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1. Introduction

This thesis aims at giving an in-depth insight into the question how dance has defined Aboriginal Cultural identity in the past and present. The thesis will portray Aboriginal dance, as it had occurred for many centuries, before there was contact with the white settlers and to contrast it with how it occurs today, without losing its traditional roots. It will offer an in-depth insight into traditional dance techniques that are taught in a specific way, through structures totally unlike those in Western dance and picture how they are used in a contemporary situation. The focus will be on the discovery of the various functions that contemporary Indigenous dance fulfils today, such as remembering culture, practicing resistance and initiating reconciliation. In demonstrating the various functions that Aboriginal dance fulfils today, this thesis argues that Aboriginal dance is an integral part of ancient but also modern Indigenous identity. Naturally, Aboriginal dance has changed over time, but nevertheless is deeply rooted in the past. The fusion of ancient tribal history and contemporary interpretation makes dance such a powerful tool for keeping culture alive.

The second chapter introduces Indigenous Australia by depicting Aboriginal traditions, kinship relations and cultural laws, going back to their story of creation. An understanding of those traditions and cultural laws are essential for the comprehension of traditional and contemporary Indigenous performances, dances and corroborees, as they are deeply connected to one another. Without this cultural background knowledge, one cannot truly understand Aboriginal dance and its interconnectedness with spirituality and land.

In the third chapter, dance as a channel of non-verbal communication will be tackled. The chapter investigates communicative functions of dance in a traditional and in a contemporary context. The focus will be on dance as a communicative tool in a contemporary context. Current Indigenous issues are expressed through dance such as keeping culture alive, and thus resisting the forceful assimilation into Western society. However, performance does not only function as a tool for resistance but also has the strong potential to foster intercultural communication and understanding which can strongly benefit the reconciliation process.

The fourth chapter aims at giving an insight into the question if and how dance can promote cross-cultural understanding, interaction based on mutual growth in understanding and reconciliation. Furthermore, it raises the question if embodied knowledge is at risk when Indigenous dance is adapted on stage for a Western audience. Possible risk and limitations, but also prospects and opportunities will be tackled in this section.

In chapter five, performances that are carried out as a means of raising political and social awareness will be explored. The chapter examines the social rights developments in urban areas such as Sydney that developed during the 1970s. It portrays how dance and theatre was incorporated into the social rights movement as a medium of expression that gave hope to the oppressed. Moreover, it depicts how dance performances can deliver strong social and political messages through both, the enactment of the performance and the chosen spatial setting.

Building on the Black Theatre movement that began in inner-Sydney in the 1970s and staged dance and street theatre performances by those engaged in the struggle for Aboriginal rights, the contemporary Aboriginal performance schools and theatres “Aboriginal Dance Theatre Redfern”, “NAISDA” and the “Bangarra Dance Theatre” are introduced in chapter six. All three have their roots in the Black Theatre and serve as a platform for Indigenous artists who want to gain a voice and raise awareness of past and current social and political issues through artistic expression.

In the seventh chapter traditional Indigenous performances and their contemporary interpretation will be explored. It will be examined which traditional dance aspects are incorporated in the performance and how they are intertwined with contemporary movements. Furthermore, the deeper meaning of the shows, going beyond mere entertainment to address current social issues, will be tackled. It will be explored how the power of narration and observation of stories through dance can serve as a first step in the reconciliation journey

This thesis aims at exploring how the Indigenous population keeps their culture alive through dance and thus resists the forceful assimilation into Western society. However, not only dance as a tool for resistance will be explored, but also its potential to foster intercultural communication and understanding. This thesis argues that engaging in Indigenous dance can create a deeper understanding of Indigenous culture and past and current Indigenous issues and thus strongly benefit the reconciliation process.

2. Indigenous Australia

Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders are the Indigenous people of Australia. Whereas the Aboriginals come from the Australian mainland, the Torres Strait Islanders originally come from a group of small islands which lie in the Torres Strait. The spoken language is particularly important for the Indigenous population, as they have an oral history, meaning that nothing is written down. Verbal communication and storytelling is vital, but also other channels of

communication are used, such as symbols that appear as body painting and as bark and rock painting.

Painting was a very important form of expression for the Indigenous population, as every painting represented a story. Painting, as well as, singing, dancing, performing, carving and sculpting played a crucial role in Aboriginal everyday life. Especially dance and music played a vital role and was used during traditional celebrations and ceremonies. Dance performances were not mere entertainment, they were used to depict a story through movement in an elaborated way. Traditional music and dance are still practiced and performed widely around Australia as part of ceremonial and spiritual life, especially in remote communities that have still maintained their traditional way of life. Music and dance had both a spiritual and educational role, performed in ceremony, but also used to teach younger people about their responsibilities, their clans, their ancestors and the dreamtime.

Dance was carried out during a multitude of different occasions and there was an immense difference between camp dancing that men, women and children could share and ritual or sacred dancing. Traditional Aboriginal dance is taught and performed through structures totally unlike those in Western dance. This is the reason why, from a Western perspective, it is very difficult to understand and write about Aboriginal dance. Western dance is usually carried out for entertainment, whereas dancing in Aboriginal communities often serves a higher purpose. Of course, there are occasions where dance takes place to entertain or to be entertained, but many dance performances that are carried out have a deeper meaning.

Therefore, to truly understand Aboriginal dance one must gain a deeper understanding of Aboriginal culture and their traditional nomadic lifestyle. This nomadic lifestyle is characterized by a life organized around tribal systems. A tribe is defined as a group of people, related by a common language and common customs, who occupy a land. It is believed that before the arrival of Captain Cook in 1770, there were between 400 and 700 different Aboriginal tribes who lived as hunters and food gatherers. Where each tribe lived depends on their ancestors. That is the reason why the land has such great importance to Indigenous people as it connects them to their ancestors. It is very important to mention that Aboriginal people did not believe that they own the land that has been their ancestor's territory. As a matter of fact, they believed that the land owns them and that it is their responsibility to look after it.

A frequent misconception is that the Aboriginal people of Australia are one nation that share the same language and cultural heritage. The reality is that there is a plentiful diversity between Aboriginal communities, which all possess different cultures, customs and most importantly

different languages. According to Walsh: “It has been estimated that around 250 distinct languages were spoken at the time of the first (significant) European contact in the late eighteenth century” (27). Whereas the Aboriginal people had a multitude of different languages, the Torres Strait Islanders were a smaller group with only two main languages.

Those 250 different languages also had a multitude of dialects, so that in total the varieties that have been spoken accumulated to many hundred. However, it is possible to establish language trees between those languages. For instance, the language tree of the Western Desert Languages which include forms of speech such as Gugada, Ngaanyatjarra, Luritja, Pintupi and Pitjantjatjara (Walsh 27). In this context it is important to mention that the Aboriginal people often dislike terms such as Western Desert Languages, as they have not been established by themselves but by the White population. In the Torres Strait Islands, the linguistics situation was less complex than in Australian mainland. As stated by Walsh: “The Torres Strait region is linguistically divided into Miriam, a Papuan language spoken in the east, and Kala Lagaw Ya which is spoken in the west” (30). As the Torres Strait Islands are geographically much closer to Papua New Guinea than to mainland Australia, it is very likely that the languages of the Torres Strait Miriam and Kala Lagaw Ya, are related to the ones spoken in New Guinea.

As mentioned earlier, the Aboriginal people were nomadic people who moved from place to place but usually always stayed in the region of their ancestry. The multitude of Aboriginal communities with different languages, cultures and customs is also highly present in dance and music, as the dancing styles varied throughout the different tribal groups. All dances were performed with set arm, body and foot movements, but those movements differed greatly from tribe to tribe. It is for this reason that it is impossible to write about Aboriginal dance in general, as it always must be examined in the tribal and historical context of its performers. However, due to their nomadic lifestyle, there were interrelations concerning culture, customs, music and dance throughout the tribes from the same region.

Although the Aboriginal tribes possessed many different customs and traditions, they shared the common story of creation which is also referred to as the dreamtime or the dreaming. The dreamtime is the name given to the period when, according to Indigenous culture, the world was created. The term can be traced back to the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer who took it from the Central Australian language Arrernte word *altyerre*, meaning both time of creation and dream. However, the use of the word dreamtime is not unproblematic, as “[a]n entire epistemology has been reduced to one single English word” (Fletcher 85). Furthermore, there is the common misconception that the dreamtime is something that happened in the past and

has no relevance for the Indigenous population today. However, the truth is the opposite. As stated by McNieven: “[...] the cultural significance of Dreaming sites stems from their ongoing spiritual energies and life forces” (333). Many sacred Aboriginal dances are directly linked to the story of creation and are performed at those sacred Dreaming sites.

Moreover, music and dance is often linked with ceremonies and is integral to ancestry, kinship, and the totemic system. Generally, a distinction is made between freshwater people and saltwater people depending on whether the tribe lives by the river in inland areas or by the sea in coastal areas. Torres Strait Islanders are therefore all saltwater people. According to McNieven: “Torres Strait Islander are one of the most marine-oriented and sea-life dependant indigenous societies on the planet” (330). The distinction between freshwater people and saltwater people is a very important one, as depending on where a tribe had lived it had shaped their cultural customs and their way of life significantly.

A further distinction is then made between clans and nations. Nations were large language groups and it is believed that prior to the European invasion there were more than 500 different Aboriginal nations. Clans, on the other hand, were smaller extended family groups within the nations. Every clan had its own territory and it was forbidden to enter another clan’s territory without permission by the clan members. Permission was usually granted through welcoming dances.

However, clan is not the only distinction made, the members of a clan knew their relationships to others through their position in the kinship system of that group and through their identification with skin names and specific totems (Gardner 28). Moieties are a form of kinship system where the people of a clan were divided into two groups, either determined by the mother’s side (matrilineal), the father’s side (patrilineal) or can alternate between each generation (generational). Often, the moieties were then divided into four to eight different kinship groups that designated a specific name for all members of each group – called kinship names or skin names which are given at birth.

In general, geographic organisation is based on language groups, nations or clans, whereas social and spiritual organisation is based on a kinship system. In addition to their position within the kinship system, Indigenous people have totems. A totem is an animal, plant or another subject believed to be ancestrally related to a person. Aboriginal people considered themselves to be descended from a totem. For instance, they would not eat the meat of any animal of their totem and would have to ensure that the animal’s population was sustained (Chiariello 21). A

totem can also be represented in nature in the form of a rock, tree, hill, river or any other landform.

Dance performances often involve the totems of its performers and tell stories about the journeys and lives of the ancestors. This is particularly common in ceremonial or sacred dance which is called corroborees. Sacred and ceremonial dance come with a set of cultural rules that must be followed. They are often carried out in a particular place for a specific purpose. Some dance performance can only be attended by men, whereas others, often connected with reproduction, can be sung and heard only by women. Semi-sacred dance is performed by women at an appointed ceremonial ground while the men are singing, whereas non-sacred dance can be performed by anyone – men or women – at any time or place. However, it is more common that men are dancing and women are singing.

Furthermore, the song that accompanied the dance performance was a central part of the ceremony and an important way of maintaining spiritual life. Songs often related to mythical figures, the creation of the surrounding landscape and the journeys of ancestors. Songs also had a very strong educative value, as they were a method of teaching the younger generation about the Indigenous culture. Indigenous songs are constructed of many short verses that usually tell a story of a place or event. They were a method of teaching about Indigenous culture and the environment, and a person's place in them. When young children reached puberty, they were taught songs which are known as the karma songs. These songs were about everyday tasks they were expected to perform once they reach puberty and most importantly they educated about the totems of the clan and the history and mythology of their tribe. These songs do not only relate to the totems of a clan, but also involve the history and mythology of the tribe and usually have their roots in the dreamtime (Poirier 25).

The karma songs are of central importance to the cultural traditions of each tribe. Each clan's songs have distinctive and unique melodic formulas that allow them to be distinguished from the songs of other groups. The karma songs are never carried out for mere entertainment, but are of central importance to the cultural traditions of a group. They are particularly important when a male member of the tribe marries. As the man then takes on more responsibility for family and clan, the karma songs play a vital role in his education and serve as a source of spirituality. The knowledge that he acquires through the karma songs are meant to help him develop responsibility and maturity.

Very closely associated with song is the cultural dance. Cultural dance is very energetic and is usually done exclusively for ceremonial purposes. Every performance is linked to a specific

place, where sacred ancestral being came to life to travel through the country and create the earth, therefore many dance grounds are considered as sacred places. The body decorations and movements and gestures that are carried out during the dance are closely related to kin relationships (Gardner 31). As with most Indigenous knowledge, the people who are the custodians of a story are the only ones who have the authority to carry out the dance. Therefore, permission is needed before someone else can perform them. Generally, dance, through movement, evoke particular stories or tasks – such as imitating a kangaroo or shark, hunting with spears, paddling a canoe, or natural phenomena such as waves.

Cultural dance of the Torres Strait region is very distinct from Aboriginal cultural dance. As Aboriginal ceremonies, Torres Strait Islander ceremonies reflect central aspects of their lives and their beliefs. As saltwater people, they have a very deep connection to the sea which is also presented in their costumes. Costume making is a very important cultural practice of the people of the Torres Strait region. The costume used throughout ceremonies are often lavish and a testament to the people's relationship with the sea, often including fishing implements or headdresses with shark motifs (Beckett 71). Especially the Saibai Islanders, the people of Saibai island located in the Torres Strait Islands archipelago, are known for their dramatic and distinctive headdresses during ceremonies.

The closeness of the Saibai Islands to Papua New Guinea has influenced cultural practices there, for example the use of long drums that are sometimes covered with sharkskins (Beckett 63). These islands have very distinctive dances that can be only found in the Torres Strait Islands archipelago such as the Maumatang, a warrior dance performed with bows and arrows or the Eagle dance, where dancers use wooden wings, large headdresses and perform with rapid head movements. Another unique dance is the shark dance, known as the Baizam, or the Kab Kar dance which is performed in Mer, also known as the Murray Islands, in the eastern Torres Strait. The dance is characterized by the costumes particular to the island and the Dhari headdress (Beckett 51).

Every Indigenous dance performance was accompanied by music instruments which were made from materials that occurred in the nature. Percussion instruments were the most common. The only exception was the didgeridoo which relies on rhythmic beating to create sound. Other frequently used instruments are the bullroarer, which is closely linked to boy's initiation ceremonies and clapsticks which are used during nearly every dance performance. Undoubtedly, the most widely known Aboriginal instruments is the yidaki which is known as the didgeridoo in Western society. It originates from east Arnhem Land which is located in the

Northern Territory but could also be found in Cape York and Kimberly due to trading (Toner 15).

The didgeridoo is believed to be one of the oldest music instruments in the world. In order to make the yidaki one must hollow the branch of a tree. Usually the chosen branch has been previously carved by termites nesting in the wood. These branches are cut to about 1.5 meters long, making sure both ends are hollow and the mouthpiece is moulded with beeswax or tree gum. According to the cultural law only men were permitted to play the yidaki. The yidaki's distinctive and melodic sounds is made by blowing into the instrument with vibrating lips and then using a technique of circular breathing to achieve a continuous sound. Whereas other instruments were only used for a certain time during the performance, the yidaki was used to create a constant hum in a deep note. Further rhythm was then created by using the tongue and cheeks (Toner 21). Playing the yidaki therefore required not only skills, but also stamina because the sound is sustained throughout all the songs in the ceremony.

As an innovative way to produce a whistle sound gum leaves were used. A tree leaf, most often from a eucalypt tree, is held against the lips and is blown to produce the characteristic whistle sound. The technique was used during many hunting ceremonies to imitate bird sounds. Also, rasps were created as music instruments, usually from a carved stick that is scratched by another smaller stick. The difference from clapsticks is that the rhythmic sound is created by scraping rather than hitting two pieces of wood together. Another two highly important music instruments are exclusively found in Cape York in North Queensland - the rattle and the skin drum (Toner 23). The rattle is created with bunches of seed pods that are shaken to make a rhythmic sound. The skin drum is an hour-glassed shaped drum from lizard or goanna skin which is used only in ceremonies. Moreover, clapping the hands together, or clapping the hands onto the thighs was used, especially by women, to create a rhythmic beat accompanying the dance performance during ceremonies.

The above-mentioned background information on Aboriginal tribes, languages, spirituality, kinship, totems, *country* and music instruments are vital for a deeper understanding of dance, as it strongly connects with all those aspects of life. Without this cultural background knowledge, one cannot truly understand Aboriginal dance and its interconnectedness with spirituality and land. In the following chapter dance as a channel of non-verbal communication will be tackled. The potential of dance for keeping Indigenous culture alive and simultaneously fostering intercultural communication will be explored. The potential of dance for keeping culture alive is vital for a contemporary Indigenous identity, as it prevents the complete

assimilation into Western culture which would ultimately lead to a disconnection from Indigenous roots and therefore an identity crisis. However, dance is not merely a tool for resistance but has the strong potential to function as a tool for mutual communication and understanding which can offer its participants and observants a reconciliatory experience.

