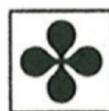


# Intersections: Gender, Race and Ethnicity in Australasian Studies

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## Dancing in the Dust: A Gendered History of Indigenising Australian Cultural Identity

VICTORIA HASKINS

In 1954 an Australian ballet celebrating Aboriginality was presented to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, the first reigning monarch ever to visit the continent. A dynamic American dancer Beth Dean both choreographed and danced the lead role of the ballet *Corroboree*: one young English woman watched another young, American, woman, play out the initiation of an Aboriginal youth, as a symbol of Australia's distinctive culture and identity. As a performance transgressing boundaries of gender simultaneously with those of race and culture, Beth Dean's performance of the Initiate is an episode in the history of Australian race relations that highlights an ongoing struggle by white women to exercise power through representing and speaking for Aboriginal people. A gendered reading of the white nationalist appropriation of Aboriginal identity shows that Dean's Boy Initiate dances on a trajectory of white women claiming an authoritative voice on Aboriginality, stretching from the earliest colonial days and even to the present.

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When Australia's cultural elite proposed that a performance of a ballet set to composer John Antill's score *Corroboree* should be included in the Royal Gala Performance for the Queen's historic visit to Australia, it was the opportunity of a lifetime for Dean.<sup>1</sup> She was already known in the US and Australia for her performances of Aboriginal women's and men's dances, and even a 'scene' from 'an Australian Aboriginal Sacred Inkura ceremony of Initiation,' when the Arts Council approached her to choreograph the ballet.<sup>2</sup> An original ballet, by Australian choreographer Rex Reid, played to packed houses in 1950 and was reported in the press as 'possibly the most important landmark in the history of our national culture' and 'an expression of the extent to which we have absorbed Australia into our deepest consciousness and feelings.'<sup>3</sup> But despite its success, Reid's pageant-like ballet, with its mask-wearing dancers, was seen as an inadequate vehicle for showcasing the best of Australia's national culture. A 'gaudy, circus-like travesty of corroboree,' as anthropologist Colin Simpson put it. 'Through lack of understanding and plain lack of knowledge, the choreographer had completely missed the spirit of the real thing.'<sup>4</sup> Such scorn by experts in a burgeoning field of popular desert anthropology obliged Dean and Victor Carrell, her Australian-born husband, to spend eight months in central and northern Australia, visiting Aboriginal communities, observing women's and men's dances, and taking copious notes. Dean

incorporated these 'authentic' Aboriginal steps they documented into her ballet, and Carell constructed a new storyline. In the narrative of initiation that culminated in a trial by jumping through fire, based upon an initiation ceremony they attended in Central Australia, Reid's lead character 'the Medicine Man' would be supplanted by Dean's 'Boy Initiate.'

Rapturous reviews praised the ballet's authenticity and Dean's ability to capture Aboriginality. '[F]or me there's a stone-age antiquity in its atmosphere that makes it supremely Australian. With amazing sensitivity Beth Dean has crept inside the skin of our aborigine: she knows his mind, his spirit, his beliefs, his customs and his art of dancing,' wrote Eunice Gardner in the *Columnist*. 'In one grand, sensitive, soul-exposing sweep,' the *Daily Examiner* editorialised, 'Beth Dean, an American shows, as even our best writers have not been able to do, what is basically Australian.' The sheer corporeality of Dean's performance fired the imagination. As another reviewer wrote, 'Miss Dean' told the story of an Aboriginal boy's 'torment . . . on her mobile face and responsive body. Look at her too long and one gains an unforgettable impression of the primitive, naturalistic fears of the aborigines.'<sup>5</sup> One lone reporter noted 'an uneasy feeling of mimicry, a sense of intrusion into unfamiliar and somewhat sacred ground' before conceding that the ballet might have some 'merit' in raising Australians' cultural awareness of Aborigines. Questioning whether it could go 'beyond that to penetrate the lack of interest most white Australians wear in relation to the earlier owners of the land,' he concluded: 'If it does not quite get under the skin, it at least pricks it.'<sup>6</sup> But it was a rare review that even raised an eyebrow at Dean's masquerade, let alone drew attention to the deplorable position of Aboriginal people in Australia.

*Corroboree* has bemused scholars in recent times. Dean's performance can be interpreted—or rather, evaluated—in the context of a rather ambiguous history of appropriation of Aboriginality for national culture.<sup>7</sup> Such was the success of *Corroboree* at the time that it has been credited with, indeed, 'creating a space' through which Aboriginal dance theatre companies such as Bangarra could emerge at the end of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> It would not, however, be performable today. As dance scholar Stephanie Burrige delicately puts it: 'In the present political climate it appears that, although Dean learnt the steps from the traditional owners, this approach involved the appropriation of traditional material and would not be sanctioned today.'<sup>9</sup>

I first heard of *Corroboree* when curating an exhibition at the National Museum of Australia; my brief was to consider Aboriginality as a signifier of national identity, and I had in mind the museum's *Corroboree* collection of costumes and props—donated by Beth Dean—as the centre-piece. I found the whole thing rather entrancing. As a ballet-obsessed child growing up in the 1970s amongst a mostly Aboriginal community in the Kimberleys in the far northwestern corner of Australia, I would have truly loved to have imagined such a career for myself. But it was also cringe-inducing. Ultimately the *Corroboree* costumes were displayed against the backdrop of the history of Aboriginal Australians' denial of rights, as citizens and as Indigenous landowners; the assimilation policies of the 1950s providing a grotesque contrast to the celebration of a uniquely Australian Aboriginal identity. I hoped some visitors might consider the conceptual and ideologi-

cal implications of Dean's performance of Aboriginality at a time when Aboriginal people were being compelled to 'perform' as white Australians.<sup>10</sup> But what I find even more interesting than the racial transgression is Dean's gender transgression, which has not been really explicitly addressed in either the praise or critique then or since. For Dean not only performed 'as an Aboriginal,' she performed as an Aboriginal male—as an Aboriginal boy *becoming* a man. What she produced was a performance of Aboriginal masculinity.

