

## On "Dancing with Strangers": Choreographing Indigenous and British Sovereignty in the Colonial Encounter

Rachel Fensham, University of Surrey

On January 29, 1778, three days after the First Fleet carrying British sailors and convicts landed in Port Jackson, Sydney Cove, to a place that became the first white settlement in Australia, the sailors met indigenous inhabitants of this country on the beach. In the words of one Lieutenant Bradley, this first-contact event began auspiciously when "all hands danced together." It is the embodied conditions of this event and their rewriting as history that concerns me in this paper.

I will first consider the publication of Inge Clendinnen's book that takes this event as the title for an award-winning popular history of the colonial encounter. *Dancing with Strangers* (2003) appeared in the context of debates about the telling of national history in Australia. I will criticize her reading of first settlement by considering this event as a performance in which the choreography of corporeal histories might speak about the physical and mental dispositions, the gender relations, or the legal and political positions of the British and Australians.

I will argue that Clendinnen's misreading of the dancing, in spite of its progressive intentions and her imaginative writing, plays into a 'white fantasy' of indigenous peoples as lacking in law, history, and linguistics.<sup>1</sup> It does so because it relies, as its key metaphor suggests, on the concept of the 'stranger,' a figure that, according to Sara Ahmed (2000), continues to be fetishized in postcolonial studies and that raises complex issues about how dancing bodies negotiate and transmit cross-cultural knowledge.

*Dancing with Strangers* has been preeminently successful among recent Australian historical narratives. It was nominated for, and won, several literary awards as the best nonfiction book of the year, and the publisher has praised *Dancing with Strangers* as a "model of what history can do, how it can make sense of silences, discontinuities and contradictions."<sup>2</sup> This book appeared, however, in the context of the vigorous public debate taking place in Australia over competing views of the historical treatment of indigenous peoples of Australia, a debate that has become known as the 'History Wars.' In the United States in the 1990s, a similar debate, also called the History Wars, arose from exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution in which its representations of the Pacific War became rhetorically identified with denigrating the public view of the nation's past (Macintyre and Clark 2003: 9).

In Australia, the History Wars raged on the front pages of the national press due to a group of powerful right-wing commentators and a conservative government generally intent on suppressing divergent views of nation, nationality, and national belonging. The History Wars have included discrediting Aboriginal testimony in relation to the Hindmarsh Island Bridge; refusing to apologize for the "Stolen Generations" report; and attacking the 'political correctness' of the National Museum's exhibition program. Recently, a National History Summit was convened to prepare a statement on what histories should be taught in secondary schools around the nation.

On the one hand, we find the 'black-arch' view of history that attempts to reconcile a bloody and destructive history of white territorial expansion in Australia with indigenous accounts of resistance and survival. On the other hand, there is a view of that same history as relatively benign and generous toward its indigenous inhabitants, migrants, and Australia's global political aspirations (McIntyre and Clark 2003: 35). This stance was exemplified by Education Minister Julie Bishop's comment, echoing Prime Minister John Howard's own view, that "the Australian story is overwhelmingly a positive one."<sup>3</sup> The political imperatives of this perspective have among other objectives the reconciliation of indigenous history to "unifying historical narratives," which have the effect of preventing legitimate indigenous claims to local or national sovereignty.

At the time, Clendinnen did not enter this debate, although she was identified by commentators such as Keith Windschuttle as one of the historical protagonists for the black-arch view (Macintyre and Clark 2003: 162). What is evident, however, is that the central metaphor of her book proposes a

sympathetic account of first contact--a 'togetherness' that might have held some promise for negotiating relations between white and indigenous peoples in Australia.

As a dance-studies scholar, I naturally seized the book with enthusiasm when it first appeared. Clendinnen's opening claim that "we don't readily think of dancing as a phase of the imperial process, but a surprising amount of interracial dancing went on" (2003: 8) led me to hope that her study of the colonial encounter, following Captain Arthur Phillip's landing in Botany Bay in 1788, might consider the ways in which nation formation begins as a complex embodied project.

