BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE

# DARK EMU

STUDY GUIDE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

Bangarra Dance Theatre pays respect and acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet, create, and perform.

We also wish to acknowledge the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples whose customs and cultures inspire our work.

# INDIGENOUS CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY (ICIP)

Bangarra acknowledges the industry standards and protocols set by the Australia Council for the Arts Protocols for Working with Indigenous Artists (2007). Those protocols have been widely adopted in the Australian arts to respect ICIP and to develop practices and processes for working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and cultural heritage. Bangarra incorporates ICIP into the very heart of our projects, from storytelling, to dance, to set design, language and music.


Last updated September 2019

**WARNING**

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this Study Guide contains names and images of, and quotes from, deceased persons.

**Photo Credits**

Front Cover: Bangarra ensemble, photo by Daniel Boud

Back Cover: Yolanda Lowatta, photo by Daniel Boud

# INTRODUCTION

Inspired by Bruce Pascoe's award-winning book of the same name, *Dark Emu* explores the vital life force of flora and fauna in a series of dance stories. Directed by Stephen Page, *Dark Emu* is a dramatic and evocative dance response to the assault on land, people and spirit. We celebrate this sharing of knowledge, the heritage of careful custodianship, and the beauty that Bruce Pascoe's vision urges us to leave to the children.

"The stain is deep in our chalk and until we can accept what the explorers saw as part of the national story our debate of national origins, character and attributes is hobbled by ignorance."

– Bruce Pascoe, *Dark Emu*

# CONTENTS


03 Introduction

04 Using this Study Guide

05 Contemporary Indigenous Dance Theatre

09 Bangarra Dance Theatre

10 The Power of Narrative

12 Urban Pre-History

13 Aboriginal Agriculture

14 Aboriginal Aquaculture

15 The Economics of Collaborative Farming

16 Creating Dark Emu

18 Performing Dark Emu

19 Creative Team

20 Discussion Starters

21 Resources

# USING THIS STUDY GUIDE

Bangarra Dancers in in *Dark Emu,* photo by Daniel Boud

The purpose of this Study Guide is to provide information and contextual background about the themes explored in Bangarra Dance Theatre's production of *Dark Emu.* This Guide can assist teachers and students in thinking critically, and in forming personal responses to the work. We encourage the audience to engage emotionally and imaginatively with *Dark Emu,* and to embrace the many interrelated themes, stories and issues that are woven into this production.

This Study Guide also proposes perspectives and provides historical viewpoints sourced from a number of historians and writers about Aboriginal agriculture, aquaculture and land management. However, it is important to note that Bangarra's *Dark Emu* is a creative interpretation of these themes, breathing the essence of culture through the dance, design, music and sound aspects of the production.

We hope you enjoy *Dark Emu.*

**CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES**

Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

Sustainability

**GENERAL CAPABILITIES:**

Intercultural understanding

Critical and creative thinking

**LEARNING AREAS:**

The Arts

English

Humanities & Social Sciences

Science

# CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS DANCE THEATRE

## PERSPECTIVES, VOICES AND CULTURES

The concept of contemporary Indigenous dance theatre cannot be understood as a categorised genre or a particular form because it exists as part of a continuum that responds to a diversity of culture and developing perspectives. Any contemporary Indigenous dance production that incorporates music/sound, design and other conventions of the theatre will inevitably have a deep purpose and an essential spirit that is, and will always be, about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. While drawing on traditional stories and cultural ways of being, Indigenous dance theatre provides an important platform for Indigenous people. It gives voice to the experience of living in a modern world that experiences constant change, where the threat to cultural identityis relentlessly present.

The growth in availability of technical resources, an increasing number of performance venues, and the proliferation of new arts festivals and digital platforms, has greatly supported the development of new Indigenous dance theatre, as well as the careers of the many creative artists involved. As more new work is created, support for the infrastructure and training that underpins these forms has also grown, resulting in a critical mass of professional artists involved in producing high quality productions that increase the demand we currently see from audiences in Australia and internationally. One of the most important outcomes of these developments is the fact that more Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander people are able to see their cultures reflected in this unique form, and are able to celebrate the resilience of Australia's First Nations people and their ancestors through the sharing of works that depict Indigenous stories, cultures and perspectives.

It is important to consider the language we use when talking and writing about Indigenous cultures in the context of art: when it is made, how it is made and where the source material comes from. The general application and understandings of the terms 'traditional' and 'contemporary' can be problematic when critiquing Indigenous dance theatre. By fixing the term 'contemporary' to the form, it could be argued that we are implying 'post-colonial', 'modern' or 'non-traditional'. Yet with many new works sourcing their inspiration from the Indigenous cultures that have existed since ancient times, what is 'traditional' and what is 'new' can exist simultaneously. This is often expressed by saying Indigenous Australian cultures are the oldest living, and continuous cultures in the world.

## FORM, ACTIVATION AND PROCESS

One way of exploring the development of Indigenous dance theatre over the last three or four decades is to trace the journeys of some of the artists who have been significant contributors to that development. It should be noted that while many opportunities have been opened up for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to develop in their choreographic work and their leadership roles, the true force behind this development has been the commitment and determination of the individual artists themselves.