3. Dance as a channel of non-verbal communication

The following chapter will examine if and in how far dance can function as a channel of non-verbal communication. Firstly, communication as such must be defined. The term communication comes from the Latin word *communicare*, which means to share or to make common. It is defined as the process of understanding and making meaning. Dance as a means of communication is highly important for Aboriginal cultural identity on many different levels. Firstly, it is significant for keeping their culture alive and thus resisting the forceful assimilation into Western society. However, it does not only function as a tool for resistance but also has the strong potential to foster intercultural communication and understanding which can strongly benefit the reconciliation process.

When it comes to dance, clearly the communication is a non-verbal one. Even though it is widely believed that verbal communication is the most powerful tool when delivering a message, this is not necessarily the case. Two-thirds of all communication take place on a non-verbal level and is often perceived stronger as direct verbal communication. Meanings can vary considerably depending on a variety of factors that have been listed by Ness. Ness has established a model of dance communication with four main nodes:

- 1) Catalysts - (Individual, social, historical, phylogenetic, physical) – which determine the occasions of dance and its varying elemental components (who dances, why, where and how)
- 2) Audiences
- 3) Dancers/Choreographers, who are identified as “encoding-decoding” nodes with respect to the dance performance
- 4) The dance-object – identified as a “medium channel” – along with “adjunct channels” of music, song and costume

(Ness 253)

This model of dance communication has been widely used by dance ethnographers who have examined the non-verbal communication capacity of dance in recent years. According to the research aims of dance ethnography, all movements systems are viewed as socially produced

by people in specific temporal-cultural circumstances by taking into account the people's conceptualizations, values and practices (Buckland 335). Key to the approach is the quest to understand and communicate the insider perspective of the participants. The aim is therefore not to only understand the dance, but to gain a deep insight into the community and thus into culture. As stated by Buckland: "Human movement as culturally patterned, learned, transmitted, conceptualised, experienced and evaluated remains vital to the dance ethnographic project" (337). Dance ethnography is mostly used when the dancing to be investigated lacked a critical or historical literature, as it is the case in Aboriginal culture.

The first non-Aboriginal contemporary dancer and choreographer who gained an insider perspective into Aboriginal culture and performed it on stage was Beth Dean. The US dancer performed in a ballet named *Corroboree* in 1954. She was not only performer in the Aboriginal dance inspired piece, but had also choreographed the whole show in honour of the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II who attended the show at the Tivoli Theatre during her stay in Sydney on the 6th of February 1954. As stated by Haskins: "[...] 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" (23).

Prior to the show, Dean went on an eight-month expedition to study the dance movements of various Aboriginal tribes in Arnhem Land, the Tiwi people of Bathurst Island, the Daly River people and finally in Yuendumu, north-west of Alice Springs. Beth attended a variety of dance ceremonies, including both male and female, sacred and secular and coming from central and northern Australia. The results of her intensive study on country, was a 45-minute work that included more than twenty dancers and told the story of a boy's journey into manhood, from his break from the women of his tribe through to his trial by fire and his final initiation. Beth Dean was way ahead of her time, as she was not only the first non-Indigenous woman to perform an Indigenous inspired show, the premier also came four decades before the fusion of Aboriginal dance and contemporary styles became an established theatrical form with the emergence of the Bangarra Dance Theatre. Her performance was perceived as a milestone, creating space for Indigenous dance companies and the emergence of mixing traditional with contemporary Indigenous dance.

Beth inhabited the very ambiguous role of being an insider and outsider at the same time. As a white American female, she was clearly an outsider to Indigenous Aboriginal culture, but at the same time she was allowed a deep insight by the Indigenous tribes she visited. Despite her own

whiteness, she gained the unique role of communicating tribal traditions to a white audience. Most remarkable was, that it seemed as if she could transcend her own white cultural heritage with ease and convert fully into an Aboriginal male dancer for the time of her performance. Beth stated in her memoir *Twin Journey* that she had intense sessions with Aboriginal dancers on their point of view and manner of thinking, as “[...] one cannot dance the soul of people unless one knows well the thoughts of that people” (146). This clearly indicates, that as a dancer and dance researcher she was way ahead of her time, as she applied a communicative approach and simultaneously recognized and reflected upon personal experiences and the dynamic nature of dance.

The communicative approach in dance studies is more widely accepted since the 1990s. According to Buckland: “Dance as cultural practice is no longer the study of *the other* removed in time and space from the researcher, but an ongoing dialogue of conversants located within the same temporal and global frame” (337). The Aboriginal people dancing within a community share strong ties of residential locality, kinship and spiritual beliefs which are hard to access for an outsider. Therefore, some research questions demand long-term residence and immersion to gain a deeper understanding of dances and its communicative functions. As dance articulates identity, it is important “[...] to understand embodied collective memories held, negotiated and expressed through dancing, and their potency for different groups of people in specific socio-temporal circumstances” (Buckland 341).

3.1 Communicative function in the traditional context

In traditional and contemporary Aboriginal dance, narrative movement is highly important. The stories of creation, the dreaming, ancestral relations and kinship relations are all communicated through dance. Through movements Indigenous people mimic the world around them, especially animals and their specific totems. Dancing, together with singing appeared long before any other expressive art. In an Indigenous context spiritual being becomes real by the enactment of song and dance. Dance is perceived as carrying out a spiritual ceremony and it is believed that it influences the thought and feelings of both its participants and its observers. Moreover, dance was performed to exert an influence into the world and to actively control the outcome of certain events. For instance, in times of drought, a rain dance also called rainmaking ceremony was performed. Aboriginal dancing was usually held in a circle like setting, one of the oldest known dance formations, an expressive artistic performance that the Indigenous population has practiced since millennia. Due to the dance’s hypnotic character, it has been

referred to as “[...] the locus of the sacred realm, as the original magic circle” (Langer 137). The circle was perceived as sacred, as it embodied complete harmony through symmetry.

Since the beginning of their times, Aboriginal people have mimicked their environment, especially animals, through song and dance. The Indigenous population knew that humans are not the only living creatures who dance. Animals such as bees, birds or scorpions carry out dances such as the mating dance. Aboriginal people have depicted some of those dancelike animal movements in more than 25000-year-old caves. Animal behaviour was constantly observed and imitated in many dance performances. These imitations were often carried out in circle dances after a successful hunt. The Indigenous population had the highest respect towards nature and its inhabitants. Animals were only killed when there was a need for food. To show respect towards the animal and thank nature for what was given to them, they often performed a dance imitating the movements of the animal they had hunted.

A variety of dances such as those hunt dances, warrior dances, spiritual dances and ritual dances were carried out by the whole tribe, especially the male members of the clan. In this way, the dance movements become ritualized and always had to be performed the same way. Not only the movements are set in ritualized dancing, but also gender, time and place are fixed and adhere to several cultural laws. Dance also had a vital educational function, as it was used to teach to a child the creation stories, ancestral relations and kinship relations and the tribe's totem. Furthermore, dance was a crucial part of the rite of passage of a boy or a girl to a man or woman.

3.2 Communicative function in a contemporary context

Apart from some Aboriginal people that still live in a traditional way as custodians of their country, most Aboriginal people now live in an urban setting and are disconnected from their traditions. There are Aboriginal people living in the city who perform traditional dances, but it is important to keep in mind that the purpose has changed. Nowadays, those dances are carried out as a tourist attraction or for entertainment, rather than to keep traditions and the cultural law alive. However, it is not always entertainment that is the driving force behind the performers, often dance is used to addresses current social and political struggles that the Indigenous community is facing. To do so, many Indigenous dance groups have decided to mix traditional with contemporary Aboriginal dance. This is not unproblematic, as it violates the traditions and the cultural law of the Indigenous community. This raises the question why contemporary dance, as a channel of dance communication, is used to tackle social and political issues.

Contemporary dance has the power to open new audiences as it can attract a variety of people ranging from young to old with different kinds of backgrounds. Traditional Aboriginal dance is perceived as exotic, foreign, sometimes even mystical, referring to ancient kinship relations and the dreamtime. As stated by Noisette: “Even though such dream worlds are not totally outlawed today, contemporary dance has turned to more modern concerns in an effort to understand other realms” (38). One of the main obstacles for white audiences to understand traditional Aboriginal dance is precisely its mythical character filled with spirits and beings from the ancient world of the dreamtime which for some seems completely removed from everyday life. For a white audience, traditional Aboriginal dance therefore seems stuck in an unfortunately “timeless” ideal.

Through the implementation of contemporary Aboriginal dance, little by little present-day reality began to intervene as some choreographers drew inspiration from their personal life’s and backgrounds, reflecting ongoing struggles as an Indigenous person living in a predominately western culture. Contemporary Aboriginal dance does not refrain from current social and political events, but emphasizes them. This can be clearly observed in the names of theatre and dance productions with explicit names such as *Stolen* or *Here comes the Nigger*. The names are chosen wisely and are meant to shock and provoke strong reactions. Many choreographers address the issues of our current troubled times by using their own non-verbal communication resources – bodies and dance.

However, nowadays Aboriginal dance artists aspire to move away from the stigma of the 1970s, of the angry Aboriginal activist and are doing so in creating shows with extravagant imagination combining past traditions with present dance styles. It is important that the audience realizes that it is not a question of provocation, but rather an artistic expression. As stated by Noisette: “Another crucial issue is collective memory: where have we come from, where do we find ourselves?” (36). It is the combination of the Indigenous rich past with a mostly positive outlook into the future that makes Aboriginal contemporary dance so unique. It shows the strength that despite the centuries-long struggle, Aboriginal people have been able to maintain their culture but are also eager to face a better future with more social awareness and intercultural understanding. Therefore, presenting Aboriginal dance to a predominantly white audience redraws borders.

Another interesting observation that can be made when viewing staged contemporary Aboriginal dance performances is the collective spirit. Drawing on the cultural law, that everybody had his position in the tribe but nobody was more important or higher up in rank

than the other, the importance of the group over the individual is stressed. This is also reflected in the program, where the performers names are listed alphabetically rather than according to their rank in the company. Indigenous choreographers conceive roles not for a single dancer, but for a community of performers. Moreover, contemporary Aboriginal dance combines several kinds of arts and is therefore much more than just movement through space. Dance is based on actual personal experiences and past traditions. It can therefore happen that a dance production combines actors and dancers, shifting from one realm to the other, until at the end, everyone begins singing traditional songs.

The depiction of past traditions in contemporary dance performances is highly important, as it does not only pass on Aboriginal traditions to the white audiences but also keeps the Indigenous culture alive. As Indigenous culture and knowledge only has an oral history, it is crucial to act out performances and other art forms in order to preserve one's culture. Regarding this oral history, Murphy argues: "This focus of oral and performance traditions has long been a core of Indigenous studies, which was affirmed epistemologies enacted through oral storytelling, with its understandings of space and time, and of embedded, interactive relations" (182).

Exploring contemporary Indigenous dance performances is therefore an act of accessing knowledge. The performances form the words and pages on which Aboriginal history has been inscribed. To receive access to this knowledge it is important to understand that when one views an Indigenous performance it is not just the depiction of traditional dances and costumes, but complexities of Indigenous cosmology, beliefs and identity that are portrayed. The three drivers behind Indigenous knowledge include a better relationship with the natural world, the weaving of knowledge leading to cross-cultural collaborations and cultural revival (Swain 517).

Many Indigenous choreographers communicate with the audience through dance by drawing on personal experiences and tribal histories. Engaging the audience with this technique is called *Indigenous methodology* and is referring to "[...] the process of accessing family and tribal histories through attuned attention to the physical impulses generated through fragments of information, oral and embodied and written, as well as envisioned or dreamed" (Murphy 182).

Indigenous choreographers are always facing the issue that they must uphold a perception of who they are as an Indigenous person but simultaneously they are trying to challenge common representations. Perception and expectations that view Indigenous people as exotic and foreign can be challenging and conflicting for their work as an independent contemporary artist. Creating dance shows that filter personal experiences can therefore be liberating them from the stereotypical expectations of the white audience. Tribal identity can never be described per se

and as such must be defined through the depiction of personal experiences. To liberate oneself from existing stereotypes and the perception of *the other*, Christine Donnelly (personal interview, 2017) described the technique of “dropping into the performance physically” which is especially stressed in her contemporary dance training. The work evolves from intuition, impulses and working with and through movement. This training enables her to “access stories and knowledge from her ancestors and tribal background” (Donnelly, personal interview, 2017). Such as their ancestors did, contemporary Indigenous dance should be approached as a place where one can freely access images, dreams and impulses.

It is believed that sensory engagement with the world such as seeing, hearing and representing, enables cognition, and thus knowing. It is an embodied and kinetic way of accessing knowledge which is highly respected in the Indigenous society. In Indigenous ancient society, knowledge was always acquired kinetically and was later passed on to the audience through presentation, a concept that remains foreign to many Western societies. Nowadays, through traditional contemporary dance not only the Indigenous ancient old way of passing on knowledge is represented but also many events from Australia’s conflicted Indigenous past and current social issues are addressed. Australia’s colonizing history is both addressed and redressed through contemporary Indigenous dance. According to Swain:” The work of contemporary Indigenous choreographers is a site in which multiple conflicting conceptual, cultural, political and personal issues can be grappled with and processed on the rehearsal floor” (515). However, the Indigenous conflicted past is not the only topic addressed in contemporary dance performances. Contemporary Indigenous dance is progress and a reflection of the past simultaneously, as it enables Indigenous dancers to follow their kinetic impulses and gain access to their own history in a temporary urban setting. Modern dance forms have intertwined with traditional Aboriginal dance, although some audiences desire to see those categories as distinct.

Prior to the 1970s, it was a strong sign of resistance to pass on information in the traditional kinaesthetic way in the face of colonizing histories that have tried to oppress them. Contemporary Aboriginal dance “[...] presents dance movements as sites of access to the embodied knowledges that colonization has attempted to mute [...]” (Murphy 192). Although the oppression based on law is officially abandoned since 1967, the Indigenous population is still subject to discrimination and racism. This can only be changed through communication and mutual understanding. Instead of targeting protest and resistance, dance should therefore be used as a communicative tool for reconciliation. Aboriginal artists therefore articulate their

own Indigeneity through modern dance based choreographic practices as acts and practices of Indigenous knowing.

Drawing on a conflicted history of dislocation and oppression, Indigenous people embody being the rightful owners of their country and a nation who has been alienated from their own homeland. According to Swain: “Contemporary Indigenous choreographers seek out dance methodologies that activate this dichotomy rather than avoid it” (504). A difficulty for contemporary Indigenous dance choreographers is to combine responsibilities to their communities and cultural custodians with national postcolonial issues and one’s own practice as an artist. Experimental practices in Indigenous art, including contemporary Aboriginal dance, involves taking on responsibilities. In order to respect the cultural law, tribe elders have to be involved in the process of incorporating traditional dance moves into a contemporary setting. Furthermore, when the rehearsing is finished, the first performance must be carried out in the place where that story comes from so that the local people get the respect of the first viewing and can give their blessing or approval. Incorporating movements of traditional cultural ownership and protocol is therefore an ongoing process and dialogue. “The artists are required to be doubly nimble in navigating the politics of their contemporary practice both at home in their local context and under the gaze of outsiders, including previous colonial rulers” (Swain 514).

Contemporary Aboriginal dance artists highly respect these cultural laws and guide their tradition. Nevertheless, there can be an ongoing tension between adhering to cultural law and moving forward creatively as an Indigenous artist. Negotiating those two roles at the same time can create a lot of pressure and even clashes between cultural authority and their role as an artist. It can “[...] simultaneously shape, challenge, limit and enable the emergence of contemporary choreographic forms” (Swain 513). Although those strong cultural laws exist, nowadays many Indigenous choreographers such as Stephen Page from the Bangarra Dance Theatre, are moving towards new interpretations of traditional dance, rather than just simply reviving existing traditions. However, most artistic dance works combine the present and the past, reflecting Indigenous tradition, past experiences and their personal artistic expression, and thus finding a balance between innovation and continuation.

One of the perhaps most remarkable interpretations of mixing traditional Aboriginal dance with contemporary elements, and thus enhancing cross-cultural communication, was the performance of Zorba the Greek *Yolgnu* style (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-MucVWo-Pw>). The dance was created as a gift of thanks to a Greek woman who had acted as

carer in Darwin for the disabled family member of one of the dancers. The performance was carried out by the Chooky Dancers, young men from Northeast Arnhem Land, at a local festival in Arnhem Land in 2007. “This and other local festivals in the region are considered a form of play, entertainment or amusement (*wakal*) that nevertheless must have an educational content for the participating youth, to whom they are mainly directed” (Tamisari 65). One of the main purposes of the festival is the encounter with the non-Yolgnu Other or white people (*ngapaki*). The festival also features speeches to the public which address themes such as sharing culture, accepting and embracing differences, realigning community and individual identity. Through song, dance and other artistic expressions culture is shared and cultural awareness is nourished.

