To Touch the Infinity of a Far Horizon: A Transnational History of Transcultural Appropriation in Beth Dean’s Corroboree (1954)

Victoria Haskins

In 1954, a ballet inspired by and celebrating Aboriginal dance performance was presented to wide critical acclaim in Australia. The ballet’s American choreographer, Beth Dean, danced the lead role of the Boy Initiate, reproducing dance steps and movements which she had recently learnt from Indigenous dancers in central and northern Australia, in combination with classical and contemporary dance steps. Rapturous reviews followed. ‘Miss Dean’ told the story of an Aboriginal boy’s ‘torment … on her mobile face and responsive body’, wrote one reviewer. ‘Look at her too long and one gains an unforgettable impression of the primitive, naturalistic fears of the aborigines.’ Another reviewer ‘saw not a dancer but a member of an ancient tribe’. Dean ‘transported us right into the tribal group so that we were no longer audience but one of those taking part in the ceremony’. A 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 challenging white Australians’ indifference towards Aborigines: ‘If it does not quite get under the skin, it at least pricks it.’ But others felt that Dean had indeed ‘crept inside the skin of our aborigine’, to present something ‘supremely Australian’. Beth Dean’s Corroboree has engaged the attention of diverse scholars since the early 1990s. As a key episode in the nationalist embrace of Aboriginality, it has been the subject of contesting evaluations: seen as creating a space for Indigenous dance companies or, conversely, as a major obstacle for Indigenous performers. Any social, cultural or historical assessment of the ballet’s production and performance cannot but highlight how firmly embedded it was in colonial relations of domination and power, undermining and indeed making redundant the subversive potential of Dean’s transgressive appropriation. The transnational nature of Corroboree, however, has been overlooked. For her capacity to perform ethnic dances, including sacred Aboriginal men’s dances, very much depended on the transnational networks within which she performed – networks which expanded dramatically for women such as herself in the post-war era.

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Dean had been specially commissioned to re-choreograph the ballet to accompany John Antill’s acclaimed symphony score Corroboree, in honour of the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, the first ever by a reigning monarch on this continent. Her version replaced a 1950 one by Australian choreographer Rex Reid, in which the lead role, the Medicine Man, had been the central figure around whom ‘the whole frenzied ritual’ of ‘prancing savages’ had revolved – in the words of the Sydney Morning Herald’s critic.10 Despite its popularity with audiences, 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. Experts in the burgeoning field of anthropology had been scornful. A ‘gaudy, circus-like travesty of corroboree’, pronounced one such writer, adding that through ‘lack of understanding and lack of knowledge, the choreographer had completely missed the spirit of the real thing’.11 Dean’s challenge was to succeed where her predecessor had failed.

She embarked on a well-publicised, eight-month tour of central and northern Australia with her husband, the Australian-born singer Victor Carell, in order to carry out the research that would ensure her version would be seen as being properly informed; the couple took turns attending gender-restricted ceremonies, wearing a brown nylon skirt and a loin-cloth and make-up that mimicked ochre body-painting, and with her hair tied back in a chignon suggesting central desert hairstyles. Dean first performed the lead role of an Aboriginal youth undergoing initiation in a shortened twenty-five-minute version for the Royal visitor on 6 February 1954 at the Tivoli Theatre in Sydney. In the critics’ response, one can read a kind of relief that Dean had managed to pull off the feat. ‘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.’12 More pointed was the Mirror’s critic: “American Beth Dean has with her fine intellect, taken her brush and obliterated the memory of some awful chichi choreography we have had to put up with … It’s an Australian masterpiece in which a Yank shares.”13 Dean’s performance was in hindsight a particularly curious display of settler-state nationalism and the complex relationships of gender, class and race which that could entail: one young English woman representing the traditional monarchy watched another young, American, woman, representing the new Pacific superpower, play out in the vocabulary of classical European ballet the initiation of an Indigenous youth into manhood, as an allegory for Australian nationhood.