Artists and leaders like Carole Y. Johnson, Stephen Page, Frances Rings, Raymond Blanco, Vicki van Hout, Gary Lang, and Marilyn Miller, are some who have paved the way. More recently Elma Kris, Deborah Brown, Yolande Brown, Daniel Riley, Mariaa Randall, Sani Townsen, Jacob Boehme, Ghenoa Gela, Thomas E. S. Kelly, Joel Bray, and Amrita Hepi are contributing to the ever-growing critical mass of Indigenous contemporary dance in Australia.

Building a skills base has been both a challenge and a significant contributor to the development of Indigenous contemporary dance and dance theatre. The establishment of training institutions like National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) Dance College in Sydney, and Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA) in Brisbane, have been fundamentally important to increasing technical skills to support the creation of new works. Market development initiatives, the growth of touring networks, and a range of strategic programs to address identified gaps in the infrastructure, have been and continue to be critical to the growth and sustainability of this work.

From the mid-20th Century, contemporary forms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander expression emerged across all art forms and began to infiltrate mainstream arts programs that largely drew on western cultures and/or western forms of presentation. By the 1960s, young black theatre makers, playwrights, writers and actors were creating works that reflected their culture in both the pre-colonial and post-settlement worlds. Writers Kevin Gilbert and Jack Davis, and actor/directors Bryan Syron and Bob Maza were among some of the black theatre makers who lay the foundation for the strong

Indigenous theatre scene that exists today. Novelist Faith Bandler, and poet/artist/educator Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker) were also strong voices in the new wave of Indigenous writers whose works now form part of Australia's rich and diverse literary landscape. The wave of contemporary Indigenous artists that followed in the wake of the Papunya Tula art movement in the 1970s has seen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander work acquired for major collections around the world, which command impressive prices in auction houses globally. Many, if not all, of these artists also consider themselves activists, and there is no doubt that their work has had a significant impact on the way non-Indigenous people have learned about Indigenous cultures and the ongoing political struggle of First Nations people in the context of post-settlement life.

The creative processes of any artist tend to emerge through a range of influences, discovery and personal experience. Yet for Indigenous artists, these processes are more complex. Respect for cultural protocols, the need for community engagement, and a strong commitment to enforce care for traditional knowledge that is shared, and/or provided through a process of request, invitation, permission and transmission, are all things that need to be considered and upheld as new expressions are created by Indigenous artists. Navigating all these considerations is complicated and takes time. However, the ongoing development of Indigenous dance (and other contemporary art forms) is dependent on these protocols and practices being observed and implemented to ensure cultural continuity. Stories, songs, dances, and connection to Place are sacred, and are passed on through oral transmission, so there is no central knowledge source, and written information is usually second hand. Indigenous Cultural & Intellectual Property (ICIP) rights are variously enshrined both Australian and international conventions and statements, and are an important safety net that seeks to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait cultures survive and thrive.

## COUNTRY, RELATIONSHIP AND CONNECTION

'Country', as a western construct, is mostly understood as a defined place, marked by borders, (natural and/or imposed), and operating on principles of sovereignty and the governance of the nation by the state. Ethnicity, religion, environment, and histories of colonisation and conflict are signifiers that overlay the identification of a 'country'. As history shows, these factors have often been the cause of conflict between groups who claim their right to a 'land' is justified. Land ownership and other interests in land have been closely associated with human rights, where groups can show a perpetual connection to the land in order to justify their right to occupy.

At a community level, the concept of public, private, individual, or collective ownership of property (e.g. land, a house, a business) has developed over just a few thousand years. The right to own property that has a capital value, possesses certain features and resources, can be bought and sold for profit, and the protection of these interests and capacities by law, is the enduring assurance of the western capitalist system.

The concept of Country and Land for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is extremely different.

The spiritual dimension of Country cannot be detached from the physical. Country can mean a person's Land where they were born, as well as the sea, sky, rivers, sacred sites, seasons, plants and animals. It can also be a place of heritage, belonging, and spirituality that is inseparable from the land. Hence, the impact of displacement from Country, and the disruption to that sense of belonging to one's Country, can be catastrophic for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their cultural and economic wellbeing. Story, song, dance, and ancestral lineage provide the foundation for an existence on this earth, and a passage to and from the worlds beyond life on earth – and those stories and songs all link to Country as a home for Culture.

For Indigenous people, these complex relationships are like threads in a tapestry of exploration that has no beginning and no end, yet is founded on, and maintained through, specific information that is transmitted by 'walking on Country', oral transference and a range of other traditional practices.

When artists draw from the concept of Country, they are the bearers of Culture, illustrated and made meaningful in many ways to many different people. In this way, the dance theatre worlds within this work provide the opportunity to delve into the concept of Country and all it holds in the way of knowledge, spirituality and cultural meaning.

Beau Dean Riley Smith, Kaine Sultan-Babij, and Yolanda Lowatta in *Dark Emu*, photo by Daniel Boud

# CULTURAL INHERITANCE AND TRANSFERAL OF KNOWLEDGE

Storytelling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life is the means by which cultural systems, values, and identity are preserved and transferred. Telling stories through song, music and dance, in order to connect people to land, and teach them about their culture and the traditions of their ancestors is the way knowledge is passed from generation to generation. Knowledge about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander totemic systems, the histories of peoples, clans and tribal associations, language, land, and concepts and connections of kinship, are maintained though these stories.