Zorba the Greek Yolgnu style displays Australian multicultural discourse by presenting a traditional Greek song (the sirtaki) that is performed by young Aboriginal men that incorporate contemporary and traditional Aboriginal dance movements. The performance challenges stereotypical expectations of a white audience of an authentic aboriginal culture with primitive traditions and timeless customs. The performance includes a variety of movements such as “[...] Michael Jackson's left and right head turns and steps, the foot lifts and feet crossing of Greek dancing, the stomping of Yolgnu male stepping style and some arm movements used in ceremonies, the wide-legged posture depicted in early British images of corroborees, the Chariot's walk, women's disco-style dancing, rope skipping and basketball handling movements” (Tamisari 66). Audience expectations are mocked by the display of oppositions and ambiguities such as ceremony/everyday life, formality/informality, Yolgnu/Greek identity and tradition/modernity. The performance is very subversive, as it gives space to people unofficial expectations, mocks the fixation of classification and challenges imposed models of Aboriginality.

The performance was recorded and uploaded on YouTube receiving more than one and a half million views in its first year. Due to this public attention, the Chooky Dancers toured parts of Queensland and performed in Sydney, before producing their first full-length theatre dance show named Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu: *Wrong Skin*. Whereas the show Zorba the Greek Yolgnu style was light entertainment, Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu: *Wrong Skin* addressed much more serious topics. The performance was intended for a non-Yolgnu audience, focusing on their lives in relation to cultural law and tradition and in relation to racism, assimilation policies and oppression. As stated by Casey: “The performance text not only presents and represents Yolgnu Law and tradition, but it operates within them, as it is spoken in Yolgnu language with subtitles in the introductory sequences, but without them for the actual narrative” (61).

Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu depicts life on Elcho Island linked by a Yolgnu version of Romeo and Juliet. The English title *Wrong Skin* refers to someone who marries the wrong skin or moiety. As stated previously, the Aboriginal society is structured around complex kinship systems. In Yolgnu traditions, there are two moieties and the world is divided up between those two: Yirridja and Dhuwa. This means that every child on Elcho Island must have one Yirridja and one Dhuwa parent. This cultural law is highly important and should never be violated. According to Casey: “To marry the wrong skin, someone of the same moiety, is to step outside and literally to have no place in the world; to become *mirriyu* – nothing” (62).

The narrative follows a romance between two young people from the same moiety, the struggles they are facing in Yolgnu society and their elopement. The families chase them and during the confrontation the girl’s brother is killed. The boy’s funeral is given a very important place in the narrative, reflecting the importance of funerals and other related ceremonies on Elcho Island. Finally, there is a reconciliation and the two lovers return to their families.

The performance includes traditional Yolgnu dance from Elcho Island, contemporary dance and a fusion of both. Furthermore, a spirit dance is carried out during the boy’s funeral that enables his spirit to rise from the grave and begin his journey to the Land of the Dead. Each cast member brings his very own totem to the funeral. Subsequently, each totem dance is performed by the members of that totem and accompanied by the song man who shares the same totem. The totems bring into focus Yolgnu law, as there is a clear distinction between private and public business. The turtle as a public totem is painted as traditional artwork on the body of the man who claims that totem as he dances the turtle dance. Secret totems however, are not translated and only present as symbolic images. *Wrong Skin* intends to communicate to a wide Australian audience by introducing Yolgnu tradition and cultural law and emphasizing the Yolgnu community’s ongoing commitment to this law. But it simultaneously aims at raising social awareness, by depicting post-intervention life on Elcho Island.

In recent years, more and more mixed dance style festivals have occurred that foster performative dialogue and cross-cultural communication such as the Laura Dance Festival that is located in the town of Laura near Cape York. The festival offers its visitors an insight into traditional Aboriginal, as well as contemporary forms of music and dance and reflects a broad reflection of Indigenous identity, ranging from classical, traditional styles to creative performances that adapt Western forms with an Indigenous style. Moreover, the festival itself is a mirror of cultural variety among Aboriginal people, as the Indigenous people come from many different backgrounds, namely:

“northern communities closer to traditional roots and lifestyles and in some cases still speaking or having knowledge of Aboriginal languages

- large communities such as Yarrabah, Palm Island, Woorabinda and Cherbourg near regional cities, to which many people had been removed and separated from their homelands speaking Aboriginal English rather than traditional languages
- dispersed families in towns and cities in more obvious minority status in the broader society, often seeking to recover their roots and identity”

(David & Michael 54)

The Laura festival originated in the 1970s and was funded by the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation. The purpose was to recover and to renew traditional Aboriginal dance forms. Moreover, the intention was to strengthen Aboriginal identity as the Indigenous population was facing intense assimilation pressure from the government of Queensland at that time. According to Rosita (325): “The festival is a means of celebrating a shared Aboriginal identity based on a common history while at the same time acknowledging differences among Aboriginal people and the significance of place in the constitution of such differences”.

Over time, the festival program was subject to change. During the 1970s presenting Aboriginal traditional dance forms, and therefore, strengthening and preserving Indigenous culture, was the heart of the festival. Nowadays, traditional dance forms are still important, but the festival also features a great variety of contemporary Indigenous dance that reflects the blending of tradition and modernity. Paradoxically, the Queensland government attempted to counter criticism on their former assimilation policy by getting involved in the festival. The government aimed for a wider audience, including tourists, and therefore, the original festival program was rearranged in the early 1990s and set up as a dance contest. This aspect was then abolished in 1997, as the organizers argued that competitive dancing was never present in Aboriginal culture, and was therefore, culturally inappropriate.

As culture is never static, changes and adaptations are inevitable. However, creating new contemporary Indigenous dance styles is equally important as maintaining traditional dance forms. The risk of losing one’s spiritual roots as an Indigenous person is always present and should not be underestimated. As Aboriginal people experience their identity through connections to land and cultural laws, those cultural forms must be maintained in order to provide the foundation for a modern Indigenous identity. A modern Indigenous identity that lives from past traditions but can also find its way into modern Australian society can serve as

a strong basis for the reconciliation process. Moreover, it is vital that the White population can respect and value a modern Indigenous identity that can truly enrich contemporary Australian society.

Aboriginal dance, as a channel of non-verbal communication, can be a very powerful tool, as it enables artists to express concepts, cultures and world views which cannot be expressed verbally. From a White perspective, observing and immersing into Indigenous dance performances might be the best way of accessing Aboriginal culture, which can ultimately lead to cross-cultural understanding through dance. In the following chapter the potential of dance as a tool for cross-cultural understanding will be tackled. The possible risks and limitations, but also prospects and opportunities will be explored in detail.

4. The rise of cultural awareness & cross-cultural understanding through dance

As stated in the previous chapter contemporary Indigenous dance can function as a channel of non-verbal communication, as it passes on knowledge and offers rich insights into Aboriginal traditions, as well as past and present social and political issues. A profound understanding of Indigenous culture can free the mind and therefore reduce existing stereotypes and stigmatizations. Moreover, cultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding can be promoted and strengthened. Cultural awareness which ultimately leads to cross-cultural understanding is the foundation of intercultural communication. According to William Howell (1982) there are four different degrees of cultural awareness which indicate how people perceive different cultures and their ability to interact and grow with them.

The first stage is defined as a complete absence of cultural awareness. At the second stage, people do perceive cultural differences, but nevertheless consider their *modus vivendi* as the only valid. Cultural differences are regarded as problematic. Thus, these differences are either ignored or reduced in their significance. During the third stage people perceive cultural differences and are eager to explore these differences in order to create common pathways. The fourth stage unites people from distinct cultural backgrounds, as they are willing to create a new shared identity characterized by dialogue and cooperation. To reach the fourth and final stage is a very difficult undertaking, as every human being is product of their own culture. Therefore, self-awareness must be created before cultural understanding can take place.

To understand how cultures differ, it is crucial to examine the core factors of culture. Edward T. Hall an American anthropologist made early discoveries of key cultural factors. He divides

cultures into high-context and low-context cultures. The approximation of people from a high and low context culture can be particularly difficult as certain cultural key factors are fundamentally different (Hall 27).

Aboriginal culture is a high context culture, meaning that Indigenous people understand cultural laws through contextual elements. As it is an oral culture, with no information written down, knowledge is passed on from generation to generation through dance, ceremonies, music, art and stories. Understanding Aboriginal culture and accessing Aboriginal knowledge is therefore immensely difficult for a Western person, as the understanding of those unwritten cultural laws is absent. Another difficulty arises, as closed dance performances and corroborees are inseparably connected with Indigenous religion. Anybody can read the bible, but Indigenous religious knowledge is hidden from people who are not member of a tribe and therefore impossible to attain for an outsider. As a high context culture, much communication takes place in non-verbal form through dance, ceremonies and music. Furthermore, there is a strong distinction between ingroup and outgroup. The bonds between tribe members are very strong and there is a powerful sense of belonging and community within the tribe which is seemingly inaccessible for an outsider. Moreover, time is perceived as very open and flexible and is not organized as a Western clock. All these factors, contribute to the difficulty of understanding Indigenous culture.

4.1 Cross-cultural understanding – possible risks and limitations

Due to the lack of other possibilities of accessing Indigenous culture, a Western audience often attends staged touristic Indigenous dance performances and ceremonies, although these performances, for many reasons, merely offer a glimpse into Aboriginal culture and tradition. When traditional Indigenous dances are performed on stage and therefore removed from their traditional context several problems can arise, which ultimately leads to the question, if embodied Indigenous knowledge is at risk through contemporary forms of representation. The issue of authenticity arises, as traditional forms always must be adapted in order to be presented on stage. Tackling this question does not mean that traditional dance forms must be frozen in the past and are not to be performed or developed in the future, but nevertheless it is important to examine what is at risk when mixing traditional with contemporary dance and presenting it to a predominantly white audience.

As stated earlier in this thesis, the larger argument involves “[...] complex tensions between legitimate/illegitimate forms of cultural borrowing, the contested authorship of embodied

knowledge and the significance of choreographic change within such contexts” (Farnell 52). Regarding the dance performance itself, traditional dances are often significantly shortened to avoid the monotony which can quickly arise due to the non-active participation of the audience. Many details that are crucial to the traditional performance are therefore omitted, as they only have relevance in the public space of the tribe. This example clearly shows that traditional dance will always be adapted on stage to meet the audience interests. This gives rise to important questions such as who decides what is being omitted and to what extent? Undoubtedly, if the most important part of a traditional dance or ceremony is omitted it has no longer any connection to its origins. Farnell states on this topic: “When spiritual ceremonies are transformed into ordinary entertainment vehicles, or worse tourist attractions, the ceremonies suffer. Audiences generally wish to have light, undemanding entertainment” (54). The public therefore often only receives a superficial showcase of Aboriginal culture, one that is devoid of sacred histories and ceremonial knowledge.

One main issue is always the spatial setting. The traditional dances are removed from country, meaning the sacred places where the dance should be carried out. But the term space does not only refer to physical space, it refers to the dance as a whole. Namely, the way bodies are moved in space, for example the dance circle which is ongoing clockwise and the four cardinal directions that determine entrance and exit from the dance area which are connected to spiritual practices. The spatial semantics are often completely lost in staged performances, as the performers are dancing in form of a stage front facing the audience.

Another important factor is time. Aboriginal people do not perceive time as a linear category. As stated by the anthropologist Michael Jackson: “Aboriginal people construe history as ever present, and ancestral land assumes for them the same vital force that self and soul have for us” (7). Therefore, traditional Indigenous dance has its own time-frame. Sacred ceremonies can expand over a period of days and certain dances are carried out at particular times, for instance, after sundown or when the sun is rising. Fitting a time frame for a performance into a European tradition violates these rules of time, and therefore moves away from the connection to spirit and country. Having time organized by a Western clock disconnects Indigenous artists from their tradition. Time also refers to dancing for one’s tribe community and honouring the past by evoking echoes of ancestral information and bringing them into the present moment. As stated by Mücke (17): “Time is not opening out into an unknown future, but it is intensifying onto the present moment down through concentric circles of forces and meanings. The song

and dancing happening now have their reference in the place, the dreaming, the kin group and so on”.

Moreover, there are shifts in the social context of the performance which alter the meaning of the dance. All Aboriginal dances are a participatory event, meaning that there are participants who dance and other participants who do not dance. It is therefore not an individualist enterprise, but a fundamental representation of community and belonging. Performing for an audience is radically different, as the former participatory event becomes a presentational event for spectators. Furthermore, the dance is taken out of its social context, as every Aboriginal dance serves a particular purpose such as honouring ancestral beings, tribe members or the food that has been hunted and gathered. All the above-mentioned factors, lead to a shift in meaning and ultimately to a loss of cultural relevance in the new context. Another issue arises when Indigenous dance companies tour nationally or even internationally in order to present their show to a wide audience. Traditional Indigenous people maintain integral spiritual connections when they are dancing on the land which they perceive as a part of them. When touring with a dance company those spiritual connections weaken which makes it difficult for them to maintain their connection and thus their well-being. (Christine Donnelly, personal interview 2016)

When performing contemporary Indigenous dance to a Western audience the cultural laws are violated in many ways. In addition, it is not uncommon that during an Indigenous dance performance existing stereotypes are reinforced rather than reduced. A Western audience who knows little about Indigenous culture and tradition, views the performance through a colonial lens shaped by a curiosity of *the other*. Interestingly enough, Aboriginal dance companies often market their company by stating that they are delivering an authentic performance, although it is very difficult to maintain authenticity when adapting an Indigenous performance on stage for a Western audience. This does not imply that Indigenous dance should not be presented to a Western audience, it does however mean that it is challenging to give a truly authentic representation of Indigenous dance.

Another important factor that can hinder bridging cultural differences is the fear of the Other. In Euro-American culture many people think that it is crucial to establish and protect one's norms. Therefore, acknowledging art, such as dance, in another culture equals threatening one's own culture and standards. Moreover, it means stepping out of one's own Euro-American framework which can be an uncomfortable and unfamiliar experience. Often traditional dance

or ceremonies are perceived as “[...] much too complex and multifaceted to be matched against our equally complex but differently formulated traditions” (Siegel 190).

The main reason for that is that Western dance forms are fundamentally different to Indigenous dance, as they draw on individual creation and the assertion of personal skills. As stated by Siegel: “They are theatrical, self-contained, mostly transitory events in proscenium spaces, they provide entertainment in a highly developed aesthetic tradition” (193). From a Western perspective, we have almost no knowledge of dance in a tribal context, performed as a ritual, spiritual ceremony, historical memory or communal celebration. This can be clearly seen when looking at Australia’s history of public Indigenous performances, such as the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust that presented a concert named *Aboriginal Theatre* containing performers from Yirrkala, Daly River and Bathurst Island. Each group possesses a completely distinct culture and language. However, in the program no distinction was made between the different groups. According to Magowan: “There was no appeal to the disparate Indigenous ritual contexts for each piece and no acknowledgment that the music and dance traditions of the different regions were quite distinct” (311). This reveals that the organisers of the concert had no understanding of dance in a tribal context or performance in a ritual setting.

However, the performance was breaking new grounds, as it offered Indigenous artist a platform where they could communicate with white audiences through performance and dance. Although it was initiated and organized by non-Indigenous people, the Indigenous artist were fully in control of what they offered during the show and how they wanted to present themselves. As stated by Casey: “The show, *Aboriginal Theatre*, included sections of ceremonies, public dreaming stories and topical performances, intended to educate white Australia about Indigenous culture” (56).

The producers of the show advertised it by stating that it was fully authentic by contrasting the primitive qualities of the performance to contemporary urban life. The topic of authenticity regarding an Indigenous performance is very ambivalent. Difficulties arise especially when the audience demands authenticity, simultaneously in a Western and an Aboriginal sense. This means that the white audience is eager to view an authentic Indigenous performance, but at the same time has a fixed mindset on how an authentic performance should look like. Therefore, no profound discovery and understanding of Indigenous culture can take place, as the audience secretly refuses to immerse in Aboriginal culture, but rather expects the reinforcement of existing stereotypes of the exotic other. This danger is also emphasized by Higgins who points out that Indigenous performances might “[...] enshrine their culture’s stereotypes of the “other”

instead of moderating these stereotypes and leading the players and the audience to a more sophisticated understanding of the individuals and cultures portrayed” (201).

The paradox of having little or no insight into Aboriginal culture, but subsequently demanding an authentic performance and seemingly knowing how this performance should look like is not new. According to Magowan: “Despite the fact that change in Indigenous performance has been ongoing since contact, “purity” and “naturalness” are still implicit in the logic that Aboriginal performance should reflect some illusory static and irretrievable past, whilst the West takes pride in its own culture being flexible and malleable enough to be able to cope with being in a continual state of flux” (314). It is still a widely common belief that there exists no such thing as a modern Indigenous identity. As stated by Muecke: “[a]ny in between “part-Aboriginal” cultures were due for assimilation, just as the traditional one was supposed to die out under the impact of modernization” (158). However, the stereotype of Indigenous culture being stuck in the past and therefore due for assimilation is clearly false. This stereotype can be invalidated when observing contemporary Indigenous dance which is representative of the ever-changing contemporary relevance that the Indigenous culture has in modern times.