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It is the audience, as Marjorie Garber suggests, that is the ultimate source of authenticity. If it takes a man to 'know how a woman should act,' we should not be surprised to find men in drag producing a more authentic performance of the idealized women than any individual and everyday woman could approach.<sup>11</sup> Nor should we be surprised to see white Australians—'white know-alls' to use Aileen Moreton-Robinson's stinging phrase<sup>12</sup>—producing authentic spectacles of Aboriginality in the service of national identity. What *is* surprising, is to find that a white *woman* should be the producer of authentic Aboriginal masculinity.

Dean was at pains to emphasise that her ballet blended Aboriginal dance with Western dance, and she used the concept of 'primitive' dance to highlight a continuum she saw from such dance forms, through 'early pagan dance festivals, . . . the classical drama of Greece, . . . the medieval plays of Europe' to 'sophisticated entertainments' of ballet and theatre today.<sup>13</sup> Her incorporation of Aboriginal culture into this anthropological schema might then be read as a form of colonization. Indeed Australian ballet has been read as such more generally, Elizabeth Dempster seeing a connection between the genre's 'global dissemination from centres of European imperial power' and the form of ballet, with its 'masterful occupation of space and its rigorous control of body and movement.'<sup>14</sup> Dempster also points to a comment made recently by an Australian choreographer, that 'ballet affirms our status as a colony' due to dancers' distance from and unfamiliarity with the traditions upon which ballet is based.<sup>15</sup> Dean's reworking and incorporation of Aboriginal dance steps into an Australian elite cultural form reflected both the Australian inability to relate to and reproduce European dance traditions (as indeed does the 'cultural cringe' evidenced by her commission in the first place); and at the same time the aggressive Australian impulse towards Aboriginal culture and land. To put it another way, as Australians 'rejected definitions of themselves as colonials,' the

process of rejecting colonialness led to a search for national identity that was predicated on being colonizers, a search in which Australian women participated and which cannot be construed as a wholly masculine project.<sup>16</sup>

Consider *Corroboree* in terms of its audience. Who were the people who saw their national identity in Dean's performance? Ballet, especially in Australia, attracts a predominantly urban female audience from professional and semi-professional backgrounds. It has been argued that in its classical form, ballet reproduces nineteenth-century stereotypes of female passivity and male dominance.<sup>17</sup> Yet a female dancer can, as Ann Cooper Albright has argued, by her living presence and

energy, 'sweep up' her audience and so complicate and even refute the conventional notion of the active male gaze on passive female body;<sup>18</sup> Dean's transgressive attempt to perform Aboriginal virility complicates the matter further. Watching Dean, a contemporary critic wrote, one 'saw not a dancer but a member of an ancient tribe'; she 'transported us right into the tribal group so that we were no longer audience but one of those taking part in the ceremony.'<sup>19</sup> This response that Dean directly and actively engaged from her audience (as she impersonated the colonized body) was based on the illusion that through her body they were indeed witnessing and were party to the most taboo Aboriginal ceremonies. The audience's awareness that Dean was 'really' a white woman only added piquancy to the experience. Dean challenged the boundaries that were imposed upon her as a woman from 'knowing' Aboriginal men; and she placed her audience (white women of privilege), in the position as if they too had transcended the barriers that restricted their gaze upon Aboriginal men.

A focus on gender transgression brings us inevitably to queer theory and in particular the work of Judith Butler and her analysis of the 'performance' of gender. But metaphors of theatre proliferate in post-structuralist analyses of sex, power and representation and one must guard against any simplistic literal interpretation of Dean's 'performance' as an Aboriginal initiate. As Butler herself said the performance of gender cannot be likened to donning a costume: 'I never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman.'<sup>20</sup> Rather, gender for Butler is 'performative,' constituted of repetitive acts that function as authoritative statements of gender subjectivity:

performance as bounded 'act' is distinguished from performativity insofar as the latter consists in a reiteration of norms which precede, constrain, and exceed the performer . . .<sup>21</sup>

Drawing upon this concept of gender as performative, we might consider the gendered/raced (and classed) category 'white women' as a process, rather than as a fixed and essential identity, and consider those acts performed that identify white women and regulate their behaviour. So: consider Dean (and others like her) not as being 'really' a white woman, play-acting an Aboriginal man, but rather, her subjectivity as a modern white woman being constituted by her reiterative acts asserting knowledge of Aboriginality, as equated with Aboriginal masculinity. (A white woman becoming a white *Australian* woman, I might add—the couple would make their permanent home in Australia, as Dean went on to make more ballets with an 'Australian' theme, and they established their credentials as experts in Pacific Islander dance.) And in turn national Australian identity might be viewed as being constituted by an elaborately transgressive performativity of Aboriginality: elaborate in the sense that the cultural border-crossing going on refers to cultures of class and gender as well as of race and geography. It is to a history of this kind of performance, a sedimentation of acts as Butler might put it, or a discourse of white and generally elite women explaining Aboriginal men, and themselves, and the nation, that has built up over the colonial experience, that I now turn.

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From the earliest days of colonization, watching Aboriginal dancing was the quintessential Antipodean experience. The 'corroboree' (a word apparently of Dharug, western Sydney, origin), as a 'cultural product jointly negotiated between two cultures,' can be tracked throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century,<sup>22</sup> but while white women were in the audience from the outset, the public records for the colonial period are dominated by white men's voices. We find a few surviving traces of a white female view in the private letters of women allied to the most wealthy and powerful of white men, such as Elizabeth Macarthur, whose letter to her daughter in 1826 described this 'festivity' being 'always given to do honour to and entertain strangers.'<sup>23</sup> The 'unconventional' Sophia Campbell, a Sydney merchant's wife, gave us a rare early colonial painting of an Aboriginal (male) dance scene by a woman. Beneath her work, a notation by her niece's husband stated bluntly, 'NB this Corrobory has no business here as it is never danced in the day-time.' Such was the male conceit of the authoritative eye that the panorama was, until recently, wrongly attributed to this man.<sup>24</sup> From the other end of the colonial century, comes a rather more challenging personal account by Queensland pastoralist's wife Jane Bardsley. Bardsley described in her intimate letter how 'at times I feel black' and how 'the natives' wanted to tattoo her:

I was afraid of the sharp glass and the burning stick otherwise I should have been branded for life. Another thing they suggested was that I should knock one of my front teeth out so that everyone would know I was married. This did not appeal to me either.