As a project in ethnographic history, her book provides a thick description of the material conditions and social decisions of the early colonial community comprised of convicts, sailors, and a governing elite, as well as medical, legal, and other senior officers. Clendinnen makes clear that the sources for reconstruction of this emerging world of the settlement during these first days in Australia are the diaries and journals of the First Fleet lieutenants that record their observations of the daily routines, minor incidents, environment, and what she calls the "Australians' secular life." The smartest rhetorical move that she makes is to call the indigenous people "Australians" with all the rest labeled "British." Still, the Australians are Aboriginal people *as observed by the British* (Clendinnen 2003: 5). With her astute eye on the ethnography of social practices, Clendinnen raises the hope that this would be an Australian publication that conceived of dancing as performance laden with critical and semiotic possibilities for cultural and historical analysis, even though only fragments of these colonial texts include any consideration of dancing.

One of Clendinnen's key interlocutors is Lieutenant Bradley, whose beautifully written, illustrated journal was published, like most First Fleet accounts, shortly after his return to England in 1793. In the entry of January 29, 1788, the ship's company was welcomed ashore by unarmed men, "in the most cheerful manner, shouting and dancing"; then after an exchange of goods, "these people mixed with ours and all hands danced together" (Bradley 1969: 67).

On the next day with a bigger party of British, the locals left their spears in their canoes, and all proceeded to more "dancing and otherwise amusing themselves" (Bradley 1969: 68). When Clendinnen cites these quotations from Bradley, she explains first that dancing could mean "caperings," in the sense of physical expression of excitement, and then wonders what this dancing together might have looked like (Clendinnen 2003: 8). She speculates on "rollicking British hornpipes followed by elegant Australian knee-lifts. Wild hoppings and leapings from some cultural no-man's land?" (Clendinnen 2003: 9). But what about the details embedded in that opposing of steps? Why are the British likely to be dancing the hornpipe? Is it rollicking? And what would be the "elegant Australian knee-lifts?" How are these "wild," and why do these "hoppings and leapings" come from a "cultural no-man's land"?

These annotations, unfortunately, reiterate stereotypes of dancing as inarticulate posturing and confirm the 'strangeness' of the "elegant" but "wild" indigenous body. Even more unsettling is the notion of a "cultural no-man's land," surely used ironically by the word-sensitive Clendinnen, that would restate the legal doctrine of *terra nullius* that prevented indigenous claims for land ownership in Australia until the Mabo judgment in 1992. <sup>4</sup> Whatever the function of poetic license in relation to the source reference, these ideas do not make it possible to conceive that dance practices might also legibly bind bodies to specific histories and localized places.

Since the pioneering work of dance scholars during the last twenty years, the contribution of embodied knowledges and performance practices to understanding culture has radically transformed ideas about dancing. Any act of dancing, according to Susan Foster, is a collection of tactically deployed disciplinary techniques that produce distinctive corporealities (Foster 1997: 239) or, according to Jane Desmond, represents a complex set of material practices that are both "symptomatic and constitutive of social relations" (Desmond 1997: 33). Performing bodies are increasingly recognized in social and cultural research as subjects with agency and distinctive histories.

For example, Jacqueline Shea-Murphy's *The People Have Never Stopped Dancing* (2007) identifies the complex political and rhetorical negotiation of American Indian dancers with various phases of colonial and modern histories of performance. For Native Americans, the significance of dancing

extended beyond performative or entertainment accomplishment, since it provided a communicative structure for them to advance land claims as well to affirm spiritual and secular indigenous identities in the face of dominant policies of erasure and containment. In Australia, the role of indigenous corroborees and ceremonies to articulate political claims or to reconstitute community solidarity has become part of the "currency of knowledge" produced in indigenous events (Dussart 2000: 21819). Dancing, therefore, takes place neither casually nor ahistorically, whether at the level of the individual body or in the social and affective community for which it has most meaning.

