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Dancing in the gap

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In 2008, Kevin Rudd, then the Prime Minister of Australia, made a historic apology to the Stolen Generations, those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were forcibly removed from their families by government agents in the name of assimilation. This government policy extended approximately from the late 1800s to the late 1960s. In response to the apology, and as a step to address the legacy of the government’s actions for First Nations Australians, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) announced six official targets to ‘close the gap’ between Indigenous and non-Indigenous wellbeing and disadvantage in Australia. Tragically, under successive governments, the gaps have continued their vast gaping indication of inequality and the legacy of past atrocities.

In 2017 the current Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced, in the annual Closing the Gap report statement to parliament, that targets were not being met to close the gap in multiple areas including Indigenous child mortality, Indigenous school attendance, and Indigenous literacy and numeracy, nor gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous life expectancy, employment, and incarceration rates (Australian Government 2017).

To these disturbing statistical gaps in wellbeing, which I propose haunt the experience of nationhood for all Australians, I also add gaps in officially acknowledged histories of colonial contact, frequently featuring disputes over acknowledgement of colonial violence. These disputes, which have been known as The History Wars, have extended to the nature of government-acknowledged histories in school curricula and exhibited in the National Museum. However, more broadly the history wars expose gaps in understanding how it is to live with the moral burden of past violence in the present narratives we tell about ourselves as a nation.

This chapter seeks to touch on how some First Nations dance artists, at times in collaboration with artists of settler and/or immigrant descent, are working within and through these gaps to activate them as troubled yet dynamic spaces of cultural renewal. Such processes can produce new forms of contemporary dance whose political force speaks back to forms of authority which attempt to confine and define narratives of Australia’s past, present, and its future.

In particular, I draw on the practice of Marrugeku, an intercultural dance theatre company based in Broome, in the remote Kimberley region, in the far north of Western Australia. I am the co-director of Marrugeku, in my role as a director and dramaturg of settler (Scottish, Irish, and English) descent. I lead the company with Yawuru choreographer and dancer Dalisa Pigram, we have worked together for 24 years, collaborating with a diverse range of local, national, and international artists to create contemporary intercultural performance in remote northern Australian communities. The company creates its touring productions and research laboratories through and within the values and responsibilities of the First Nations communities in which we work. In Broome, our choreographic practice and research
takes place on the land of the Yawuru people and we acknowledge their enduring custodianship through more than a century of colonisation and government control.

In Western Australia Indigenous prisoners represent 38% of those incarcerated, yet make up only 3.1% of the population of the state. The Kimberley region is home to 34 Indigenous language groups. Here suicide rates are some of the highest in the world, an Indigenous Australian young man is almost seven times as likely to take his own life than a non-Indigenous Australian. Bunuba leader June Oscar, a friend and advisor to Marrugeku and current Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, asked recently: ‘Can we look our children in the eyes and explain that this is their future when statistically it is more likely that an Aboriginal child will go to jail than achieve a degree in higher education?’ (2016).

The Australian Government has taken steps to address social dysfunction in remote First Nations communities through heavy-handed top-down measures, including the controversial Intervention, initiated in 2007 by conservative Prime Minister John Howard and continued through successive administrations. Debates over control of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s lives versus self-determination and cultural leadership have polarised opinion and, as Waanyi novelist and academic Alexis Wright has pointed out, these debates created an endless stream of voices of non-Indigenous people expounding on the detail of Aboriginal people’s lives in remote communities (Wright 2016):

This is the storytelling war of bullies and you need to know how to fight in the ring, know how to fight the strategy of story-making from people who impersonalise other people’s sufferings, and again use key words such as Intervention to publicly erase the high level of emotional turmoil that suffocates Aboriginal people’s ability to respond, and their ability to be heard.

(2016)

Within these painful debates the question of who tells the story, as Wright has said, and the role of storytelling itself is critical. The position of First Nations artists to ‘fight in the ring’ (Wright, earlier) to express counter-narratives to the complex manoeuvring of government while enduring the impacts and effects of the ongoing colonial project in their own communities, requires fierce imagination alongside careful cultural negotiation.