Bardsley took delight in tantalising her reader, observing that her husband was concerned that they might 'become like the natives.' 'I can certainly corroboree as well as any gin already,' she boasted.<sup>25</sup> But such allusions to the bodily nature of her racial/cultural transgressions did not go so far as to suggest she could out-Aborigine an Aboriginal man.

When confronted by 'savage' male sexuality, Penny Russell has pointed out, the colonial lady, through 'enactments of social blindness' and 'undisturbed comportment. . . demonstrated moral virtue, impeccable social conduct and—implicitly—rank.' While white male accounts could and did freely assert the 'most lewd and disgusting character' of Aboriginal 'corrobories,'<sup>26</sup> white women constrained by these performative requirements of a 'perfected' high-caste feminine civility did not see and certainly did not comment on Aboriginal men or their masculinity.<sup>27</sup> By the end of the nineteenth century, however, such women—squatters' wives like Kate Langloh-Parker,<sup>28</sup> or her predecessor, Mary A Fitzgerald<sup>29</sup>—were finding currency in retelling 'authentic legends' of Aboriginal people, referring to Aboriginal men as their sources. Though some writers, especially the Durack sisters, Elizabeth and Mary, daughters of a pastoral dynasty of far north western Australia, achieved recognition for these accounts,<sup>30</sup> they could not always be counted on to bring the writer success—as Mary Grant Bruce discovered in 1922.<sup>31</sup> The irrepressible spate of Aboriginal legends by white women from the turn of the century reflected a changing performativity of white womanhood. They must be seen in the broader context of an emergent feminist movement in which the sanctity of white motherhood was argued.<sup>32</sup>

hand-in-hand with the construction of an exemplary white female pioneering past, as embodied in the figure of the mythic 'good fella missus' who cared for Aboriginal people.<sup>33</sup>

Meanwhile, white women like the missionary Annie Lock, the anthropologist Olive Pink, and the most famous of all, the journalist-anthropologist Bates, played out the 'goodfella missus' role in the newly opened regions of central Australia (the term, indeed, was coined to describe Lock<sup>34</sup>). These women had the opportunity to provide not only firsthand accounts of 'corroborees' but even to assert a role in their performance. In 1920, for instance, Daisy Bates was asked 'to arrange a display of aborigines. . . in honour of His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales' who was on a tour of Australia. The visiting royal shared the dais with Bates as she explained to him the significance of the Aboriginal dances.<sup>35</sup> In 1934, Bates was again prevailed upon to arrange the performance of 'tribal dances' at Ooldea for the visit of the Duke of Gloucester; Bates described how despite their 'reluctance' to perform their secret initiation ceremonies for outsiders, the 'natives . . . promised me' they would 'give a little of this amazingly agile dance.' 'Their confidence and trust in me was fully illustrated in their own way when they gave me charge of their young boy novices, whom they took me to see, and touch, and feed,' she boasted.

That journey in itself would have made an interesting camera picture. There were no native women present, only 25 men, all blood relations of the boys, and myself, walking quickly in single file through the tangled bush, and later the ceremony of approach, &c., to the young lads.<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, Annie Lock sought the support of the secretary of the Aborigines Friends Association, John Henry Sexton, to arrange a rival performance for the Duke at Ooldea—Lock told Sexton that the prince had been 'terribly disappointed' at the display organised by her predecessor Bates, and she wanted to show the duke 'that they are better cared for now the mission has taken them up.'<sup>37</sup> The 'initiatory rites had already begun' and Miss Lock, chosen as 'successor' to the recently deceased native 'Queen,' 'had the honor [sic] of setting the corroboree going, and they had conferred upon her some native honours. . . .' Sexton agreeably arranged for 'neat fitting' dark blue shorts to be sent for the men to wear 'together with the red ochre and other colours on their bodies'; this would 'fit the situation perfectly and add great attractiveness to these armed warriors.'<sup>38</sup> When photos of the performers duly appeared in the newspaper, commentary observed the 'contrast' between the 'barbaric nature' of their performance and their fashionable clothing.<sup>39</sup>

The real irony was that Aboriginal people themselves were being prevented from performing corroborees, whether by missionaries or frontier violence in remoter regions, or by an increasingly draconian administration in the 'settled' states. In 1926, another white woman, Elizabeth McKenzie-Hatton, wrote to the Governor-General of Australia on behalf of the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA). The group, a political organization of Aboriginal people committed to Aboriginal rights, had offered to give a performance of a traditional corroboree for the visit of the Duke and Duchess of York. 'We have in our membership a number of old full

bloods who have kept up a sort of corroboree group and are experts at displays of this kind.' The offer was politely but firmly declined.<sup>40</sup>

When it came to expressing their opinion of appropriations of corroboree, without the political rights, economic resources or social acceptance that elite white women had, Aboriginal people were at a great disadvantage, and their voices are few in the record. However, a fascinating letter by an Aboriginal woman at La Perouse, Sydney, in response to one of Bates' very early sensational articles, sparked a fervent letters debate in the editorial pages of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Annie Bowden's letter is worth quoting at length for the challenge she makes not only to Bates' depiction of corroboree, but more generally to white women speaking on Aboriginal culture, and the insight this gives to the contested views on Aboriginal masculinity.

[Mrs Bates] states that all aboriginal dialects throughout Australia have terms only for the lowest, such as lying and cheating and thieving, and no terms for honesty, making the language in common with the rest as low as she possibly can.

It would be laughable if it were not so serious: and we know it is not true. I am an aboriginal, and understand and speak eight different languages. I am an educated woman, having been educated in the State schools of Victoria, and I think that I am in a better position to know than a white woman.