Many of Bangarra's productions are based on or include stories from the Dreaming, which are allegorical representations of contemporary existence and the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and people. Expressing and maintaining culture through contemporary interpretations and rich theatrical realisations enables the world of Australian Indigenous culture to be shared with the full diversity of today's audiences.

# THE DREAMING

Indigenous spirituality exists in the concept of the 'Dreaming'. Dreaming connects Indigenous people to the past, creates relevance to the present, and guides them for the future. Dreaming stories can illustrate the phenomena of creation, transformation, natural forces, and life principles. They are specifically related to landforms, places, creatures and communities. The ancestral beings that populate the stories form the spiritual essence of the stories. Bangarra's portrayal of stories of the Dreaming through the contemporary dance theatre form requires a diligent process of connecting and building a relationship with the traditional custodians of those stories so that the integrity and authenticity is respected.

# CONSULTATION AND OBSERVANCE OF PROTOCOLS

For all of its productions, the Bangarra Creative Team researches and explores the stories of Indigenous cultures in close consultation and collaboration with their traditional custodians, before embarking on the process of creating the production. Each year, Bangarra spends time in specific Indigenous communities, meeting with Elders and traditional owners and living with the people of that community – learning about the stories that connect the people, the land, the language, and the creatures of the land. Everyone who works at Bangarra feels very strongly about their role in the company's work. They make sure that the stories they tell are true to the traditional owners of those stories and uphold the integrity of the stories' meanings.

# EXPERIENCING DANCE IN A THEATRICAL CONTEXT

It is important to note that dance theatre works are essentially artistic invention, and are created to express a broad range of ideas and thoughts. While some information is provided in the program notes of each production, the viewer is free to interpret the work according to their individual perspectives, emotional responses, and level of experience in the viewing of performing arts. Repeated viewing of the work, along with the cumulative process of learning about the themes, source material, cross-referencing of the range of subject matter and creative processes involved in the making of the work, contributes to personal and critical responses to the work. Bangarra invites its audiences to share, learn, and appreciate the critical importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures in order to understand their own relationship with the cultures and the people of Australia's First Nations.

# RESOURCES


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**The Deep Archive: Wesley Enoch on Contemporary Indigenous Arts Practice.** Real Time Arts, 2017. https://www.realtime.org.au/the-deep-archive-wesley-enoch-on-contemporary-indigenous-arts-practice/

**Johnson, Carole Y. (1940-).** National Library of Australia https://trove.nla.gov.au/people/1491391?c=people

**Carole Johnson — Delving into Dance with Ausdance Victoria** (2017) https://www.delvingintodance.com/podcast/carole-johnson?rq=carole%20johnson

**Bangarra Dance Theatre YouTube Channel** - interviews with Artistic Director Stephen Page and other Bangarra Creatives. https://www.youtube.com/user/bangarradancetheatre

# BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE

Frances Rings, Djakapurra Munyarryun, and Marilyn Miller, photo by Greg Barrett

Bangarra Dancers, photo by James Morgan

Carole Y Johnson, Matthew Doyle, and Phillip Lanley, photographer unknown

Bangarra Dancers and Crew, photo by Tiffany Parker

## BANGARRA'S BEGINNINGS

Bangarra Dance Theatre was founded due to the efforts of an American woman, Carole Y. Johnson, who toured to Australia in the early 1970s with the Eleo Pomare Dance Company from New York.

Johnson had experienced the full impact of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, and been a part of the proliferation of new modern dance exponents across America, who were focused on freeing dance from its institutionalised bases and using dance to make commentary on the contemporary world. She studied at the prestigious Juilliard School in New York and was awarded scholarships to work with communities in Africa. Johnson knew the power of dance as a practice, and as a communication platform.

During her time in Australia in 1972, she was asked to conduct dance workshops. These were very successful and resulted in a Johnson's new dance production that depicted Australia's own civil rights actions. *The Challenge – Embassy Dance* was about the Moratorium for Black Rights initiated by workers' unions in 1972, and the challenge to uphold the presence of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

Johnson quickly realised that there was a lack of contemporary dance expression in the Australian sociocultural environment, and decided that she would do something about it. On the back of her workshops, she established the Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Scheme in 1976, which was to later become the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association – known today as NAISDA Dance College. At the same time, black theatre makers, playwrights, writers, and actors were creating works that reflected their culture in both its pre-colonial and post-settlement states (see Form, Activation and Process, p. 5)

By the 1980s, NAISDA had developed a performance arm called the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, which showcased the development of students into professional Dancers and also gave opportunities for these Dancers to develop as Choreographers. Raymond Blanco, Marilyn Miller and Dujon Nuie were some of the artists who took on the role of Choreographer and paved the way for many more to come.

In 1989, Johnson founded a new company, Bangarra Dance Theatre. Bangarra is a Wiradjuri word meaning 'to make fire'. In 1991, the artistic directorship was handed to Stephen Page and he premiered his first work, *Up Until Now* for the company in October of the same year.

