Pan-Indigenous encounter in the 1950s: “Ethnic Dancer” Beth Dean

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Abstract

From 1950, ‘ethnic dancer’ Beth Dean made her living on a lecture demonstration touring circuit of the dance traditions of Australia, New Zealand, the Cook Islands and North America. To assert her expertise, she claimed to have studied Maori and Australian Aboriginal cultures for a number of years. This paper will investigate how Dean’s didactic performances drew on American traditions of ethnic dance to present apparently authoritative representations of Indigenous cultures, supported by Adult Education Boards in NSW, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia and national arts organisations. I argue that Dean exploited the symbolic potential of ‘corroboree’ as a performance of intercultural communication to establish her authority to speak about and perform Aboriginal dance.
The American choreographer and dancer Beth Dean is known to Australian cultural historians for her high profile ballet *Corroboree* performed to a musical score by John Antill for the visit of Queen Elizabeth II in 1954. To paraphrase Victoria Haskins, *Corroboree* was an event in which a young American dancer performed Australian Aboriginal culture for another young English woman (Queen Elizabeth) as an allegory for Australian nationhood.¹ Though *Corroboree* established Dean’s reputation as a choreographer and was cited for the remainder of her career as a defining professional moment, it was not the event that established her as an expert in Aboriginal dance. This expertise had been established in the four years preceding *Corroboree*, when Dean toured Australia, with side trips to Britain, Italy, Canada and the US with her demonstrations of Indigenous dances.² The attendance by the Arts Council of Australia’s NSW President Dorothy Helmrich at one of these shows led to an invitation for Dean to choreograph Antill’s ballet for the gala performance.³ The 1954 *Corroboree* was not a single moment in Dean’s career, but was rather a high point in a career trajectory she had been working towards since the mid-1940s. Dean’s promotion of Aboriginal dance both drew attention to the worth of the performance practices of Aboriginal people across central Australia and the north, and also carved a space in the Australian cultural landscape for Dean as a performer, creator, and cultural/political voice, and for the rest of her life, as an expert in non Euro-American dance traditions.

In far-reaching tours between 1950 and 1954, but continuing into the 1960s, Dean and her husband Victor Carell staged performances, which they framed as opportunities for audiences to encounter Indigenous cultures. Though images and accounts of the performances would now be easy to dismiss as kitsch, they functioned in a cultural currency that traded Aboriginal
arts in a variety of political and economic ways. For Dean, the claim to expertise in Aboriginal dance facilitated her transition from musical theatre performer and novelty American personality to a national authority on dance practice and to an extent, on Aboriginal cultural practice. Dean’s performances echo within historical and ongoing meanings of the ‘corroboree’ in Australian cultures – separated from its ceremonial context connoting religious knowledge, symbolism and myth, and denoting a wide variety of public performances of song and dance that bring a variety of disparate groups together. In Paul Carter’s framing of ‘corroboree’, performative cross-cultural interactions have acted as an attempt to articulate the ‘disputed spaces occupied by Aborigines and Europeans’. As Carter suggests, the corroboree came to operate as a ‘transitional object, a specially manufactured symbolic event’ whose cross-cultural communication articulated a response to white invasion. Some European Australians embraced the symbolic currency of this performative response, manipulating it to their own political ends. Like the performances Carter describes, Dean’s touring shows intervened in the navigation of disputed spaces, but also employed the art of corroboree as a means of settling territory, in a country, new to her, in which she had identified a professional niche that she could occupy. In arguing for the artistic worth of Aboriginal dance and music, and seeking to draw the inspiration gained from it into a modern dance space, Dean occupied this disputed space, while also claiming it as new territory discovered by her.

Beth Dean and ‘Dances of the World’

Beth Dean was born in Denver, Colorado and first came to Australia in the late 1940s, while performing in the musical Annie Get your Gun by Irving Berlin. In Annie Get Your Gun, Dean was
Evie Hayes’ understudy for Annie, a character loosely based on the 19th century American sharpshooter Annie Oakley, who toured as a performer in Wild West Shows, showcasing her shooting skills and caricaturing American colonial history in Cowboy and Indian scenes. These shows included a command performance for Queen Victoria. In a real life imitation of art, ballerina Beth Dean left Annie Get Your Gun to establish her own touring career as a dancer in variety shows which showcased “ethnic dance” including Native American dances. Her command performance for the youthful Queen Elizabeth II, came with Corroboree. Also a cast member of the show, Victor Carell was an Australian baritone, whom Dean had married in 1944 after they met performing in The Waltz King in Hollywood. Theirs was a formidable entertainer partnership which endured until Carell’s death in 2001 and one in which Dean played the prima ballerina role while Carell acted as her manager, backup instrumentalist, accompanist, composer, stage manager and director.