Yawuru lawman Patrick Dodson, cultural advisor to Marrugeku and current Senator of Western Australia, does not see self-determination and renewal of cultural values as an either/or situation with the end to violence in remote communities, stating: ‘contemporary indigenous nations throughout Australia whose people want liberation from material deprivation, sickness and social disorder, but at the same time to defend what is most important to them – their culture and identity’ (2009). Dodson positions the role of ongoing cultural recovery and maintenance as a critical step out of dysfunction and highlights the nexus between the situation these communities find themselves in and the policies imposed upon them by governments, which he has described as: ‘policies grounded in a philosophy of institutional control. Top-down measures which seek to address the behaviour of people who are vulnerable breeds a situation of hopelessness, dependency, and destabilisation in communities’ (Dodson 2017).

In 2017, while addressing the annual ‘Closing the Gap’ report statement to Parliament, Dodson reiterated concern for Australia’s ongoing resistance to implementing the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Howard government refused to become a signatory of the Declaration in 2007, the same year that The Intervention was launched, demonstrating linked regressive acts of control and subjugation. Dodson went on to state:

Implementing the declaration is a necessary pre-condition for governments to close the gap of Indigenous disadvantage and to reset relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and to build trust in order to work together to overcome past trauma and build a more reconciled future.

(Dodson 2017)
Intercultural dance theatre practice can play a crucial role in the work of resetting relations between First Nations Australians and those of settler and immigrant descent, by reorienting the narratives we tell about ourselves as a nation. In Marrugeku, we have sought to foster new pathways to intercultural contemporary dance by capturing the forces which haunt these painful debates and disjunctions in national narratives in order to speak directly to a nation where a double standard of health and wellbeing exists for its Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens. Along the way, we have asked ourselves what intercultural transactions can support new choreographic and dramaturgical poetics to emerge from conceptual acts of reciprocity, along with a moral engagement that promotes recuperation? This has led dance artists within Marrugeku’s artistic and cultural processes to work with a potent mix of biography, imagination, blood memory, intergenerational dialogue, and in some cases active revival work from archives.

**Dancing with Strangers**

Dalisa Pigram and I recently curated a triple bill of intercultural dance works titled *Burrbgaja Yalirra* (*Dancing Forwards* in Yawuru) in part to demonstrate the critical role of intercultural processes within First Nations contemporary dance contexts. Contemporary dancer and classical violist Eric Avery of the Nggaiampa,Yuin, Bandjalang, and Gumbangirri peoples collaborated with Belgian choreographer Koen Augustijnen to create a solo titled *Dancing with Strangers* (Avery 2018a), which I also collaborated on as dramaturg.

In *Dancing with Strangers* Eric charts a path to closing gaps in our understanding of ourselves as a nation by remembering and reimagining a first contact story passed on through his family. The oral history recounts Eric’s great, great, great, great, great grandfather Jack Biamanga, a Yuin man who watched the first fleet of the British colonialists sail past his mother’s country on the south coast of New South Wales. In the production Eric imagines where we might be now as a nation if we had made music and danced together in those first hours, days, months, and years of colonial contact. Whilst there is some description and one drawing in the diaries of Lieutenant William Bradley, second in command of HMS *Sirius* of the first fleet, of brief encounters of dancing between members of the first fleet and people of the Eora Nation in the first few days after landing, Eric expands the possibility of these moments further to ask where would we be now if dancing and making music together had continued as a form of engagement and negotiation of differences between peoples. As a classical violinist and contemporary dancer, as well as a keeper of songs and stories from his father’s line, Eric embodies and performs the possibility of such a fantasy to audiences and as such offers the possibility of participating in a process of national recovery for First Nations Australians as well as those of settler and immigrant descent.

After conducting research in the national archive at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) into recordings from the 1970s of his family members speaking Nggaiampa to linguist Tamzin Donaldson, Eric reconstructed songs which we hear in *Dancing with Strangers* in recordings and that he also sings live on stage. In a process of aural repatriation, Eric has worked in the gaps which exist for his people from the rupture of knowledge, whilst also imagining a space of meeting each other through dance and music that could have been possible for his ancestors. From performing live the revival of his Nggaiampa language to his embodied exploration of past and future moments for his people, in choreography co-created with Koen Augustijnen which also demonstrates a contemporary aesthetic and approach to dance associated with the Flemish Wave, Eric has worked through intercultural processes to inhabit and reduce the gap between remembrance, cultural knowledge, and the past and the future for his people.

Dressed in a reversible costume; one side a repurposed colonial navel coat with tails and a flashy brass buttons, the other side faux possum skin, carefully stitched for warmth from the elements, Eric shape shifts across time and experience to radicalise the gap by imagining a different past in order to conceive of the possibility of a different future. Recently, when discussing the nature of decolonisation, Eric stated:
Dancing in the gap

Reimagining black futures and pasts and experimenting with what we can do to make these into new realities is necessary at this time, especially with the looming threat of global warming. I think that sometimes we can get caught inside the trap of imagining that what we understand to be real is dictating our only choices.

