

Education Resource

by Shane Carroll for Arts Centre Melbourne | Creative Learning



CREATIVE VICTORIA



Rites: Dancing towards a shared history

Artists of Bangarra Dance Theatre and The Australian Ballet in Rites 1999.
Photograph by Branco Gaica.



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander viewers are advised this resource contains names and images of people who are now deceased.

Using this resource

As teachers and students experience their journey through the online exhibition *Rites: dancing towards a shared history*, they will become aware of the multiple layers of meaning being communicated through this unique form of art making and storytelling.

This resource draws on some of the interconnected themes within the *Rites* exhibition and offers three distinct viewpoints for discussion, along with two options for a class activity. We hope this resource will support teachers in encouraging students to build their critical thinking skills and develop their own perspectives as they respond to the exhibition.

Viewpoint 1 identifies dance making practices of the mid-20th century that saw non-Indigenous choreographers making work *about* Australian Indigenous people and cultures. This is compared to more recent practices of dance and dance theatre being created by Australian First Nations people through the lens of their own 65,000 years of Culture.

Viewpoint 2 focuses on the impact of the changing socio-political landscape in the 1960s, 70s and 80s and highlights this period as giving rise to the movement known as Artivism. The question to be explored here is whether art of this time had found a 'greater purpose' or if art was simply responding to current political and social disruptions and using its agency as a 'voice'.

Viewpoint 3 illustrates the stark differences in the contexts surrounding Igor Stravinsky's composition *The Rite of Spring* (1913) and Stephen Page's choreography for *Rites* (1997) and asks if there might be something fundamentally common to both creations – or not.

We also hope students will take time to consider that creative works that endure through time do so for reasons that are often found in the histories and experiences of the past, and their relevance to the present and the future.

Curriculum relevance

Across the curriculum priority:

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures.

General capabilities:

Critical and creative thinking; Intercultural understanding; Ethical understanding.

Subject/learning areas:

Humanities and Social Sciences (History, Civics and Citizenship),
Arts (Dance, Music, Media Arts, Visual Arts).

Topics/band descriptions:

Continuity and change, Cause and effect, Perspectives, Empathy, Significance, Contestability. Traditional and contemporary dance making and performance, Meaning and interpretation, Cultural and historical contexts.

Artists of Bangarra Dance Theatre in Rites 1999.
Photograph by Jim McFarlane.

VIEWPOINT 1

Rites: a landmark work of significance





On 29 October 1997, the dance work *Rites*, a collaboration of Bangarra Dance Theatre and The Australian Ballet, premiered in the State Theatre at Arts Centre Melbourne. This historic commission brought artists from the world's oldest living culture into the realm of the European tradition of classical ballet and immersed classically trained dancers in Aboriginal culture. It was unprecedented.

The significance of Page's *Rites* was not only that it gathered Indigenous and non-Indigenous dancers together creatively for the first time – *Rites* was an intensely powerful statement. It was a statement of truth that resonated loudly with audiences far and wide, notably in the same year as the Australian nation's first Reconciliation Convention.

Rites firmly closed the chapter on previous decades during which it was widely regarded as acceptable for non-Indigenous choreographers and dancers to create works about and/or inspired by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultures without any consultation or participation by the people of these Cultures.

While these older works claimed, in part, to speak to audiences in a way that acknowledged Australia's Indigenous people and cultures with empathy for their situation in a colonised land, there was no effort to give that voice to those being portrayed.

Here are some examples:

**Terra Australis, 1946. Choreography:
Edouard Borovansky**



Photograph of Peggy Sager, Vassilie Trunoff and dancers in *Terra Australis*, The Borovansky Ballet, 1946. Gift of The Australian Ballet, 1998. Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne

Terra Australis was choreographed by European born Edouard Borovansky to a commissioned score by Esther Rofe in 1946. Borovansky came to live in Australia in the late 1930s and founded the Borovansky Ballet in 1940.