Both Dean’s choreography and her performance exemplified her bodily mobility. By first recording a series of distinct Aboriginal dance steps – observed at a variety of Indigenous groups’ dance ceremonies, both male and female, sacred and secular, coming from central and northern Australia – then adapting, reworking and reordering these into a synthesis for a number of different performers, and finally performing in the lead role, Dean quite

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literally was a moving and creative subject. She also used her choreography and her dancing body – and the bodies of her dancers, an unusual mix of classically trained and modern dance practitioners – as vehicles to carry her observations of Aboriginal peoples and their dance from a far distance, in geographic and indeed temporal terms, since Aboriginality was then considered unquestionably as being fixed not only in pre-modern but in pre-historic time.13 Her costuming signified nakedness at a time when such revealing costuming still had the power to do so.14 This drew attention powerfully to her physicality – including her skin – and the trilling thought that she had not only been able to move among the naked bodies of Aboriginal men and women, but was now performing for urban white audiences and spottily (un)garbaged. The confronting physical act of genital circumcision, as familiar to Aboriginal audiences at the time as it was sensational, was signified in Dean’s performance by a climactic ordeal of jumping through fire. In the same way that her brown body-stocking drew attention to her white body, the fire ordeal drew attention to a shockingly corporeal native masculinity, and in itself recalled the physicality of the moving Aboriginal male body – the vision which Dean described in the book that she and Carell produced on the ballet, of ‘leaping, virile young men, their dark glistening bodies ochre-daubed and decorated in fantastic designs’.15

Dean’s transgressive performance, and her career generally, is an illustration of the complexities of transnational modernity in the post-war era. Historian Barbara Bush has noted the feminisation of the British Empire during the first half of the twentieth century, attributing this to the increased mobility for white women afforded by imperialism,16 but Dean’s story shows that similar, even enhanced, opportunities were available to white women in the post-war period of US hegemony, particularly in the Pacific. Such opportunities were made available by circuits of cultural consumption and commodification for women, particularly of the ‘other’, that were quite different to earlier models of genteel white femininity in the possibilities which they allowed women for transgressions. The daughter of a wealthy Denver engineer, Dean trained in Paris and London before joining a New York theatre company that specialised in touring musicals, where she did some choreography. The end of the war, however, found her in Hollywood as a stand-in for dancing stars, a demoralising experience which she escaped by virtue of a role in a musical, where she met her future husband, the singer Victor Carell, in 1944. Run-off show contracts for the musical, Annie Get Your Gun, would bring the couple to Australia in 1947.

J. C. Williamson Theatres Ltd, a major Australian theatre company that produced this phenomenally successful musical about the legendary cowgirl Annie Oakley, was itself a product of Australian-American connections dating back to the end of the nineteenth century. But the couple’s mobility for white women afforded by imperialism,16 but Dean’s story shows that similar, even enhanced, opportunities were available to white women in the post-war period of US hegemony, particularly in the Pacific. Such opportunities were made available by circuits of cultural consumption and commodification for women, particularly of the ‘other’, that were quite different to earlier models of genteel white femininity in the possibilities which they allowed women for transgressions. The daughter of a wealthy Denver engineer, Dean trained in Paris and London before joining a New York theatre company that specialised in touring musicals, where she did some choreography. The end of the war, however, found her in Hollywood as a stand-in for dancing stars, a demoralising experience which she escaped by virtue of a role in a musical, where she met her future husband, the singer Victor Carell, in 1944. Run-off show contracts for the musical, Annie Get Your Gun, would bring the couple to Australia in 1947.

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Annie proved as popular in Australia as it was in the USA: it was a legend that enabled a globalisation of the American settler-colonial frontier at the same time as it spoke to a gendered modernity.25 It ran for just over three years in Australia and New Zealand, providing Dean – in a relatively undemanding supporting role – an opportunity to learn all she could about Maori and Aboriginal dance, in order to reinvent herself as an ‘ethnic dancer’. The former she learned from Maori performers in New Zealand – particularly the influential Maori leader Princess Te Puea Herangi – but in the case of the latter, she was obliged to rely on the published works of anthropologists T. G. H. Strehlow and E. P. Elkin, and on C. P. Mountford’s ethnographic ‘dance films’. She gave her first performance of Aboriginal dance at the Sydney Conservatorium in 1950, as the Annie tour ended, and went on to give a series of performances of Aboriginal and other ‘ethnic’ dances around Australian country towns under the auspices of the New South Wales Council of Adult Education.21 By the time she left Australia in 1951, Dean had charted a plan to present Aboriginal song and dance recitals across the USA, and she had enlisted the support of influential federal politicians, who saw the opportunity of ‘gaining valuable publicity for Australia’.22