When Dean and Carell first staged their shows in 1950, they put together a variety program showcasing dances and songs from many regions of the world and historical periods. These included dances to the music of Bach; the songs of other Baroque composers such as Scarlatti and Pergolesi; concert arias by Mozart and Mendelssohn; traditional 17th century English dances; Anglo-Celtic traditional music; flamenco dancing; reconstructions (from images) of 15th-16th century Aztec dances; Native American dances; American Negro spirituals with accompanying choreography; Maori traditional dances; and Australian Aboriginal dances performed to songs composed by Alfred and Mirrie Hill and Victor Carell based on legends collected by the anthropologist C. P. Mountford (See Figure 1).
Figure 1: Program for performance of Beth Dean, Victor Carell and Eric Mitchell with the Korumburra Choral Society for the Council of Adult Education 10 October 1950. Beth Dean and Victor Carell Papers MLMSS 7804/8/3, State Library of NSW.

Though Australian Aboriginal music and dance formed a small part of the programs, the songs performed were explained in disproportionate detail in the program notes, with attributions to Mountford and several paragraphs outlining the stories behind the dances and songs. By 1952, when the show had been touring for two years, the programme increasingly focused on demonstrations of Australian Aboriginal songs, dances, musical instruments and sacred objects alongside “authentic Maori dances”. By now, the Aboriginal material occupied the full second half of the programs, while the first half took a pan-Indigenous sweep across the dances and music of Native Americans, Maori and Mexican traditions (see Figure 2). This shift away from traditional ballet and music of the western art music tradition may have been a response to reviews which consistently praised Dean’s Indigenous dances and dismissed her uninspired renditions of European traditions.⁷

Figure 2: Programme for performance of Beth Dean, Victor Carell and Dory Stern at the Sydney Mercury Theatre 29 & 31 October 1952 from Beth Dean and Victor Carell Papers MLMSS 7804/8/3, State Library of NSW.
In the programs shown in both Figures 1 and 2, the sacred origins of Dean and Carell’s performances were emphasised, sometimes explicitly as men’s sacred dances. Dean emphasised that she was probably the only woman in the world to perform these. Dean and Carell also insistently asserted the authenticity of their costuming and musical instruments, noting, “all costumes are authentic”.

The programming of the concerts was certainly bizarre, and not only to current sensibilities – promotional material and press reviews from the time suggest that the combination of different historical and national traditions in a show aiming at authenticity and serious dance and music was peculiar for many of the audiences and critics who watched the shows in the early 1950s as well. One reviewer wrote “Perhaps it could be described as a variety program of the highest quality... and it is certain that Geelong will not see such an unusual and well-arranged show for some time to come”. 8 In a 1952 article about their show, Dean was quoted as saying “The audience expected a third rate vaudeville show and were inclined to resent our act at first. However the spirit and fire of the genuine tribal ritual won them over”. 9

Indeed, the hybrid demonstrations of Australian Aboriginal culture by an American dancer had an enduring appeal to the general public. This appeal was evidenced by the hundreds of dance performances and lecture-demonstrations given by Dean in the 1950s. Her performances were supported by the major arts institutions prior to the advent of the Australia Council, including the Arts Council of Australia and Adult Education Boards across the country. They were also staged at the American Museum of Natural History, Denver Museum of Natural History, and several anthropological societies, universities and major theatres in the US and Europe. Dean
received invitations to talk from benevolent organisations such as Quota International and Rotary, prestigious Sydney private schools, public libraries, and women’s organisations like the Sydney University women’s union and Women’s International Zionist Organization.\textsuperscript{10}

