



Designing in Response to Indigenous Sovereignties

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May 7, 2020

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Abstract (Designing in response to Indigenous sovereignty)

In this paper I present moments of provocation that collectively describe 'gaps' within the Western design epistemes. These provocations come through the requirement to be in relation to Indigenous sovereignty and reveal non-Indigenous, design-based practices of passively, innocently deflecting the challenging work of deep epistemic engagement. However, Indigenous sovereignty remains an opportunity to situate the non-Indigenous designer into a practice of designing lawfully on Country. This is to locate design ontologically and epistemically as 'the guest' or 'the visitor'; dependent on and distinct to the Indigenous sovereign host. In this research setting, in Melbourne / Naarm I respond to Kulin practices of Welcoming; Womin Djeka. This paper may also serve as an example to non-Indigenous designers, in global contexts designing, researching and visiting on unceded lands. On Kulin lands, the sovereign practice of Womin Djeka addresses the guest or visitor and may include the laws of Bunjil. I contend this is a foundation from which to ongoingly, lawfully practice design in response to the ontological and epistemic boundaries set by Indigenous sovereignty.

N.B. The author is a non-Indigenous white man; invited to live and practice Western Eurocentric design on the unceded lands of the eastern Kulin Nations (Melbourne / Naarm).

KEYWORDS: Sovereignty, design ontology, epistemes, Womin Djeka, plurality, whiteness

The Acknowledgment, an important first step: In the contemporary moment

Across Australia it is becoming increasingly common to hear an Acknowledgement of Country at the start of formal occasions, meetings or gatherings. While these are often tentatively, awkwardly expressed, it is nonetheless a significant step forward. Until it no longer is. Until it is performative or becomes a barely noticeable social nicety. A, 'how are you?' 'Good thanks,' ritual. The Acknowledgement of Country captures a complex amalgam of tensions for the non-Indigenous, it is an enactment of what we've not been allowed to know or what we've wilfully ignored. It triggers the anxiety of feeling inept and exposed. The Acknowledgement of Country is not a token gesture, but it can feel like it is, because we are unsure how to mature Western epistemes into a sovereign relationship, so in our incapacity we recite an institutional statement as Acknowledgment and then move on to the event at hand.

As we fumble we reveal our ontological displacement. We fumble and yet we make the circumstances in which we are the problem. And these circumstances are so well designed that we struggle to recognise the design itself. We don't have a footing, but we don't know why.

Introduction

The Service Design conference is hosted on the unceded lands of the Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations. To state this, is to recognize the sovereignty and the sovereign practices of the eastern Kulin.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have never ceded their land, rights or identity. The continent known as 'Australia' is comprised of over 300 sovereign nations with distinct language, laws, culture, knowledge and governing systems (Behrendt, 2003). However, Indigenous sovereignty, dislocates and unsettles particularly white non-Indigenous people as it is heard and deflected through the racialised logics of the white possessive (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Here the 'White Possessive' is rendered a term by Moreton-Robinson for describing the links between race, sovereignty and possession through themes of property and owning property as outlined in her book, of this title. In this paper, the author draws from Critical Race and Whiteness and Indigeneity (CRWI) scholarship as a provocation to Western design. I draw from the theorizing of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars within CRWI discourse as foregrounding my emerging concerns that non-Indigenous designers might stall at the Acknowledgement and how the relationship be rethought as a design practice of itself. This is towards the possibility that Indigenous sovereignties be understood as foundational to non-Indigeneity and design; to be ontologically and epistemically located through the sovereign in order to be lawfully 'on country'.

Designing in response to Indigenous sovereignty

I argue for an approach to design that moves into a consciousness of being and designing *in response* to Indigenous sovereignty. This prioritises a focus on what Indigenous sovereignty asks of and offers the non-Indigenous design practitioner, as a fundamental premise of how design is enacted in relation to place or more specifically practiced lawfully 'on country'. These relationships are at times explicit, demonstrable engagements, such as acknowledging the sovereign or acknowledging the Indigenous knowledge systems that you design in relation to; while others are much more transformative, in terms of the non-Indigenous individual, looking critically for the omnipresent yet illusive practices of colonial whiteness and / or challenging the possessive, capitalist logics at the core of design epistemes (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). Furthermore, I argue that design can only develop a unique 'Australian' identity through an epistemological and ontological grounding in response to Indigenous sovereignty.

This requires a particular critical reflection which occurs through a focus on the non-Indigenous and the position of being 'the visitor' or 'the guest.'¹ This is to wrestle with the discomfort or White Fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) of not being the owner of design knowledges which come from here. Easier said than done.

"Welcome": Positioning the Western Design episteme.