4.2 Cross-cultural understanding – prospects and opportunities

In order to receive a profound understanding of Indigenous culture and identity, Indigenous dances must be examined in its social and cultural context, preferably by a face-to-face encounter in a truly authentic setting, namely *on country* (Monika Stevens, personal interview 2016). An authentic setting does not necessarily imply that tourists must travel to remote tribal areas. Truly authentic performances can also be viewed at the annually held festival such as the Laura Dance Festival. The crucial point is that the performances at the Laura Dance Festival are not intended at tourists only, but rather function as celebrating and strengthening Indigenous identity. A substantial part of the festival’s visitors is Indigenous; therefore, the performances are not specifically aimed at white tourists, but at Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who want to access Aboriginal culture through dance and music.

The spatial semantics are maintained during the performances, as the performers do not dance on a Western like stage front facing the audience, but dance in circles, presenting their back to the audience. The dance groups often come from remote areas and even when performing for a white audience, they are not tourist oriented. These performances have a power which tourist performances often lack, as they are accompanied by a song man, instruments from their region and music in their own language.

According to Galliford: “[...] cultural tourism can help develop the perception and attitudes of Australian tourists towards not only Aboriginality, but their own national identity” (15). Self-awareness, which can only be achieved when carefully observing one’s own national identity, is the first step to cross-cultural understanding. Observing one’s own national identity is particularly challenging when dealing with the problematic history of colonization. In the Australian context, this is especially problematic, as the settlement strived for an exclusive white identity by removing half-caste children from their families, but was simultaneously always confronted with Indigenous presence. Nowadays, the doctrine of *terra nullius* has been overturned, Australia recognizes Indigenous peoples’ land and there is a strong wish for reconciliation. Nevertheless, most of the white population of Australia does not engage with the Aboriginal people and has little or no knowledge about Indigenous perspectives, attachments to land and cultural traditions. However, as the term of reconciliation has become the dominant socio-political discourse defining relations between Aboriginal people and white Australians in the public domain, some do seek to explore Indigenous Australian culture and tradition.

One important aspect when viewing cultural dance celebrations on country is the intimacy that can be created through personal contact. Personal contact has the strong power to break through persistent romantic or primitivist discourses that define authentic Aboriginality in the popular imagination. Thus, as a point of contact, Aboriginal tourism can be a powerful companion on the reconciliation journey. However, it is important to keep in mind that despite the excessive use of the term reconciliation in socio-political discourse, it is left open how this can be achieved. But in the end, it is the interaction with Aboriginal people on an intimate level that represents the essence of reconciliation and the opportunity for mutual understanding and cross-cultural awareness. Observing dance and ceremonies on country can therefore offer a reconciliatory experience.

Through the observation and participation in traditional Aboriginal dance which offers rich insights into Aboriginal culture, the binaries of “self” and “other” or “us” and “them” can be deconstructed. Therefore, it is crucial that the tourist does not view the performance through the tourist – or colonial lens but fully engages in it. As stated by Galliford: “For some Australian tourists, visiting Aboriginal places ‘at home’ can offer a serious pause of reflection, ultimately perhaps, even a new way of thinking about Aboriginality, Aboriginal issues *and* themselves. For some, it may even be the beginning of a new way in becoming Australian” (242).

The journey of reconciliation and cross-cultural understanding is not an easy one. To understand dance in its cultural context, the viewer must step out from the audience's point of view and conceive body and movements from the performer's point of view. Not only the dance itself, but all its surroundings, the actions, the energies, objects, places, people and sounds should be brought to attention. Furthermore, the beat and rhythm are essential. It is crucial to understand the rhythm and "[...] how that rhythm is expressed, musically, physically, spatially, its colour, its energy, its variety" (Siegel 192).

Furthermore, the structural elements must be examined, for instance, the segments of each dance and how they are marked off. Important questions can arise such as: When do the segments of each dance change and what triggers those changes? Is the structure of the dance always repeated in the same way or does it occur extemporaneously? The above-mentioned factors are very important when examining a performance, as they have been selected and refined by the tribe and the development during the dance can be read as a text that gives important insights into culture and tradition.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Aboriginal dance all those details have to be considered as they do not appear coincidentally, but serve a particular purpose. Only by examining the dance surroundings, the energy, the place, the people, the beat, the rhythm and the structural elements one can engage in Indigenous dancing and its deeper meaning. If one is truly willing to engage in the tribal dance performance, the performance will offer rich insights into one of the oldest cultures of the world and a temporary access to community, spirituality and belonging.

To truly engage in an Indigenous performance means to momentarily step outside one's own culture frame. It demands from the spectator to pay attention to country and its stories which are inextricably intertwined. The story of *country* which is also a story of *being* and *belonging* cannot be accessed through words but only through seeing, listening and feeling. It demands from the audience to be able to listen to history, to sense and experience the environment and the stories it holds. Ultimately it also requires an experience of loss and disconnection from time, as we know it.

After having explored dance as a tool for non-verbal communication and cross-cultural understanding, attention will be now drawn to the recent past of Indigenous dance and theatre performances. Since the 1970s, Aboriginal activism has been enacted and reinforced by dance and theatre performances. Especially in Indigenous ghettos, such as Redfern (Sydney), Aboriginal people came together to fight against social injustice and oppression. Dance and

theatre was a driving force behind their ongoing activism, as it has the potential to address serious topics in a multitude of different ways.

5. Performance as a protest

In the following chapter theatre and dance as a means of raising awareness for current social and political issues will be examined. The main reason for including theatre performances, as well as dance performances, is that Indigenous resistance and protest as an art form was initiated with the Black Theatre in Redfern. Furthermore, the theatre includes not only Aboriginal drama, but also dance, music, song and culture as well as contemporary performance.

Since the arrival of Captain Cook 1770 in Botany Bay Aboriginal people have been facing an ongoing struggle. The arrival of the European settlers set an abrupt end to their traditional, peaceful way of life which was marked by a strong sense of connectedness towards their ancestors and their country. The devastating effects of the Australian Assimilation Policy which took place in 1937 destroyed a multitude of Indigenous families by separating children from their parents. It was not till 1967 that Aboriginal people were granted citizenship and the right to vote. Despite ongoing oppression and assimilation policies some Aboriginal tribes, predominantly in the Northern Territory, such as Arnhem Land, maintained their traditional way of life including law and culture and their connectedness to country.

Prior to 1967, legislation restricted and controlled the movements of the Indigenous population within the reserves. After the 1967 referendum, which shifted legislative responsibility to the federal government, the populations on the reserves were forced to leave. This resulted in a dramatic increase of the Indigenous Australian population of Sydney. While prior to 1967 only approximately 2000 Aboriginals lived in Sydney, that number rose to 35 000 by 1969. Although there were more possibilities in the city this did not necessarily provide more opportunities for the Indigenous population. Thus, the overall poverty and other related issues such as drug and alcohol abuse occurred in the urban areas and remain present till today. As stated by Morgan & Gulson: “[...] Indigenous people are caught in cultural limbo, dwelling in the shadows of modern society, destined to remain excluded from mainstream opportunities” (266).

5.1 The Black Theatre in Redfern

Although officially Aboriginal people have nowadays the same rights and opportunities as the white population, racism and inequality still takes place. Negative stereotypes and prejudices are maintained, mainly because there is little interaction between Aboriginals and the White population. According to Attwood “[...] the place of Aboriginal people and Aboriginality in Australian democracy rests to a large degree on representation because, in as much as the majority of settler Australian know Aboriginal people, they only do so via the stories and symbols that circulate in various media rather than through face-to-face encounters” (172). Thus, existing stereotypes, such as that many Indigenous people have drug and alcohol related problems, are reinforced.

Marcia Langton continues those thoughts by stating in her book *Well, I Heard it in the Radio and Saw it on the Television* (33).

The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and symbols created by their predecessors. They relate to stories told by former colonists [and] the constant stereotyping, iconising and mythologising of Aboriginal people by white people who never had any substantial first-hand contact with Aboriginal people.

The result of the extensive migration wave from the reserves into the cities was the development of ghettos. The Aboriginals were concentrated in the poorer parts of Sydney such as Redfern, Alexandria and Newtown. The large Aboriginal population in Redfern realized the need for collective organizations. Thus, an Aboriginal medical service centre and food programs were established. But not only substantial needs such as food and medicine were provided. Aboriginal people, who were still fighting for their rights and equality of chance, raised social and political awareness through the establishment of the Black Theatre in Redfern. Redfern quickly became the heart of Aboriginal Sydney and focus for urban activism. Due to the lack of financial resources the first theatre performances took place as guerrilla theatre and were performed on the streets of Sydney. The theatre’s focus was to raise awareness for the social and political struggles which were closely linked to the land rights struggles.

The land rights struggles reached its peak on the 26th of January 1972 when Aboriginals set up a tent embassy in front of the Parliament House in Canberra. After the tent embassy had been forcefully removed in July 1972, the Black Theatre Dance Group performed the *Dance of the Embassy*. The dance was a symbolic re-enactment of the Tent Embassy, portraying the ongoing history of conflicts between Aboriginals and European settlers. The National Black Theatre’s first commercial theatre show was *Basically Black*. In *Basically Black* the colonist gaze was satirised, using comedy as a strategy for questioning cultural underpinnings of racist narratives.

Australian literature expresses the colonialist gaze that renders the non-white person as a fixed identity, collectivised, no matter what interior differences exist among them (Casey 83).

One sketch, which was described as bitterly comic, involved an aggressive Euro-Australian labourer and an Indigenous Australian in a bar. The exchange between the two characters quickly became aggressive and ended in a fight. At the end of the sketch the Aboriginal, after being beaten and kicked half to death, is arrested for assault (Casey 55). This sketch intended to raise awareness for the injustices the Aboriginal population was facing daily. It showed that the police were explicitly biased against Aboriginals and that there were racial disparities at many levels of law enforcement from drug-related arrests to use of force. Of course, those biases were not unique to police. However, in matters of criminal justice, implicit bias can have life-altering implications.

The theatre performance was immensely successful and was much-noticed by established newspapers such as the Sydney Morning Herald. It was a historical event, as for the first time, a predominantly White middle-class audience could see Indigenous people presenting their view of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous society. Foley's statement in the press at the time is indicative of the group's success in achieving their aims:

We are getting through to white audiences with *Basically Black*. But more importantly, we are getting through to black people. I must have talked to thousands of people from the political platform, but I never felt I was getting through as well as I am at the Nimrod theatre.

(Casey 55)

With this quote Foley emphasises the importance of *Basically Black* as part of Aboriginal activism that specifically addresses the Indigenous population. The play stresses the bitter truth of bias and unfair treatment directed against Aboriginals, from law enforcement to institutional levels, ranging through all levels of society. The play was therefore aimed at encouraging the Indigenous population to take a strong stance for Aboriginal rights.

One of the Black Theatre's first formal theatre productions was *The Cake Man* that was first staged in 1975. The play was written "[...] as an expression of what to be the root causes of Aboriginal despair" (Merritt 25). The play focuses on three members of the same family, namely, Ruby, Sweet William and their offspring Pumpkin Head, who are trying to survive the hard life on the mission. Furthermore, it stresses the injustices and exploitations the Aboriginals had to suffer while simultaneously being forced to assimilate into Western society. The theatre production is divided into three parts. Part one, is a theatrical reproduction of Anglo-Saxon

invasion in colonial times. It shows the Indigenous family being invaded by a catholic priest, a civilian and a soldier. The cake man, who will later become a crucial role in the play, is also introduced in the first part. The Aboriginal family is sent to a mission in the outback in act one where the rest of the play takes place.

The second act is a monologue by the father Sweet Williams. In a long and intoxicated speech, he reflects on his life on the mission. This sets out some of the main themes of the play, namely racial subjugation and drug and alcohol abuse to escape the hard life on the mission. Act two and three portray the family's poverty-stricken life on the mission. The family lives in a shack with only the most important necessities. The most powerful figure of the play is the mother Ruby who must deal with her husband, who is an alcoholic, and his hopelessness. In the meantime, Pumpkinhead becomes more and more angry at the family's living conditions and his father's inability to change their situation.

Pumpkinhead has been stealing coal to keep the shack warm through the winter nights, but Civilian catches him in the act one night and he is forced to return the stolen coal. When returning the coal, he finds a large box which the boy and Civilian bring back to the mission. Civilian has now transformed into the Cake Man, and all of a sudden, the stage is filled with Aboriginal children grasping at him. The appearance of the Cake Man takes the play to a new metaphysical level. It is not clear if the event occurs in Pumpkinhead's dream or if the occurrence is real. Dream and reality, as well as Christian symbolism and Dreamtime narratives seem to merge together. The fusion of Christianity and the Aboriginal story of creation are embodied by the Cake Man. The Cake Man; therefore, blends into a hybrid symbol – half-Jesus, half-Aboriginal spirit. He was sent by God to bring cake to all children. However, he was blinded by evil men and cannot find the Aboriginal children, only the “gubba” children (aboriginal slang for a “white” person).

Pumpkinhead: And then the Cake Man lose his way, and can't see because his eyes is blind, and he can't see the Kuri boys, only the gubba kids he see ever since them bad men done that! Cake Man's a blind man ...

(Merritt 42)

In the last act of the play Sweet William travels to Sydney to find a work opportunity. However, what awaits him there is a change for the worse, as he is unjustly taken into custody as soon as he reaches Sydney. The play ends with an epilogue from Sweet William's in which he addresses the Cake Man.

“Two realities. [Pause]. And I’ve lost one. [Pause]. But I want it back ... I need it back. [Pause].
Not yours ... mine.”

(Merritt 95)

The Cake Man displays the search for Indigenous identity in a contemporary context and in a world where many Aboriginals have lost their traditions and connection to culture, but simultaneously are denied access into Western society. This is clearly reflected in Sweet William’s dream to go to Sydney.

Rube, I’ll just go down to that Sydney, I’m gonna be lucky and get a job and find somewhere that’s gonna be ours, and soon buy a big red house like Pumpkinhead wants and clothes and a ‘lectric iron for you, ‘lectric light, too, and plenty of tucker for the kids that we could buy out of my good job I’ll get. I can work, Rube, you know I can. Job, that’s all it needs.

(Merritt 79)

Sweet William’s degree of acculturation becomes present, as he expresses his wish for materialistic things. However, he has no chance of realizing his goals, as he is not accepted in the White system. The production of *The Cake Man* was perceived as an important milestone by those involved in the theatre. It was the most important and most successful play of the National Black Theatre. The play was regarded as the first full-length play written by an Aboriginal playwright and produced, directed and performed by an exclusively Aboriginal theatre company. Even more important was the fact that it was the first Indigenous-controlled production that received recognition by a wide Aboriginal and Non-Aboriginal audience.

Another Indigenous theatre play that received wide recognition was *Here Comes the Nigger* from Gerry Bostock who had been actively involved in the tent embassy demonstrations. The play tackled the issues of racism and sexism in Australia and was the first play by an Aboriginal writer, set in an urban environment, to achieve any profile outside the Indigenous communities.

Here Comes the Nigger deals mainly with the topic of sightlessness on multiple levels. Sam Matthews, one of the protagonists, is a blind Indigenous poet. Moreover, not only actual – but also symbolic blindness is tackled in the play. Sam Matthews, who is an Aboriginal, meets weekly with the white woman Odette O’Brien his tutor. The protagonists slowly develop a deep friendship which later turns into a relationship. Here the theme of symbolic blindness is explored. Due to their deep affection for each other they become “colour blind” by overcoming racial preconceptions. However, the society, including their close friends and family, condemn this mix-raced relationship. It is important to point out that *Here Comes the Nigger* is the first

Indigenous Australian play that takes place in an urban environment. Consequently, police violence and unjust treatment of Aboriginals by police men is a central theme that runs throughout the whole play. Furthermore, the play underlined the solidarity of the Aboriginals living in the black city ghettos, such as Redfern, and their commitment to collective resistance and activism.

5.2 The Noongar Theatre

Whereas the plays of the National Black Theatre focused mainly on Koori and Murri stories, the Indigenous population of modern day New South Wales and Queensland, the Noongar theatre portrayed the life and struggles of the Noongar people in Western Australia. The first Noongar writer to achieve commercial mainstream production was Jack Davis who narrated stories about the history between the Noongar people and the Europeans, including the conflicts, life under the protection legislation, life in the mission and in an urban context. Davis was known among the Indigenous art scene for having participated in the workshops of the National Black Theatre in Sydney in 1975 where he also had presented his own performance *The Biter Bit*. Later in 1979 Davis wrote one of his most important plays named *Kullark* which has been described as a documentary on the history of Aboriginals in Western Australia (Hewett 82).