In the 1950s and 60s, Dean’s shows were in great demand, even if in later years, Australian national cultural organisations like the Australian Ballet and Elizabethan Theatre Trust were reluctant to reproduce her hybrid creations. This public demand and institutional support also coexisted with reprimands from individuals with broad knowledge about, and sensitivity to cultural protocols in Aboriginal societies. Dean was called to account for her transgressions of these protocols by powerful individuals including the Administrator of the Northern Territory, the Minister for Territories, Paul Hasluck, anthropologist T.G.H. Strehlow, poet and writer Roland Robinson and Adult Education Director and Egyptologist Leslie Greener, if not in her touring performances then for her publication of secret photographs and stories and staging of large-scale ballets.\textsuperscript{11} And yet as a freelance touring performer, amateur ethnologist and artiste, she had little accountability to any of these, let alone to the Aboriginal people who owned the stories, dances and music used in the performances.

\textbf{A Tradition of Ethnic Dance}

International companies of dancers frequently toured with financial and marketing support of the Arts Council of Australia, Elizabethan Theatre Trust and Adult Education Board in the 1950s and 1960s. Groups such as the Kalakshetra Indian dance troupe, Alvin Ailey’s dance theatre and Katherine Dunham’s Dance Troupe all carried out major tours of Australian cities in the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{12} A small number of performers à la Dean also toured variety shows of a similar
flavour in the same period, including dancers like Latvian Vija Vētra who performed Western European, Indian and Australian Aboriginal dances (including her own choreography to movements of Antill’s *Corroboree* in a small number of concerts in 1962 and 1963), and Margaret Walker’s Unity Dance Group who incorporated stories of the treatment of Aboriginal people in their left-wing dance productions and lectures on the history of dance in the early 1950s.\(^{13}\) While Dean’s ‘ethnic dance’ demonstrations existed alongside a range of modern dance practices in Australia, she did not become an integrated part of Australian practices.

Though Dean would later pass judgement on the full range of Australian dance theatre in her role as dance critic for the *Sydney Morning Herald* (1965-1972), in her choreographic and performance practice, she saw herself as continuing the American tradition of ethnic dance. Among Dean’s papers in the State Library of NSW are ‘ethnic dance’ family trees which indicate a lineage, to which Dean saw herself as belonging.\(^{14}\) In Dean’s rendition of this lineage, she listed Ruth St. Denis as the first “ethnic dancer”. White Americans, St. Denis and Ted Shawn, the mother and father of the ethnic dance tradition, founded the Denishawn dance company in 1915 and were accompanied in Dean’s family tree by their musical director Louis Horst. Dean also listed “ethnic leaders”, African-Americans Pearl Primus and Donald McKayle. In her 1966 book, dancers including Isadora Duncan, St. Denis, Shawn, Ailey, Primus, Dunham and Martha Graham from the American ‘ethnic dance’ tradition were described as constituting a larger tradition.\(^{15}\) Modern dance in Australia had also been influenced by dances from the Orient well before Dean began her Australian performances, however, Dean seems not to have had much knowledge of the Australian tradition that included dancer/choreographers like Louisa Lightfoot, and Joan Henry and Joan Joske’s Orientalist dances of the 1930s.\(^{16}\)
More comprehensive accounts of American dance than Dean’s family tree would also include dancers such as Maud Allan and Loïs Fuller (along with Isadora Duncan) – all white North American dancers whose careers were made in Europe through orientalist and exoticised performances of dance from the near and far east. But Dean’s performances followed most closely in the tradition of St. Denis and Shawn, who, like Dean, staged lecture demonstrations, dressed in full costume and crafted a narrative that to engage with modern dance, one had to engage with the origins of dance – namely its “primitive” and non-European roots. The native American dances that formed part of Dean’s programs in Australia, England, New Zealand and Italy (but not in north America) seem to be a direct tribute to St. Denis and Shawn who had been staging similar solo performances during the decades of Dean’s childhood and adolescence (see Figures 3-5). St. Denis and Shawn also sought to learn dances from distant countries, and became famous for their Indian and Japanese dance styles.

INSERT Figures 3-5

Figure 3: Beth Dean promotional photograph in costume for Aboriginal dances (1953), MLMSS 7804_8_3, SLNSW.