The couple went first to England, where Dean’s performance of Aboriginal dance in London’s Rambert’s Theatre was previewed favourably by the influential ballet critic Arnold Haskell. ‘Ethnic dance has a monstrous dry sound and many of us have unhappy memories of tedium associated with the name’ he wrote, [b]ut Beth Dean is neither a ‘school marm’ nor a dilettante collector of travel souvenirs – she is a highly trained dancer and a sensitive artist. Choreographers and all who love the dance should find a wealth of material here.23

As Dean recorded, ‘it caused quite a lot of publicity and furor because no one had seen Australian Aboriginal dance before’. They went on to perform in Rome, utilising Carell’s connections, before returning to New York; here Dean lectured and danced in a programme titled ‘Dance Around the World’ at the Museum of Natural History. In an array of costumes, she performed a range of exotic characters, a particular highlight being a ‘scene’ from ‘Annie’.

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Australian Aboriginal sacred Inkura ceremony of Initiation. 24 They then toured the USA, with Dean dancing and Carell accompanying her on improvised instruments, finally ending up in Los Angeles. 25

If ‘modernity for white women was linked to sexual subjectivity and autonomy, to physical freedoms and mobility’, as historian Angela Woolacott observes, ‘that mobility was epitomized by international travel’. 26 Woolacott traces the extensive international movements of white Australian women in the pre-war decades, facilitated by the near-global entertainment circuits that London-based Australian women professional performers used as infrastructure to tour widely in the northern hemisphere. The USA was a key destination, identified as a focus of both political progressivism and career opportunities. 27 In some ways, Dean was already performing a role as a white Australian woman when she departed Australia for London, then Europe and the USA, by following this particular entertainment circuit. But as an American woman, her professional transnational mobility was played out by her return to Australia and New Zealand, and the justification for this mirror-image movement was, ironically, to visit a people designated as entirely immobile, both temporally and geographically.

‘I am glad you have been dancing and lecturing of our dear lost old Australians’, the journalist and prolific writer Ernestine Hill wrote to Dean in New York in October 1951, ‘… they are something new under the northern sun, and you have the grace, the zest, the understanding to express an inarticulate people’. 28 With her transnational networks, Dean had the access to resources – or potential resources – that made her articulate in a way that was blocked to Indigenous Australians, and enabled her own acts of cultural appropriation. 29 Dean, who had met Hill on her first visit to Australia, was now in the process of applying for a Fulbright research grant that would enable her to travel back to Australia. 30

The presumptions that make mobility the property of the coloniser and ‘stasis the preternatural condition of the indigene’ are clearly visible in this part of Corroboree’s story and, as commonsense as they may seem, at a time when Indigenous Australians were routinely described as ‘Stone Age’, it is important not to overlook their significance. Dean’s self-representation as a credentialed researcher enabled her to position herself as one who could and should be funded to travel to the terrain marked discursively ‘Aboriginal’, that is, central Australia. It also enabled her to call upon the support of influential anthropological experts, such as Strehlow and Elkin, for advice and endorsement. Thus, Dean’s mobility was morelimited than the promotional hype that surrounded her performance implied. In the first place, she could not visit Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory without permission from the head of the Commonwealth Department of Native Affairs, Paul Hasluck. 31 Such permission was not automatically given, and Dean was dependent on the support of powerful white men in this