The play begins by describing the forcible separation of families and communities and the removal of the Aboriginal people to the reserves. Furthermore, it pictures the discrimination against the Indigenous population during a multitude of occasions in their daily life. The theatre production presents the Yorlah family. Alec Yorlah, a man with low expectations on life has turned to alcohol to cope with his problems. As his son's disgust for him grows throughout the play, the viewer sees flashbacks of Alec's life struggles and his biggest dream to live as an equal in his own country. Moreover, the audience becomes witness of Alec's son Jaimie dealing with the police and legal issues. Although in separate times, both must fight for survival in a racist world. The only difference is that Alec has already given up, escaping reality through drugs and alcohol. Not only the presentation of Aboriginal struggles in an urban setting was ground-breaking, but also the set-up of the theatre stage was very innovative. The external world of Western Australia was represented as Waargul the Rainbow Serpent, meaning that the action was framed and defined by Aboriginal maps within the Noongar perspective.

The play is a documentary on the history of Aboriginals in Western Australia, as it begins with the first contact of the Noongar people with the Europeans, culminating in the death of Yagan

1833, and covers the forcible separation of families and communities. However, it does not stop there, but presents a detailed picture of Indigenous discrimination and hopelessness in the contemporary Australian society. It was remarkable that it was the first theatre production in Western Australia that evolved around Aboriginals in an urban setting. Theatre productions in Western Australia during the 1970s and 1980s were among the most conservative and Anglo centric in whole Australia. Therefore, for many audience members, it was the first time to see an Indigenous theatre play that did not portray the performers as an archaic tribe from ancient times (Broome 35). Indigenous people sitting around a kitchen table provided a plain but very powerful message. Namely that Aboriginal people were alive and no matter how hard the Western Australian government had tried to control their lives, they were free individuals and part of modern day Australia.

Encouraged by the success of his first theatre production *Kullark*, Davis wrote the theatre play *No Sugar* in 1985. *No Sugar* was staged at the Festival of Perth in 1985. The play dealt with the specific problems by the Aboriginal population that lived on the outskirts of Northam. “It concentrates on the fragmentation of the Aboriginal family, forced dislocation, and the abuse of authority that Aboriginals were subjected to in the camps and reserves” (Carroll 100). The theatre production focuses on a family that was forced to dislocate from their hometown on to a mission station.

The play is based on a true story, as in 1933 the entire Aboriginal population of Northam was arrested and sent to the Moore River Settlement. The living conditions at the Moore River reservation camp were horrendous, “[a]s a general assessment had found out that the settlement offered Aboriginal people an inadequate diet, a lack of work opportunities and training facilities, and a high mortality rate (Casey 150). Nevertheless, the play that is relentlessly honest, ends on a positive note as it demonstrates the family’s and the community’s survival and resilience.

The play highlights the normalised racism against Indigenous Australians which becomes evident in the white key characters of the play, such as the chief protector Mr Neville, and the head of the settlement Mr Neal. Davis successfully shows that racist policies are entrenched throughout the whole political system. However, Davis does not present every white character as racist, he introduces a variety of different characters with differing views about the Indigenous population. While those in a position of power are overtly racist, many who have real-life experience with Indigenous families are more compassionate and tolerant. This offers a very powerful message, namely that racism is often due to fixed stereotypes and a lack of

real-life encounters. Furthermore, it gives the hope that racism can be overcome if White- and Indigenous Australians approach and interact with each other.

5.3 Political dance performances held in public

Indigenous performances can deliver a very strong political message, but often these messages are not that straightforward and must be deciphered by the audience. Therefore, interpretive moves are required to read Indigenous dance as a political text. White audiences often fail to realize the political potential of Indigenous performances, such as in the case of the prime minister John Howard who visited Elcho Island in 1997 and “[...] was led through the most secret component of one the Yolgnu ceremony, the Ngarra, or fertility ritual on Elcho Island” (Magowan 318).

The prime minister had been invited to view the secret corroboree, and therefore had been treated with the highest respect by the Yolgnu community. Howard failed to realize that he was obliged to return an equal favour by reinstating Native Title rights. As stated by Magowan: “In the dance, the Ngarra ground took on symbolic and political value equivalent to a Western court room and something akin to the street space outside the High Court” (318). The politically very sensitive issue of Native Title rights was mediated through the symbolic power of dance, and therefore had been put in their own judicial structures. However, Howard was unable to recognize this strong political message. This raises the question about “[...] how politicians might need to rethink the taken-for-granted epistemological grounds on which they expect to negotiate political issues when they are continually being repositioned within Indigenous performative contexts (Magowan 318).

This example clearly shows that the mainstream societal assumption, that views law and the judicial system as universal, independent and neutral, is fundamentally wrong. There is no universal judicial system, as it must always be viewed in the context of culture and the social reality of its participants. In this case, the Yolgnu community had applied their own judicial system through dance to achieve justice. However, their judicial system and their political agenda, concealed in dance, had not been recognized as such. For a White Australian to recognize the importance and correctly respond to this corroboree, he would have to know and understand Indigenous cosmology and culture.

Another highly significant event, that delivered a political message through its performance and its spatial setting, was the *Welcome to country* dance by Matilda House Williams, the Ngamberi-Ngunnawal Elder who is the traditional custodian of present-day Canberra, the land

on which the Parliament House stands. As stated by Gay: “A Welcome to country is an ancient Aboriginal custom, a courtesy extended to visitors, a formal proceeding which out it would be dangerous to travel into someone else’s country” (49).

This performance delivered a very strong political message, as it acknowledged Aboriginal people as the traditional custodians of their land. It was revolutionary in the sense that it was the first *Welcome to country* performance that was held in a formal setting, namely the opening of the 42nd Parliament of Australia. According to Gay: “The decision by the incoming Rudd government to include an Aboriginal Welcome to Country as part of the opening ceremonies of the new parliament was, thus, a highly significant political act” (50). However, the present politicians Kevin Rudd and Brendon Nelson had clearly no knowledge of the nature of the songs and the dances. Therefore, they were forced to fall back in aesthetic categories when acknowledging the performance by stating that it was indeed a very welcoming and entertaining performance. By treating the performance as mere entertainment the politicians failed to realize the strong political message this dance offers, as they did not seek to understand what was being conveyed.

According to Casey: “Indigenous Australian performance drawing on historical practices is recognized as a form of performative politics within the cross-cultural context” (53). However, cross-cultural communication that raises political awareness can only take place when the White audience actively engages in the performance and its underlying meanings. This is only seldom the case, as Magowan points out in her article “Dancing with a Difference”, published in the *Journal of Anthropology* (317):

Aboriginal groups are performing statements of their Indigenous rights when important political issues are at stake and politicians are being forced to participate in the conditions of Indigenous dance contexts. In these contemporary performance events, the non-transparency of Indigenous dance, coupled with the rising profile of Indigenous politics, is forcing both politicians and the public to participate as co-producers of meaning rather than as tacit consumers.

As mentioned previously, the politicians who were involved commented on the performance as being “welcoming and entertaining”. By labelling a dance, that delivers such a strong political message, as “entertaining”, clearly the politicians had failed to recognize its significance. Furthermore, they had positioned themselves and the White audience as tactic consumers, as people who wish to be entertained and not as co-producers of meaning.

Nowadays the focus of Indigenous dance performances has shifted. Although dance performances are still carried out to raise social and political awareness, the aim is often to address Indigenous and Non-Indigenous audiences likewise and thus, create a bridging device. The performances, though still political, do not have to be exclusively that. As can be observed from the Bangarra Dance Theatre and other theatre – and dance companies, who merge traditional and contemporary Indigenous dance, performances can range from purely aesthetic to political. Indigenous dance is now open to interpretation, not an art form that is frozen in the past, neither exclusively a means for raising social and political awareness. In the following chapter, three Aboriginal theatre and dance companies, who aim at mixing traditional with contemporary dance forms, will be explored in more detail.

6. Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Performances

As stated in the previous chapter, the National Black Theatre in Redfern was the starting point of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander activism. The Indigenous population wanted to gain a voice and raise awareness of past and current social and political issues. The Theatre was a starting point for many Indigenous artists to express their conflicted past and current issues through art. Furthermore, it influenced many other artists to initiate a platform where they could express themselves in a creative way and at the same time help the Indigenous population escape social problems such as poverty and the abuse of drugs and alcohol.

6.1 Aboriginal Dance Theatre Redfern

The Aboriginal Theatre in Redfern was founded by Christine Donnelly who had also actively been involved in the National Black Theatre. The following information were passed on through a personal, ethnographic interview with Christine at the Dance Theatre in Redfern, Sydney during the period of March 2016 till June 2016. Christine Donnelly established the Aboriginal Dance Theatre in Redfern in 1979 where there was an immensely high rate of poverty, youth unemployment and illiteracy among the Aboriginal population. Her mission was to “motivate young unchallenged people through dance and art” (Donnelly, personal interview, 2016). Her school immersed young Aboriginal people into the study of dance and its related subjects such as theatre, culture and performance. Her performing arts school offered a pedagogy that emphasized spiritual growth and community development.

Christine had the idea to establish the Aboriginal Dance Theatre in the early 1970s but it was not till 1979 that the theatre was founded. As a big inspiration, she named the ongoing activism

in Redfern from the 1970s onwards. Redfern, which quickly became the Aboriginal ghetto of Sydney after the 1967 referendum, was the heart of Aboriginal activism. The Indigenous population was fighting for better living condition and more social awareness. The Indigenous community of Redfern became actively involved in that process by establishing the Aboriginal Medical Centre and the National Black Theatre in the early 1970s.

The Aboriginal dancer Christine Donnelly had not only completed a six-week drama workshop at the National Black Theatre but was also actively involved when she choreographed the theatre's fashion parade in 1975. She supported the National Black Theatre from the very beginning and inspired by the NBT she established the Aboriginal Dance Theatre in the heart of Redfern in 1979. The Dance Theatre opened many opportunities for its participants as it brought them back their culture that they had been forbidden to practice since the arrival of the European settlers. Due to this prohibition for centuries most Indigenous people were completely disconnected from their culture and the Dance Theatre was the first opportunity for them to discover their roots.

Although it is rather a school than a dance theatre, offering its participants an extensive training in Aboriginal dance and culture, she named it a theatre in order to stress the holistic view she wants to mediate. Furthermore, the dance theatre offers mid-year and end-year performances that are open to the public. The theatre includes Aboriginal drama, dance, music, song and culture, as well as contemporary performances such as jazz dance and hip hop. The whole heritage, background and management belongs to the Koori community, the Aboriginal territory which is now labelled as New South Wales. For Christine, this is a crucial point which she stresses throughout the interview by saying: "This is about New South Wales Aboriginal culture and people having the rights to their own country".

The schools approach in teaching dance is very unlike those of Western dance schools. The students, that often travel from remote areas to participate in one of the courses, usually do not stay longer than four weeks. In those four weeks, a very extensive training is offered daily. Not only the students but also the teachers often come from remote areas and only travel to Redfern to teach one dance in those four weeks. In a four-week period, not only the dance is taught, but also the accompanying music, instruments, the language, the cultural background and its meaning according to the ancestral past of the country from which the dance originates.

The dances that are taught are usually play dances, rather than ceremony dances. A ceremony dance would require much more cultural knowledge than a play dance and can therefore not be learnt in four-weeks. Furthermore, it is highly important that the teacher and the students come

from the same region as the dance that is taught. Aboriginal people who come from the same region are regarded as family amongst each other because they share the same ancestral line and the rights to their own country, including all the cultural traditions such as music and dance that have been passed on through generations

According to the cultural Aboriginal law, a person is only entitled to teach or perform a dance if the dance comes from his region, meaning that it originates from his ancestral line. For example, a member of the Koori tribe (NSW region) is only entitled to teach a Koori dance. He is not entitled to teach or even perform a dance from the Murri tribe (Victoria region). An exception can only be made if a member from the Murri tribe is present and has given him the permission to carry out the Murri dance. The same applies for music instruments such as the yidaki which is widely known as the didgeridoo. The custodians of the yidaki originate from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. Although the yidaki is nowadays one of the most famous symbols of Aboriginality and is played by many Indigenous people throughout the country, often as a touristic attraction, only the tribes of Arnhem Land are officially entitled to play it. Another example is the boomerang and the clapsticks which originate from Central Australia.

Teachers and students that travel from remote areas to participate in the dance theatre usually do not stay longer than a four-week period. Aboriginal people who do not live in an urban setting but in Australia's countryside are usually much more connected to their country and their tribe members. It would be impossible for many to stay away from their country longer than four-weeks, as they would feel disconnected from their country.

Christine's main focus was to attract the Indigenous youth living in Redfern and its surroundings in order to give them an understanding of their own culture. Many Indigenous people living in an urban setting, such as Sydney, were disconnected from their own culture and heritage. Moreover, they were struggling with social problems such as poverty, racism and a lack of opportunities. Many of her students came from shattered family backgrounds and were escaping their problems through alcohol and drug abuse. The dance theatre should give them the opportunity to express themselves creatively and to learn about their own culture which many of them knew nothing about.

In order to attract the Aboriginal youth, Christine offered jazz dance and hip-hop courses, which she taught herself. Initially these courses found much more interest than the traditional Aboriginal dance classes. It was the music the Indigenous youth was listening to in private and was therefore much more attractive than traditional Aboriginal music. Christine stated that the

Aboriginal youth almost frightened of traditional Aboriginal music. It was not till the early 1980s that Christine was able to attract Indigenous young people to participate in Aboriginal dance classes. The participation in traditional Aboriginal dance classes involved much more than just coming to class. The participants were also taken to the bush to learn more about their own cultural heritage. Many of them, being born and raised in urban Sydney, had never left the outskirts of Redfern before.

As it has been mentioned earlier, there is an ongoing movement to mix traditional Aboriginal dance with contemporary dance. Although many dance companies such as the Bangarra Dance Theatre are very successful with that concept, Christine does not believe in mixing traditional with contemporary dance. For her, this is also a legal issue. As traditionally performers are only allowed to perform the dance that originates from their country, it is a very difficult undertaking to mix different dance styles and still maintain the traditional rules. By the cultural law, when a dance style from a certain tribe is incorporated into one's own dance, a person from the tribe must allow it and be present during the performance. In contemporary Aboriginal dance productions, this rule is often violated. For dance companies that mix traditional Aboriginal dance and contemporary dance, it is therefore crucial that a cultural adviser is present. Furthermore, Christine stresses that the contemporary Aboriginal dance must be made by a true Aboriginal and not by a white person or a white minded Aboriginal.

One ongoing problem that the dance theatre is facing is the governmental funding. During the time the interview was held, Christine stated that currently there were no classes operating. The board of the theatre had been waiting for an official response from October 2016 till May 2017 and then had received the answer that government funding for the financial year 2017/18 had been declined. Nevertheless, the theatre is planning to re-open and start courses for the year 2018 even without government funding. As the theatre always had problems with government funding, therefore they are trying to operate as independently as they can. The management of the theatre has been able to offer courses even without government funding, as both buildings in which the theatre operates belonged to them.

However, in recent years there has been an ongoing conflict between the Australian government and the board of the dance theatre regarding the ownership of the property. The building had been property of the dance theatre for more than 20 years, nevertheless, the government had claimed that the ownership was not rightful. Years of legal dispute have now brought the result that the government is willing to give the property back but only with additional stipulations. Those stipulations include that the government has the right to take the building from the dance

theatre if certain requirements are not met. Christine refused to agree to that, as she claimed ownership for the property without additional stipulations. Furthermore, she submitted a claim for compensation, as one of the buildings that served as a venue for the dance theatre could not be used while the legal conflict was ongoing. Despite these conflict, Christine is very dedicated in keeping the dance theatre alive.

During the interview, Christine also mentioned the Bangarra Dance Theatre, which is a very successful Indigenous Australian contemporary dance company. Stephen Page has become the artistic director in 1991 and since then the dance theatre has developed from low-budget productions to an annually national-wide tour throughout Australia performing in venues such as the Sydney Opera House. Students from the Dance Theatre in Redfern and the NAISDA who want to pursue a professional career in dancing usually try to get into the cast of the Bangarra Dance Theatre. However, usually only few students achieve this goal. Christine believes that they should be a middle step between graduating from the Dance Theatre in Redfern or NAISDA and dancing professionally for Bangarra, were the students should learn at least for one year how to work in a professional dance company. Furthermore, she is criticising Bangarra for working with black Indigenous and white people, as she believes the theatre company should only stage its show with Indigenous people. Although Christine pointed out that the mix of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal dance can cause problems such as legal issues, she does believe that Bangarra is doing it right because they do include the cultural aspects in their performances and show the differences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

6.2 NAISDA - The National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association

The National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance college that was founded in 1976. The Bangarra Dance Theatre developed from NAISDA, therefore, many NAISDA graduates are part of the current Bangarra cast. Moreover, the current artistic director at Bangarra Dance Theatre Stephen Page completed his studies at NAISDA. For its first thirty years NAISDA was located in the Sydney metropolitan area, namely in Redfern, Glebe and The Rocks. In 2007, the dance college relocated to the Central Coast in Gosford (New South Wales) which under its traditional name is Darkinjung Land.