St. Denis and Shawn’s successors such as Martha Graham, Lester Horton and La Meri subsequently earned fame for ethnic dance performances in the 1930s and 1940s. La Meri (Russell Meriwether Hughes) coined the term “ethnic dance” in the 1940s and toured for several decades as an ethnic dancer specialising in Spanish and Indian dance styles, but also venturing into Australian Aboriginal dance. Though Beth Dean was her contemporary, Dean is never mentioned in La Meri’s books about the ethnic dance tradition, nor in more recently published histories of ethnic dance by scholars.¹⁹ Neither fully part of the American, nor the Australian traditions, Dean occupied a rogue position in the recent history of modern dance.

By the end of the 1940s, white American modern dance creators’ staging of culturally foreign dance performances was well and truly out of fashion, even if some of the steps, style and movement frameworks would continue to influence modern dancers for decades to come. “Ethnic dance” performances moved off the concert stage and into museums and community halls. After 1949, there was no longer a place on the modern American concert stage for white dancers to dress up in the costume of brown and black dancers and perform their dances, a practice which dance historian Susan Manning terms “metaphorical minstrelsy”.²⁰ African-American dancers who drew on their cultural roots in Africa and the Caribbean continued to have a place on the concert stage, if an ambivalent relationship with notions of the modern. Dance performances by African-American dancers Pearl Primus, Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, Asadata Dafora and Donald McKayle continued well beyond the 1940s.²¹

Given the wealth of creative outputs that were deeply embedded in and engaged with American racial and class politics, such as performances by Dunham, McKayle and their
contemporaries, it is no surprise that Dean and Carell’s comparatively culturally isolated and politically naïve dance shows received some pushback from the modern dance establishment in the US. Dean and Carell’s attempts to choreograph a ballet to the score of Corroboree in New York in 1952 went nowhere, and their correspondence with Trudy Goth, founder of the modern dance company Choreographers’ Workshop suggest that their assumption that white dancers would wear black body stockings – a kind of full-body blackface – were irksome to progressive American sensibilities. Goth replied to their enquiries “My idea would be to have the accessories of costuming sent over here and do it with perhaps a colored cast instead of these horrible black tights I see the people wearing in the photos I was shown”. When Corroboree was eventually staged in Australia rather than the US, the cast wore blackface and brown body stockings not very different to the black ones referred to by Goth, based on the designs created by William Constable for Rex Reid’s 1951 production. Indeed, the subtleties of Goth’s objection to blackface seem to have been lost on Dean, who 16 years later, in 1968, insisted on the faces of Mexican dancers being painted for productions of her “Aboriginal” ballet Kudaitcha. As she put it “nothing could be more ludicrous than dancers with complete [costumed] Australian Aboriginal bodies and Mexican unmade-up faces.”

Dean’s emergence from the American tradition of ethnic dance is important, because her outsider status qualified the eccentricity of what she was doing in Australia; she was described in almost every promo, article and review as an “American dancer”. Significantly, Dean emigrated away from an American dance scene in which ethnicity and cultural heritage increasingly determined the appropriateness of portrayals of cultural authenticity. In Australia, she emerged, indebted to the American tradition, and yet contrary (if not oblivious) to its
direction in the 1950s, and joined a handful of other Australians and new arrivals parading foreign cultural traditions to Australian audiences.\textsuperscript{25}

Though the stage shows and lecture demonstrations of La Meri, Beth Dean and their contemporaries are reminiscent of the vaudeville shows of modern dance’s very recent history, Dean was diligent in distancing the ethnographically-worthwhile work (in her own conception) that her shows were doing, from any kind of frivolous entertainment. In this, she followed in the steps of Pearl Primus, whose lecture-demonstrations about African dance aimed to be “exact, ethnic, and educative”.\textsuperscript{26} Dean, consistently reiterated the educative intention of her shows in media interviews, in the text of the lectures themselves, and in the circuits she targeted for her performances. She aimed not just to educate but also to be authentic, and to convince her audience of the authenticity of her performances.