Terra Australis was praised by reviewers for both the choreography and performances of the dancers. Librettist Tom Rothfield offered this view prior to the premiere: "We were concerned with writing the true story of Australia and naturally the fate of the Aboriginal [sic] came into it. And if the national conscience is stirred by the ballet, well so much the better." The cast of non-Indigenous dancers were costumed by Eve Harris in all-over dark fabrics painted with markings that were intended to resemble ceremonial body paint.

**Corroboree, 1950.
Choreography: Rex Reid**



Back cloth design by William Constable for *Corroboree*, c.1950. Purchased, 2005. Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

Australian composer John Antill's 1946 composition 'Corroboree' attracted a great deal of interest from audiences and music reviewers of that time. Some considered the work to be influenced by Igor Stravinsky's 'Le Sacre du Printemps' (The Rite of Spring) however Antill claims he had never heard the work before he wrote 'Corroboree'.

In 1950, Australian choreographer Rex Reid created a ballet to Antill's score for a production by the National Theatre Ballet. The work was conceived and created at a time when Aboriginal culture was starting to become more commodified, and in many cases appropriated, by white artists for consumption as artistic product.

Premiering in Sydney at the Empire Theatre, Reid's *Corroboree* was performed by a cast of 30 non-Indigenous dancers.

It was regarded by audiences and reviewers as unique and successful, and a notable departure from the standard classical ballet repertoire that formed most of the company's programming.

**Corroboree, 1954.
Choreography: Beth Dean**



Photograph of Beth Dean in *Corroboree*, New South Wales Arts Council Ballet, 1954. Gift of The Australian Ballet, 1998. Australian Performing Arts Collection, Arts Centre Melbourne.

In 1953, American dancer and choreographer Beth Dean was invited by the Arts Council of Australia to create a new work to Antill's 'Corroboree'. This was commissioned for the 1954 visit to Australia by Britain's newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II.

Dean had recently made Australia her home and advocated for respect to be shown to Aboriginal people and their cultures.

However, in her version of *Corroboree*, she not only cast an ensemble of non-Indigenous dancers, but took the lead role of the male initiate herself, ignoring cultural protocols that defined men's and women's business. Dean also misappropriated both Traditional movement motifs for the choreography and body paint design in the costuming. Dean and her husband Victor Carell had embarked on a long research trip across the continent and engaged with some Indigenous Communities, yet no Indigenous people were involved in the creation of the work.



Discussion questions

1

Frances Rings talks about *Rites* as, "... a new expression in Australian dance". Looking back on the examples above how does Stephen Page's work *Rites* mark both an end and a new beginning?

2

Rites was a first collaboration between two very different dance companies with artists from varied backgrounds. Thinking about this, and the time in which *Rites* was created, where might have been the intersections for common (creative) ground in making the work? Refer to the sound excerpt from Miranda Barker 'I grew up in Perth...', as a primary source.

Sidney Saltner, Djakapurra Munyarryun and
artists of Bangarra Dance Theatre in Rites 1999.
Photograph by Jeff Busby.

VIEWPOINT 2

Rites: a statement for the times, a message for the future



In 1950s Australia phrases such as ‘the dying race’ were spoken and written publicly in relation to the Indigenous population. One reflection of this statement was the fact that most Indigenous people lived in poverty on the fringes of ‘white’ society, displaced from the lands of their ancestors, and suffering from all the poisons that Colonisation had wrought.

Government assimilation policies and deeply embedded racist mindsets actively worked together to prevent Indigenous people from having a voice in the discourse of the public domain. Speaking one’s language was forbidden in education and employment settings, slave labour was rife, traditional lands continued to be exploited, and children were removed from their families.

Then in the 1960s and 70s, the socio-political and cultural landscape began to change radically, not only in Australia but in many parts of the world. Human rights campaigns were particularly effective in highlighting inequalities in issues of race, religion, sexuality, employment and more. Change started to sweep across many societies,

challenging social norms, shifting outdated government policies and eventually seeing specific legislation enacted to address inequity.