In order to be accepted at the dance college all students have to participate in auditions. The audition process takes place at NASIDA over a 4-5-day period. The selection is then determined

by the training department staff. NAISDA students receive a profound education in American modern dance techniques and Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander dance and culture. Furthermore, the students can complete Certificate II, III and IV in dance or a Diploma degree in careers in dance.

The following information were passed on through a personal ethnographic interview with one of the members of the NAISDA management board, the artistic producer Monica Stevens and with the ethnographic choreographer Vicky Van Hout who teaches at NAISDA.

In 2014 the Sydney based Aboriginal dancer and choreographer Vicky Van Hout has won the prestigious \$30 000 New South Wales dance fellowship. Vicky, a Wiradjuri dancer who has been breaking new grounds with her inspiring political works, is the first Indigenous winner of the prize. Vicky's dance performances are always powerful and offer a political message. Moreover, she stresses the importance of dance as a medium of communication and mutual understanding. All the NAISDA end of the year shows, that are usually choreographed by Vicky Van Hout, contain a political message that is expressed through dance. The dance show from 2016 was called *Embassy* referring to the tent embassy that was set up by Aboriginal activists in Canberra in 1972. When the Aboriginal people were marching up the parliament house in Canberra they made a dance performance in front of the parliament which served as an inspiration for the current *Embassy* show. *Embassy* is therefore much more than just a dance show but it is telling a political story.

The artistic expression of Aboriginal people in the 1970s through dance, music, theatre and art was celebrated as a cultural revival by the Indigenous communities. Especially on Australia's east coast Indigenous communities have been reviving their dances, languages and their culture. Furthermore, Indigenous communities have gained the courage and the will to play an active role in Australia's society by opening businesses such as NAISDA. However, especially in the dance industry this process has been developing rather slow. According to Monika many Indigenous people have taken on the Western mindset, believing that dance is elitist or in the case of young Indigenous men, showing homophobic reactions to dance. She believes that many Indigenous people have forgotten their roots in dance and therefore their culture.

To bring the students, who are called developing artists, closer to the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander culture, NASIDA offers travel programs to remote areas where they can dance *on country* and learn first-hand from Aboriginal elders. The decision on where to travel is made by the academic training area and they choose who they want to work with. For the last four years NAISDA has been working very closely with the Indigenous population of Elcho Island,

located on the coast of Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and with the people from Tiwi Island which is located 80 km from Darwin and is part of the Northern Territory as well. Long lasting relationships with one tribe are favoured by both the board and the students. The exchange works both ways, students from NAISDA travel to Elcho Island and Aboriginal tutors from Elcho Island come to teach at the NAISDA college in Gosford. When students undertake these trips, it is called residency trips and they usually last two weeks.

Currently NAISDA has four annual residencies. During the college residency I and II, between two and six Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tutors leave their home communities to live on the campus at NAISDA. The students learn all aspects of the dance including the song, cultural understanding and costume-making. When the cultural tutors return home, the NAISDA teachers are responsible for the students rehearsing the dances throughout the year. Towards the end of the year, the students travel to the cultural tutor's homeland, this is called remote residency III. These residencies run for one week and are a transforming experience for the students. The students usually come from all over Australia, many of them from an urban setting, meaning that for many these trips are the first they have ever made to an Aboriginal territory where the Indigenous population still lives in its traditional way. There they gain in-depth insight into the cultural life and dance on country. The final visit for the year takes place when the cultural tutors return to NAISDA to teach and perform in NAISDA's annual End of Year Production. There the focus lays on the performance and production aspects in a contemporary theatre context.

The age of the students usually differs, with the youngest being 15 and the oldest 32 years old. Although NAISDA prefers to take students that have already completed their HSC (High School Certificate), it is not a requirement to enter in the dance college. Furthermore, the college offers entry points, meaning that if one already has experience in dancing it is not a necessity to start in year 1. Students with basic dance abilities that have received an acknowledged training can therefore start in year 2. Moreover, there are students who already have pursued a career in dance, but would like to participate in the dance college to learn about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance additionally.

The dance college does not only offer traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dance but also courses for other dance styles such as ballet or even tumbling. Furthermore, cultural classes take place. Each cultural class is about a group of dances from a specific country. The person that teaches this class is either from that country or has been given the permission by an elder from the country in question.

Every Friday the dance college has a cultural dance performance which is also open for ex-graduates from NAISDA who are willing to participate. During those cultural dance performances, different dances from the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island region are performed that have been learned in previous years. The purpose is to refresh the memory and to always have a repertoire of dances at hand. The current cultural Friday dance sessions focuses on dance from the Torres Strait, particularly from Moa Island, which is located in the Banks Channel of the Torres Strait region. Furthermore, the students will perform Aboriginal dances from the *Yolgnu* region which they have been visiting in a recent residency trip. Those cultural dance sessions are usually taped and later watched by the students to revise their dance moves.

Monika, who is originally from Yirrganydji country (present day Cairns), works at NAISDA as a dance consultant, artistic director, producer and choreographer. She graduated from NAISDA in 1988 and has been on several residency trips to Mornington Island, Roper River, Central Desert and Kimberly. Although she has many years of experience and a broad knowledge of Torres Strait Islander and Aboriginal dance, she stresses that she's not an expert in either of them because every country has its very own specific dances and its own cultural law. As she is very aware of the importance of the cultural law and has a lot of experience in implementing it, she is frequently contacted when other choreographers are concerned about infringing cultural law by adapting dance styles from other countries.

Generally, there is a big difference between Torres Strait Islander dance and Aboriginal dance. In the Torres Strait Island region, there are also many sit-down dances where the performers sit-down with their legs crossed, clapping their hands, whereas Aboriginal dance is characterised by a lot of foot movement such as shuffling the feet in rhythm of the drum beat, stamping, jumping and *shake-a-leg* which is originally from the Cape York Peninsula now known as Queensland. The Torres Strait Islander also have a lot of stand-up dances, but there are characterised by stamping on one spot and a lot of hand movements. Furthermore, dances differ in terms of gender. Usually there are gender based dances and songs where only men or women perform and there are combination dances where both genders perform together.

Moreover, the instruments differ from region to region. For example, in Mornington Island river rocks are used for clapping whereas in Arnhem Land, men use two Boomerangs and clap them together. The didgeridoo which originally comes from Arnhem Land (Northern Territory) has reached the Koori region (NSW) even prior to the European settlement through trading. Whereas the people who accompany the song with music such as the didgeridoo or the drum stick player are very important as well, it is only the song-man who knows the storyline of the

song. The story-line of a song is highly important, as it follows the creation story and is passed on from generation to generation.

The Aboriginal creation story that portrays the dreaming is often brought to stage for a Western audience. However, it can be difficult to portray for a Western audience. For showing reality vs non-reality often a scrim is used to portray the things that are not reality but can be classified as dreaming or myths. The performers dance behind the scrim to portray this, whereas reality is represented by the performance on stage in front of the scrim. NAISDA also uses motion capture to present these different dimensions of reality.

6.3 Bangarra Dance Theatre

As previously mentioned in this thesis, the Bangarra Dance Theatre developed out of NAISDA and the NAISDA graduate Stephen Page is the current artistic director of Bangarra. The dance theatre is an Indigenous Australian contemporary dance company which has been operating since 1989. It was founded by Carole Johnson, a US born dancer and activist who came to Sydney in 1972 with the Elco Pomare Dance Company. After her first visit, she returned to Sydney multiple times and participated in the Sydney Black Theatre workshop where she taught dance workshops in Redfern. Finally, she stayed in the country to work with Australia's Indigenous people and established the Bangarra Dance Theatre in 1989 (Rimmer 281).

Bangarra's headquarters can be found in Pier 4, a former industrial wharf that is located in Walsh Bay in Sydney's harbour. The location is close to the Sydney Opera house, where Bangarra performs annually when they are not touring internationally. The Bangarra Dance Theatre is the only continuous Indigenous dance company that has been filling Australia's main stages for 27 years. Furthermore, Bangarra is "[...] organisationally well governed, exceptionally well marketed, and committed – on the whole – to growing and enhancing outreach and education programmes, and contributing to a dance community that is more dynamic than it has ever been" (Lee 124). Their transparency and good organizational skills are crucial for their success; especially as Indigenous theatre companies have had ongoing struggles with government funding because they have been labelled as unorganized and little transparent. Whether this is true, or if there were stricter demands and scrutiny across all government-funded Indigenous activity remains open for debate.

The dance theatre offers a rich insight into a at least 40 000-year-old culture, their story of creation and the dreamtime. At the same time, it tackles social and political issues that appeared as aftermaths of the European settlement in 1770. Bangarra is therefore a unique dance

company that combines the past with the present through traditional and contemporary dance. As stated by Burridge: “Contemporary Aboriginal dance, and Aboriginal arts in general, is expressive of this struggle as well as the joy, optimism and belief in the power of the Dreaming and the continuation of the oldest surviving indigenous culture in the world today” (77).

Like the NAISDA dance college, Bangarra Dance Theatre holds ongoing connections with remote areas where Aboriginal communities live in a traditional way. Ongoing connections are held with the Yirrkala community in north East Arnhem Land. Those relationships are fundamental for the choreography and the creative process. Moreover, it is crucial that Indigenous elders from Yirrkala verify that every dance production is presented with integrity and is respecting the cultural laws.

Stephen Page, the current artistic director of Bangarra, is a descendant from the Nunukul people who originally inhabited the south-east of present day Queensland. After graduating from NAISDA, Stephen worked for the Sydney Dance Company, before he became the artistic director of Bangarra in 1991. Since then he has shaped the theatre with his unique choreographs and his ability of storytelling which combines past and present.

Djakapurra Munyarryun, who is a song man from the Yirrkala community, occupies a very important role in the dance company as a dancer and consultant. Munyarryun, who has never received institutionalized dance training, is not only part of the Bangarra cast, but also cultural adviser for the company. As a cultural representative or custodian, traditional songs and dances are authorized by him (Marshall 100). Stephen Page formed a strong relationship with Djakapurra Munyarryun quite early on in his career, during a visit to Yirrkala as a student at the National Aboriginal and Islander Dance School. The creative partnership of Stephen and Djakapurra, developed into a relationship between Bangarra and the entire Munyarryun clan. Their collaboration is marked not only by friendship, but by deep respect and the recognition of cultural laws and communal ownership. Bangarra has the right to use and reproduce dance, songs, and stories of the Munyarryun clan. However, the traditional ownership of those works will always reside in the Munyarryun clan.

Carole Johnson, the founder of Bangarra, voices some important thoughts on cultural ownership in her paper “Ideas on appropriation”, which is addressed to Indigenous artists (49).

Since appropriation is a fact of existence in a settler society that is also racist and an exchange of cultures is inevitable, the questions to ask are:

- 1) How or what can I individually do in my small way to make sure that the people, whose culture I'm borrowing and incorporating and making my own, are valued and counted and will be perceived as such by the dominant culture?
- 2) How can I make sure they are acknowledged, included, and a part of development and financially compensated?
- 3) What do I have to give up?

Initially, Carole Johnson was the artistic director of Bangarra, but because she had to divide her time between working in Australia and the US, Stephen Page was hired as artistic directors in 1991. A big part of Bangarra's success can be accredited to Stephen Page who has the extraordinary ability to create shows that speak to the Indigenous audiences as well as the white audience and enhances intercultural communication and understanding. As stated by Magowan: "[...] the wonder and resonance of Bangarra's performance lie in the visual power of the dance style and the stage lightning, displayed in such a way as to heighten charisma, to compel and reward intensity of the viewer's gaze and to suffuse the dancers with a mysterious aura. Fittingly to this statement is the fact that Bangarra means "to make fire" in Wiradjuri language (316).

One of Stephen Page's early works for Bangarra was *Praying Mantis Dreaming* which he choreographed in 1992. The story follows a young woman who grows up in an urban Aboriginal context and is trying to retrieve her roots, culture and spirituality in order to survive in present day urban Australia. In 1994 Stephen created *Ochres* based on spiritual symbolism and the healing power of the four colours of the Aboriginal colour palette which are earth pigments of red, black, yellow and white. Both dance productions have been accomplished in connection with the Yirrkala community. *Ochres* was an outstanding success and secured Bangarra's position as one of Australia's top dance companies.

Another early work of Stephen Page was *Pride* which was staged in 1993. The Bangarra cast was recorded and a short film for television was made from the dance production. *Pride* broaches the issue of Aboriginal deaths in police custody. Till the 1990s there was an ongoing struggle between the Indigenous population and the police. Aboriginal people were much more likely to be arrested than a white person and it was reported that "[...] 11 per cent of all custodial deaths were Aboriginal and that this number is disproportionate to the Aboriginal population" (Weiss 92). The performance of *Pride* begins with the depiction of an Aboriginal dancing in a traditional way on the beach. His body is adorned with paint and symbols, that only a certain Aboriginal tribe will be able to decipher. Subsequently, a new scene occurs, depicting a man sitting in a prison cell. His face is bruised, indicating that he was subject to police violence.

During the whole show images of traditional Aboriginal dancing, the urban setting of the former red-light district Kings Cross (Sydney) and a police cell are intertwined to contrast past traditions and present struggles. Stephen Page's dance productions never fail to address current social and political issues, such as the stolen generation, land rights and cultural diversity in the contemporary Australian society. As stated by Burridge: "The body is a powerful means of dialogue that transcends verbal language, and, through embodiment, encapsulates signs and symbols of place and belief" (86).

The Bangarra Dance Theatre was the first Indigenous Australian theatre company that broke new grounds by collaborating with the Australian ballet. Classical ballet and contemporary Indigenous dance was brought together by Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The performance, which was named *Rite*, was choreographed by Stephen Page in 1997. *Rite* represents the four elements earth, wind, fire and water and captures their spiritual elements through dance. Although the performance has received excellent reviews and was celebrated for recognizing Indigenous dance and enhancing cross-cultural collaboration and understanding, there have been critical voices as well. As stated by Marshall: "*The rite of spring* is in many ways a celebration of the fearsome sexual power of primitive culture" (98). The women that collapsed seductively into the arms of male dancers therefore continue to echo the work's origins in primitivist ideas of human sacrifice and sexual violence (Marshall 98).

Some critics saw the performance as a reinforcement of stereotypes by stating: "Bangarra's role within the project was, if anything, to add further credence to primitivist ideology by having it enacted by a group of both white dancers *and* their primitive Aboriginal other (Marshall 99). However, others celebrated it for its progressiveness and its ability to connect people beyond cultures. Bangarra certainly occupies a difficult role in trying to find the balance between tradition, progress and cross-cultural collaborations. According to Meekinson, Bangarra represents an "[...] urban folk caught up in a process of cultural reinvention in which they have to draw something truly "other" to constitute themselves as Indigenous in the here and now" (11).

Although its big success, Bangarra has received profound criticism and questions have been raised such as: "Can ceremonial songs, with all their hieratic force and splendour, make a journey into the commercial market place and not lose their soul?" (Lee 132). Concerning this question Bangarra stresses its ongoing relationship to country elders and that all productions are carried out respecting the cultural laws. Moreover, dance should never stagnate but should develop and grow with the new generations. Mixing traditional with cultural dance is therefore

not a disobedience to tradition and cultural laws, but rather an opportunity for innovation and risk taking.

As contemporary Aboriginal artists, performers practice a unique art form, where Indigenous cultural resources are constantly reappropriated with the forms and techniques of the modern West. This leaves urban Indigenous artists at times in a difficult position. As stated by Stephen Gray: “Such artists occupy a doubly marginal position within Australian political and artistic debate: on the one hand, they suffer the social and economic deprivation associated with their “Aboriginality”, while on the other they are stigmatized for not being “real” or “authentic” Aboriginal artists” (29). Furthermore, Bangarra had to tackle criticism regarding the heritage of its performers. As stated by Jones: “The Bangarra charter requires at least 70 per cent of the dancers to have either Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander heritage [...]”. The fact that it is not a necessity to have Indigenous roots to participate in an Indigenous dance theatre is highly disturbing for some Aboriginal people, such as Christine Donnelly, who stated that Bangarra “defeats its purpose” (personal interview, 2016). Other voices, however, have stated it as a desirable outcome to see Indigenous and non-Indigenous people work together. That way, mutual understanding and growth can be fostered, not only by addressing the white audience but by learning from each other’s culture and beliefs.

In the following chapter two Bangarra performances, namely *Fish* and *Ochre* will be analysed in more detail. It will be examined which traditional dance aspects are incorporated in the performance and how they are intertwined with contemporary movements. Furthermore, the deeper meaning of the show, going beyond mere entertainment to address current social issues, will be tackled.