**Ethnography and Authenticity**

Though Dean’s choreography for *Corroboree* explicitly designated it as modern dance inspired by the dance steps of Central Australian Aboriginal dancers, her touring shows made more direct claims to authentic representation of Aboriginal cultures. Her perceived expertise in conveying Aboriginal dance traditions to a wider Australian audience, which subsequently led to the invitation to choreograph *Corroboree*, was established in these touring shows. *Corroboree’s* royal gala performances were a career-making success for Dean, and her collaboration with composer John Antill continued for decades afterwards, even if their subsequent works based on Aboriginal themes never hit the same highs of this initial one. The 1950s *Dances of the World* shows, and their claims to authenticity, were then, foundational for
establishing Dean as an expert in ‘ethnic dance’ and as a medium for transmitting Aboriginal cultural practice into the wider Australian cultural sphere. Her embodiment of the dancer of male secret/sacred dances, gleaned from the anthropological record, was a decisive step into the disputed space of colonial negotiations in the post-war Australian cultural landscape that transmitted to Australian audiences an authority to speak for Aboriginal people about their cultural traditions.

In media interviews and promotions for her lecture-demonstrations, Dean claimed to have dedicated years to research about Maori and Aboriginal cultures. In one interview from 1952, Dean stated “we spent four years among the Australian aboriginal people studying their songs... chants, and dances, which became more and more interesting as we came to understand them better.”27 In promotions for her tour with the Adult Education Board of Tasmania, also in 1952, Dean claimed to have “spent five years studying Maori culture in New Zealand, and that of the Aborigines in Australia” and moreover, that “Her work has been recognised by the Australian Government”.28 The years cited here encompass those in which Dean and Carell travelled with Annie Get Your Gun, during which Dean and Carell studied published anthropological accounts of Aboriginal cultures, and spent time, when Annie was in Adelaide, with Charles and Bessie Mountford as well as T. G. H. Strehlow.

This secondary research while on tour with Annie was the sole source of material for the Aboriginal dances performed in touring shows of the early 1950s, in spite of her claims to expertise and authenticity. Only after three years of these tours, and prompted by Helmhich’s invitation to choreograph Corroboree, did Dean and Carell make their first “expedition” into
Aboriginal communities in the dry season of 1953. Over an eight month period, they travelled through parts of Arnhem Land and Central Australia, staying mainly at station homesteads as the guests of white Station owners, or at Missions as the guests of Missionaries or the local Native Settlement Superintendent. They observed as many dance performances as they could gain access to, ranging from short demonstrations by individual dancers, to week-long boys’ initiation ceremonies, attended only in gender-appropriate parts by Dean, while Carell was permitted to witness entire men’s ceremonies. This subsequent fieldwork equipped Dean and Carell with a rich store of memories and sketches of Aboriginal dances along with the stories, legends and cultural context for their performance.

In her substantial reading about Aboriginal cultures, Dean had learnt about gender restrictions on certain kinds of ceremonies and the taboos that existed on women observing male sacred ceremonies (she does not seem to have read work by Phyllis Kaberry and others who discussed women’s ceremonies). On the basis of this knowledge, she boasted that since men’s sacred ceremonies were taboo to women, she was possibly the only woman in the world who could (or would) dance the material. As one journalist sensationally paraphrased:

When the men of Australia’s few remaining aboriginal tribes perform their sacred dances, no woman is permitted to watch. At one time death was the penalty for disobedience of this age-old tribal law. But one woman – a white woman and an American – not only knows many of the secrets of the aborigines’ dance ceremonies, but performs passages from them herself.29

It is likely that Dean exaggerated the extent to which her dances replicated sacred men’s dances. Though she had viewed some of C. P. Mountford’s films containing secret/sacred
material, the dances from the Yuendumu Initiation Ceremony that she later wrote about were seen only by her husband in 1953, as she was absent during the restricted parts of the ceremony along with the other women.\textsuperscript{30} Well before the 1953 trip, Dean and Carell had acquired a range of artefacts and musical instruments (likely from their friend Mountford’s extensive collection). Dean’s concert programs complemented the performances with demonstration of these authentic objects. A running order for one lecture indicates that Dean demonstrated a wooden \textit{tjurunga}, with the accompany text noting that she had been excluded from the party collecting the object she would hold and describe: “This sacred board was given to my husband at the time he visited the Snake rock but I... a woman, was not allowed to join them.”\textsuperscript{31}