Bowden continued, asserting that the Aboriginal language, 'taken as a whole, is the most expressive language spoken. . . . Its terms for endearment are legion. There was never any cruelty to women in my personal experience. . . . The women were always taken care of in my case and made much of, and there was more discipline in the camps than there is in many white homes today. . . . As for saying there were no brave men, well Mrs Bates can know nothing about it.' Bowden particularly took issue with Bates' claim to be an authority on Aboriginal male initiation:

As for the awful practices carried out at initiations, just let me say this: If, as Mrs Bates says, they were such cannibals there, and they killed and ate people for the smallest offence, how is it she was allowed to witness so dreadful a scene, without being eaten herself?

'Initiation as I know it was a sacred rite,' she continued, 'and no one but a select few were ever allowed to witness it.'

A young man about to be initiated was brought in by the elders or governors, a ring of fire was made, and after a lot of formality he was lifted on to a man's shoulders and carried away, and no one but a very select circle were allowed to see where he went. The other faces present were hidden, great sheets of bark cut for the occasion, and no one saw that particular young man for twelve months. It was an utter impossibility for anyone outside the selected circle, so how Mrs Bates comes to know so much about initiation I cannot tell. Probably she only heard it from some poor, ignorant aboriginal who could not express himself in the rather expressionless English language.<sup>41</sup>

By the 1930s Aboriginal people in south-eastern Australia were chary themselves of such displays of cultural difference. Not only could performance of corroboree (especially initiation ceremonies) offer cause for the removal of their children.<sup>42</sup> The surge of white interest in the new

'social anthropology' was seen as a retrograde step away from the equality 'earned' during the first world war, as a way in which white people gave themselves 'the pleasure of feeling superior,' and diametrically opposed to the demand for equal rights and opportunities.<sup>43</sup> For white Australians, 'corroboree' signified a primitive past. When in this decade musician and lyricist Varney Monk created a 'corroboree' piece for the first Australian historical musical production, *Collits Inn* (set in the nineteenth-century Blue Mountains) as a way of providing 'the background touch of reality of the period,' she claimed she had adapted it from a song she had learned from an Aboriginal 'Queen,' 'the last full-blooded aborigine of the Illawarra tribe.'<sup>44</sup> Indeed, during the 1938 sesquicentenary celebrations of the arrival of the First Fleet, the only reference to Aboriginal people (apart from a group of Aboriginal people from a distant reserve being forced to 're-enact' running in fear from the ships in the official movie of the events) was 'a grotesque shot demonising a corroboree dancer, used as a contrast to what modern Australia had achieved.'<sup>45</sup> As Aboriginal people themselves drew back from such performances, the writer Zora Cross performed her 'Aboriginal Corroboree' on 5 November 1937, before the Society of Arts and Crafts of New South Wales—possibly the first white woman to offer such a public performance in recorded history.<sup>46</sup>

In 1946, composer John Antill created the symphony orchestra score for which both Reid's and Dean's ballets would be choreographed. This was based on his childhood memories of watching tourist corroborees at La Perouse Aboriginal reserve. The score, which he called 'Corroboree,' was to be hailed as the first truly Australian piece of contemporary music.<sup>47</sup> His achievement marked the beginnings of an incorporation of Aboriginal dance into elite culture, hand in hand with the development of modern dance and its interest in 'the primitive' in the wider western world. Interest by overseas artists in Aboriginal dance was a distinctive shift of the post-war era. In 1936, the visiting German expressive dancer Norda Marta (reputed favourite of Hitler who 'prided herself on having been the first woman to appear on stage at Tokyo's famous Temple School, where performing artists are men only') had stated 'she was quite certain that Australia had nothing to offer her, and that she was most anxious to see New Zealand in order to study the dances of the Maoris.'<sup>48</sup> Now, some ten years later, leading US exponent of modern dance and co-founder of the Denishawn School of Dance with his wife, 'one of America's most famous women dancers, Ruth St Denis,' Ted Shawn, found his way to Australia. Shawn had begun to feel 'that dancing in western countries had lost some of its vitality through the preponderance of women dancers.'

This had given the lead to the ballerina, whereas in primitive countries men were the main performers. It was the fact that Australian corroboree was performed almost exclusively by men that made him so anxious to see it.<sup>49</sup>

In 1947 Shawn witnessed Aboriginal dance performances in the company of three other white men, John K Ewers, Bill Harney and Douglas Lockwood, and Ewers' book (complete with a description of 'a male ballet impersonation of lubras at work and at play'<sup>50</sup>) was published in 1953,

as Dean and Carell were themselves attending Aboriginal corroborees in central and northern Australia.

That same year, however, Elizabeth Durack made an important assertion of white female authority, when her Aboriginal-style illustrations replaced those by McRae, for a hugely successful republication of Langloh-Parker's *Australian Legendary Tales*.<sup>51</sup> Durack claimed that 'the aboriginal manner' displayed in her illustrations were taught to her by an old man called Jubbul. In a new foreword, pastoralist Henry Drake-Brockman explained that these original drawings had been 'imitative' and 'far removed in spirit from pre-white era masterpieces.' Durack, on the other hand, was one with 'knowledge of authentic aboriginal art forms.'<sup>52</sup>

Whereas Langloh-Parker had written disparagingly that her stories were 'old-women's stories' that would be beneath the dignity of the 'young blacks' to remember,<sup>53</sup> Drake-Brockman's praise for Durack marks a crucial point at which white women were able to consolidate their authority on Aboriginal culture and their ability to be more authentic than Aboriginal men. It has been pointed out that the 'native,' as a 'non-man,' was 'feminized' within anthropological discourse, as relations of power encoded and produced subordination as a lack of masculinity.<sup>54</sup> But the erotic undercurrent, for instance, in Deborah Buller-Murphy's 1958 collection of the legends of a 'departed race,' given to her personally as a child from 'the authentic lips' of the tribal Queen's son,<sup>55</sup> suggests a more complex rendering of Aboriginal masculinity in the social anthropology boom. It is clear that the 'uncontaminated native,' at least, was considered to be *particularly* masculine; it was the 'detrribalized' survivor who was emasculated and domesticated, 'his' subjugation thereby given especial piquancy. For a nation newly self-conscious of both identity and modernity, the postwar 'opening up' of the continent's vast desert interior and its resources had brought with it a renewed zest for the living colonial encounter. But the 1950s witnessed white women contest white men's exclusive authority to see and 'know' Aboriginal masculinity, and attempt to produce their own 'authentic' representations of 'primitive virility.'