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The presumptions that make mobility the property of the coloniser and ‘stasis the preternatural condition of the indigene’ are clearly visible in this part of Corroboree’s story and, as commonsense as they may seem, at a time when Indigenous Australians were routinely described as ‘Stone Age’, it is important not to overlook their significance. Dean’s self-representation as a credentialed researcher enabled her to position herself as one who could and should be funded to travel to the terrain marked discursively ‘Aboriginal’, that is, central Australia. It also enabled her to call upon the support of influential anthropological experts, such as Strehlow and Elkin, for advice and endorsement. Thus, Dean’s mobility was more limited than the promotional hype that surrounded her performance implied. In the first place, she could not visit Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory without permission from the head of the Commonwealth Department of Native Affairs, Paul Hasluck. 31 Such permission was not automatically given, and Dean was dependent on the support of powerful white men in this

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Australian Aboriginal sacred Inkura ceremony of Initiation. 24 They then toured the USA, with Dean dancing and Carell accompanying her on improvised instruments, finally ending up in Los Angeles. 25

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regard. Strehlow himself had blocked the outspoken woman anthropologist Olive Pink from acquiring a permit in 1939, by reporting critically on her ‘habit of interviewing the old men of the tribe’.28 Dean’s emphasis in her Fulbright application, that she intended to study Aboriginal women’s dances, was at least partly strategic. Then there were more practical difficulties. Her Fulbright petition was for the use of a motor vehicle to carry out the travel, without which she could not get there, even with permission. Central Australia had only very recently been made relatively accessible to travellers by road by a combination of advances in automobile technology and the development of graded dirt roads in some areas. As a modern white woman, Dean may have been able to travel the world performing her dances, but whether she would be able to travel to central Australia was another question.

Dean’s own narrative, constructed and reconstructed over the years in her interviews and various published writings, denotes a chance meeting in New York between the Carells and the Australian popular anthropologist Charles Peary Mountford, as pivotal. She was so inspired by Mountford when she first met him around the end of World War II, that she at once resolved that if she ever had the opportunity she would go to Australia to learn about Aboriginal dancing, and ‘perhaps, later, make dance her speciality’.33 Ironically, in this regard Dean’s narrative conforms to an older tradition of women performers’ memoirs, where the recurring use of a crucial encounter with a powerful man – that provided the opportunity or catalyst for the performer’s success – was a device which removed agency from the female performer and gave the male the lead role in ‘propelling the narrative forward’.34 What is striking in this construction is the way it operates to negate not just Dean’s own agency in shaping the direction her career took but also the pre-war efforts and ideas of other women performers in the USA, to which her transgressive performance was heir.

It is evident that the Carells had already thought about developing an Aboriginal-themed ballet when they met Mountford in March 1945. Carell had conceived the idea of running a radio programme on Australian music, after hearing an NBC one introducing South African folk songs that year, and he had been put in touch with Mountford by an Australian journalist working in the newly established Australian News and Information Bureau in New York.35 Mountford’s diary entries reveal that the couple initially asked him for some recorded Aboriginal music which they might be able to use in their programme. Mountford took them to the American Museum of Natural History to play them recordings. Later that day, however, Dean and Carell aired their idea of designing the music and choreography for a ballet based on Aboriginal dance.

Mountford expressed cautious support. ‘I personally think it could be done’, he mused, ‘but the professional ballet dancer would have to unhook his mind from many of the traditional steps and poses’.
Then, that might not attract the crowd and make money, the be-
all and end-all of entertainment. Still, the’re [sic] keen, and it
won’t hurt to talk about it. I feel sure that some of the dances I
have seen, ie, the simpler ones, would make wonderful ballets,
especially if they were performed by artists that know the
background. 46

Mountford was not necessarily all that candid himself. One wonders if he
shared with the couple a letter he had received from Arnold Haskell the
previous month, suggesting that if Mountford had ‘an illustrated lecture on
aboriginal dancing, [he knew] many ladies that would welcome it and could
fix up some interesting lectures’ for Mountford in London. 47

Dean was only one of a number of enterprising and energetic women
whom Mountford was meeting in America, having been sent to New York at
the end of 1944 by the Australian Government to promote Australia by
conducting a lecture series. 48 Receptivity to such gestures reflected a surging
interest in that newly confident country in the exotic peoples of the Pacific.
There were all sorts of opportunities for women, as well as men, with an
entrepreneurial eye towards ‘primitive’ culture. Bathie Stewart from New
Zealand, for example, gave lectures on the ‘Legends of Maori Land’ in
January 1945. Her promotional flyer, carefully pasted into Mountford’s
diary, stated: ‘Because the future of America appears to lie in the Pacific and
because so many of our armed forces are now engaged there, every audience
will find Miss Stewart’s delightful appearances to be of greater than ever
value and interest.’ 49 Delightful was an adjective that could define the
tension posed by women taking such authoritative roles, but in Mountford’s
diaries there seems to be an undertone of anxiety about the competition
that these women represented.