In Australia, several key events occurred during this time:

- 1967 – Referendum on Constitutional change to bring Aboriginal people to the status of citizens
- 1968/69 – Equal wage for Aboriginal pastoral workers decision in Western Australia
- 1972 – Tent Embassy established in front of Parliament House in Canberra and the first flying of the Aboriginal flag
- 1973 – Anti-Discrimination legislation

In the 1980s, further milestones occurred:

- 1985 – Uluru (formerly known as Ayer's Rock) handed back to Aboriginal people
- 1987 – Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody
- 1988 – Bicentenary Protest saw thousands march in protest of what was essentially, and sadly, a celebration of land theft

Things were changing in the arts as well. Aboriginal theatre groups were established in Melbourne and Sydney, producing new works by Aboriginal writers. Visual arts were also coming to the fore with the 1981 Australian *Perspecta* exhibition of Clifford Possum and Tim Leura Tjapaltjarri at the Art Gallery of NSW. Aboriginal bands *No Fixed Address* and *Us Mob* made inroads into the Australian music scene, and Sally Morgan's *My Place* was a best seller in 1987, opening the doors for publishers to change the tone on First Nations literature. This was a time of artistic re-imagining of First Nations stories, history, and aspirations, which showcased the rich cultural life of First Nations Peoples.

This artistic activity was further boosted by the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board in 1973 which stated in its press release:

"The decision to place control for the arts in the hands of Aboriginals is intended to stimulate indigenous Australian arts and lead to the preservation of many art forms almost lost since the settlement of Australia by Europeans."

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, Press statement 83, 3 May 1973.

When Carole Y. Johnson, an American dancer and activist, came to Australia on tour with the US-based Eleo Pomare Dance Company in the early 1970s, she realised that Australian dance had no black voice. Johnson was motivated to establish the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association (NAISDA) and the Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre as a presence for First Nations voices in dance. NAISDA continues to this day.

In 1989 Johnson, along with Rob Bryant and Cheryl Stone, founded Bangarra Dance Theatre. This was established as a platform for First Nations people to claim a public space in the mainstream for their Culture and their People, to voice their stories and shift prevalent mindsets. Audiences engaged emotionally and intellectually with Bangarra's works and over the next three decades the company went from strength to strength. Today Bangarra exists as a testament to that vision and continues to speak, to educate, and be a voice for our First Nations Communities.

The term Artivism combines the words 'art' and 'activism'. The meaning is clear. The term was first coined in the late 1990s and referred to creative arts having the power to draw attention to important issues of political and social inequity or trauma. Some might consider that the arts has always had such capability. While the creative contexts for engagement, and the impacts have been diverse, it could be argued that the potential for the arts to move people to think differently has been an existing strength.

Discussion questions

1

How does the work *Rites* relate, or not relate to, the concept and practice of Artivism?

This quote from Frances Rings is a possible starting point:

"During that time, in that room, we weren't thinking we were being political but [the production] had such big ramifications - we didn't understand it at the time, but I look back now and think, that was pretty phenomenal ..."

Frances Rings, 2022

2

Could the dance work *Rites* be framed (or seen as effective) within the concept of Reconciliation? If so, how?

This quote from Stephen Page is a possible starting point:

"That drive and that energy of just wanting to change people's perspectives. We were wanting to channel into that and explore that."

Stephen Page, 2022

Steven Heathcote and Vicki Attard in *Rites* 1999.
Photograph by Jim McFarlane.

VIEWPOINT 3

Rites: a coming together through ceremony



Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du printemps*) original production at the Theatre des Champs Elysees, Paris, 1913. Ballets Russes de Diaghilev. Photo by Charles Gerschel. Lebrecht Music & Arts / Alamy Stock Photo



The title of the work – Rites – could be interpreted to primarily refer to Cultural rites practices, there is also an underlying theme of universal human and cultural rights that is present in the exploration of the work. This could be relevant to Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* as well as Page's *Rites*.