In popular ethnographies, as Ewers' book demonstrates, phallocentrism dominated. The doings of men were considered of significance and interest to all; Aboriginal women's culture was deemed of interest only to women, and marginalised. As social anthropology became an established discipline female students and scholars were dissuaded from conducting research on Aboriginal men (though the professors were happy to teach contingents of admiring women about Aboriginal men).<sup>56</sup> Given the anxieties about women's roles in the 1950s, it is ironic that white women should now assert their interest in 'knowing' Aboriginal men. But after the war, urban, middle-class, mobile and modern white women quickly discovered a new power to flex, as consumers. It was at this point in the trajectory that Beth Dean, whose dream was nothing less than to 'tell the world of the Aboriginal culture,'<sup>57</sup> began her research for the ballet *Corroboree*.

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On her first visit to Australia in the immediate postwar period, Dean had met the journalist Ernestine Hill, she who had helped Daisy Bates prepare her newspaper articles into the 1938

publication *The passing of the Aborigines*.<sup>58</sup> 'I am glad you have been dancing and lecturing of our dear lost old Australians—,' Hill wrote to Dean on her return to America, 'they are something new under the northern sun, and you have the grace, the zest, the understanding to express an inarticulate people.'<sup>59</sup> Now, with a commission to choreograph the ballet, Dean made the strategic decision to contact T. G. H. Strehlow for advice and support.

The powerful anthropologist (and son of a central Australian missionary) was not inclined to endorse white women to the study of Aboriginal customs. 'Miss Pink,' he had advised the authorities in 1939, with regard to that white woman anthropologist of central Australia,

has the habit of interviewing the old men of the tribe in order to give her information about their religious ideas; and quite a few of the old men resent this, and either turn from her or else are forced to utter falsehoods in order to put her off the trail when discussing some of the things that may not be told to a woman.

As his biographer notes, Strehlow's motive was 'territorial.'<sup>60</sup> Pink had been outspoken on Aboriginal men's rights as well as on the abuse and impregnation of Aboriginal women by white men. Strehlow said she had an 'unhealthy obsession' with sex and took delight in informing her that her permit to study the Aboriginal people had been denied.<sup>61</sup> If Dean was unaware of his opposition to Pink's work, she was no doubt in full realisation of the power he wielded.

In the event, Strehlow advised Dean to approach the head of the Commonwealth Department of Native Affairs, Paul Hasluck, for permission to visit the Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory. Dean then wrote to Hasluck, dropping Strehlow's name as well as that of C.P. Mountford and Professor Elkin, explaining her 'especial interest in collecting women's ceremonies. . . . This aspect of ABO [sic] life has never been tabulated.' In her correspondence with both Strehlow and Hasluck, she used her married name, Ruth Elizabeth Carell—unusually for her.<sup>62</sup> She may well have deliberately downplayed her autonomy as a woman, to avoid any resistance by the authorities to her working too closely with Aboriginal men. Certainly, there was no trace in this clinical correspondence, of the flamboyant vision that Dean later wrote had inspired her in the first place, a vision of 'leaping, virile young men, their dark glistening bodies ochre-daubed and decorated in fantastic designs.'<sup>63</sup>

Dean *was* interested in Aboriginal women's dances, however. In her notes, she was careful to identify which dances were women's and which were men's dances, her notes scattered with comments such as: 'MATARANKA Buffalo Dance—Women only Dance—Men only may sing—Very strict on this.'<sup>64</sup> Irritated by the common assumption that Aboriginal women didn't perform 'corroboree',<sup>65</sup> she made sure some women's dances were included in the ballet, and even corrected a review sent to her before publication, which had stated, mistakenly, that as women were 'traditionally kept away from significant ceremonies,' Dean's female dancers 'kept up [masculine] appearances with padded tights.'<sup>66</sup> After Dean's intervention, the reviewer eventually published an article in which he made more of the taboos she and her husband had been able to evade:

Some of the secret and sacred dances of the initiation ceremonies, which are strictly taboo for women, were taken down by Mr Carell, whereas Beth Dean was admitted to the exclusive women's dances. As so far most explorers and ethnologists had been men, the existence of many of these dances had not even been suspected. Elated with the result of their work, having gathered fresh material which was "good theatre," the two returned to civilisation.<sup>67</sup>

Indeed Dean's notebooks reveal that her husband sat in on Aboriginal men-only dances, then described to her the steps performed; at other points it is evident that Carell was invited to attend highly secret men's ceremonies then transmitted that information to his wife. (As a white female researcher myself I found some of these notes very uncomfortable and disturbing reading, so skimmed over them hurriedly.)<sup>68</sup> Dean for her part was most often witness to women-only dances. That she would be positioned in the audience herself, by the Aboriginal people, as a woman, can be read in her notes and between the lines of the book she co-wrote about her experiences with her husband, *Dust for the Dancers*. An episode at an initiation ceremony where all the women, Dean included, fled from the ground at the sound of the bullroarer,<sup>69</sup> was reworked with some poetic license in the book to an earlier part of the ceremony. Here, having implied that she had only joined the departure because the panic had alarmed her, the incident was used as a device to indicate Dean's difference from Aboriginal women: "It was obvious that centuries of taboo were too deeply ingrained in the lubra soul for the women ever to disobey the rule not to disturb 'blackfellow business.'"<sup>70</sup> No mention was made of Dean having covered her eyes during the lead-up (the 'women covered their eyes at specific moments in the ceremony—as I myself did with my notebooks'), nor of the two boy 'escorts' who held her hands and ensured that she did leave when required.<sup>71</sup>

These young boys play another role in the book. As Dean was writing in her notebooks, in the company of the women and children, she found 'Gordon, her shadow, was at her elbow, spelling out words' and 'since so much of her notes was of things taboo to uninitiated boys, she changed into French, which intrigued and mystified him.' Trying unsuccessfully to keep him and his friend Charlie from catching a 'glimpse of a rough sketch of a *tjurunga* [sic]' she was obliged to close the book altogether—'Again Beth felt the sense of having no hiding place.'<sup>72</sup> While there are indeed pages written in 'schoolgirl French' (although no accompanying sketch of a *tjurunga*) amongst Dean's papers, alongside these notes she provided the information that she had as her constant 'companions' two *daughters* of one of the senior elders, who explained 'what to do at strategic moments' in the ceremonies.<sup>73</sup> In using such a semi-fictional and transgressive anecdote to place herself in a position of knowledge and authority over uninitiated youths in her published account, it is certainly ironic that Dean felt her own privacy being invaded.