So what about this dancing on the beach mentioned earlier? By the eighteenth century, dancing was a regular part of British naval training, and the ship's fiddler was a full-time crewman. Greg Denning records that Captain Bligh, sailing to Australia in the same years as the First Fleet, required his sailors to do the hornpipe for two hours a day as part of a regime of healthy exercise or enforced "cheerfulness" (Denning 1992: 66).<sup>5</sup> When two aberrant crewmen refused to dance, they were given no more drink and threatened with further punishment (ibid.: 71). It appears that dancing the hornpipe was more a disciplinary regime, a learned component of naval solidarity, than it was joyous expression, although Denning also contemplates the power that might have been exercised by the sailors who "mocked their captain in the ditties they sang and the steps they danced" (ibid.: 73). Does the sailors' dancing, therefore, hyperbolize the role of social control over physical exertion even in this first moment on the beach? Or was it a cheeky rendition of the sailors' independence? A digression on the hornpipe provides some further insight into the disciplinary histories of the sailors' dancing bodies, although for a dance with such an extended (and now popular) history, very little detailed research has been produced on its genealogy and transformation in different contexts over the last two hundred years.<sup>6</sup>

The hornpipe is one of several kinds of step dances, including the jig, that have a Celtic history although different origins in Scotland and Ireland. To understand the choreography of first settlement, this contradictory national history is relevant since the hornpipe is not a "British dance" and does not, therefore, neatly codify the corporealities of imperial power. In a performance choreographed eighty years earlier for Queen Anne's birthday in 1707, as Linda Tomko explains, the hornpipe in affective terms was associated with "Scotland, and specifically with the quality of stubbornness" (1997: 114). She argues that new forces of 'nation' were embodied in the dynamics of the hornpipe whose "drive and energy" was identified with a powerful Scottish "work ethic"; thus, the unification of Scotland with England would serve commercial and nationalist imperatives (1997: 121).

In order to conscript Scottish bodies to the powerful mercantile interests of British imperialism, English military structures needed to discipline the idealized vigor that they admired in the Scottish labor force. In fact, the codification of the hornpipe in the court dancing represented the extinguishing of an independent political economy for the first of those British colonized bodies closest to home. The disciplinary processes of hornpipe dancing on the ship thus provided what would have been a mixture of English, Scottish, and Irish sailors with a means of marking out difference in their footsteps under the watchful gaze of English captains.

Today, the hornpipe in Irish dancing uses hard shoes that make a loud clapping sound and is danced to either a 2/4 or 4/4 beat; but in movement terms, it has, as Tomko notes, a "fleet, almost running quality" (1997: 115).<sup>7</sup> The figurative stance of the Irish dancer, a motif commodified by the impresario Michael Flatley, involves an upright upper body with arms held stiff and close to the body, almost inexpressive, and a fast forward-and-backward flicking of feet. The leg positions, while open insofar as they maintain balance and allow the dancer to turn, stay close together, while below the knees there is a dynamic scissoring action. The leg either extends directly forward or bends behind to touch the bottom or diagonally across the other leg. The movement comes through the toes, springing from the floor with maximum propulsion from the lower legs and tightly drawn upper body.

Popular mythology has it that this constricted dance style emerged as the Irish were oppressed by the British and forced to dance in their houses. Since the houses had dirt floors, the performers would place a small square of timber on the ground for the dancer to perform, while the fiddler provided musical accompaniment. As a solo virtuoso dance, this confined corporeal expression could be easily accommodated onto the tightly regulated upper decking of a ship, while its more social aspects belonged to the competitive *caelli*, or occasions, when individual dancers would show off one after another. Dancing, therefore, could locate different classes of sailors in a competitive and social form

of activity as well as communicate repressed tensions between the ship's ethnic groups, with different ancestries and national identifications.