## BANGARRA TODAY

Today, Bangarra is one of Australia's leading performing arts companies, widely acclaimed nationally and around the world for its powerful dancing, distinctive theatrical voice and utterly unique soundscapes, music and design. The company is recognised globally for critically-acclaimed theatre productions that combine the spirituality of traditional cultures with contemporary forms of storytelling though dance. Bangarra is supported with funding through the Australia Council for the Arts (the federal Government's arts funding and advisory body), Create NSW (NSW arts policy and funding body) and a number of private philanthropic organisations and donors. The company also derives earnings from performance seasons, special events and touring.

Based in Sydney, Bangarra presents performance seasons in Australian capital cities, regional towns and remote areas, and has also taken its productions to many places around the world including Europe, Asia and the USA.

Bangarra provides the opportunity for people of all cultural backgrounds to share knowledge about, and have a contemporary experience of, the world's oldest living cultures. Bangarra has nurtured the careers of hundreds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professional artists, including Dancers, Choreographers, Composers and Designers.

Since 1989, Bangarra has produced dozens of original works for its repertoire, collaborated on the creation of new productions with other Australian performing arts companies such as The Australian Ballet and the Sydney Theatre Company, and played an integral role in opening ceremonies of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and the 2018 Commonwealth Games. In 2016, Bangarra created its first feature film, *SPEAR*.

Bangarra's Dancers and collaborating artists come from all over Australia, including the major groups in relation to location, for example: Torres Strait Islanders, Queensland (Murri), New South Wales (Koori), Victoria (Koorie), South Australia (Anangu and Nunga), Arnhem Land, Northern Territory (Yolngu), Coast and Midwest Western Australia (Yamatji), Southern Western Australia (Nyoongar), Central Western Australia (Wangai) and Tasmania (Palawah). Some of the Dancers are graduates of NAISDA Dance College (NSW), or Aboriginal College of Performing Arts (QLD), and others are graduates of dance courses delivered by universities around Australia.

# THE POWER OF NARRATIVE

Yolanda Lowatta in *Dark Emu*, photo by Daniel Boud

"Narrative is both about what we put into a story and what we leave out."

**– GREG MELLEUISH,** *THE TEACHING OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORY IN AUSTRALIAN SCHOOLS: A NORMATIVE VIEW* (2006)

Since the first Europeans started to visit the Australian continent over 400 years ago, and the subsequent British settlement in the late 18th century, the Australian national narrative has been a fierce and furious work in progress. The history of Australia is a story that is under constant revision as evidence is revealed, considered and often contested.

Contradictions of accepted truths are frequently proposed and examined, sometimes causing a major shift in peoples' understanding, sometimes changing nothing, and sometimes proving what everyone knew in the first place.

Challenge and controversy over Australian history has never been far from a political agenda and politicians have used history in a number of contexts to advocate for change, or for continuity. Historical information and perspectives can consciously be manipulated to support a political, social or economic policy, and can also unconsciously be taken into the national narrative to become part of the 'story' that either supports or deconstructs positions of power. Primary source discovery can be exposed, camouflaged or blatantly denied. As society shifts its compass, and seeks to know the truth, knowledge barriers come down and new histories are written. In this respect, 'official' history is an interesting concept.

## Is ‘unofficial’ history the voice barking in the background, unsettling mythologies and disrupting notions of national identity?

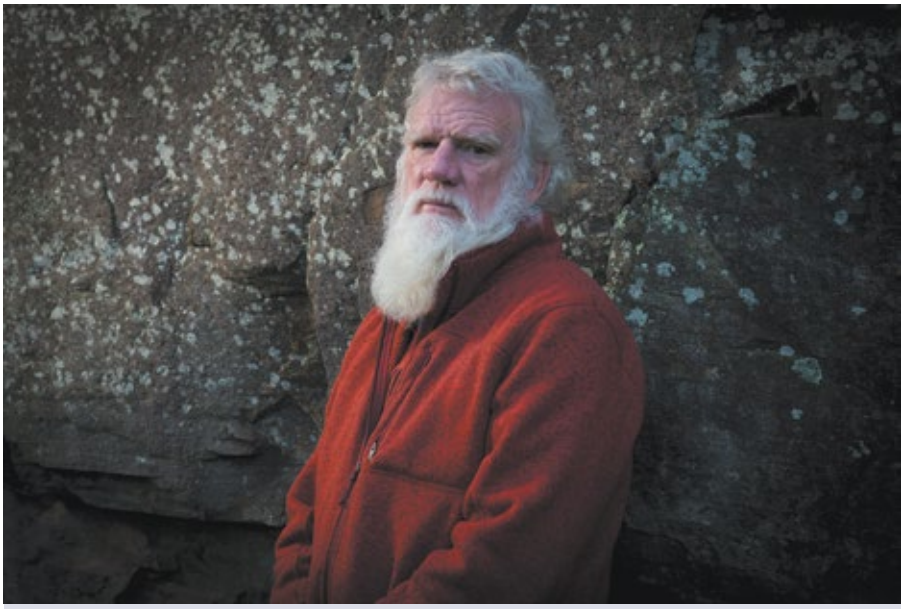
Bruce Pascoe’s book *Dark Emu, BLACK SEEDS: agriculture or accident?* was published in 2014. It challenges some of the most accepted ‘truths’ in regard to Aboriginal people and their ways of life prior to European settlement. Armed with compelling evidence from an impressive body of historiographical research, the book shatters the myth that refers to Aboriginal society as being primarily (if not exclusively) a hunter-gatherer society, foraging for food, killing wild game and not engaging in agriculture or sedentism.