The implication was that Dean had transcended these barriers in central Australia, as in the ballet, when in fact she had not. As a representative of a white female audience, Dean vicariously allowed white women to breach the barriers that were 'too deeply ingrained in the lubra soul,' and enter into a field of knowledge and power hitherto dominated by white male anthropologists.

Yet it is also instructive to note that in almost, if not all instances, it was white women who acted as the conduit enabling Dean to meet local Aboriginal women. At Mt Doreen station in central Australia, for instance, the owner's wife announced she had a 'surprise' for her guests, following dinner. She led the party around 'the back of the sheds' to find 'all the camp girls' waiting beside their small camp fires to perform a special series of women's dances:

Soon, the dancing women came in. Bare to the waist, they were painted with black charcoal designs, outlined in white. All the women wore different 'paint-up' markings.<sup>74</sup>

They performed 'a complete series of secret Yowulyu 'women business' dances that night' which, the writers went on to explain, told 'the full story of lovemaking.' However, they continued, '[We] felt sure that Mrs. Braitling had very little idea of what the girls were telling, with their often gracious, sometimes oddly tense dance movements. . . . Station women . . . are seldom aware of [the women's dances'] actual significance and deeply psychological origins,' and simply 'find them lovely and charming to watch.'<sup>75</sup> Despite Dean's dependence on women like Doreen Braitling, the portrait presented cemented the difference of 'station women' not only from Aboriginal women but also from the world-travelling dance scholar and ethnologist Beth Dean.

Mrs Braitling is a charming, capable and sincere woman, who has lived most of her life in this secluded spot with only her husband, her son and the tribe of blacks. Her days are busy, and she works hard at her responsibility of feeding her 'family'—for the blacks are dependent on the station homestead for much of their food. Each day she bakes at least sixty large loaves of snowy white bread. All water must be brought to the house in forty-four gallon drums from a small creek a few miles away. With all her busy life, Mrs. Braitling has still found time to be not only interested in but sympathetic toward her aborigines.<sup>76</sup>

As evidence for this she displayed her collection of Aboriginal artefacts, including a *tjuringa* (a sacred object owned by an initiated man, not to be seen by non-initiates) that her husband had reportedly been given by one of the Aboriginal men. In truth Dean also depended on her husband to access secret Aboriginal men's culture: but Dean could 'see' the significance of such culture in a way that the other lady could not.

As with the other accounts of watching women's dancing in the book, there is a constant blurring of masculine and feminine viewpoint so the reader is unable to discern when Dean was the witness or her husband. But throughout the book a framing white male gaze is adopted, and the authority, such as it is, is derived from male anthropological knowledge. White women may be 'interested in' Aboriginal culture, and affectionate with the domestic servants, but it takes a white man to understand the 'significance' of what they see. And Dean provides the white man, also, with the chance to transcend Aboriginal conventions.

Startling voyeuristic images of nubile and naked young girls met in their travels proliferate in *Dust for the Dancers*,<sup>77</sup> making the most powerful statement of the book's perspective. The message is clear here: the white audience for Aboriginal women is men. The account of the women's dances at Mt Doreen is concluded with a rather gratuitous apology for the sexuality they exhib-

ited. 'These naked and semi-naked women . . . express the joy and beauty of life in their dancing . . . sex is as ordinary a part of normal life to the natives as thirst and hunger.'<sup>78</sup> This is a particularly white male perspective, especially as we have already been informed that white women who live amongst Aboriginal people are incapable of seeing these dances as sexual at all. Were the white men of the party (Victor Carell and Mr Braitling) present at this 'secret' women's performance? Despite the nature of the performance, it is certainly possible they were. In the context of the power realities of the frontier, the restrictions on white women's engagement with Aboriginal men did not apply to white men.

There is a repellent twist to this particular tale. Back in 1939, Strehlow had referred to a couple of incidents where Braitling had apparently come to Olive Pink's aid, to argue that Pink was unable to 'get along on her own . . . without outside assistance,' and would require police assistance to remove white prospectors (considered the main predators of Aboriginal women) from the area.<sup>79</sup> The following year, Strehlow as an Aboriginal Patrol Officer had called in at the Braitlings' property 'looking into the usual thing,' as Strehlow's biographer put it, and found that over half of the 33 adults tested at the Aboriginal camp had the venereal disease gonorrhoea. Braitling tried to explain that two roving prospectors had spread the disease with three young girls a few months earlier;

Braitling himself denied any intimacy with the lubras. Strehlow was dubious. (When Sergeant Koop had camped there one night 'two abo girls' had offered themselves to him.)

There was, Strehlow felt, a very 'low morale of the native community here' in contrast to 'other groups.'<sup>80</sup> Such degradation might be accounted for in the report of another Patrol Officer who visited Mt Doreen station within the next two years. He 'camped the night among many children and women' finding them 'all naked and in a "deplorable condition."'

The semi-starvation in which they wage their constant battle against a hostile milieu was apparent in their thin limbs and haggard faces. A constant chorus of coughing, spitting and the crying of hungry children arose. My cook worked half the night making johnny cakes from our slender stock, and we did what we could for them.<sup>81</sup>

In light of these two horrific reports on the Mt Doreen people, Dean's observations a decade later about Mrs Braitling's 'busy' days baking bread for her Aboriginal 'family' and her inability to recognise the sexuality of the Aboriginal women (as 'natural' to them as 'thirst and hunger'), have a peculiarly macabre echo.