Bradley's journal provides remarkable visual evidence of the dancing on the beach in a delicate watercolor painting titled "Broken Bay, New South Wales, March 1788" (see fig. 1). According to Clendinnen, it depicts "dancing in the British style," with the British and Australians "dancing hand in hand like children at a picnic. The pairs are scattered over the whole foreground, with none of the local preference for formation dancing, which reinforces my suspicion that it was the British who took the initiative" (2003: 8). This reading diminishes the event's significance as if only children dance hand in hand, rather than the possibility that dancing might also be a pastime performed by adult men. I will return to the picture later, but I want to utilize further Tomko's analysis of the formation of couple-dancing figures in the hornpipe.



Fig. 1. Drawing from *A Voyage to New South Wales, December 1786–May 1792* by William Bradley (c. 1757-1833), compiled after 1802, (ML ref. Safe1/14 opp. P.90). Reproduced with permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

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Its floor pattern, Tomko writes, is characterized by the "spatial use of numerous crossing patterns" and a common figure that follows from an instruction to "take hands and circle" (1997: 115). This crossing of paths, designed for matched couples of opposite genders, "features an advance and retreat, a taking the measure of the Other, and meditation on joining or merger" (1997: 121). This precise figuration of a choreographed encounter between strangers, across male and female genders and across English and Scottish nations in the court dance, articulates a partnering that dismisses Clendinnen's assumption that only untutored or naïve bodies hold hands while dancing across a space. When the sailors stepped out at Port Jackson, it seems unlikely that they performed a choreographed or theatrically staged hornpipe; however, the cumulative effect of dance embodiment is that habits of physical movement and spatial formation include the traces of constraining and plotted, cultural sequences. In an improvised context, the familiar bodies from the boat could use these corporeal dynamics to "take the measure of the Other" as they took their partners in hand.



Rather than gleeful abandon, the codified gestures of "advance and retreat" across the sand could have been used corporeally to negotiate what it would be like to "join or merge" with the assembled strangers. As in any enforced social-dancing situation (remember school dances), there was likely to have been a combination of attraction and active distrust added to the frisson of hand holding in this couple dancing.

From the evidence of Bradley's journal and other accounts of this day, it seems that this first dancing was a relatively friendly occasion: "our people and these mixed together and were quite sociable, dancing and otherwise amusing themselves" (1969: 68). But Clendinnen again modifies the cultural agency of the exchange when she adds her "suspicion" that it was "our people" who took the initiative, even though Bradley himself makes no such claim (2003: 8). Reading further back in his journal notes, we find that he actually describes the Aboriginal men on shore dancing three times before he describes this dancing together with "our people."

First of all, on the January 28, Bradley writes that when the sailors push back from the beach in their small boats after a first day of extended exploration, "the Men began dancing and laughing." As the boats pulled away but got closer to where some Aboriginal women were hiding behind trees, the men "got on their legs and danced till we were some distance, then followed us up on the rocks as far as the Boats went along " (1969: 66). On the next day, when exploring another tributary of the bay, another group of Australians put down their lances, gesturing the sailors ashore, "shouting and dancing, [with] the women kept a distance near the Man with the spears" (68). And only after this willingness on the part of the Australians did it happen that the groups "danced together."

Syntactically, the historical record suggests that the Australians were using their dancing to express different ideas long before the British realized that an active physical response might be needed to these different communicative gestures from the shore. And their preliminaries extended beyond the more formal figurations of exchange to long lines of men, up to seventy-two in number, that Bradley describes in turn as dancing and laughing, dancing to protect their women by chasing the sailors away, and dancing and shouting (1969: 71). Each of these danced actions appears to have had a different social and political function: the former perhaps in surprise and hilarity, the second in defense as the predatory sexual intentions of the sailors became more apparent, and the last in preparation for conflict as they lay claim to their own territories and privileges. Another First Fleeter, Captain John Hunter, elaborates on this latter attitude when he writes: "they appeared very hostile, a great many armed men appeared on the shore wherever we approached it, and in a threatening manner, seemed to insist upon our not presuming to land" (1968: 38). The shift from threatening to dancing cannot be discounted in this narrative and makes more sense if dancing is included in the repertoire of warrior behaviors and not assumed to be benign.