Le Sacre du Printemps (*The Rite of Spring*) was written by young Russian composer Igor Stravinsky in the years prior to World War I and the Russian Revolution. The score was radical for its time and the 1913 premiere of the ballet of the same name, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, was reported to have caused a riot. The work's libretto (synopsis) referred to the ancient pagan ritual of human sacrifice and borrowed musical motifs from Lithuanian folk songs, which were woven into radical tonal and rhythmic interplay. *The Rite of Spring* was revolutionary and holds a unique place in the canon of musical composition to this day.

Stephen Page's *Rites*, choreographed to the same Stravinsky score, speaks from the oldest continuing Culture and brings two worlds together through dance. The bodies of the dancers in motion are testament to Page's vision for the work, which was created when the reconciliation conversation was gathering a great deal of momentum in Australia. Histories were being disrupted through the writing of historians such as Henry Reynolds, Marilyn Lake and Lyndall Ryan, and contested by others such as Keith Windschuttle. It was a dynamic and disruptive time; a period of great significance in our history.

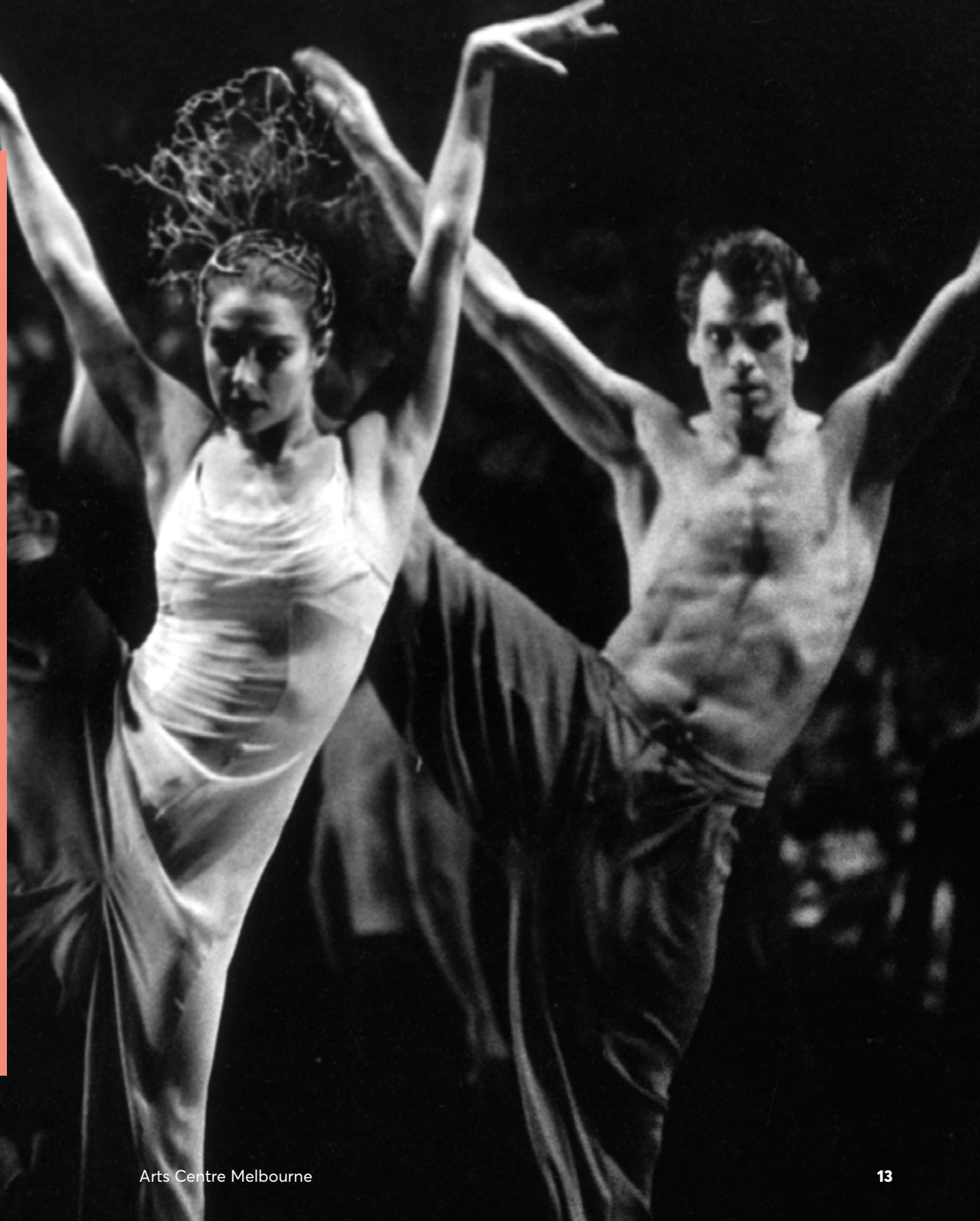
Discussion questions

1

The subtitle of Arts Centre Melbourne's online exhibition focused on Page's *Rites* is 'Dancing towards a shared history'. After viewing the exhibition, how would you talk about the idea of *Rites* as a 'coming together in a shared spirit of reconciliation'?

2

The 'right to have a voice' and a 'rite of passage' are familiar concepts, though with quite different meanings. However, in *Rites* are we perhaps seeing these two concepts coming together? What are the parallels, if any? Where are the meeting points? Where are the departures?



Reflection

Today, levels of cultural awareness and respect for Australia's First Nations people are increasing in contemporary Australian society across public and private spheres. We see more First Nations people and content on our broadcasting platforms, First Nations languages are heard and are more visible in written communication, and our school curriculum pays more attention to the Histories and Cultures of Indigenous Australians. That said, this does not lessen the ongoing tragic reality of intergenerational trauma, and the devastating impact of colonisation.

And sadly, a great deal of embedded racism still exists in many of our institutions, causing persistent barriers to First Nations people achieving true social and political equality.

Against this backdrop, there is no doubt that we are witnessing a growing critical mass of First Nations voices in Australia's performing arts – voices that speak to people of all cultures, Indigenous and non-Indigenous – and the impact is powerful.