Building on the work of contemporary historians Rupert Gerritson and Bill Gammage, as well as earlier history writers, Pascoe also sourced first-hand writings of the explorers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and spoke with a number of Elders and senior Indigenous community members. The result is a book that illustrates a world of highly sophisticated agricultural systems, land and water management strategies, sustainable fishing practices, construction methods and domestic living arrangements.

The title *Dark Emu* refers to Baiame – the dark shape between stars in the Milky Way that resembles the spirit emu who left the earth after creation. This practice of looking at the space between echoes throughout *Dark Emu*, and sets up a key dichotomy between Indigenous and colonial approaches to land and land management. While First Nations people understood the land as a living, breathing entity, colonisers saw the land as an object to be used; that could be exploited and modified for raw materials in order to achieve economic return. They did not see what was already there, and they chose not to learn.

Seeing the southern continental land as empty of productive use, and the Aboriginal people as not part of the ‘civilised’ world was analogous to not seeing the spirit of the land, the owners of the land, and the care and management of the land over thousands of years. And this blinkered perception was not innocent ignorance in any way. It supported the British settlement project in line with imperialist claims, appropriating a right to colonise and assuming the right to govern.

Bangarra Dance Theatre’s *Dark Emu* invites audiences to experience the spirit of Baiame, and all it represents, and think about the knowledge barriers that have clouded Western perspectives since European occupation. *Dark Emu* presents an opportunity to be interested to know more about the ways Aboriginal people have cared for, and drawn life from this land for over 60,000 years, and how the deep and enduring connection to land through ancestry and culture is fundamentally critical to the future of this land.



The start of that journey is to allow the knowledge that Aboriginals did build houses, did cultivate crops, did sew clothes and were not hapless wanderers across the soil, mere hunter-gatherers. Aboriginals were intervening in the productivity of the country and what they learnt during that process over many thousands of years will be useful to us today. To deny Aboriginal agricultural and spiritual achievement is the single greatest impediment to inter-cultural understanding and, perhaps, Australian moral and economic prosperity.

**– BRUCE PASCOE,** *DARK EMU BLACK SEEDS: AGRICULTURE OR ACCIDENT?* (2014)

# URBAN PRE-HISTORY

Many people would claim that Australia's urban history began with the first European settlement. In the late 18th century, Europeans saw Australia as a land without large buildings or recognisable infrastructure, and a people who did not present in the look, language and behaviours of Europeans. Australia was proclaimed by the British as being *terra nullius* ('nobody's land' in Latin). It took until 1993, when the Federal Government handed down the Mabo Decision, for the doctrine of *terra nullius* to be overruled in law. This delay demonstrates the overwhelming strength of a socio-political agenda that sought to bypass any acknowledgement of Australia's Indigenous people as the First Nations of this country, by way of ignoring their complex, scientific and successful traditions that enabled them to live sustainably.

One of the signifiers of urban history is the construction of settlements and housing, and one of the most enduring mythologies in Australian history is that Aboriginal people were exclusively a hunter-gather society. However, in the diaries of the early explorers there are numerous descriptions of clusters of huts and permanent settlements across many areas of Australia, both coastal and inland. Large villages consisting of permanent dwellings that would have supported around 800 to 1000 people were reported by British explorer Charles Sturt, and other similar housing is documented in the journals and reports of explorers Thomas Mitchell, Willem de Vlamingh, Nicolas Baudin, Daniel Brock and Lawrence Well.

"... (The dwellings) were made of strong boughs with a thick coating of clay over leaves and grass. They were entirely impervious to wind and rain, and were really comfortable, being evidently erections of a permanent kind to which the inhabitants frequently returned."

**– CHARLES STURT,** *TWO EXPEDITIONS INTO THE INTERIOR OF SOUTHERN AUSTRALIA* (1833)

The building of houses for groups of people to live as a functioning community is purpose-related to producing sustenance and shelter on a permanent or rotational basis. Locations that support food supply, access to water, and other resources, enable the practices of agriculture and aquaculture to develop. The precolonial Aboriginal agricultural economy was not based on individual or company ownership or competition and profit; this economy was developed from the land – not imposed upon it. It was sustainable, collectively managed, and environmentally sensitive. As European forms of farming took over the land, the land suffered. Hard-hooved grazing animals destroyed the soil, blowflies came with the animals and brought disease, fertilisers contaminated the waterways. Aboriginal farming collapsed under this assault, and the villages that the explorers described in their journals were abandoned.

## DISCUSSION STARTER

What can be learned from knowing more about precolonial Aboriginal urban settlements, architecture and land management?

# ABORIGINAL AGRICULTURE

It is a commonly held view that Indigenous Australians in traditional circumstances never engaged in food production, specifically in terms of developing of adopting agriculture. Based on this assumption there had been extended debate on the supposed reasons for this. Such debates are meaningless if the initial premise is incorrect. And it may well be. Furthermore, if that assumption is incorrect it has significant implications for theories on the origins of agriculture.