7. Traditional Indigenous performances and their contemporary interpretation

The following chapter examines traditional Indigenous performances and how they are adapted into a contemporary setting to raise awareness for current social issues and promote cross-cultural understanding. Indigenous performances serve a variety of different functions, namely to pass culture on and keep past traditions alive. Moreover, they are enacted to address current problems that the Indigenous population is facing in the contemporary Australian society.

Many Aboriginal tribes have used music and dance in both sacred and non-sacred ceremonies. Sacred ceremonies are referred to as “closed” ceremonies, as they are not intended for everybody, whereas non-sacred ceremonies are called “open” ceremonies that can be seen by

anybody and where everybody can participate. Non-sacred ceremonies mostly fulfil a social function as friends and family gather together. However, “[...] even in these all-profane gatherings there is always a reference to the Dreaming dimensions and the dancers are not altogether ordinary human relatives and friends, as they also bring the Dreaming substance in their persons” (Engelhart 76-77). Therefore, sacred and non-sacred dance performances both are in deep connection with Aboriginal past and the period of creation. The main differences between sacred and non-sacred performances lie in the selection of songs, body movements and participants.

Sacred ceremonies can involve many parts of daily, including hunting and food gathering. In a traditional post hunting ceremony, such as the kangaroo dance, only the hunters can perform the dance. The Aboriginal kangaroo dance was traditionally performed in Western Australia by the people living on Wardandi and Bibbulman country. As most Aboriginal tribes they had the kangaroo as one of their most important food sources. Not only did they eat the kangaroo meat, but they utilized every aspect of the animal such as fur, skin and the bones as a sign of respect towards the animal.

This traditional kangaroo dance belongs into the category of the dreamtime stories which is a term devised by anthropologists for the Aboriginal story of creation. According to the Aboriginal believes, all plants and animals have been on earth before them, meaning that the humans must act as careers and custodians for what they have been given. It is for that reason, that the hunters do not only bring back the food to the camp, but celebrate the food they found by singing the story of the kangaroo. When performing the dance, the performers examine the behaviour of the animal, including the way the kangaroo moves, digs for water, fruits and vegetables, looks after his young and fights with other kangaroos. Those moves are then imitated by the male members of the tribe.

7.1 *Fish* – Bangarra Dance Theatre

One important contemporary interpretation of the traditional post hunting dance has been produced by the Bangarra Dance Theatre in 1999. The dance production called *Fish* explores the deeper meaning and connection between man and the landscapes. The stage setting was held in blue representing the sea. Some members of the cast were dancing with branches in their hand representing trees. This representation of trees held a strong cultural message, as it shows the intertwinement of the Aboriginal people with the nature around them. The nature does not only sustain them, it is part of them. As mentioned earlier, Indigenous people had a totem which

can be an animal, tree, plant, rock, hill, river or any other landform believed to be ancestrally related to a person. They considered themselves to be descended from their totem. This meant that ensuring their totems sustainment and wellbeing was vital for their own happiness and welfare.

During the performance the dancers simulate the act of hunting in the bush land. Furthermore, they often touch the floor with their hands and generally incorporate a variety of floor movements to express their strong connection to the land. The land has great importance to the Indigenous population as it connects them with their ancestors. Although the Aboriginal people did live a nomadic life, they usually stayed in the region of their ancestry. Christine Donnelly (personal interview, 2017) pointed out that Aboriginal people who still seek a traditional life do not feel comfortable to leave the land of their ancestors for a long period of time, as it makes them feel emotionally and physically unwell. In a Western world view, human culture is connected to the physical world, but Aboriginal traditions go further than this. The anthropologist W. H. Stanner sought to explain the fundamental difference between Aboriginal and European understanding of land (230):

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word “home”, as warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean “camp”, “hearth”, “country”, “everlasting home”, “totem place”, “life source”, “spirit centre” and much else all in one. Our word “land” is to spare and meagre. We cannot scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets. The Aboriginal would speak of earth and use it in a rich symbolic way to mean his “shoulder” or his “side”. I have seen an Aboriginal embrace the earth he walked on. To put our words “home” and “land” together into “homeland” is a little better but not much. A different tradition leaves us tongueless and earless towards this other world of meaning and significance.

From a Western perspective it is hard to grasp the significance of “homeland” for Aboriginal people. As a matter of fact, there are no words in Western languages to match their concept of land and belonging. Where words fail, dance performances can offer an access to those concepts. The story of *country* which is also a story of *being* and *belonging* cannot be accessed through words but only through seeing, listening and feeling.

The Indigenous relationship to flora, fauna and the land is intrinsic to all social structures. This is expressed in the show through the fish gutting dance *Traps*. *Traps* displays the violence of throwing a gutted fish away instead of appreciating the gift of food. As mentioned earlier, for the Aboriginals, who lived as hunters and gatherers, every animal was sacred and when they

had to kill an animal in order to survive they frequently performed a dance to acknowledge what the earth has given them. Furthermore, every part of the animal including the bones and the skin was used. For them throwing away a gutted fish was an act of violence. Therefore, the disposal of gutted fish represents the cultural clash of traditional Aboriginal way of living and the Western society. Moreover, it represents the despair that Aboriginal people have experienced when forcefully assimilating into Western Society. In Aboriginal culture the fish has a variety of meanings, including the fish trap as the catching of souls. Therefore, a carelessly discarded fish is a soul unable to find its way home.

7.2 Ochre – Bangarra Dance Theatre

Another important dance show that has been produced by the Bangarra Dance Theatre is *Ochre*. It explores traditional dance movements of the Yolgnu people and mixes them with contemporary dance. The Yolgnu people originate from Northeast Arnhem Land situated in present-day Northern Territory. Their culture is very strongly related to dance, rituals and music. Till today Arnhem Land is known for its strong continuing traditions of its Indigenous inhabitants, which may also be due to its relatively isolated position in remote Australia. The Yolgnu people are one of the largest Indigenous groups in Australia who have successfully maintained their traditional culture and art forms.

Understanding dance and dance rituals of traditional Aboriginal communities means to understand their culture and their beliefs. “Yolungu musicians often describe their musical practice as having an ancestral precedent, that the words they sing, the melodies they use and the rhythms they perform are those which were taught to the first Yolngu by the ancestral being of the *wangarr* creative period” (Toner 31). To grasp what that means, it is crucial to gain an insight into the concept of *wangarr*.

“Spirit man”, “Spirit woman”, “ancestor” or “totem” are the English terms that can be used to explain the concept of *wangarr*. The *wangarr* is deeply related with Aboriginal past and the dreamtime, which is the period when their ancestors moved over the surface of the earth and brought all the people, animals, plants, landscapes, music, dance and song into being. It is believed that after they had completed the creation, the ancestors merged back into the earth and that during ceremonies they re-emerge. Most ceremonies in Arnhem Land therefore aim at invoking the ancestral beings from the earth.

In the context of *wangarr* it is also very important to mention *manikay* which is “[...] performed most often in ritual settings” (Toner 34). The Yolngu people have been singing and dancing

manikay for millennia. *Manikay* are a series of songs that have been passed on through generations and those songs can be traced back to the ancestors that have shaped and named their homeland Yolgnu. As stated by Clark: “*Manikay* are often paired with *bungul*, the dancing that features prominently in *bäpurru* (funerals), *dhäpi* (circumcisions), and other ceremonies that significantly impact Yolngu lives” (21).

Although the Yolgnu people share the same cultural beliefs and the concepts of *wangarr* and *manikay*, they are nevertheless differentiated in distinct groups which implies that there is no homogeneity of beliefs and practices. Each of the groups has a unique perspective of religious beliefs and social practices such as kin relationships and ceremonial performances including music and dance. Toner notes on this topic: “We can see, then, that Yolngu culture is dialogical in the sense that different groups have unique interpretations of a commonly shared body of cosmology” (36). These differences are particularly reflected in music and dance, meaning that some groups perform dances that other groups do not and vice versa.

The music that accompanies the dance is commonly sung in *dhuwal* which is one of the eight separate dialects of the Yolgnu language. The song text and the dance movements are passed on from generation to generation and are usually not subject to change. As mentioned by Toner (35): “The ideology of Yolgnu musical performance is that the songs are performed in the same way today as they were by all their ancestors back to the very first people, and many singers and dancers today emulate the style of their fathers or grandfathers”. Furthermore, the performers tailor each performance to its audience and its ritual context. Dance performances are often accompanied by the *yidaki*, which Europeans have named Digeridoo.

Dance, music and performances are often referred to as *wangga*. *Wangga* is the name for the traditional music, dance and ceremony genre that originated in Arnhem Land created by the Yolgnu people. According to Marett: “*Wangga* articulates fundamental themes of death and regeneration. During ceremonies, the Yolgnu people sing and dance as the ancestral dead, which they call *walakandha*” (1). The term *walakandha* has derived from the Marri-tjevin people who have created this term to refer to their ancestral dead. Although *wangga* is associated with the fundamental topics of life, death and regeneration, it is also used to refer to other changes such as “[...] from boyhood to manhood, from student to graduate, from callow youth to hero” (Marett 2). Moreover, the many social changes and injustices that were imposed on the Aboriginal people through the invasion by the Europeans is referred to as *wangga*.

The structure of a man’s dancing during a *wangga* ceremony usually has 5 phases:

- preparatory movements, generally a walk
- a run onto the dance ground
- an action termed a halt
- a sequence of stamping actions
- an ending sequence of extended movements

(Marett 101)

The above-mentioned phases of the dance are fixed, meaning that they are always carried out in exact the same order. The preparatory walk usually serves the dancer as a warm-up and an introduction into the song. The performer therefore either walks to the dancing ground or walks on the spot in the rhythm of the music generated by the beat of the clapsticks. The second phase is the running on to the dancing ground. The performer does not necessarily have to run to the dancing ground, but can also walk there. The difference between the first phase, the preparatory walk and the second phase is that the movements, either running or walking, are directed directly to the dancing spot.

Before a dancer begins the stamping action, he initiates a short stop of the movements by doing a halt. This halt allows “[...] the dancer to establish his placement in the space and to prepare his body for the nontraveling movements that will follow” (Marett 102). The stamp phase is the most important part of the dance and very characteristic for male *wangga* dancers. “Here the dancers stamp with alternate feet and raise the non-stamping leg high in preparation for its stamp (Marett 103). Consequently, the ending phase marks the end of the dance performance and the end of the instrumental background. According to Marett (104): “It features an increase in the dynamics of the movement and the use of extended limbs, or the inclusion of additional body parts.”

The Bangarra Dance Theatre works very closely with the Yolgnu people, as their cultural advisor is Djakapurra Munyarryun, a member of the Munyarryun clan of northeast Arnhem Land. Bangarra’s show *Ochres* which was first staged in 1994 and then reproduced for their show in 2015 combines *wangga* which is a traditional Yolgnu dance and contemporary dancing. The 2015 production of *Ochre* opens with the cultural advisor Djakapurra Munyarryun who sings *ngurr tjä*, the land cleansing song in *dhuwal*. The land cleansing song is usually performed when initiating a ceremony and therefore belongs into the context of *manikay*, as those songs and dances are traditionally performed in a ritual setting.

The opening scenes are followed by the four ochre sections. Each section is named after a colour, namely yellow, black, red and white. The section *Yellow* is inspired by female energy, which is reinforced by the all-female dancers during this section. Subsequently, *Black* represents male energy. The dancers combine contemporary movements with the traditional structure of man's dancing during a *wangga* ceremony which includes a run onto the dance ground, a halt, a sequence of stamping actions and an ending sequence of extended movements. During this section *wangga* ceremony movements and the simulation of hunting and warrior movements are intertwined.

Subsequently, *Red* which has the strongest narrative element of the four sections, connects the male/female counterparts on the stage. *Red* initiates with playful and lighthearted movements signifying youth and levity. However, during this section the movements become more edgy, intense and partly aggressive. They are hinting at the many problems the Indigenous population is facing today in modern Western society such as domestic violence, drugs and alcohol abuse. The strong tension that has been created in *Red* finds its release in the catharsis of the concluding section *White* which emphasizes the spiritual dimension of Aboriginal dancing. *White* draws on the concept of *wangarr* which can refer to "spirit man", "spirit woman", "ancestor" or "totem". As mentioned earlier, *wangarr* is deeply related with the dreamtime, the Indigenous story of creation. During this section, all the dancers are covered with white ochre. The colour and symbols on their skin represent the concept of *wangarr* which ranges from kinship to totemic ideas. The dancers embody the ancient past and the voice of their ancestors who moved over the surface of the earth to create all living beings.

The section *Red* aims at highlighting the many social issues the Aboriginal society is facing today. Its purpose is to address a multitude of problems such as domestic violence and drug- and alcohol abuse. However, the show goes beyond the mere representation of these social issues. The concluding section *White*, which emphasizes Indigenous spirituality and the close ties to land and the ancestor beings known as *wangarr*, functions as catharsis to the audience. It shows that there is much more to Aboriginality than the stereotypes and prejudices that exist among many white people.

7.3 *Shake-a-leg* - Gladys Tybingoompa

Both Bangarra dance productions *Fish* and *Ochres* mix traditional Indigenous dancing with contemporary moves to give the predominantly Western audience an understanding of Indigenous traditions and culture. In doing so the dance company promotes cross-cultural

understanding and simultaneously raises awareness for current social issues. However, it is important to mention that these performances and their story-line are carefully designed, rehearsed and staged. This has the benefit that they can reach a much wider audience than a spontaneously held performance by Aboriginal people. However, it is crucial to also take a closer look at non-staged Indigenous performances in a contemporary context. The most prominent one is probably the shake-a-leg dance that became famous overnight in December 1996 when the court case took place that was fought between the Wik people and the state of Queensland. To understand the traditional meaning of the shake-a-leg dance it is vital to gain a deeper understanding of the traditional dance of the Murri people from present-day Queensland.

One of the most important dance of this region is the *wanam* dance that incorporates the shake-a-leg movement. The *wanam* dances merge out of the *wanam* people's own history and have been passed on from the beginnings of their time. Therefore, the dances serve as a medium of expressing and remembering their own vibrant history. According to the myth the ancestors who created the *wanam* dance were the two *Kaa'ungken* brothers. They were travellers, mainly singing and dancing through the country and teaching those songs and dances to other people they encountered on their way. During those encounters the *wanam* dance was created. By travelling through the country, the brothers created and shaped the land as it is today. The brothers finally arrived at *Thaa'kungada* which is a sacred site for the Aboriginal people. When Aboriginal people perform this dance they therefore remember their ancestral past and their story of creation. As stated by Arnold (162): "The myths associated with the dances serve as a link between the creative activities of *kam waya* (agnatic clan ancestors and hero-divinities), the *awu* (story places or sites) and the ritual practices which in turn create the precedents for the present form of any given dance belonging to this specific tradition".

The *wanam* dance includes the "shake-a-leg" movement which is carried out by loose hips and the shaking together of the thighs. The "shake-a-leg" movement is traditionally only carried out by men. In general, the step sequences of a dance, which are all meaningful units, are rather short, lasting no longer than a minute. Each sequence imitates the movements of the ancestor in question and therefore represents the strong ties to ancestral beings.

The shake-a-leg dance surprisingly reached a wide audience in December 1996 when the court case took place that was fought between the Wik people and the state of Queensland. The Wik people claimed crown land, that was rightfully theirs, but had been held by the government. The high court argued in favour for the Wik people, by stating that a pastoral lease granted by the crown did not extinguish native title. Following this victory, Gladys Tybingoompa from

Queensland performed a theatrical shake-a-leg dance outside the high court. As stated by Magowan (312): “Her ancestral shake-a-leg dance from Cape York combined theatre as ritual and theatre as life and demanded some sort of responsive understanding or responsive resonance from those who witnessed it”. The dance was witnessed by a wide Indigenous, as well as non-Indigenous audience, as the live cameras outside of the high court broadcasted the performance nationwide on television. Although a non-Indigenous audience may not have understood her movements, the performance gave an emotional response to a history of oppression and an unforeseen victory. Through her spontaneous one-woman dance performance, she had converted the streets into a theatre where she publicly claimed Indigenous rights. Her short, yet very powerful dance performance, clearly shows the political potency that dance has. Dance or theatre performances can deliver a very strong social and political message, not only through the enactment of the performance, but also through the chosen spatial setting. In this case an Aboriginal woman chose to perform at the entrance to a legal forum of white authority.

Gladys Tybingoompa enacted the traditional shake-a-leg performance in a contemporary context. It is important to mention that the dancer was female, as the movement is traditionally only performed by men. Nevertheless, the traditional meaning of the dance was maintained, as it represents the strong ties to ancestral beings which are inevitably intertwined with land. Therefore, Gladys made a strong statement, namely that the Aboriginal population of Queensland had not lost their connection to their tradition and their country. Despite the oppression and unlawful treatment of the Indigenous population, Aboriginality and their strong ties to country were very much alive and eager to fight for their rights.