References /further reading

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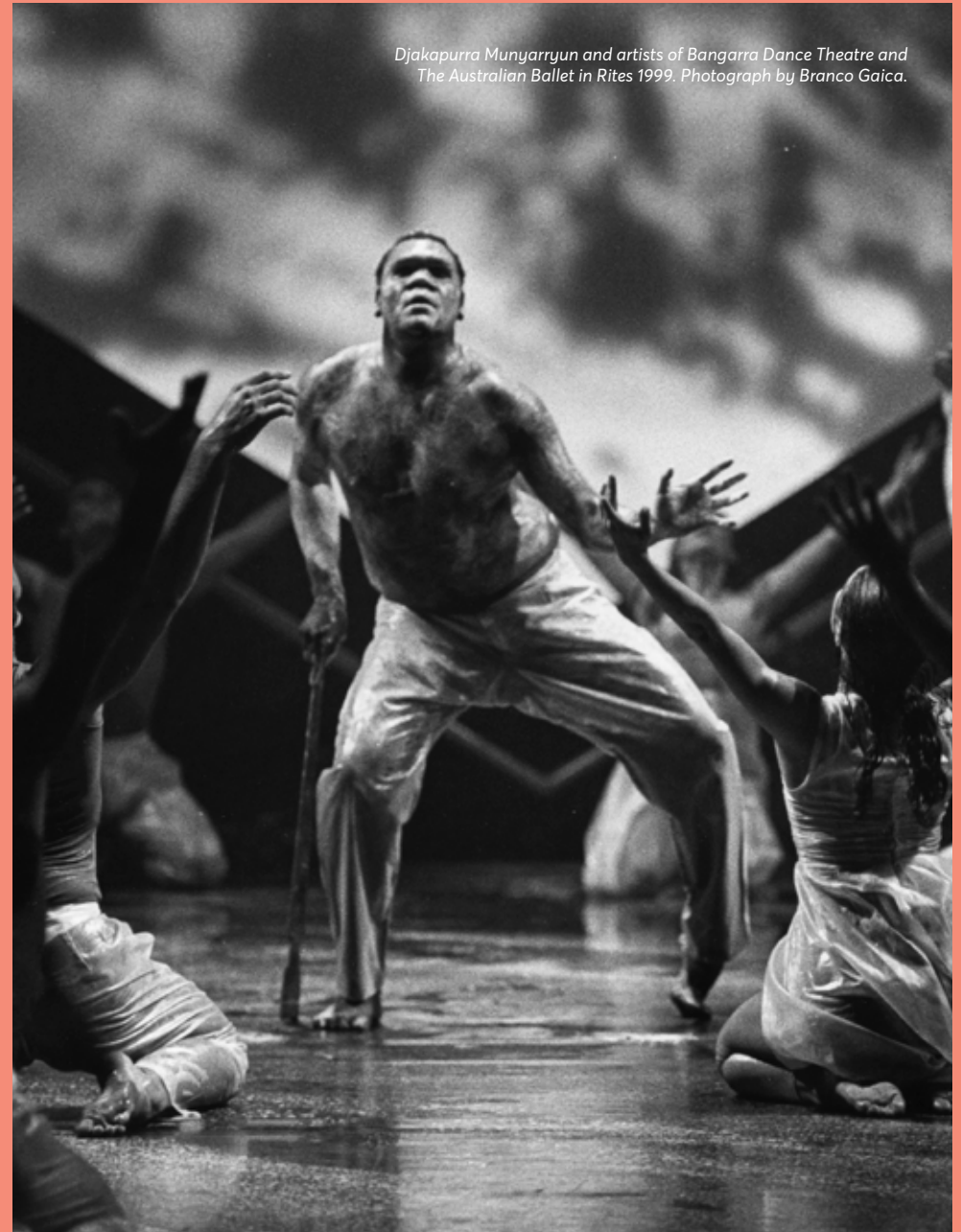
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Steffensen, Victor (2020) *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia*, Hardie Grant Explore

Wasgo, Chelsea (2021) *Another Day in the Colony*, University of Queensland Press

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Djakapurra Munyarryun and artists of Bangarra Dance Theatre and The Australian Ballet in *Rites* 1999. Photograph by Branco Gaica.