**– RUPERT GERRITSON,** *AUSTRALIA AND THE ORIGINS OF AGRICULTURE* (2008)

The practice of agriculture before the time of white settlement is rarely noted in historical narratives about Australia, despite there being considerable evidence found in colonial journals and reports, and the fact that many preserved traditional practices exist to this day in a number of Aboriginal communities.

One of the most popular crops was Murnong (also known as the yam daisy). Murnong resembles the contemporary sweet potato with the texture of a water chestnut. It was grown and harvested in many of the wetter areas of the country, and is still enjoyed today in some parts of Australia. The tuber/root is full of nutrition, and the leaves and flowers are also edible.

Grain production was carried out the drier areas. The Panara (grass people) collected and propagated seed, redirected water to the crop, and harvested the grains which included sub-species of millet and barley. Grains were crushed and used to make paste or baked to produce bread. Surpluses were stored in specially constructed storage buildings and traded with other groups.

As the colonists spread across the grasslands and brought grazing animals onto the land, the ground that supported these highly nutritious crops was lain fallow and the soil structure was irrevocably altered.

"(at the time of colonisation), at least 19 different species of plant were being cultivated by at least 21 different identifiable Indigenous groups. These included species of yam, sweet potato and its relatives (such as "bush potato") "native millet", ngardu, "bush tomatoes" and "bush onions".

**– RUPERT GERRITSON,** *AUSTRALASIAN SCIENCE* (JULY/AUGUST 2010)

In 1844, Charles Sturt led an expedition party onto the Stony desert, reaching the point which is now called Cooper's Creek. The creek was completely dry and the party was dangerously fatigued and weak. They came across a large village of Aboriginal people who immediately offered them water (from underground water holes), roast ducks and cake (Sturt, in Pascoe, p.75).

We do not know exactly how long Aboriginal people were roasting ducks and baking bread and cake, but we can speculate that perhaps these were the first people to do so. Aboriginal prehistory presents not only the challenge of sourcing evidence, but the willingness for history writers to see past embedded bias and trust the voice of those who hold the knowledge.

## DISCUSSION STARTER

There is a growing body of evidence that challenges the broadly accepted view that Australian Aboriginal people were essentially a nomadic hunter-gatherer society, living off the meat of wild animals and fish and native pants.

What are some of the reasons that this mythology was allowed to become so generally accepted?

# ABORIGINAL AQUACULTURE

Tyrel Dulvarie in *Dark Emu*, photo by Daniel Boud

Evidence of Indigenous peoples' fishing practices can be seen today in many places throughout the country. One of the most famous of these is at Brewarrina in New South Wales, where there are fish traps said to be over 40,000 years old. Brewarrina is located on the Barwon River about 800 kilometres northwest of Sydney.

There were hundreds of traps such as these throughout the Australian river systems and their capacity to harvest fish to feed thousands of people is not disputed. The technology involved an intricate construction of river stones that would drive the fish into shallow waters for easy capture. Part of this practice was the careful consideration of remaining fish populations, in order to ensure spawning and maintenance for future harvests.

Other forms of fish traps consisted of platforms built into the riverbank and connected to a series of gates and tunnels where fish were corralled for easy extraction. Again, the amounts were controlled to take into account changing seasons and periods of drought.

In the Eden area of southern New South Wales, Yuin Elders talk about the abalone fishing, and special cooking methods employed to avoid the meat being tough. In Victoria, Aboriginal people employed some very innovative ways to net and spear crayfish, and stories of automatic fishing machines further reveal the vast amount of knowledge that has been lost as Europeans choose to ignore Aboriginal ingenuity. As we look at the current issues around overfishing, land degradation and salinity, we realise how much poorer we are for the lost knowledge.

## DISCUSSION STARTER

Have a look at some images of Aboriginal fish traps, and research the technology that enabled their function. Could this technology be used today? How could Western culture make this technology work in a market economy?

# THE ECONOMICS OF COLLABORATIVE FARMING

In his book *The Biggest Estate on Earth* (2011), Bill Gammage dissects the idea that Aboriginal people were not farmers, and shows evidence that Aboriginal people knew this country in ways that Europeans have never understood. With diametrically opposed policies about land use and land care, a great deal of fundamental knowledge has been lost, and the environmental impact has been significant.

If we look very hard, and listen to Elders and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community members, we can see and appreciate the value of Aboriginal land care and management, and learn from the very sophisticated practices that were developed over tens of thousands of years. These practices were based on a deep knowledge of plants, soils, seasons, natural resources, river systems and populations. What one group of people had in surplus could be shared with another group who were in need; water, feeding grounds, fishing nets and traps operated with efficiency and sustainability as priorities.

"They shaped Australia to ensure continuity, balance, abundance and predictability. All are now in doubt"

**– BILL GAMMAGE,** *THE CONVERSATION* (DECEMBER 8, 2011)

Using the land by changing it and using the land by managing it are different.

'Fire-stick farming' works in Australia, but not in Europe, so to the early colonists the concept of burning to regenerate was unknown. In Australia, controlled burning regenerates the bush to produce more food – for both game and people; it reduces fuel to prevent widespread and dangerous fires; and is tailored to the seasonal patterns of a given area, rather than commercial demand. Aboriginal farming is framed as an economic paradigm that is based on the needs of the community, as opposed to the needs of individuals or businesses. Aboriginal farming was practiced collaboratively, to maintain balance and abundance.

