same Tommy who, alongside Bertie, was buried alive and traumatized upon his rescue. By only gradually revealing this information, the play makes the audience members complicit in Tommy's anonymity, forcing them to imagine the progression of a life scarcely remembered or knowable from the outside—like all the stories from which this book's characters are drawn. Of course, Tommy's ultimate fate reflects the perfect storm of severe trauma combined with the Australian government's utter indifference toward Indigenous soldiers.

In the town of Murgon in 1939, Ern walks into a pharmacy and gives the chemist his war medals, because his family is "not interested" and "they'll only get lost."

Unlike his friends Norm and Bob, during the war Ern was confident that his sacrifices would be recognized. Unfortunately, he, too, was mistaken—and the indifference to his service comes not only from Australian society at large, but also those close to him.

In a new scene, short excerpts from soldiers' **letters** fall from the ceiling and the cast reads them. In the first, a soldier thought his service would "make [him] a naturalised British subject and a man with freedom." Instead, he ended up stuck on a farm settlement "like a dog" in Australia. In the second letter, someone named Higgins laments that his family did not get to claim the same privileges as white Australians, even though five of them served in the war. In the third, a veteran reveals that he has decided to pass as Maori and leave the farm where he has been working, since he is being treated even worse than in the past, as he waits for his back pay. In the fourth, Ernest Hopkins explains that he enlisted under a different name, but does not understand "why I have to prove what my former comrades do not…"

The format of this scene—anonymous letters—is extraordinarily significant because it directly points to the play's own archival foundation. All the letters and stories from which the play's playwright, director, and research team drew were at least partially anonymous (much remained unknown about even the most readily identifiable soldiers) and largely fragmented. All the stories that fall from the ceiling testify to the Australian government's discrimination against Indigenous veterans after World War One, a position unfortunately perfectly commensurate with its earlier (and many present-day) policies.

In the fifth **letter**, a schoolmaster vouches for "Mr. Prudden," whose shell shock has gone untreated and unacknowledged. The sixth letter concerns "the gross injustice intended to us [Indigenous veterans] by depriving us of our food." And the seventh implores the RSL to appeal to the State Government and help "grant full citizen privileges to every one of us coloured soldiers," instead of leaving them "servile to the Aborigines' Protection Board."

The letters subtly transition from complaint to advocacy, bearing witness to calling for change, which points to a parallel process underway in the play itself as it turns from the effects of war in Act One to specific condemnations of policy failures in Act Two. As petitions to the government, these letters adopt the necessary medium and tone for making change, but it remains to be seen whether any of them will be taken seriously.

In the woods near the Murrumbidgee river in 1927, Bertie's Grandad laments that the formerly beautiful land has grown covered with trenches because of irrigation. Bertie, now 25, simply stares into space and holds **the lock of Frank's hair**, as his mum says he is "not coming back from the world of the grown-ups." Before the land was irrigated, when it used to burn, Grandad remembers, "little green shoots came up everywhere."

The irreversible destruction of the land parallels and predicts Bertie's irreversible psychological decline as a result of the war; both, of course, are results of the same settler colonial process. By clutching the lock of Frank's hair, Bertie represents his continued fixation on the violence he witnessed during the war, his dedication to preserving the memory of a fallen compatriot, and the impossible hope to return Frank to his ancestral land and restore Australia to its traditional form—and owners.

On Castlereagh Street in 1949, Harry is begging for money and Stan, in a suit, passes by, before they recognize one another and try to catch up. Harry admits he cannot find work, and Stan admits he is now working at the Department of Lands. They momentarily recall the war and Stan gives Harry some cash. Harry "shuffles off" and Stan laments, "we that are left, grow old."

More than three decades after they met in the war, Harry and Stan's promise to remain friends (and go for a drink) never comes to fruition. Instead, their opposite fates seem to have resulted purely from how the government apportioned out opportunities based on race—in fact, Stan works for the agency that has been appropriating Indigenous land. Their chance encounter emphasizes that the fundamental problem is not individual discrimination or goodwill, but rather a structural commitment to fostering unequal outcomes based on racial background.

In 1937, Laurie collects congregants' hymn books at a church in the city of Mount Gambier. Someone stops and asks if he was in the Light Horse, fighting in Palestine. The man recognizes him, since "you'd hardly forget a face like yours," but Laurie denies this and insists it must be someone else. He claims to be "just an usher on the Sabbath, doing my duty," but the man insists. Laurie breaks and tells the man, Mr. Burchett, that the war is "of this world. This broken, weak, sad world." But Laurie prefers to "think of another world." Mr. Burchett leaves and Laurie turns off the lights before remembering that he "walked in the Holy Land," which is "enough for [him]."