Activities

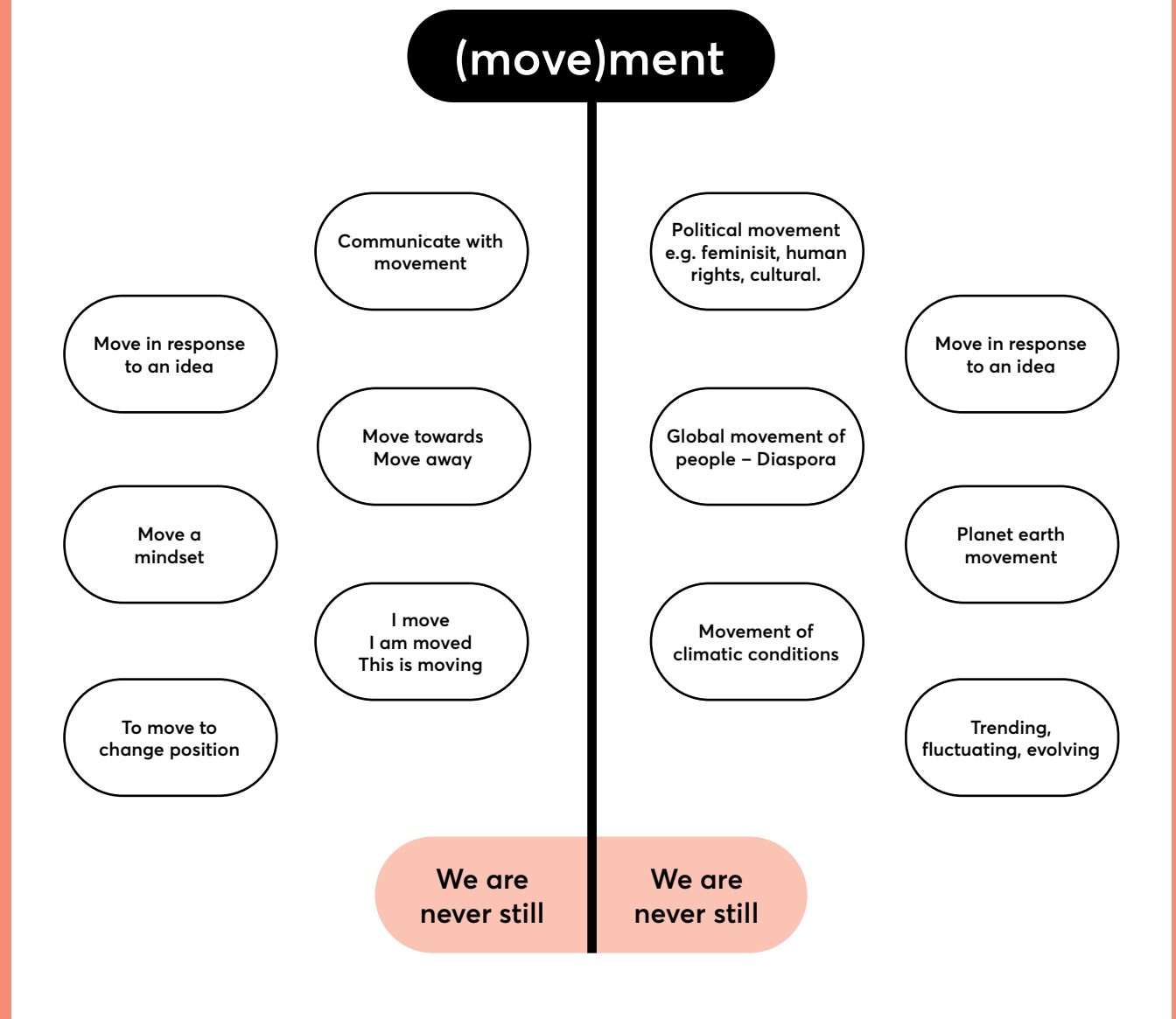
The title of a creative work can be simple or complex – or simple and complex at the same time. Titles can be explicit, provocative, ironic or carry a range of signifiers that can be unpacked in various ways. The work comes together under its title and takes on an identity through its title.