In demonstrating Aboriginal dances and sacred objects, Dean aimed to raise the profile of cultural practices that had largely been ignored by non-Indigenous audiences beyond attendance at tourist corroborees. Dean also aimed to include Aboriginal dance practices into a larger narrative about the historical evolution of dance. In the lectures accompanying her performances, she sketched a lineage of dance practices that had led to modern dance and ballet of the twentieth century, a theoretical framework that she realised more fully in her 1966 book \textit{The Many Worlds of Dance}. Dean’s work in this area was part of larger practices of popular anthropology. Professional anthropology, established in Australia with the first Chair of Anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1926, had become increasingly characterised by arcane and unintelligible language preoccupied with purely technical matters such as increasingly complex representations of kinship networks.\textsuperscript{32} As Henrika Kuklick describes, after World War II “there remained a popular audience eager to learn from ethnography whether
humankind is naturally violent or peaceable, selfish or altruistic, egalitarian or hierarchical.”

Dean’s narrative of “ethnic dance” was strongly structured around concepts of social Darwinism, and the idea that so-called “primitive” dance might show us the origins of our own dance traditions:

To understand the sophisticated forms with which we are familiar in our own theatre, we have here sought out some of the roots of dance among the few so-called primitive people left on our globe. Through observing the primitive we can see the path of our own artistic development.”

Dean’s exploration of the origins of dance was ambitiously conceived as an exploration of the history of humanity, as she indicated in her frequently reiterated phrase “Dance is thought made manifest in movement and rhythm”. She cited the dance innovations and styles of Aboriginal and other so-called primitive dancers as the origins of modern (Euro/American) dance. This juxtaposition of modern interpretations of traditional dance practices with theorisation of the evolution of dance provoked comment from reviewers: “It was difficult to decide where anthropology left off and art began in Beth Dean’s recital”.34

The largest number of these shows were toured under the auspices of Adult Education. It is unclear how Dean and Carell first came to be invited to perform as part of Adult Education concerts, but their participation in Summer Schools spanned from 1950 until at least until 1955, by which time they had progressed from being guest performers to Official Hosts of the family summer school.35 Some of the aims of the Tasmanian Adult Education Board at the time of their tours were: “popularisation of science through simple practical research”; “Discussion group courses on subjects in demand: literature, appreciation of music... understanding painting,
drama, economics, world affairs, etc.”...  

Dean’s popular anthropology approach seems to have been a good fit with these programs, yet the uniqueness of what Dean and Carell were doing with their performances was remarked upon both in publicity brochures and reviews of their shows. Dean’s pan-Indigenous show was billed alongside dancers performing their own cultural traditions, for example Indian dancer Shivaram. In one of the early concerts “Dance and Song Around the World”, in 1950, the Council of Adult Education Council billed their show as “The most unusual programme C.A.E. has so far presented”, and the Tasmania tour was described as showing “Three unusual young people...” (the third was their accompanying pianist).  

In their programs and publicity materials, Dean and Carell fully embraced the didactic framework of Adult Education programs, embodying with enthusiasm and authority the role of resident cultural intermediaries.

Dean later ran a series of tutorials in Continuing Education at the University of Sydney in 1967, recording TV tutorials in 1969. Following those courses, she distributed questionnaires and kept some of the answer sheets. Her leading questions reveal the humanist aims of her teaching, as well as her aspiration to be the medium for revealing Aboriginal culture to wider Australia.

Q. Is there a greater possibility of relating yourself to these people and their culture – problems, environment, arts – because you have ‘seen’ them through their dance arts?

A. Yes I think so, because having seem them through their dance arts, one sees so much that is primitive in oneself

Q. If you find empathy with them now, did you ever before?
A. No – They were a race apart although so close to us, we have had Negro, Spanish, Russian
many artists from other countries here on numerous occasions, only once a Company of
Aborigines. This was the beginning of finding the beginning of an empathy with them.”  

Claiming Disputed Territory

Dean’s touring career was established at a time when Aboriginal people had limited freedom to
tavel outside of specified areas, were barred from full economic participation and full
citizenship rights. Similar restrictions on the people of the other colonised nations whose
dances Dean performed meant that she could remain distant from those to whom the dances
belonged, and untroubled by the ethical problems of her artform. This also meant that Dean’s
authority to speak for Aboriginal culture was able to go largely unchallenged by those with a
greater depth of knowledge, experience and ownership of the performance traditions.