Mountford had with him a number of ethnographic films and recordings
which he had produced, including the documentary Tjurunga, another about
the artist Albert Namatjira, and an ethnographic film documenting
circumcision and sub-incision rituals. On showing the latter, Mountford
noted that women made up half of his audience and were as interested as the
men, ‘but did not ask any questions’. His equanimity was shaken, however,
when he encountered expatriate Australian Winifred Walker showing films
of Australia under the billing ‘Lecturer, Photographer, World Traveller’. She
had, ‘by all the bad luck in the world’, managed to procure a copy of his film
Tjurunga from a ‘Yankee’ woman who had bought it in Australia. To
Mountford’s obvious relief, she promised not ‘to show it in any place where I
am likely to appear’. Walker was, it seems, ‘ever such a nice friendly person,
a bit of a go-getter, but not to the extent of being greedy …’. 40

He had met another, American, woman a few weeks before that, Mrs
Oghtwaite, with her husband. Mrs Oghtwaite – again, ‘really a delightful
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person’ – had told him that it was ‘the dancer, the artist, the musician’, not anthropologists, who should be investigating Aboriginal cultural life. And then a month after meeting the Carells, Mountford was promising to visit in New York a Miss Laura Bolton – employed by the Canadian Government to record the ‘folk music’ of that country – who ‘had done a great deal of recording of primitive music’. In April 1945, he attended a dinner hosted by the sculptor Malvina Hoffman, who was ‘very interested in people, especially primitives’. It turned out that just prior to the war, she had organised a ‘series of international dances’ including those of ‘American Indian tribes, Negroes, Haitians, Russians, Polynesians, etc’ at Radio City under a programme called ‘Dance International’, before the whole thing abruptly ‘fell to bits’ with the onset of the war. ‘But they were on the verge of starting something really good, something which Miss Hoffman thought would have lasted’, recorded Mountford.43

Dean’s ‘Dance Around the World’ programme of lecture demonstrations, which she performed in New York on the couple’s return to the USA in 1951, was the post-war heir to such endeavours. Performances of ‘otherness’ were well established in US modern dance practice by female dancer-choreographers including Ruth St Denis, Margaret Graham and Katherine Dunham. In 1937 in Sydney, writer Zora Cross had performed an ‘Aboriginal Corroboree’ before the New South Wales Society of Arts and Crafts; ten years later, Ted Shaw, leading US exponent of modern dance and former husband of St Denis, visited Australia to see Aboriginal male dancers perform corroboree.44 Dean, however, never acknowledged predecessors or competitors: Mountford’s evocations, triggering childhood memories of being taken by her parents to Gallup, New Mexico, to see the tourist dances of the Native Americans,45 were in her account her sole source of inspiration. Such erasures worked to obscure the transnational nature of Dean’s enterprise, even as they did not impinge on her self-representation as a modern, mobile world traveller. Indeed, Dean denied having ever seen Rex Reid’s version of the ballet when she and Carell first heard Antill’s symphony being played on the radio in Canada, that they thought about choreographing the ballet Corroboree.46

Dean and her husband departed the USA again in April 1952. She had secured no research funding, nor had she managed to secure the important interview with Hasluck in Canberra for a permit. However, she did have a recent letter of reference from the Director of the Choreographers Workshop in New York, Trudy Goth, stating that the Workshop had invited Dean to choreograph the American première of the ballet Corroboree, planned for the 1952–53 season, but ‘with great regret’ they had to ‘find another choreographer as Miss Dean will not be able to be in New York at the time’.47 The ballet Corroboree was already planned as an entirely American production before Dean even left.