To the non-Indigenous guest or visitor Indigenous sovereignty sets the foundation through the practice of Welcoming. On Kulin lands this is expressed as; Womin Djeka. This poses questions; requiring 'you' to stand forward, to account for yourself in relation to the Kulin Nations as sovereign. Kulin Elders often directly refer to non Kulin as 'the guest' and / or 'the visitor' and through Djeka ask, 'what is your business or intention?' This is an invitation and obligation to know both yourself *and* your design practice in relation to the sovereign. It is a positioning that obliges the design epistemes to contour in relation to Indigenous knowledge systems, expressed as distinct sovereignties across Australia. The first dent, which might offer some contouring, is to begin to understand that design and design thinking has been practiced on these lands since time immemorial. What is not from here and needing to locate is Western Design. If we accept that prior to first contact, Indigenous sovereignties have been operating through distinct systems of trade, sharing and knowledge transmission we must deduce that these practices were and are design. However, the offer of being 'the guest' can elicit an adverse response in the non-Indigenous, especially white designers. This offense is justified and confirmed by practices of whiteness

¹ In the Australian context I often use whiteness to include all non-Indigenous who, to differing extents, are implicated in and benefit from the colonial apparatus.

and design such as property ownership, nostalgic connection to place, modernity and Western knowledge based academic measures (Nakata, 2007; Foucault, 2013).

Womin Djeka is a statement and practice of sovereignty in situating the non-Indigenous designer as to say; I am from here. Where are you from? This question isn't demanding an answer. It is to state, 'you' (non-Indigenous you) can never be from here (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2014). It follows then that the Acknowledgment is your reply, accepting of the terms, laws and commitment to engaging with the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. We can think of the Acknowledgement as an epistemic (design practice) commitment to the conditions of the Welcome. However, it is useful to note, as a positioning exemplar that the acknowledgement is irrelevant to Indigenous sovereignty itself. Indigenous sovereignty just *is*, irrespective of the non-Indigenous Acknowledgement. The Acknowledgement is for the non-Indigenous to signal their role and responsibility in grounding or locating their design practice in relation to knowledges that have been here since time immemorial.

Plurality for the non-Indigenous guest or visitor

In *Designs for the Pluriverse* (2017), Columbian Design and anthropology scholar Arturo Escobar eloquently tears apart neo-liberal modernity, patriarchy, individualism, colonialism. This is a broad reaching, thorough critique of the failures of the capitalist existence. Pertinently, Escobar points directly to Design and design theory as being the enablers of expansionist capitalism leading to the fragile, uncertain environmental socio-economic state we navigate now. For Escobar, the privileged, freewheeling nature of design is a design failure. To shift this trajectory would require a significant epistemic shift away from defaulting to the whims of capitalism, which I argue requires reckoning with Design's racialised possessive logic as its epistemic core.

Escobar hopes to get at what he calls the Pluriverse; a world where many worlds exist alongside each other. I suspect that Escobar is conscious of the white colonial misreading of this, qualifying the term by stating (2019: 20), "It is not about 'expanding the range of choices' but is intended to transform the kinds of beings we desire to be". He writes,

I present ontological design as a means to think about, and contribute to, the transition from the hegemony of modernity's one-world ontology to a pluriverse of sociocultural configurations; in this context designs for the pluriverse becomes a tool for reimagining and reconstructing local worlds (2019: 19).

There is significant complexity and tension here which of course Escobar is also alert to, evidenced by his range of choices qualifier. I hope to add to this alertness by naming the manager of this range of choices as white privilege and more broadly highlight the likely white reading of the Pluriverse. My initial thoughts center around the risk that *Designs for the Pluriverse* might be read and invites practices that expand the design episteme via what Nicoll names as white virtue (Nicoll, 2014). Design discourse and methods have moved significantly towards participatory and co-designing practices, in which experts not trained in (Western) design are invited into the design process (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011; Parker & Parker, 2007; Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Elizabeth, Sanders & Stappers, 2008). These approaches are underpinned and currently propelled by institutional emphasis on practices of diversity and inclusion. I also draw from Ahmed's critique of the institution's ability to substantially respond to difference (Ahmed, 2012). This might be as explicit as meeting diversity targets or to invite in alternative voices to challenge Western design assumptions such as the homogeneity of design and the positioning of designer as expert knowledge holder (Akama et al., 2019)

A consciousness of design's intention and agency emerges through Suchman who argues for situatedness by challenging the notion that the Designer holds an objective, benign, apolitical view. Suchman's work is significant in illuminating the conditioned, circumstantial bias often at play (Suchman & Suchman, 2007). Furthermore, Suchman emphasizes the importance of locating the intent and provenance of design. It is pleasing to hear in more recent design discourse that the dominant Western Eurocentric design framework is being named as such. I see this critical consciousness as a valuable preparatory grounding for the 'stand forward and design with intention' aspect of designing in response to Indigenous sovereignty.