Dean and Carell’s programming was careful to avoid presenting specific cultural products back
to the people to whom they belonged. In North America, Dean performed no native American
dances, in New Zealand, no Maori dances, and yet her reputation in Australia was founded on
her performance of Australian Aboriginal dances (especially those derived from men’s initiation
ceremonies). Revealingly however, when Dean staged performances in the Northern Territory’s
Alice Springs and Darwin in 1953, she omitted the Aboriginal dance and music numbers that
were otherwise standard on her Australian touring programs. Bringing Aboriginal dance to
Darwin, asserted Carell, would be like “bringing coals [sic] to Newcastle”.  

Their avoidance of performing dances based on recordings made in central Australia while in the region suggests
some sensitivity to their transgression of cultural protocols. It also points to pervasive notions
of Aboriginal culture as being absent from the populated centres on the East and Southern Coast of Australia, and discoverable only in the Centre – a kind of territory apart, which, from the perspective of many coastal dwellers, might as well have been a foreign country. Australia’s Indigenous character was to be found in its vast centre, as far away as possible from its Europeanised urban centres.

By bringing the culture of Australia’s authentic Indigenous centre to the coastal settlements, Dean’s demonstrations aimed to promote the recognition of Aboriginal people as rich in cultural, historical and ecological knowledge. She conceptualised these efforts as attempts to counteract the apparent indifference of the non-Indigenous Australian populace to the traditions of the land that they and their ancestors had settled. Dean’s insistence that Aboriginal music, dance and legend were noble, worthwhile, intelligent and worthy of serious artistic attention was a counterpoint to the cultural cringe of Australians who looked beyond Australia’s borders for artistic inspiration. But at the same time, her performances were not grounded in serious engagement with Aboriginal cultures. Although in New Zealand, she took trouble to learn Maori dance through the proper channels, and retained lifelong relationships with her dance mentors there, her appropriation of Australian Aboriginal dance techniques and traditions was opportunistic and unsystematic.

In Australia, the ultimate aim of establishing a performance career as an expert in the dance practices of indigenous peoples stood in place of any genuine engagement with living Aboriginal people or ongoing cultural traditions. As a displaced American determined to carve her place in the Australian cultural sphere, Dean quickly took on the practices of those whose
distinctiveness from her own cultural background marked them as exotically Australian. She then juxtaposed, and later integrated, these practices into her American modern ethnic dance tradition. In the terms of Nicholas Thomas and Ian McLean, historians of settler colonial arts, Dean articulated the fate of the displaced settler colonial, who longs for the link to her own heritage while at the same time longing for indigenisation that can never be hers.41 As an American in Australia, Dean longed for indigenisation in a new country rather than the one in which she was raised. She both leveraged her outsider status and claimed insider knowledge by drawing on American dance traditions to create an encounter narrative with Australian Aboriginal dance for non-Indigenous Australian audiences.

In her far-flung regional tours, Dean gave non-Indigenous Australian and international audiences an opportunity to encounter Aboriginal cultures up close with “the only woman in the world to have performed the sacred dances”.42 Engagement with Aboriginal people was overlooked not only by Dean as the presenter of this material, but also by her audiences, who could satisfy their curiosity about the historical and ongoing traditions of the Australian continent through the expertise of an American dancer, in a familiar cultural vocabulary. Placed alongside other Indigenous dances of the world, Aboriginal culture was diffused into a pan-Indigenous wash of culture that failed to comprehend the specificity of the cultural traditions of Australians’ history and present. Dean successfully manipulated the symbolic potential of intercultural corroboree to create a localised Australian identity. While imbuing her practice with authority and expertise, she occupied some of the disputed space of non-Indigenous and Aboriginal territories.
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Notes


2 Anna Haebich’s work has played an important role in establishing the ballet within a history of assimilation-era appropriations of aboriginality, and she acknowledges Dean’s prior tours in her book Anna Haebich, Spinning the Dream: Assimilation in Australia 1950-1970 (North Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2007), 308-9, 324-5.


4 David Horton, ed. The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander History, Society and Culture (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1994), 233-34.