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On arrival, the couple embarked on what Dean described as a ‘gruelling tour’ of Australia and New Zealand: sixty-five ‘one-night stands’ delivering ethnic dance performances in New Zealand: four concerts in Sydney; and another thirty-five in Tasmania. From Wellington in New Zealand in 1952, Dean and Carell wrote to the Consolidated Concerts Company – which had produced Dean’s tour in the USA – with an intriguing offer. In alliance with the composer John Antill, and William Constable, the set designer for Reid’s ballet, the Carells offered to sell their version of Corroboree to the American company. This created problems for the director of the Australian News and Information Bureau in New York, Hartney Cutler, who had already given an undertaking to Goth to produce the ballet. Cutler cautioned that Goth was ‘quite a figure’ and that it would be ‘foolish and tactless’ to upset her unnecessarily. Furthermore, he pointed out that ‘Miss Dean as a choreographer is not as well known in New York as the present group’. It is not known whether the American production was ever evaluated – it seems that it did not – but, at any rate, Dean finally got the lucky break she needed at one of her Sydney performances. The President of the Australian Arts Council, Dorothy Helmhrich, Dean tells us, approached her afterwards to ask her to choreograph Corroboree for the Royal visit.

In January 1953, an article appeared in Melbourne’s Age newspaper announcing that Beth Dean was ‘To Study Our Native Dances’, supported by an anthropological funding institution in New York. As Dean noted years later, she had only been given a ‘wire recorder’ and still had no means of transport to carry out her research. In March 1953, she wrote to the head of the Ford Motor Company in Australia to ask for the loan of a car, promising to stress the value of the Ford car in any press releases, books, monographs or articles which she might write, and offering to shoot any footage that the Ford company desired. Dean explained:

I have been asked to choreograph and produce the ballet ‘Corroboree’ which will be mounted for an expected Command performance for the Queen’s visit to Australia early next year. This is news which is definitely ‘off the record’ until later. However, you can confirm it through Miss Dorothy Helmhrich, President of the Arts Council of Australia at 71 Hunter Street, Sydney.

Although Ford Australia declined to assist her,30 the commission to do the ballet did give Dean the leverage she needed with the Northern Territory Administration. In March 1953, they finally received the official permits ‘to enter and be upon’ Aboriginal reserves, in July 1953.31 The car that they eventually set out in was the first Holden utility truck, the 1951 FX – constructed on an American Chevrolet design with support from the Australian Government.32 The ‘picanniny truck’ played more than a cameo role in the film that they made of their journey, Carumbo; as the emblem of Ford company desired. Dean explained:

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Dean’s remarkable international mobility was now to be matched by her intrepid adventures driving across central and northern Australia. Her trip was mapped out on the fly-leaves of the book Dust for the Dancers, showing the circuitous, looping route that the couple took: from Melbourne along the east coast up to Rockhampton in Queensland, before turning inland to cut across and up central Queensland to the middle of the Northern Territory; heading north to Darwin; then down again to central Australia, before heading back to Melbourne, going through the middle of South Australia and to Adelaide. Historian Georgine Clarsen has compared the representation of women’s transcontinental motoring in the USA and Australia in the post-war period. She notes the impulse in Australia to trace the circumference of the continent as well as crossing it, a gesture of integration that served to confirm ‘white society’s full possession of the continent’. Such trips in Australia did not attract the significant sponsorship from car manufacturers available to American women motorists; nor, writes Clarsen, were they represented as a flight from corrupting cities as they were in the USA. Rather, media coverage linked journeys of female motorists in remote Australia ‘to the unfinished project of establishing a new nation in an old country’;

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In one of the most gripping media events connected with Dean’s journey, the couple were reported to have gone missing in central Australia, although it transpired that Dean and Carell, with great symbolism, had been comfortably ensconced all along in a cave at Uluru – the monolith just then becoming a national icon and a subject for appropriation, through the efforts of a range of cultural entrepreneurs, including Mountford.56 Describing their return from their travels, Dean and Carell wrote in their book of the ‘new life’ that they saw now in the Australian landscape, and how they ‘drank in the beauty with an unquenchable thirst’.57 In Dean’s case, the fantasy of a ‘new pioneering struggle’ in which urban adventurers, empowered by modern technology, enabled Australians to see their country ‘with the eyes of the twentieth century’,7 attained another, redoubled level of intensity.