Let us return to the three couples in Bradley's painting, each with an Aboriginal man on the left and a uniformed soldier on the right. They are thinly placed along the liminal border of the picture in which the vastness of Sydney Harbour to the new colonists is represented by an expanse of open, bowl-like sky. All the figures have bent legs and outstretched arms held just above waist height. The taut slant of their bodies resembles a dance-workshop exercise that requires a pair of dancers to hold hands, lean back, and find a point of weight balance between them, so that neither body is stable without the other. It is difficult to see any musical accompaniment, although both the British and the Australians appear to have guards carrying weapons--on the one hand, guns and on the other, a spear. The dancing takes place, then, not without some fear of the 'other' or a sense of 'stranger-danger' since both groups have a watchful audience in the boats. In the middle of the picture, however, another figure shows an Aboriginal man standing midway between two clothed men with both arms extended. His legs are stretched very wide, and no knees are lifted; and the man on the right who is tipping backward appears to be trying to imitate this pose.

Hunter gives this decisive indigenous movement vocabulary in 1791, its first written description: "placing their feet very wide apart, and by an extraordinary exertion of the muscles of the inner thighs and legs, moving the knees in a trembling and very surprising manner, such as none of us could imitate" (in Clendinnen 2003: 41).<sup>8</sup> This 'shaky-leg' gesture, visible in the southeast of the country at settlement, has subsequently been transmitted so widely that it serves as a quasi-universal signifier of male Aboriginal dancing. The anthropologist John von Sturmer, writing of dancers in Cape York, notes that the rhythmic dynamics of this dance vary as "the knees are flexed and trembled smoothly

or jerked in and out more or less rapidly" (1998: 227). 'Shaky-leg' dance requires a high degree of coordination and muscular elasticity, to work both the wide almost horizontal balance and swift rotation of the hips, at the same time as the feet shuffle close to the ground whether forward, backward, or sideways. Accompanied by an emphatic but soft stamping rhythm, the lower body weight travels forward and is underscored by the rhythm of clapsticks. The effect of this intensified throbbing is to construct a vibrational animated space in front of the body as the group moves forward, and it is from within this chorus movement that individual variations are elaborated and presented.

I would argue that the evidence of the painting suggests that the dancing on the beach includes this gestural vocabulary and that the Australians were holding the power in this exchange as the "marines used to ship life" attempted to adapt their bodily comportment to the expansive stance of the land's owners (Tench 1961: 127). As a performed greeting to the white invaders, their dynamic amplifying gestures would have registered in stark opposition to the more constricted scissor-like forward and back movements of the British sailors.

Having elaborated on both the content of Bradley's text and his painting, I conclude with three reflections on the postcolonial difficulty of reading cultural encounters between strangers. The first is about the matter of imitation. Hunter (according to Clendinnen) admits that the Australians' dancing that he observes at the corroboree in 1791 is a movement that "none of us could imitate" (2003: 41), which, for her, reinforces the willingness of the British to try to meet these "strangers" through good humor and on open terms. Yet according to Hunter's text of this first meeting in 1788, the Australians were a "very active" people who "danced and sung with us, and imitated our words and motions, as we did theirs" (1968: 37). Hunter's text places more emphasis on the Australians' capacity to imitate and only later demonstrates an insecurity about the British inability to acquire facility with the corporeal knowledges of the indigenous other. This British weakness contrasts sharply with the much-noted Australian capacity to imitate convincingly the colonizers' walk, gesture, voice, and song in other accounts (Tench 1961: 97n13). As Homi Bhabha remarks, "The effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is profound and disturbing" (1994: 123). When the colonized prove to be superior at imitation by appropriating a movement vocabulary and mocking compliance to a normalizing attitude, then the colonizer begins to implement more ruthless forms of control and regulation of behavior.