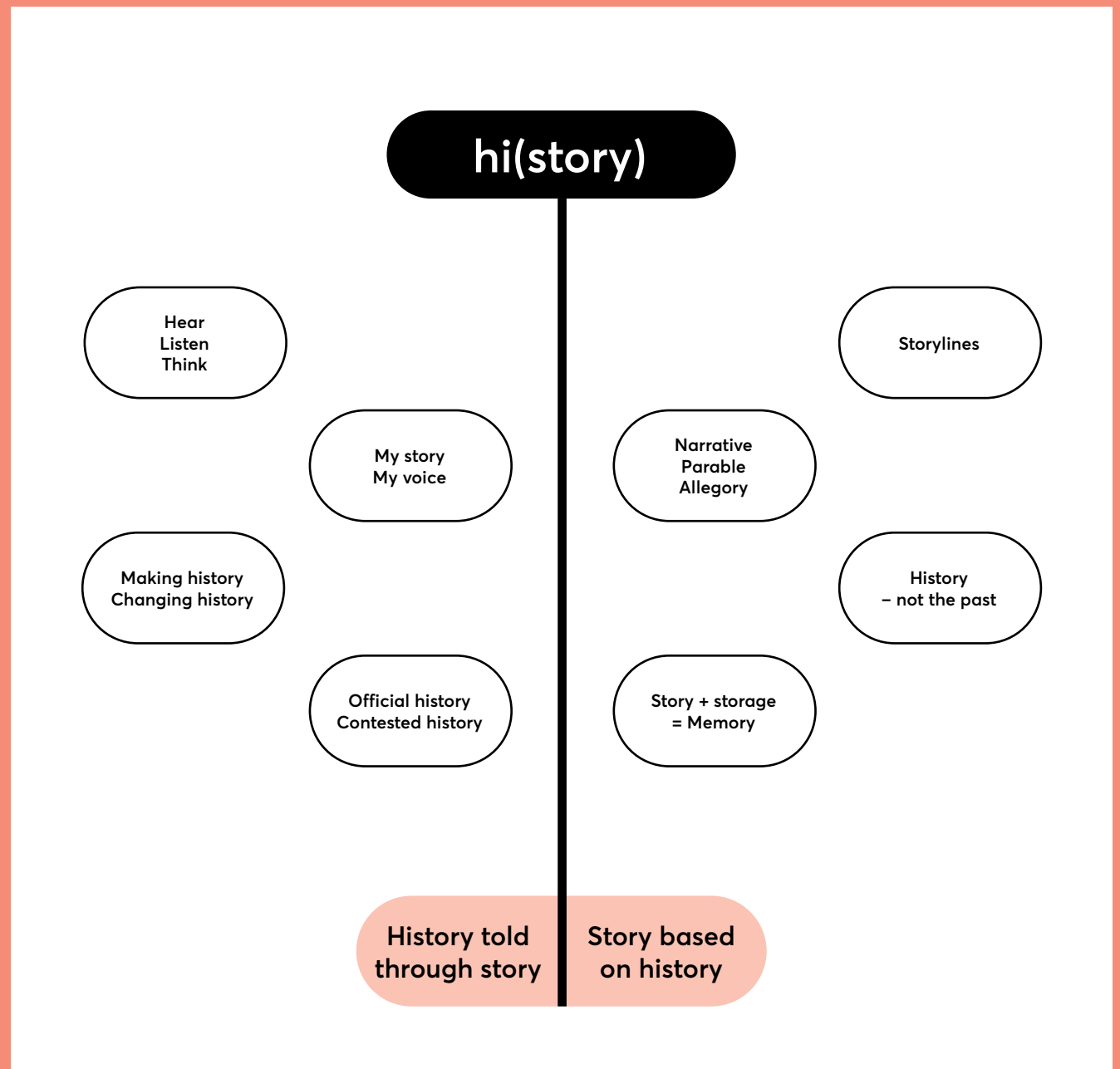
The title of the dance work *Rites* is clearly loaded with meaning. After exploring the exhibition, listening to the podcasts and considering the viewpoints in this resource, it might be interesting for students to explore the process of using words to play with meaning, then create their own responses.

The first example of this takes the word 'movement' and then adds the suggestion of multiple meanings by bracketing the first syllable – (move)ment.

The second example takes the word 'history' and brackets the word 'story' within the word history.

We have provided examples of how teachers and students might brainstorm this creative process with words. The activity can be continued by creating a visual, musical, literary, dramatic and/or dance response.





Artists of Bangarra Dance Theatre
and The Australian Ballet in Rites 1999.
Photograph by Jim McFarlane.



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