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In one of the most gripping media events connected with Dean’s journey, the couple were reported to have gone missing in central Australia, although it transpired that Dean and Carell, with great symbolism, had been comfortably ensconced all along in a cave at Uluru – the monolith just then becoming a national icon and a subject for appropriation, through the efforts of a range of cultural entrepreneurs, including Mountford.56 Describing their return from their travels, Dean and Carell wrote in their book of the ‘new life’ that they saw now in the Australian landscape, and how they ‘drank in the beauty with an unquenchable thirst’.57 In Dean’s case, the fantasy of a ‘new pioneering struggle’ in which urban adventurers, empowered by modern technology, enabled Australians to see their country ‘with the eyes of the twentieth century’,7 attained another, redoubled level of intensity.

post-war prosperity and modernity based upon new alliances with the American superpower, it was certainly an apt vehicle for Dean’s widely publicised adventures.54

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As a white American woman, Dean brought Australians a refreshing and exciting vision of the country through the eyes of the American superpower. Her ‘authentic’ performance of a tribal youth Initiate, understood to be based on her actual attendance at secret Aboriginal spiritual performances, gave Australian audiences a kaleidoscopic reflection of the contemporary world and their place in it. She was an ‘insider/outside’, to draw on the work of Paul Gilroy, in making a rather different argument, that the study of national histories and cultures encompasses the hybrid and transnational, and this complex positionality depended entirely upon the physicality of her moving body, as white, female, American and modern. Yet this very physicality appeared as something that could be ultimately and completely transcended, at least by a remarkable individual.

It was not easy for any of her dancers, modern or classical, to accept the ‘wide reaching’ of Aboriginal movement, as Dean would recount:

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body of signifying marks of indigeneity – instead she could don the ‘costume’ she chose. Her mobility, even in contrast to white Australian women of the time – ‘hemmed in by whiteness and suburban domesticity’ or, alternatively, fixed and isolated on remote outback stations – was dramatised in the production of the performance and the performance itself.

The contrast with the Indigenous people whom she represented was made starkly. If the prospect of an Aboriginal woman’s travelling the world performing for admiring audiences was, literally, outlandish at the time, the prospect of an Aboriginal male elder putting in an appearance for the Royal performance in Sydney was not beyond Dean’s imagination. But Dean’s request that the Pintupi elder, Nosepeg (Tjupurrula Nosepeg Tjunkata) – who had hosted their attendance at the initiation ceremonies at Haasts Bluff – be allowed to come to Sydney in order to appear on stage as the Premier of the ballet was staunchly opposed by the Acting Administrator of the Northern Territory, R. S. Leydin. He was outraged that the couple had published photographs taken at Yuendumu of secret ceremonies in a promotional article – this ‘violation of the trust’ having been brought to his attention by the Yuendumu superintendent who had persuaded the people there to agree to the photographs being taken – and felt his ‘prestige with the natives’ to be threatened. With Leydin asserting that the ‘only interest of Mr and Mrs Carell in the aborigines is to obtain some personal gain’, the performance had to proceed without Nosepeg, whose own wishes on the matter were not sought at all. Leydin’s assessment of Dean’s and Carell’s commercial savvy in contrast to Nosepeg’s guileless docility – he ‘will not be unduly disappointed’, Leydin wrote, ‘He is a semi-nomadic native and he has most likely forgotten it was suggested that he go to Sydney’ – might be read, also, as an expression of the authorities’ fear of the impact of transnational commercialisation on the Aboriginal people whom they sought to control. Even if the authorities were not able to control the mobility of the likes of Beth Dean to the extent that they might have desired, they could and did limit the freedom of the ‘nomadic’ Indigenous people.