While it is difficult for mainstream contemporary society to see the vast so-called 'uninhabitable' areas of Australia as being able to sustain large numbers of people, this is exactly what did occur. Knowing Country, respecting Country and living collectively in harmony with Country is a policy for land and resource management that cared for Country. Floodwaters were stored and dispersed, crops were sewn and harvested according to the natural climate patterns, and an economy of sharing and trading operated effectively and sustainably.

"... more than the physical management of a geographical area it encompasses looking after all of the values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations associated with that area, as well as associated processes of spiritual renewal, connecting with ancestors, food provision and maintaining kin relations".

**– ALTMAN, BUCHANAN, AND LARSEN,** *THE ENVIRONMENTAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INDIGENOUS ESTATE: NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN REMOTE AUSTRALIA* (2007)

## DISCUSSION STARTER

Ngarrindjeri Elder Tom Trevorrow remarked in Murrundi Ruwe Pangari Ringbalin 'River Country Spirit Ceremony: Aboriginal Perspectives on River Country' (2010) that *"...our traditional management plan was don't be greedy, don't take any more than you need and respect everything around you. That's the management plan – it's such a simple management plan, but so hard for people to carry out."*

Why do you think Trevorrow suggests this is 'so hard for people carry out'?

# CREATING DARK EMU

Bangarra Dancers in *Dark Emu*, photo by Daniel Boud

The creative process of Bangarra's production of *Dark Emu* is inspired and motivated by stories and issues of Indigenous Australia. Making a new Bangarra work is always complex and challenging, due to the sheer breadth of material that is being explored in the process of research and discussion. To create a new work is to find and awaken the unique spirit of the story, and to share it with the utmost care and respect.

Bruce Pascoe's book *Dark Emu BLACK SEEDS: agriculture or accident?* (2014) provides a deep and inspiring well of information for Bangarra's *Dark Emu*. Fuelled further by information passed down through Aboriginal communities, and discussions with a number of Cultural Consultants, Bangarra's Creative Team start their creative process by examining themes and ideas that represent the stories that are needing to be told, at the same time embedding their own personal responses in the work.

Drawing up fragments of ideas and weaving them into sound, design, and dance is a delicate and highly focused process. Words are important. They can become banners in the mind, and drive abstract ideas into more substantial concepts. These ideas and concepts start to gain traction, building in strength as more layers are uncovered. Textures, sound, and light are imagined and the creative threads start to weave into the fabric of the work as a whole.

Some ideas are quite specific, such as the story about Bogong Moth season, when people would capture thousands of moths in caves, harvest them, use the oil on their skin, eat the highly nutritious meat or ground it into a paste to be preserved as cakes. Other ideas were more abstract, for example the idea of the sky looking at the earth and the earth being reflected in the sky. What would that look like? What would it mean? What is the energy that passes between, and how can we relate that to our own individual place in the world? Gradually the creative process enables the work to take on a force of its own. The artists start to listen to the spirit of the dance and trust that spirit. It is an organic process and there are often surprises along the way.

Bangarra's *Dark Emu* presents a world that has been mostly extinguished from history; a world where this land was cared for and managed well by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and where the economy of the land was based on reciprocity, balance and deep knowledge. The audience is offered the chance to think about this world, and learn and value Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures for their ingenuity, resilience, beauty and hope.

The Creative Team for *Dark Emu* consists of an Artistic Director/ Choreographer, two additional Choreographers, a Dramaturg, a

I've enjoyed exploring the ways of reawakening these cultural practices physically through dance and movement and the challenge of telling a story, smartly and cleverly, and with respect to the stories, traditions, and history.

**– DANIEL RILEY, CHOREOGRAPHER 2008**

Music/Sound Composer, and Set, Costume, and Lighting Designers. As well, there are a number of Cultural Consultants, the author of the book *Dark Emu*, a Rehearsal Director and eighteen Dancers, all contributing to the creative process. It is a difficult process and there are no short cuts. There are deadlines to reach and there is limited time to make the work. In the early stages, a great deal of discussion and experimentation occurs among the Creative Team. The Director offers ideas, the Dramaturg brings information from research and reflection, and the Designers try various illustrations and experiments based on the ideas that emerge and develop.

Once in the studio, the physical language enters the process and the Dancers and Choreographers play with movement responses to the ideas. As each movement motif develops into a sequence and takes on a structure, the arc of the production starts to form; the design elements begin to coalesce with the choreographic and audio elements. The final version of the production is usually complete just before the premiere. This is not unusual, as every moment is important, so every moment is used.

After the premiere, the new work will continue to grow and mature, and the artists will discover new layers to their interpretations. The life of a work is not over when the performance season is over, because the impact for audiences and artists will live on and move with them into their next experience.