In the balletic tradition, mimesis has become associated with the acquisition of dancing knowledge because of the presence of the mirror; in these accounts by Hunter and Bradley, the effects of a scopic regime dependent on likeness appear to be presented as the preferred model by which the Australians might learn how to behave like the colonized.<sup>9</sup> However, in indigenous and many other communities, dancing takes place in the absence of a mirror as the primary mode of instruction, when dancers, often children, in the company of many adults learn by focusing on the haptic, tactile, and kinesthetic qualities of moving. The genuine difficulty of learning to dance like any other in this situation is emphasized since it takes years of adjusting the senses to accommodate processes of moving in one's own body in order to incorporate a different complex of imperatives about balance, spatiality, temporality, and inner imaginative work. Let us consider the imbalance of those men whose feet are awkwardly splayed apart--they have no sense of how to move from this position without falling over. The failure of mimesis on the part of the colonizers in this first act of dancing demonstrates that they are struggling to grasp an epistemological difference in bodies, relationality, and ground before they can begin to dance together.

In this counterreading of colonization, I have relied almost solely on the written and visual fragments from the colonial archive, and I am woefully aware of the limitations this imposes on understanding. Given the few people who are descendants of the once-populous tribes of Port Jackson and Botany Bay, there are only scarce remains of traditional lore. I cannot, therefore, speak for or about the experience that the Australians might have had in their dancing, nor attempt to examine what this dancing looked like to them or through their eyes.

Elsewhere in Australia, the recent historical past has been constructed in relation to an alternative white archive recorded in anthropological writings.<sup>10</sup> In that archive, there is a prolific (I would say excessive) amount of commentary on indigenous dance. I remain critical of anthropological discourse that focuses exclusively on categorizing, recording, and documenting the 'other,' which, as Ian

Anderson points out, has sentenced today's Aboriginal people to a "colonial reality--an authenticity--based on notions of Aboriginal life as primitive and uncivilised" (2003: 45). More encouraging is that new and radical uses of anthropological documents by indigenous communities allow them to recuperate dance styles and traditions that once were prominent in social and ceremonial life. Increasingly, anthropologists understand that control and administration of indigenous knowledges must be owned by local Aboriginal communities or artists. These political shifts in anthropology have led to an encouraging reevaluation of dancing as a social and cultural practice that embodies and participates in processes of cultural negotiation and (usefully for historical understanding) always has. Specific indigenous dances "embody moral rights, responsibilities, obligations and sentiments" on political occasions, according to Fiona Magowan (2000: 310). In returning to this colonial encounter, I am, therefore, interested not in the spiritual or ceremonial uses of dancing but in the actively secular activities, such as warfare, political negotiation, sexual contest, and competitive bartering, that are being played out on the beach.

If dancing is an embodied expertise that links subjectivity to political dynamics, then it is conceivable that the Australian dancers were using their dancing to explain who and what they were to the white strangers. "Totemic dances," as von Sturmer explains, "are said to be transmitted from one's immediate ancestors, from one's father and one's father's father. A performance can be validated simply by claiming, 'I follow from my father,' one might also assert 'being Bonefish, how can I dance other than Bonefish?'" (1998: 226). In these terms, a dancer's being coexists with a sense of accountability to an ancestral dancing self who articulates an individual's belonging to a distinctive corporeal disposition as well as a complex choreographic tradition. <sup>11</sup> The narrative of Bonefish thus includes the reembodiment of an animated landscape of collective identity.

When Australian men come down to the beach to dance with the sailors, they are, therefore, asserting a particular kind of authority: "The superior dancers are determiners as much as keepers of the tradition," writes von Sturmer (1998: 226). If, at first, the energetic activity of their dancing functions as a kind of preliminary greeting to the British as it would to an opposing tribe, the signs are that these different genres of dancing include a display of physical prowess in preparation, like many other war dances, for prolonged contests of authority. As the dancing names and marks territory, it also defines the dancing maneuvers that should be followed by visitors who wish to travel in a particular country. Bradley makes clear that the dancing shifts from one location to another, and presumably also from one tempo to another, over the course of those first few days. To modify the Bonefish text, it could be said that the Eora peoples in Sydney Cove were saying, "I am dancing this sandy shore, this land, and how can I dance other than this place? You, therefore, must dance not with us but for us." From the Australian perspective, the colonizers needed to be "superior dancers" if they were to be incorporated into the "immaterial" knowledges of the local cultural economy. From the Australians' perspective, they were communicating their power, identity, and ownership when they invited the "white strangers" to contemplate the difficulties of dancing together.