Laurie's encounter with the soldier from the Light Horse perfectly parallels Harry's encounter with Stan; just as he prayed furiously when he first landed at Dardanelles, Laurie continues to turn to religion for the promise of a better future that the world refuses to give him. His optimism is belied by a deep despair, for the war seems to have broken his faith in the world and even his desire to continue existing in it.

In Forest Lodge, Sydney, in 1929, Nigel writes a **letter** condemning the previous year's Coniston massacre and insisting that Australia's "brutality and savage butchery" continues. He charges the public with "a strange silence, a lack of curiosity, and a peculiar lack of outrage" about the massacre, which is contrary to the values he fought for in the War. On the other side of the stage, there is a newspaper office, and its workers come over and take Nigel's letter, which they find difficult to believe could be the work of a "darkie." An assistant suggests printing a copy of the letter to show Nigel's "beautiful handwriting" and prove "that aborigines are educated enough to write like this," and the editors agree to make Nigel's handwriting the story as they insist that nobody will bother to read the content of his letter or care about the massacre.

Just as in the book's opening scenes and his time in the Zössen Camp, white people entirely reduce Nigel's humanity to an appearance that they find intriguing—here, they ignore the meaning of his message because they are impressed by his handwriting (which, signifying his education, should ordinarily be a reason for them to take him seriously). Again, he is treated as a spectacle rather than a human being, and indeed spreading the notion "that aborigines are educated enough to write like this" is likely to achieve the opposite effect that Nigel wants and make whites think their Aboriginal countrymen are doing just fine. Of course, it is also historically significant that Indigenous Australians were still being massacred by the government more than a decade after World War One.

On George Street in downtown Sydney, Nigel wears a costume reading "TARZAN THE APE MAN" and hands out flyers for the show. He drinks and says, "Sorry Dad."

Given that his brilliant letter presumably failed to win him a writing career, Nigel's eventual job is an unfortunate echo of his earliest days, when the Taxidermist responsible for stuffing apes saved his life. The sign around his neck implies that he was hired to advertise the Tarzan show because others, as always, see him as an "ape man"—as not fully human because of his race.

An old soldier, who turns out to be Ern, gives a long monologue in 1956. He remembers entering the war so naïve, too young to understand "the way the world worked." When he returned to Australia and showed people his scars, "they whistled and said poor bugger you and we all got on with things." Sometimes he wondered if the war really happened, but for the most part he was happy to have gotten on with his life.

Ern's final words to the audience initially suggest that he has fared better than the other Indigenous soldiers—that, despite his physical wounds, he managed to recover from his trauma psychologically and focus on "[getting] on with things."

During World War Two, Ern says, one day his scar began "oozing that lovely rich black blood." He got fixed up, but when he removed the bandages, the smell reminded him of the war, and then he dug his fingers into his wound and pulled **a piece of bullet shell casing** out. In the following three years, he found seventeen other pieces. This is what happens after war: metal "inches its way up," a little bit every year. He gave the pieces to his grandchildren, and the next Anzac Day he went into town in the rain, feeling "about as lonely as a black bastard can feel," and cried on the street before going to the pub, where "our mob" shouted "Coony! Coony! We thought you was dead!" Ern finds this "funny. Because for a long time, I was."

Ern's scar and bullet casings represent the way that trauma can remain latent, sitting under the surface for years and sinisterly grating at people until they are forced to confront it. It is no coincidence that Ern's wounds start bleeding during World War Two, when a new generation of men faces the same challenges, disappointments, and injuries that he and his friends had 30 years earlier. In giving the pieces to his grandchildren, he comments on the importance of passing down memories about and evidence of his experience—including through cultural means like this play. Although his friends still call him by a racial slur, he is simply glad to fully and genuinely feel again.


A recessional hymn uses war metaphors to implore God not to let people forget their pain and celebrate God's "ancient sacrifice."

This hymn is at once a literal plea for salvation in the context of Ern's monologue and a call for people to remember the Indigenous soldiers' sacrifice.


In 1993, the Prime Minister speaks at the opening of Australia's "Tomb of the Unknown Soldier." The Prime Minister explains that everything about "this Australian" is unknown, from his home and rank in the military to his occupation, religion, and family.

This speech from a real historical moment shows how the Australian government, like the team that produced Black Diggers, *has sought to foreground the invisibility of many of the most important contributors to the war effort. And yet this play has put faces on numerous otherwise unknown Indigenous soldiers in order to show how their stories must be remembered and transmitted alongside whites'—in many ways, Aboriginal soldiers are so forgotten that they are not even imagined as possible candidates for the "Unknown Solider."*

At the Callan Park psychiatric hospital in 1951, a nurse wheels a sleeping man past Nigel and asks if he is "enjoying the sun," but tells him not to "stay out too long." He claims to be "the British Forces Representative in this camp" and promises to "intervene on your behalf with the Red Cross." The nurse asks Nigel if he can see people "rowing on Iron Cove," and he replies that he can see "the big world" beyond. The nurse reminds Nigel to join the following morning's service (presumably for Anzac Day). Nigel says, "I don't want to join in. I don't belong." The light fades and the play ends.