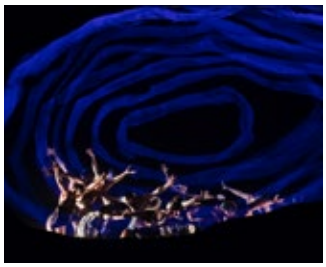
Luke Currie-Richardson and Dancers in rehearsals for *Dark Emu,* photo by Daniel Boud

Stephen Page speaks to Dancers about *Dark Emu,* photo by Daniel Boud

Dancers in rehearsals for *Dark Emu,* photo by Daniel Boud

# PERFORMING
# DARK EMU

*Dark Emu* is a collection of 14 interlinked sections inspired by stories of respect and connection. Each section illustrates lines of cultural lineage and traditional knowledge relevant to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relationships with Country.



**Dark Spirit of the Sky**
Looking into the void

**Ceremony of Seed**
Working with the cycle of life

**Forged by Fire**
Fertilised by ash

**Bogong Moth Harvest/ Moth Oil Ritual**
Oiling and feasting

**Crushed by Ignorance**
The calamity of disregard

**Escape Through Dust**
A resilient lone spirit prevails, moving onwards

**Bowls of Mourning**
Tears mix with the earth in caps of clay

**Trampled by Indifference**
A scourge of hooves, of flies and disease

**Rebirth Ritual**
Carefully we are restored

**Rocks of Knowledge**
Weaving traps with stone and skill

**Whales of Fortune**
The pinnacle of reciprocity, trust is shared with the cetaceans

**Smashed by Colonisation**
A final, climatic massacre, an uncomprehending destruction

**Resilience of Culture**
A wonder and power that nurtures earth, sea and sky

**Baiame**
The spirit of resilience and hope, singing up the land

Photos by Daniel Boud

## THANK YOU MY COUNTRY

I am the rock that holds the hear, after the sun has set
Thank you, my Country

I am the grain that takes the oil, after the pouring is done
Thank you, my Country

I am the stone soaking up water, long since retrieved from the pool
Thank you, my Country

I am the spirit of Country, still giving all life to the land
Thank you my Country

# CREATIVE TEAM

**Artistic Director**
Stephen Page

**Choreographers**
Stephen Page
Daniel Riley
Yolande Brown
Dancers of Bangarra Dance Theatre

**Composer**
Steve Francis

**Costume Designer**
Jennifer Irwin

**Set Designer**
Jacob Nash

**Lighting Designer**
Sian James-Holland

**Dramaturg**
Alana Valentine

**Cultural Consultant**
**Yuin/Biripi Nation Woman**
Lynne Thomas

**Language Consultant**
**Yuin Knowledge Holder**
Warren Foster

**Author of *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?***
Bruce Pascoe

Tyrel Dulvarie backstage, photo by Tiffany Parker

Bangarra Dancers at curtain call for *Bennelong*, photo by Tiffany Parker

## PRE-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

Refer to the list of Resources provided on page 21, which relate to Indigenous agriculture, aquaculture and farming, Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives, land care and environmental science. If you are able to access a copy of *Bruce Pascoe's Dark Emu BLACK SEEDS: Agriculture or accident?*, familiarise yourself with some of the main themes.

Discuss the evolution of Australia's national historic narrative, examining how it has been revised over time.

Use the following a guide.

1. Since colonisation, what are some of the mythologies have been created and challenged?
2. Are there continuing tensions (economic, cultural, social, and political) between western capitalist society and levels of awareness and respect for First Nation communities and their culture? If so, how are these tensions manifested?
3. How is history often a contested practice that requires thorough research as well as a level of objectivity and sensitivity?
4. How can we investigate and re-investigate our history from multiple perspectives?
5. Build the discussion to incorporate a range of perspectives be aware of the stories within the stories.

## POST-PERFORMANCE DISCUSSION

Consider the themes and stories in the production and think about how they make you feel.

1. How does dance theatre form tell a story that is complex and largely based on historical record, but is abstract in presentation?
2. Is this a powerful form of storytelling? If so, why?
3. How do the dance, design and audio elements complement each other?
4. Were there any specific sections that made a particular impact on how you felt about something, stimulating a response that you weren't expecting?

# RESOURCES

**Not hunter-gatherers: Bruce Pascoe on storytelling, history and cultural pride.**
NITV, 2016.
https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2016/05/17/bruce-pascoe-storytelling-history-and-cultural-pride

**Bruce Pascoe - Conversations with Richard Fidler.**
Radio National, 2016.
http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/conversations/bruce-pascoe/7134452

***Dark Emu*: Bruce Pascoe and Tony Birch in Conversation.**
The Wheeler Centre, 2017.
https://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/the-wheeler-centre/dark-emu-bruce-pascoe-and-tony-birch-in-conversation

**Word Up: Bruce Pascoe - AWAYWE.**
Radio National, 2018.
http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/features/word-up/word-up/9591844

**Bruce Pascoe and '*Dark Emu*'.**
The Paper Tracker, 2017.
http://www.papertracker.com.au/radio/bruce-pascoe-and-dark-emu/


Pascoe, Bruce.
***'Dark Emu BLACK SEEDS: agriculture or accident?'***.
Magabala Books, Broome, 2014.

Gammage, Bill.
***'The Biggest Estate on Earth: How Aborigines Made Australia'.***
Allen & Unwin, Sydney (2012).

Gerritson, Rupert.
***'Australia and the Origins of Agriculture'.***
Archaeopress, Oxford (2008).

bangarra
DANCE THEATRE

**BANGARRA DANCE THEATRE AUSTRALIA**

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