The final point I wish to make is about the figure of the stranger that Clendinnen evokes in her title. The word *strangers* has a reluctant resonance with Sara Ahmed's (2000) postcolonial critique of this concept. The problem of the stranger, as she suggests, is that no sooner is it hailed or brought into being by the power-knowledge of the colonizer than it becomes a fetishized category of otherness because it assumes an ontology of difference from the self. In this position of cultural antagonism, the otherness that constitutes the stranger belongs to a social, cultural, and political reality that can be neither known nor assimilable: "And yet we do not become them, and they do not become us. The stranger is both familiar and strange, both within and without our field of knowledge" (Ahmed 2000: 5). And strangers are particularly excluded when forms of belonging and identity are used in discourses of nationhood. The concept of strangers dancing together established by Clendinnen's account, however, displaces the figure of the stranger from the ships to those on shore, whose belonging in the dance cannot be understood. The metaphor of dancing is proposed as if this encounter with others might constitute yet another epistemological category that is ahistorical, that is without precedent. As Ahmed writes, "The encounters we might have with others hence surprise the subject, but they also reopen the prior histories of encounter that violate and fix others in regimes of difference" (2000: 8).

The colonial gaze assumes that dancing can be reconstituted by white modes of learning to dance through mimesis and forgets that the constrained bodies of the sailor's hornpipe represents already those displaced conditions of disciplinary power at work in their own bodies. As Bhabha asserts,

colonialism has always functioned as a discursive encounter that appropriates one condition of embodied knowing into the other. In symbolic terms, the colonial appropriation of Australian bodies robs them of the power they had in dancing, a corporeal and affective situation that has been devastating for indigenous communities. What is extremely problematic are descriptions where sympathetic accounts of white history remain complicit with a 'stranger' fetishism, thus perpetuating the loss of corporeal and kinesthetic histories that give cultural authority to indigenous dancers as legitimate parts of their political negotiation with 'strangers.'

In her sensitive reading of the colonial archive, Clendinnen rightly argues for recognition that a condition of unfulfilled promise could emerge from the image of black and white, Australian and British, "dancing together" and admits that the problem was "real comprehension" (2003: 10). But she fails to develop the "double consciousness" that Paul Gilroy (1993) asks of postcolonial ethnohistoriography in relation to this example of cultural transmission because she never seriously considers dancing as evidence of historical and cultural knowledges written in and through the body. Her account discredits an alternative political and symbolic narrative that might have been founded in embodied sensuous and choreographic structures of dancing between and across differences. Her notion that the dancing opened up a common ground of mutual copresence appears, then, unduly nostalgic and dismissive of the complexity of corporeal encounter.

My closer reading of this 'dancing' as a form of disciplinary practice by the British and as collective authority by the Australians exemplifies an 'incomprehension' that exists even where dancing and playing replace spoken language. Yet, the corporeality of this exchange is not without an important affective and communicative content; these men were touched by one another. The dancing provided a structure for the face-to-face encounter that, beyond a simple coupling, was to mediate a close taking in of the skin, flesh, and weight of the other's body. The 'dancing of strangers' is felt when neither dancer can assimilate the movements or corporealities of the other into the familiar, whether Scottish with English or Australian with British. A postcolonial reading of dancing with strangers would not, therefore, assume any easy 'union' of particular beings, states, or nations. And it would have to admit two kinds of sovereignty evident in the complex structure, patterns, and movement of dancing.