10 Invitations are contained in MLMSS 7804/1/10 Beth Dean: correspondence concerning talks, lectures and tutorials, 1951-1988, Dean Papers.

didacticism played down these performances. A 1960 friendly, but not intimate, letter from Vētra to Dean exists in Dean's papers: MLMSS 7804/2/2 Beth Dean: general correspondence, Undated; 1945-1991, SLNSW; MS 8495, Boxes 11-13, Papers of Margaret Walker, 1938-1991, NLA.

14 Ethnic Dance Genealogy is in folder MLMSS 7804/2/2 Beth Dean: general correspondence, Undated; 1945-1991.
17 Duncan is included in Dean's *The Many Worlds of Dance* (1966) as a pioneer who searched for a new way to speak in dance, p. 102. Fuller was an American whose reputation was largely established in France which she found more receptive to her creations, and Allan, a Canadian-born, Californian-raised, German-educated dancer, whose career was based in Europe with tours back to the US and beyond.
20 ‘metaphorical minstrelsy’ indicates that the dancers engaged not in impersonation, but rather presented an abstraction or personification of other cultures. Susan Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 9.
21 Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*.
22 Susan Manning categorises dance trends in the US in the 1930s and 40s in three streams: modern dance, leftist dance and negro dance. The Marxist concern with the rights of African-Americans in this period meant that there were significant crossovers in these streams, and that racialised dance was fundamentally politicised in the US. Manning, *Modern Dance, Negro Dance*. The parallel in Australian dance can be seen in Margaret Walker’s Unity Dance Group in the early 1950s.
23 Trudy Goth to Beth Dean 21 November 1952, MLMSS 7804/3/5 Beth Dean and Victor Carell: Correspondence: Corroboree, 1952, Dean Papers.
25 See Vetra, Vija (dancer): programs and related material collected by the National Library of Australia - Ephemera (PROMPT). At least one white Australian woman performed Aboriginal dances in public: Sandra Holmes' renderings of Aboriginal women's dances in Perth in 1956 are documented in her book. I am grateful to Ian McLean for alerting me to these performances. Sandra Le Brun Holmes, *Faces in the Sun: Outback Journeys* (Ringwood, Vic: Viking, 1999), 53.
26 The theatre management of Primus' shows often insisted that the drama should be played up and the didacticism played down, but Primus later qualified and worked as an anthropologist in West Africa. Richard C. Green, "(up)Staging the Primitive: Pearl Primus and 'the Negro Problem' in American Dance," in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, ed. Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 117.

28 Announcement of Dean and Carell’s tour for the Adult Education Board of Tasmania 7 November-12 December 1952 in MLMSS 7804/47/1 Beth Dean: Literary Manuscripts: ‘Articles not Published’, 1946-1967, Dean Papers.

29 “From Primitive to Ballet” People 12 August 1953, 17-19. Clipping in MLMSS 7804/24/2 Subject file: Research trip – Central Australia, 1949-1953, Dean Papers. Dean also states explicitly in this article that she watched films of Mountford’s that no woman is permitted to see (p19). In another article Mountford’s films are described as being “of inestimable value in revealing to the Carells dances which they would personally never have been able to see: sacred and secret dances forbidden to women and shown only to men who have been initiated into the tribe”. F. K. Manzie “World to See” The Australasian Post 27 July 1950, 12-13. MLMSS 7804/8/5 Subject File: Australian tour, 1950-1951, Dean Papers.

30 Victoria Haskins has demonstrated Dean’s obfuscation of her observance of cultural protocols by claiming to have been only swept up in the rush of women leaving the scene, rather than having been compelled to leave by the ceremony owners. Victoria Haskins, "Beth Dean and the Transnational Circulation of Aboriginal Dance Culture: Gender, Authority and C. P. Mountford," in Circulating Cultures: Exchanges of Australian Indigenous Music, Dance and Media, ed. Amanda Harris (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 34.

31 “Running order of programme for Beth Dean” [no event or date specified]. MLMSS 7804/47/2: Beth Dean Literary Manuscripts: ‘Lectures Beth’, Dean Papers.


34 Moses, John “Symbolism in Dancing of Beth Dean” The Sun, 30 October 1952.


38 MLMSS 7804/32/3 Subject File: WEA lectures, 1967, Dean Papers.


40 See Lesley Head, Second Nature: The History and Implications of Australia as Aboriginal Landscape (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 80.