(Avery 2018c)

At the beginning of the process, Eric improvised movement phrases in response to tasks given by Koen Augustijnen and facilitated with Dalisa Pigram in a residence in Bundanon, close to his mother's country on the South Coast of New South Wales. The movement material produced in this stage of the processes were constructed in response to the choreographic instruction, acts of cultural remembrance and the physical environment.

By connecting story to landscape Eric begins Dancing with Strangers with a scene that performs the alertness he imagines human and non-human species may have displayed in response to the ‘giant canoes carrying white ghosts who looked sexless’ (Avery 2018b) appearing on the horizon. Eric performs an identity which shape shifts between human and animal, across time, from encountering the first fleet, to the ongoing alertness required for his people enduring the legacy of invasion.

While these choreographic elements are essentially enigmatic and open, they are juxtaposed with material traces of his family's past including the archival recordings of his great uncle in Ngiyampaa and English discussing the struggle to source enough food and recordings of his family members singing in Ngiyampaa, a language which was considered lost. These juxtapositions link the revival work to real people and conversations, and to the reality of Eric himself as a descendent, as he plays both classical music and his own contemporary compositions. This work remediates his family's stories of early contact, the material traces of songs and vocal recordings in archives and repatriates them, using imagination, improvisational work, and experimental contemporary dance processes as forces for change.

Close to the end of Dancing with Strangers Eric performs a poem titled Future where, in an impassioned voice, he describes an imagined utopia of cultural relations between the people of the land and the many immigrant cultures of Australia, as if it is real now. The intensity of his presence, breathing heavily and glistening in sweat from the efforts of the previous scenes, contributes to the poem which could seem naive if it wasn’t for its political provocation. His words bring us, the audience, to an awareness of how far from current realities the scenarios he describes really are, how broad the gaps are in our experiences of settler, immigrant, and First Nations Australian relations.

Eric concludes the 34-minute solos in a scene called Wind, which I jokingly call the utopia of Eric. Here Eric dances a choreography he imagines we might dance now, if we had engaged with each other back then: if a treaty had been signed and carried across the land, if a depth of exchange of arts and technologies of living on the land had occurred, if respect for difference and imaginative curiosity had prevailed. He performs the choreography to a soundtrack of his own composition on the European instrument he has mastered and finishes with a song in Ngiyampaa that he has written himself in his own, reclaimed language. While his own cultural dances are ever present in his contemporary movements, they are understated as he reaches into the air in rhythmic gestures, as if grasping some possible future which we could almost touch. This is no naive hybridity or fusion of languages, no third space to fill the gap, but culturally distinct elements which work through and with each other to allow for the exploration and representation of ambivalences and complexity.

As an act of cultural remembrance, he reimagines past settler and Indigenous contact in the present as a means to indicate a future that could potentially still come, should we, as a nation of Australians, be able to radicalise the gaps in wellbeing and disadvantage which, through his dance, song, music, and language revival, Eric argues do not need to define the future.

His curiosity, his vivid imagination, activated through experimental contemporary dance processes, has produced a work which contributes to the transcultural memory of contact and as such can be understood as addressing the ‘necessary pre-condition to close the gap’ explained by Dodson, which seeks to overcome past trauma and which ‘fight in the ring’ as explained by Alexis Wright, to reset narratives we tell about ourselves as a nation.

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Notes

2. The History Wars have been understood as gaps in culturally informed perspectives and experience of Australia’s foundational histories. See Henry Reynolds for more information.
6. In 2007, the government of prime minister John Howard introduced the Northern Territory National Emergency Response, widely known as The Intervention, as a military response to allegations of wide-spread child sexual abuse and neglect in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. The Intervention has been widely criticised for its dominating control of Aboriginal people’s lives by white government administrations which have absorbed significant funding and delivered few outcomes. The Emergency Response was replaced by the Stronger Futures Policy in 2012, with similar agendas.
8. See Inga Clendinnen’s book of the same name for a historical discussion of these events (Clendinnen 2005), and also Kim Scott’s novel That Deadman Dance describing early contact between whalers and the Nyungar people. (Scott 2010). Both works were used as research to expand on Eric’s family memories in his solo Dancing with Strangers.

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