My aims in this paper were, thus, both specific and general: on the one hand, to look at the particular evidence in the dancing on the shores of Port Jackson and its possible contribution to thinking about political sovereignty in Australia; on the other, to suggest that attention to embodiment in historical narratives can challenge white historians in their accounts of nation formation. As Aboriginal writer Steve Kinnane explains, "The redressing of dominant non-Indigenous historical narratives of Indigenous collective and individual lives is to experience the delicate space of negotiation, collaboration and re-interpretation of our diverse identities" (2005). The Australians' dancing at Port Jackson contests those knowledge categories anxiously determined by the settler community as modes of social control and respects the inassimilable difference carried in potentially hostile bodies. Any misreading of this dancing by the scholars and public of a dominant white nation only perpetuates the difficulty of dancing with strangers in contemporary political discourse.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Ghassan Hage (2000) analyses the "white fantasy" of Australia's national imaginary in relation to multiculturalism, but the same ideological framework applies to indigenous history.

<sup>2</sup> Winner, 2004 Kiriya Prize for nonfiction; Winner, 2004 NSW Premier's Literary Award; Winner, 2004 QLD Premier's Literary Award; Short-listed, 2004 *Age* Book of the Year Award; Short-listed, 2004 *Courier Mail* Book of the Year Award; Short-listed, 2004 Victorian Premier's Literary Awards; Short-listed, 2004 Westfield/Waverley Library Awards. For publisher's comment, see Morag Fraser (ed.), *Inga Clendinnen: A Celebration* (Canberra: Friends of the National Library, 2005): 29.

<sup>3</sup> An address by the Honourable Julie Bishop, minister for Science and Training, to the Australian History Summit dinner, August 16, 2006. See [http://www.mrcld.org.au/research/education-reports/Address\\_by\\_the\\_Hon\\_Julie\\_Bishop\\_MP.pdf](http://www.mrcld.org.au/research/education-reports/Address_by_the_Hon_Julie_Bishop_MP.pdf) (accessed May 14, 2009).



<sup>4</sup> After several decades of land-rights claims and a decade of litigation, the High Court of Australia ruled on June 3, 1992, that the land title of indigenous peoples, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, would be recognized as common law. This overthrew two centuries of legal denial of land ownership, and therefore of Aboriginal sovereignty, by the doctrine of *terra nullius*, a legal fiction built on the myth that Australia was an empty land at the time of colonization.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to dedicate this paper to the late ethnohistorian Greg Dening, whose history student I was thirty years ago in a course titled "Culture Contact in the Pacific"; the long shadows of that course are evident in this paper. He has written of performance, and used its metaphors, with all the abandon of scholars not versed in theater and dance, and at times, this blurring of genres has been disconcerting. In other contexts, however, his rigorous listening to the hidden voices, bodies, and ritual behaviors within historical accounts has led to profound shifts in political and aesthetic understanding of the past.

<sup>6</sup> Dance historian Theresa Buckland, whose expertise includes English folk dancing, confirmed this gap in the scholarly literature (verbal communication, Society of Dance History Scholars conference, June 2006).

<sup>7</sup> With thanks to Travis Moran for giving me access to his lessons on Irish dancing, September 2006.

<sup>8</sup> This postural kinesthetic appears in most representations of the corroboree, presented by Australians and depicted by white artists during early settlement.

<sup>9</sup> Looking glasses became common household items in the eighteenth century that were available to officers on naval ships; therefore, the connections between mimesis, colonialism, and subjectivity through the analogy of the mirror, and thus likeness, become compounded. The use of mirrors to supplement the mimesis of the ballet lesson has enhanced transmission of norms and codes of corporeal instruction (Gardner 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Alongside narratives of exploration, official reports, diaries, and letters, the white archives in Australia contain the writings of celebrated European anthropologists, as any search under the heading of "dance" or "aboriginal" in the National Library or the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies will reveal.

<sup>11</sup> Von Sturmer explains that "differences are jealously guarded, and there are frequent accusations of stealing. Groups worried that their repertory is in danger of being commandeered may threaten to 'kill it'" (1998: 226).

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