White women were denied the gaze of the colonizing white man precisely because of what they might see from that perspective; namely white male violence against Aboriginal people, sexual and otherwise.<sup>82</sup> Olive Pink, who transgressed gender as well as racial boundaries back in the 1930s, did contest such colonialist abuse of Aboriginal women as did the handful of 'frontier feminists' of her time.<sup>83</sup> Beth Dean offered no such challenge to white patriarchal authority, and given her task was to present a celebratory version of Australian culture for the Queen, one would

not necessarily expect to have see her do so. But by play-acting a white male expert wise in the sexual mores of the natives, Dean illuminates the complexity of a white female subjectivity constructed by her 'knowledge' of Aboriginality, when such power-knowledge claims were essential buttresses of colonial patriarchal authority. The transgressive performance was quite clearly to transcend the gender limitations imposed by Aboriginal performers; and we can leave her to have the last word on this. Corroboree was a ceremony of beauty, dignity and art, 'a highly evolved art.' Dean concluded in her *Dust for the Dancers*. It was 'an expression of the utmost feeling and purpose' that would enable 'the boy [to] take his place among the men of the tribe . . . not going, as before, only with the women.'<sup>84</sup>

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In the late 1990s, a now elderly Elizabeth Durack created a sensation when she revealed she had been painting under the guise of 'Eddie Burrup,' a fictional and composite character made up of her recollections of various Aboriginal men she or her father had known. Having used Burrup as a vehicle to express her beliefs about 'real' Aboriginal attitudes to land and culture, Durack sought refuge by insisting that her actions were an attempt at reconciliation and healing.<sup>85</sup> Her defence drew scorn from Aboriginal people who described the hoax as 'the ultimate act of colonisation,' and the media, as well as the academy, took up the scandal with enthusiasm.<sup>86</sup> That a woman once described as the embodiment of 'an often-imagined, rarely-realized Australian womanhood,' filling 'with distinction' her 'hereditary role as daughter of a pioneering squatter,'<sup>87</sup> should have imagined herself within the body, mind and spirit of an Aboriginal man was particularly disruptive at this point. A once 'inarticulate' people were no longer voiceless by the time Durack performed her masquerade. The Eddie Burrup affair highlighted not only the new strength of taboo against white women laying claim to Aboriginal male authority; it showed, also, the decline of white female authority in the broader society since the 1950s to speak on Aboriginal culture, that led to Durack's sense of marginalization and her apparent need to make a covert performance of Aboriginal masculinity to have her 'voice' on Aboriginal issues heard.

*Corroboree* had been performed again in 1970 for the Captain Cook celebrations, but its days were numbered. Since gaining the political rights white women had won at the time of Federation, and with the broader acceptance of the rhetoric, at least, of 'self-determination,' Aboriginal people across Australia had been in a better position to resist the power-knowledge claims wielded by white people, male or female. The decision to have a black (African-American) man dancing the lead role in the place of Dean was a clumsy response.<sup>88</sup> Dean did not seem to comprehend the changes that had occurred, writing to the Australian Ballet's director Marilyn Jones in 1979 to advocate the company put on a performance of her *Corroboree*, telling her 'This ballet is Australia, true Australia.' Her husband in similar vein would suggest that the ballet be performed at the Sydney Opera House for the 1988 Bicentenary of white settlement: 'It will not only highlight a major Australian cultural success but more importantly, provide a truly meaning-

ful, significant and sincere tribute to our original inhabitants, in a way most valid to the aborigine—his culture.’<sup>89</sup> Their suggestions were ignored.

The Eddie Burrup affair in the 1990s set in chain a frenzy of questioning the Aboriginal identity of a number of writers and artists, beginning with the exposure a week later of another gender/race transgression, this time that the award-winning Aboriginal woman writer, Wanda Koolmatrie, was really white male author Leon Carmen.<sup>90</sup> Later that year a book by the leader of a new populist right-wing political party, One Nation, hit the bookstands. *Pauline Hanson: The Truth* drew upon the discredited evidence of Daisy Bates to vociferously claim that Aboriginal people had been cannibals: this was used to justify Hanson’s anti-Aboriginal stance, and to fan the embers of a resurgent resentment in the mainstream white society against Aboriginal rights.<sup>91</sup>

In 2003 Australian feminist Germaine Greer suggested ‘a way out’ of the non-Aboriginal predicament ‘in which we find ourselves as guilty inheritors of a land that was innocently usurped by our ignorant, deluded, desperate forefathers’:

The single step that begins this journey is the simple admission that ours is an Aboriginal country. All of it. Every single bit. Try saying it to yourself in the mirror. “I live in an Aboriginal country.”

The ‘second step in the journey is a second statement to the self in the mirror. “I was born in an Aboriginal country, therefore I must be considered Aboriginal.”’<sup>92</sup> Though she referred vaguely to the tradition of close relationships between Aboriginal and white women—‘Black gins smoothed the birthing pillow of the white woman, and nursed both mother and child’<sup>93</sup>—Greer was critical of specific historical white women who ‘brusquely truncated’ intimate relationships with Aboriginal women when ‘circumstances changed.’<sup>94</sup> Greer cautioned against the ‘unbearable appropriations’ of the past, calling for ‘a more intelligent reading of our own myths.’<sup>95</sup> Yet it was the motif of male initiation (and the initiation especially of ‘full blood white men’) complete with references to ‘Red Ochre’ ceremonies and corroborees, that Greer engaged to argue that white Australians could become Aboriginal;<sup>96</sup> and she even suggested that the high degree of sex segregation evident to ‘observers of white Australian life’ in Australian culture could be traced to the influence of Aboriginal culture (corroborees in particular).<sup>97</sup> Harkening back to the muscular radical nationalism of Russell Ward and Vance Palmer, in many ways ‘Jump Up Whitefella’ was a 1950s piece itself.