The above-mentioned examples of Aboriginal dance in a contemporary context show that Indigenous dance is still very much relevant for Aboriginal culture today and that it enables the Indigenous population to raise awareness for current social and political issues. Moreover, it can serve as a powerful tool in keeping Indigenous culture alive and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

7.3 *Crying Baby* – Marrugeku

One highly important intercultural dance performance is *Crying Baby* which was produced and first staged in Arnhem Land. The dance theatre combines contemporary- and traditional dance and historical- and *djang* (dreaming) stories from Western Arnhem Land. The production can be labelled intercultural, as it contains both Indigenous and Non-Indigenous dancers and

storytellers. The show is based on Thompson Yulidjirri's story from birth to displacement, covering colonization and its continuing impact in contemporary Australia. The dance performance connects two worlds: the immediate physical environment and the dreaming, the Aboriginal story of creation that is ever present. Jackson states on the relationship between the lived experience and the dreaming the following (132-33):

The relationship between lifetime and dreamtime is one of synecdoche. Past and present are brought together. Biography and mythology are effectively fused. What happens in the one is seen to have repercussion in the other. Thus, the concerted effort of people in bringing the Dreaming into Being is reciprocally linked to the force that the Dreaming has in human conception and growth.

The show explores past and present Indigenous cultural identity by blurring the edges between the physical environment and the dreaming, as the one is inextricably intertwined with the other. Such as the Bangarra Dance Theatre, Marrugeku pays the highest respect to tribe elders and cultural laws. Therefore, the company creates its productions in direct dialogue with custodians of country who can set core concepts, view rehearsals and give permission for the use of a dance and the transformation of a dance into a contemporary context. Developing contemporary Aboriginal dance in relationship with custodians of the country is of vital importance. It stems directly from the Indigenous philosophy of keeping things alive in their place and the gravitas to the order of things. This has some far-reaching consequences for the dances and songs that are performed in the show. It meant that certain dances could not be performed in proximity to others, as the dancers would get sick if they would dance them out of context. Moreover, some dances could only be performed some of the time, for example, on alternate nights and at a certain place in the structure of the work (Swain 179).

The whole theater's show *Crying Baby* is framed by the story man Thompson Yulidjirri's story. During each performance he redraws a map of his country in the sand and tells the story of the *Marladj Djang*, or Orphan Dreaming. He narrates the orphan's removal of his family from country by Reverend James Watson, the first missionary into Arnhem Land and Yinginar the creation mother who walked across the country from sunrise to sunset to place all the first people as babies (Swain 172).

In the dance show fragments of traditional and contemporary dance are intertwined. The dance performance is inspired by the traditional *yagam* dance that has been passed on from the beginnings of their time and is directly linked to the creation mother Yinginar and thus to the story of creation. Therefore, the dance serves as a medium of expressing and remembering their

own history which begins with the creation story. According to the myth the creation mother Yinginar brought the *yagam* dance into existence. She was a traveller, mainly singing and dancing through the country and teaching those songs and dances to other people she encountered on her way. During those encounters the *yagam* dance was created. By travelling through the country, the mother created and shaped the land as it is today. By performing the *yagam* dance the Aboriginal people therefore remember their ancestral past and their story of creation.

With the permission from tribe elders and custodians of country, Marrugeku dancers perform the traditional *yagam* dance and incorporate contemporary dance elements into it. Furthermore, they perform the *yallaby* dance that has evolved out of the tradition of the *yagam* dance. Traditionally the *yallaby* dance starts with a circle of seated people. It is important to highlight that the Marrugeku cast has maintained this traditional form and has not altered the traditional dance array, such as many tourist-orientated Indigenous performances groups do, to face the audience on a Western-like stage.

In the traditional sense the second part of the dance is initiated by a play-fight of two men (Arnold 163). In *Crying Baby* this part of the dance is maintained, but the play-fight is performed more aggressively, incorporating contemporary dance that is mixed with the rough and tumble of street fights, acrobatic movements and hip-hop (Swain 175). The altered *yallaby* dance which contains some aggressive elements is performed in the opening scene and is used to portray the hard life on a mission station in Arnhem Land.

Traditionally, the *yallaby* dance contains a third part where some men are holding spears, symbolizing hunters. The other men mimic the kangaroo, crouch on the ground and hop, as the kangaroo does (Arnold 163). However, this part of the dance is not incorporated into the contemporary performance of *Crying Baby*. It may be possible that through the absence of the third part of the dance the producers wanted to stress the loss of country and traditional lifestyle that the Aboriginal population had to endure during those years in the mission stations.

7.4 *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright* – Neminuwarlin Performance Group

Fire, Fire Burning Bright is a production of the Neminuwarlin Performance Group of the East Kimberley in Western Australia. The show, that is a contemporary interpretation of a traditional corroboree, also called Joonba, adapted for the stage, includes historical and contemporary dance, song and story-telling. The story that is narrated and reinforced by dance and music, is the incarceration and murder of the Gija and Worla people by Non-Indigenous cattlemen in the

early years of the 20th century. It is noteworthy that the all-Indigenous cast played the white station workers by painting up their faces white. With this action, the cast intended to criticize and perhaps satirize the common practice to blackface white actors who mimed Aboriginal characters till the mid-1950s.

The first act of *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright* is a narration of the poisoning and murder of black seasonal workers early in the twentieth century by a white station worker as punishment for killing a bullock (Swain 169). The second act narrates the exact same event but, in contrast to the first, this time the story was staged as a Joonba, a sacred song and dance cycle. By narrating the event in a Joonba cycle, the all-Indigenous cast narrated their story through dance and song from their own point of view and in their own structures.

The Joonba has its origins in the heritage corroboree of the Indigenous clans in the Kimberly Region in Western Australia. Oral histories tell that it was initiated after World War I, related to the story of the spirits' journey after the massacre (Swain 169). The Joonba incorporates forms of traditional dance styles, where ceremonial decorated and painted wooden boards depicting story-lines are carried. In discussing how the Joonba became into being the cultural leader of Neminuwarlin stated at an interview at the Melbourne festival opening, where *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright* was performed, the following:

Fire, Fire, Burning Bright was a stage performance telling the story of the Bedford Downs massacre. It incorporated a Joonba, a song and dance cycle, given by a clever man by the spirits of the people who died. The Joonba had been performed in secret by relations in the East Kimberly and never shown to Europeans.

(Swain 169)

The dance performance *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright* can be interpreted in various ways. Although the show was visited by Western audiences as well, it was not primarily directed to them. The show can be interpreted as an act of public mourning. The Indigenous population in West Kimberly certainly was affected by grief and trauma. Dancing and singing in the Joonba cycle, in memory of the deceased, was their way of collective reprocessing those tragic events. As stated by Jonathan Marshall, a reviewer of the performance:

Indigenous people watching the original dances would have been familiar with the broad history of the massacre: the dances are largely unconcerned with questions of cause and character. Rather, they were a densely coded form of spiritual mourning, the Kimberly people using their language and mythos to make sense of events such as the effect of white settlement on geographic mobility and economic relations.

(Marshall 6)

The Joonba dance cycle, that is performed in *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright*, is a highly interesting dance example. Although it is a sacred corroboree carried out in honor for the deceased, it came into being only after World War I. The historic event of the massacre in West Kimberly and its disturbances in the Indigenous spirit world have led to the creation of the sacred dance cycle Joonba, that was related to the ancient-old corroborees, but nevertheless new. In comparison to the ancient-old corroborees, the creation of the Joonba can therefore be labelled a contemporary sacred dance cycle. As stated by Marshall: “The production did away with the patronizing assumption that Indigenous culture is ancient and unchanging” (6).

The vehicle for the birth of a new dance cycle in modern times was the *clever man*, an Aboriginal English term for someone who can connect with the spirits. The vision of this *clever man* was translated into dance performance, which led to a traumatic historic event becoming the Joonba. For a long time, the Joonba was inaccessible to a White person. *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright* was the first production that staged the Joonba and therefore made it accessible to the White population. Cornwell explains the Joonba as “[...] a narrative dance cycle, a vehicle by which both current and historical events and traditional spirit stories can be revealed in public” (13). Therefore, the decision to present this former secret narrative dance cycle to a wider audience, including the White population, was a big step for the Indigenous dance group.

This decision to stage the sacred Joonba might have occurred for several reasons. Firstly, through the narration of the Joonba, the Indigenous cast had the possibility to dance, sing and narrate their version of the story and collectively reprocess past events. However, the performance was not just for an Indigenous audience. It was also directed at a Western audience, which leads to the second reason, namely to give an understanding of certain traumatic events in Indigenous history and offer insights into ways of storytelling and processing trauma and loss through dance. It was also a way of making peace with the past and possibly sharing a reconciliatory experience with the White audience.

For this to happen it is crucial for the White audience to understand the deeper meaning of a narrative dance cycle. To gain this understanding it is vital to know that the Joonba always combines the present, the past and the spirit world. Furthermore, it builds a link between the multilayered nature of a traditional performance and a contemporary performance exploring a historic event in country. The narratives in the narrative dance cycle resonate across space and time and thus make multiple meanings possible. The performance researchers Heddon & Milling note on dance narratives that “[i]n place of a singular meta-narrative there is

contingency, partial and plural perspectives and an understanding of the rules that pertain to “narrative construction of making truths” (205). The plural form of *truths* in this quote is highly important, as it shows that within the dance narrative there is not one universal truth, but rather many narrative strings that offer different interpretations and subsequently different truths which are all valid. This knowledge can lead to a deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge which is inextricably intertwined with Indigenous performance. As stated by Swain:

Stories are polysemic and devolve meaning in multiple ways simultaneously to different sections of the community. They are both universal and archetypal guides to multiple aspects of daily life, good and bad, but also operate as an enigmatic and somehow shifting veil, obscuring and revealing meaning in a complex and multifaceted patterning of narrations of events, transformation and kinship ties (165).

This clearly shows that accessing Indigenous knowledge through the observation of dance cycles, such as the Joonba, is not an easy undertaking. It requires to step out of one’s Euro-American framework which can be an uncomfortable and unfamiliar experience. The layers of meaning can only be deciphered if one is able to listen to history, to sense and experience our environment and the stories it holds. Furthermore, it needs the ability to temporarily disconnect from place and time, in order to reconnect and engage with the notion of now. The notion of now is deeply rooted in Indigenous logic and their perspective of “seeing” country. Howard Murphy notes on the perspective of “seeing” country: “Art is not so much a mode of representation, as it is a mode of seeing, and that in making important representations artists present the viewer not simply with an internally consistent image, but with an entire world view (87).

Although *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright* is a performance of mourning and processing trauma, it is also a performance of joy and celebration. This might seem contradictory at first sight but the narrative dance cycles reveal that the acts of mourning and celebrating are closely linked. Although the living mourn the deceased, they also celebrate their new pathways of travels as spirits throughout the land. As stated by Langton:

The dance narratives refer to the ancestral beings whose existence remains poised in places throughout the country, and to the celebrated pathways of their travels that network the land. And, as well, the life histories of the artists and their forebears are memorialized in the well-known tracks of their ancestors, so that the suffering and tragedy of their lives can be endured (12).

The above-mentioned examples of traditional Indigenous performances and their contemporary interpretations were selected to demonstrate the various functions contemporary Indigenous dance fulfills today. The Bangarra Dance Theatre is undoubtedly the biggest and most professional Indigenous dance company that has the most financial resources, and can therefore create carefully staged and elaborated dance productions. However, in certain aspects the aim of the performances does not differ from Gladys Tybingoompa's spontaneously held *shake-a-leg* dance outside the high court. Although they all differ greatly, the performers share the common aim of keeping Indigenous culture alive and remembering their own history. It enables the Indigenous population to show that they have not lost their connection to their tradition and to country. However, this is not the only function contemporary performance fulfils. Aboriginal dance performances, that are held for a White non-tourist orientated audience, are also an invitation to access and engage with Indigenous knowledge and tradition. Such as *Fire, Fire, Burning Bright*, the performances often tackle traumatic events in recent Indigenous history which were caused by colonization and the subsequent forceful assimilation into the settler society. The narration and observation of stories through dance can be a first powerful step in the reconciliation journey and help to not only come to terms with the past but respect and value a diverse society in the present.

8. Conclusion

This thesis aimed at giving an in-depth insight into the question how dance has defined Aboriginal Cultural identity in the past and present. Furthermore, the question was raised how Indigenous dance and theatre is used in a contemporary situation without losing its traditional roots. Moreover, the various functions that contemporary Indigenous dance fulfils today, such as remembering culture, practicing resistance and initiating reconciliation, have been tackled.

In pre-settler times, Aboriginal people had an immensely strong connection with the nature and the country they were living on. Their strong ties to country and other tribe members sustained them. The Aboriginal people were one of the most performance based cultures in the world, as every important event was accompanied by dance, song and music. To perform dance meant to perform identity and place them in the world they were living in. Although there were a multitude of different tribes which all had distinct cultural customs, dances and songs, they shared the commonality of strong spiritual beliefs that were reinforced through music and dance, referring to the dreamtime when the world was created. Furthermore, they shared common cultural laws which were vital for their peaceful livelihood and mental wellbeing.

Their peaceful life and connectedness to nature ended abruptly after the first settlers reached the shores of Botany Bay in 1770. What followed was an age-long struggle with the Anglo-Saxon invaders and a history of oppression and assimilation policies. After being deprived from their natural way of living, which meant being deprived from their very own identity, many Aboriginal people attempted to fill the void with the escape into alcohol or drugs. Aboriginal people were forced to live on the margins of Australian society till long into the first half of the 20th century, as it was not till 1967 that they were granted fundamental human rights such as citizenship and the right to vote. Social change and political awareness began to arise during the 1970s especially in urban areas such as Redfern which was an Aboriginal ghetto in Sydney. And again, it was through dance and other expressive art forms such as theatre that Indigenous people practiced and reinforced their identity.

Through performance and dance, current social and political issues were raised, as it gave the artists a platform where they could express themselves artistically. The birth place of their socio-critical performances was the Black Theatre in Redfern and although it was only 5 years in existence, it has made a long-lasting impact till today and was the starting point for many other Indigenous based performance theatres and schools such as “The Aboriginal Dance Theatre”, “NAISDA” or “The Bangarra Dance Theatre”. The above-mentioned performance theatres and schools have staged a multitude of socio-critical performances that have proven the tool of non-verbal communication a very powerful one. Through the mixing of traditional Aboriginal dance and contemporary dance they have reached a wide audience of Indigenous as well as non-Indigenous people. Many Indigenous people who were disconnected from their culture could gain an insight into their traditions and non-Indigenous people were offered an understanding of Aboriginal culture.

The combination of traditional Aboriginal and contemporary dance was also a strong statement, as it indicated that Aboriginal culture must not be frozen in the past but is fluid and open for development. By combining past traditions with contemporary styles, a new identity is created, one that has not forgotten its strong and powerful traditions but nevertheless is open for future developments. Dance has also proven to be a strong companion on the reconciliation journey, as it can offer a non-Indigenous audience rich insight into Aboriginal culture. By acknowledging the Aboriginal people as the original inhabitants of Australia and trying to access cultural traditions and practices, white Australians can gain a deep insight into sustainable living that is close to nature and country. Through the acceptance and understanding

of each other's beliefs and cultural practices a common ground can be established. One that ultimately may lead to a new shared identity.

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10. Appendix

Abstract

Dance has defined Aboriginal cultural identity since millennia and continues to have a strong impact on Indigenous life's till today. This thesis portrays Aboriginal dance, as it had occurred for many centuries, before there was contact with the white settlers and contrasts it with how it occurs today, without losing its traditional roots. It offers an in-depth insight into traditional dance techniques that are taught in a specific way, through structures totally unlike those in Western dance and picture how they are used in a contemporary situation. The focus will be on the discovery of the various functions that contemporary Indigenous dance fulfils today, such as remembering culture, practicing resistance and initiating reconciliation. In demonstrating the various functions that Aboriginal dance fulfils today, this thesis argues that Aboriginal dance is an integral part of ancient but also modern Indigenous identity. Naturally, Aboriginal dance has changed over time, but nevertheless is deeply rooted in the past. The fusion of ancient tribal history and contemporary interpretation makes dance such a powerful tool for keeping culture alive.

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Die Ureinwohner Australiens und deren jahrtausendealte Kultur sind sehr stark von Tanz geprägt. Tanz ist ein wesentlicher Teil indigener kultureller Identität, der den Aborigines dabei hilft ihre reiche Vergangenheit und ihre Traditionen am Leben zu erhalten. Der Fokus dieser Arbeit liegt auf den verschiedenen Funktionen welche traditionelle indigene Tänze innehaben und wie diese zeitgenössisch umgesetzt werden. Indigene Tänze werden von den Aborigines praktiziert und genutzt um ihre Kultur aufleben zu lassen und Widerstand gegen die ehemalige Kolonialmacht auszuüben, aber auch um eine Wiederversöhnung mit eben jener einzuläuten. Traditionelle indigene Tänze sind daher nicht nur tief verankert in der historischen indigenen Kultur, sondern auch Teil ihrer zeitgenössischen Identität.