The play ends as it starts, with Nigel's fate. Despite his talent as a writer, he was unable to achieve anything after the war because he was never taken seriously. This final, distressing scene shows how the war both comes to define Nigel's identity (it figures centrally in his thoughts and interactions with the nurse) and quite literally drives him to madness when it proves, although painful, the most fruitful and accomplished period of his life. At the same time, this is the only example of any soldier getting psychiatric care (although it is clearly far too late to make a significant difference). With Nigel's last words, he condemns a system that has failed him and his fellow black diggers.

END MATTER

Two final documents are included in the book after the text of the play. First is "A Brief History of the Indigenous Diggers in World War I," in which a researcher for the play, Dr. David Williams, explains that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were not considered citizens" at the beginning of World War One in 1914. They were forced onto reservations and faced extensive discrimination, but many decided to join the military, even though those "not of 'substantially European descent'" were formally excluded. Some managed to enlist anyway, and in 1917 the law changed to allow "half-castes" to join.

The inclusion of this document serves to remind readers and audiences that Black Diggers was truly a team effort, with the director, researcher, and playwright all playing similarly important roles. The "Substantially European" criterion—something Norm, Bob, and Ern had to face in the play—was a collective hurdle for Indigenous soldiers, leading largely the most determined to make their way into the military, and the limited change in the law in 1917 shows how racist policy is at once flexible and unnecessarily specific (in order to proclaim a single truth about race).

Ultimately, 2,000 of Australia's 80,000 Indigenous people joined the AIF, and—for the first time in any domain of Australian society—served on equal footing with whites. They fought in various places and served various roles; many were decorated, many never came back, and all who returned were again shunned by the government, which took much of the land it gave to veterans from Indigenous Australians. Indigenous veterans were often deprived of their promised pay and excluded from RSL groups. These soldiers' contributions are an incredibly important part of Australian Indigenous history, and only beginning to be acknowledged on a wide scale in the 21st century. Many fallen indigenous soldiers "remain buried thousands of miles away from their ancestral homes," and re-burial ceremonies represent an important next step toward honoring their service.

Although Indigenous soldiers left and returned to a racist society that made it nearly impossible for them to live complete lives, Williams makes clear that it was still a remarkable accomplishment for these soldiers to temporarily escape their condition through the military; again, the variety of stories in the play reflects the variety of stories from the archive and the play points forward to novel and necessary means of recognizing Indigenous soldiers in the future.

The final document included in *Black Diggers* is an email sent by Indigenous Army serviceman named Col. Watego, whose family also has a long history of military service. He thanks the producer, director, and actors for the production, which he considers important in six ways. First, it honors and "exemplifies the character of our Indigenous heroes," who enlisted out of a protective instinct for Australia—a "Warrior Spirit"—and not out of political motives or a desire for glory. Secondly, the play recognizes the horrible conditions that Indigenous soldiers faced in the war, something the government failed to do—and this failure contributed to the prevalence of PTSD among Indigenous World War One veterans.

This document is a testament to the play's power as a tool for commemoration and empowerment. Although some of Col. Watego's arguments might conflict somewhat with the play (e.g. the notion that Indigenous soldiers' motivation was their desire to protect Australia), his reaction to the play demonstrates that it is a unique and important step towards including Indigenous people in Australia's narratives of its military history and national identity—and acknowledging the long histories of military service that already exist in some Indigenous families and communities.

Thirdly, Col. Watego continues, the play shows Australians how much Indigenous people were willing to sacrifice for their country. Fourthly, it shows the racial equality within the ADF, and fifthly, it shows how soldiers' absence and return impacted their families. Finally, the play "tells a very, very positive yarn or story of how much WE ALL HAVE GROWN in our journey to the present," and how much Indigenous soldiers' contributions have contributed to that growth.

The end of Col. Watego's letter emphasizes how histories like Black Diggers *are meant to teach about "our journey to the present," and how this story shows both the severity of the conditions Aboriginal Australians faced and their drive to overcome them, a full generation before conditions actually improved. It reminds Australians, in other words, that the struggle for Indigenous rights in their land is much longer than they might remember, relatively uninterrupted since colonial times, and largely made of everyday struggles for equality by those who are now forgotten or invisible.*

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