In the existing scholarship on Dean and Corroboree, the tendency is to frame analysis in the bounds of the nation, as if Dean’s nationality and even gender were mere incidentals. Yet the transnational and global networks that shaped her career, brought her to Australia, provided her with the opportunities to go into the desert to meet Aboriginal dancers, were central to the success of her transgressive performance of Aboriginality. It was her almost mystical bodily transformation, combined with her physical journey into the largely unknown and mysterious central Australian desert, that made Dean’s performance so well received. It is ironic, certainly, that the ballet Corroboree, so warmly embraced as being authentically Australian, should have been such a transnational construction. In fact, Corroboree was predicated and contingent upon the global networks that opened up to women body of signifying marks of indigeneity – instead she could don the ‘costume’ she chose. Her mobility, even in contrast to white Australian women of the time – ‘hemmed in by whiteness and suburban domesticity’ or, alternatively, fixed and isolated on remote outback stations – was dramatised in the production of the performance and the performance itself.

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such as Dean in the post-war period — networks through which representations of the ‘primitive’ were being eagerly constructed, circulated and consumed by modern, urban, white women. Despite being represented as a spectacle of nationhood, Beth Dean’s Corroboree of 1954 is a testament rather to the opportunities for privileged white women that opened in a globalising post-war world, to reach out to touch the infinity of a far horizon.

NOTES
1 This article has benefited from feedback provided to two anonymous reviewers and by my colleague Lisa Feathertone; useful discussions with choreographers Meg Abbie Denton in Adelaide and Barbara Nimmo in Melbourne, research advice on Charles P. Mountford provided by Martin Thomas, and the invaluable assistance of Marie Alcorn, archivist of the Dean–Carell Collection at the Mitchell Library, Sydney. Research was carried out under the auspices of a Council of State Libraries Honourary Fellowship.


7 Haebich and Taylor 74; see also Haebich 335.

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10 Colin Simpson, Adam in Orbit (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1951), in Burridge 60.

11 Beth Dean, oral history interview with Hazel de Berg, 4 December 1975, transcript (hereafter de Berg interview) Hazel de Berg Collection, DeB 902, National Library of Australia, Canberra; see also Haskins, ‘Dancing in the Dust’ 65.

15 Dean’s research notebooks, where she compiled her original observations, are held in the Mitchell Library, ‘Series 05: Beth Dean and Victor Carell research notes and working papers, 1904–1985’, BDVC PPS – ML MSS 7804/33. Denton’s labanotation of the ballet, made in 1944, is available in the National Library of Australia at MS 9469.


25 De Berg interview.


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TOUCH THE INFINITY OF A FAR HORIZON


33 “From Primitive to Ballet”, see also Dean and Carell, Dust for the Dancers 1–2.

35 Dean and Carell, Dust for the Dancers 1; “From Primitive to Ballet”.

37 Letter, Haskell to Mountford (8 February [1945]) enclosed Mountford diaries, Vol. II.


43 “From Primitive to Ballet”.


49 De Berg interview.


52 'Permit to Enter and Be Upon an Aboriginal Reserve' (14 July 1953): BDVC PPS – ML MSS 7804/24.
53 ‘From Primitive to Ballet’. see also Dean and Carell, Dust for the Dancers 1–2.

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67 De Berg interview.


70 ‘Permit to Enter and Be Upon an Aboriginal Reserve’ (14 July 1953): BDVC PPS – ML MSS 7804/24.
71 ‘From Primitive to Ballet’. see also Dean and Carell, Dust for the Dancers 1–2.

72 First Holden Model
University Press, 2009) 202; Don Loffler,

73 A Concise History of Australia
Cambridge University Press, 2009) 202; Don Loffler,

74 ‘From Primitive to Ballet’. see also Dean and Carell,

75 Tracking the Nation

76 Subjects: Gender, Mobility, and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009) 5–6.

77 First Holden Model
University Press, 2009) 202; Don Loffler,

78 Tracking the Nation

79 Tracking the Nation

80 Tracking the Nation

81 Tracking the Nation

82 Tracking the Nation
58 Clarsen 121.
60 Dean and Carell, Twin Journey 146.
63 Haebich 325.
64 Haskins, ‘Dancing in the Dust’ 66.
65 See Riddett 57.

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