Where Dean had been lauded, and Durack reviled, Greer was ridiculed. Her proposal for ‘the shortest route to nationhood’ was greeted with scepticism, and a number of Aboriginal people were invited to respond to her in print and in public forums.<sup>98</sup> Greer appeared to have been somewhat surprised and disconcerted that their response was generally negative. Greer certainly did not see herself as following in the tradition of white women appropriating Aboriginality. (She had even spent time debunking none other than Mary Durack—without mentioning her sister’s indiscretion<sup>99</sup>). Yet in her presumption of authority to speak on Aboriginality—her use indeed of the Aboriginal issue to stake a claim to Australia’s national identity—Greer was indeed dancing in the dust of generations of white Australian women.

In her own explanation for her presumptiveness, Greer stated she had been 'adopted' by 'Kulin women from Fitzroy' some twenty years earlier. Fearing she might be 'painted or smoked or cut about' (an echo of Bardsley) Greer was relieved to find nothing dramatic was expected of her. 'Since then I have sat on the ground with black women and been assigned a skin and taught to hunt and how to cook shellfish and witchetty grubs, with no worse punishment than being laughed at.'<sup>100</sup> This self-validating claim certainly drew howls of derision. For Marcia Langton, a prominent Aboriginal academic, it was a shallow 'boast.'<sup>101</sup> Greer was mystified by Langton's 'nastiness'—'What's to boast?'<sup>102</sup> Like Dean and Durack before her, Greer missed the Aboriginal impatience with such claims to authenticity. Perhaps most telling of all was the one statement of support for her, made by another Aboriginal woman academic Lillian Holt. Holt mused it was Greer's humility when questioned on TV 'in a country where everyone knows about or at least has an opinion on the original inhabitants' that won her: 'I thought to myself, Good on you, Germaine—finally a whitefella who can admit to "not knowing."<sup>103</sup>

Beth Dean's performance as the Initiate in the 1950s can be seen as a crucial and dramatic display of the assertion of white women to 'know' Aboriginality—to know even the most taboo aspects of Aboriginality. The criticism and provocation Greer offered, as Holt said, in fact *has* to come from women like her who 'inhabit, daily' the 'power and privilege of Whiteness.'<sup>104</sup> But such women need to interrogate that power and privilege. The power of knowledge, a power jealously guarded by white male patriarchy, is not dispelled by being taken up, however subversively, by white women. Though Dean danced as a white woman, as an Aboriginal man, in the face of those who denied she could possibly know what it meant to be an Aboriginal man, Dean did not challenge but strengthened the white patriarchal power she imitated. White women's identity in Australia (and in other colonial settings) is grounded in a sedimentation of acts asserting knowledge of 'authentic' Aboriginality. It is this that becomes the 'dust' stirred up by white women's varied and changing transgressive performances of Aboriginal masculinity; understanding that white women have sought to contest white men, essentially, for authority on Aboriginality is to understand the imbrication of such a struggle with colonialism's structures of domination and repression.

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## NOTES

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58. See Anderson, 'A glorious thing,' 2005.
59. Ernestine Hill to Beth Dean, 20 October 1951: DC Papers.
60. Barry Hill, *Broken Song: T.G.H. Strehlow and Aboriginal Possession*, Vintage, Sydney, 2003, p. 338.
61. Julie Marcus, 'The Beauty, Simplicity and Honour of Truth: Olive Pink in the 1940s,' Julie Marcus, ed., *First in their Field: Women and Australian Anthropology*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1993, pp. 111-35, 128-30; Hill 2003, pp. 337-39.
62. J.G.H. Strehlow to Mrs Carell, 24 September 1952; draft letter, Beth Dean to Paul Hasluck (on the back); P. Hasluck to Ruth Elizabeth Carell, 13 October 1952: DC Papers.
63. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, pp. 1-2.
64. Notes on a table listing different dances: DC Papers.
65. Her attempts to refute this belief recur in her book, Beth Dean, *The Many Worlds of Dance*, K.G. Murray, Sydney, 1966, p. 39, and in her public talks: DC Papers.
66. Typed copy of an article (or radio transcript?) by Cornelius Coyne 2BL 12 Feb. 10 p.m., Beth Dean's notation 'note: women do appear. Beth Dean': DC Papers.
67. Cornelius Coyne, 'Corroboree into Ballet,' *The Weekly News* (New Zealand) 2 June 1954, clipping: DC Papers.
68. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, pp. 176-77; Blackfield note exercise book, DC Papers.
69. Typed notes, unmarked folder 'An experience at an initiation ceremony. . . Beth Dean,' in DC Papers.
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71. 'An experience at an initiation ceremony. . . Beth Dean,' DC Papers.
72. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, p. 168.
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75. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, p. 141.
76. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, p. 140.
77. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, pp. 56, 101, 127, 128, 179.
78. Dean and Carell, *Dust for the Dancers*, 1955, pp. 140-41.
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80. Hill, *Broken Song*, 2003, p. 339.

81. Quoted in Hill, *Broken Song*, 2003, pp. 366-67.
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95. Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, p. 53.
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97. Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, pp. 101-2.
98. David Seale, 'Greer flags Australia as indigenous republic,' *Canberra Times*, 9 October 2004. See responses at the back of Greer 2004, three out of the nine respondents published being Aboriginal. Greer also participated in a public forum at the National Museum of Australia, with a forum panel of three Indigenous people discussing the issues she raised afterwards: Germaine Greer with Larissa Berendt and Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Chaired by Professor Mick Dodson, 'The Possible Dream,' National Museum of Australia, Canberra, 7 October 2004.
99. Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, pp. 42-54. It's interesting that she made no mention of the Burrup affair, though she would have known of it, coming in at the end of the year 1997 with an article in which she announced that 'recent Aboriginal art is a con': Germaine Greer, 'Selling off the Dreaming,' *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 December 1997.
100. Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, pp. 37-38.
101. Marcia Langton, 'Response,' in Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, p. 167.
102. Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, p. 226.
103. Lilian Holt, 'Response,' in Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, p. 144.
104. Holt, 'Response,' in Greer, *Whitefella Jump Up*, 2004, p. 145.