Where white virtue plays out is in the assumption that by including the marginalized other the designer has politely, benignly included a voice that needed to be heard or elevated. This, in so many instances is important, as exemplified by the emergence of intersectional thinking in design (Onafuwa, 2018). I argue that it is equally important to remain vigilant of the privilege and power of the disciplines as being able to construct and consume the 'other' as source material (Tuhiwai Smith, 2013; Nakata, 2007; Foucault, 2013). These concerns are raised and advanced in design discourse from scholars such as Akama (2019, 2015); Light (2018) Irani et al. (2010); & Haslem (2012) and in relation to design and coloniality, and perspectival awareness, through the work of Matthew Kiem (See Shultz et al., 2018; Akama et al., 2015). I seek to build from these crucial arguments specifically through awareness of the practices of whiteness in design. These are omnipresent in the continent known as Australia and difficult to see, particularly for myself, as a non-Indigenous white man (Macoun, 2016; Ahmed, 2013; Maddison, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). This dilemma is deeply considered by the author, particularly that of being the good, innocent critical white academic, but I see this is not a deterrent but rather an impetus for 'staying with the trouble' (Haraway, 2016) of continually questioning what I can know and how I design in relation to multiple and truths. I return to Escobar's urging towards consideration of local worlds. I agree wholeheartedly with Escobar but seek to include a critical consciousness of whiteness amongst the Australian local worlds. Here, in Australia and in other colonized countries such as Canada, New Zealand and the United States, I argue that non-Indigenity can only see or 'account for itself' itself amongst local worlds through Indigenous sovereignty. This activity of knowing yourself, then possibly knowing the Western design episteme as emerging from capitalist or consumptive, racialized logics, presents the opportunity to expand how design is challenged and contoured specifically in response to local worlds. As a challenge for the non-Indigenous, it is Indigenous knowledges that cannot be known and therefore challenges the diversity and inclusion reading of the pluriverse. The practice of recognizing Indigenous sovereignty sets a border or gap for the non-Indigenous, which situates us within the Pluriverse. Without these challenging reckonings I fear that the design episteme is likely to only change incrementally, then adapt and further smooth over the tensions that briefly emerged.² I argue that whiteness must reckon with itself as one of the guesting or 'freewheeling' (Escobar) visitor worlds. The global, or one world modernity, is potentially propelled by the capitalist logics of whiteness and whiteness in design under the virtuous shield of diversity and inclusion. The critical examination of visitor whiteness is the global application of my argument, referred to earlier in this paper.

Design's capitalist logics and consequent inability to practice through an understanding of the sovereign relationship or knowledge systems in relation (Fry, 2013) is perhaps most blatantly revealed by the dilemma of 'cultural appropriation'. This is the 'gap' moment in which Western Design is 'called out' as non-Indigenous designers attempt to consume and replicate Indigenous knowledges, yet fumble with the opportunity to deeply challenge the power structures which allow it to occur in the first place. Design discourse focused on cultural appropriation tends to address this through management of the Western

² These critical strategies of deflection are outlined in a forthcoming paper that accompanies the 2019 NAISA conference.

design practice and offer guidelines to avoid disadvantaging the Indigenous community as collaborator (Scaffidi, 2005). The Australian Indigenous Design Charter (IDC) has sought to make leeway in this area, by specifically noting how Design collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can result in theft and consumption of Indigenous knowledges (Kennedy, Kelly, Greenaway, & Chatfield, 2017). However, there is a risk here of white virtue and politeness defining an 'authentic' relationship via the offering of design as supporting or solving an Indigenous issue (West, Akama et al., 2016). Here the focus is on the person (designer) to person relationship in what might be for the non-Indigenous, a transient exchange. Whereas the obligation to design in response to Indigenous sovereignties is a constant, across the continent known as Australia. The non-Indigenous is always in a sovereign relationship by virtue of being on Indigenous lands. I see this as a return to the positioning of 'visitor' offered via the Welcome from Kulin, in the opening of this paper.

The problem of defining Indigenous sovereignty

It is important to note that I approach the use of Sovereignty knowing that it is a Western construct and term. It is a term Indigenous people use to speak to or be heard by non-Indigenous people. Indigenous sovereignty predates the term sovereignty. The interplay between Indigenous senses of sovereignty and how it relates to western / Westphalian sovereignty is articulated in the recent Uluru statement (2017):

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return hither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown. How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

The first critical challenge for the non-Indigenous is to understand this as not a relationship of middle ground, balance, reciprocity or mutual recognition. The non-Indigenous design as lawful response is in the practice of grounding the conditions of the Welcome as their way of being. In Melbourne / Naarm it is the laws of Bunjil that draws my design practice into home. Bunjil is the constant offer that grounds my ways of being home.³

As outlined in the Uluru Statement, Indigenous sovereignty is lived, felt and embodied, and known ontologically. It is this constitutive, indefinable quality that CRWI scholar, Fiona Nicoll points to as demonstrating the inherent belonging of sovereignty to Indigenous Australians. This inability to know and define immediately casts an epistemic and ontological separation between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous (Moreton-Robinson & Nicoll, 2006). Being an inherent or 'originary' sovereignty

³ The Bundjil Statement has been developed to deepen the RMIT community's ngarn-ga (understandings) of how we work lawfully and respectfully on Kulin Nation where RMIT University stands. This statement informs how we know, be, and do our dhumbali (promise/commitment) to Bundjil. This statement helps us frame how we deliver education, undertake research and engage with the communities we serve. It informs all aspects of how we conduct business on place.

Womin djeka,

Bundjil was a powerful man, who travelled as an Eagle. He was the head man of the Kulin people. Bundjil taught us to always welcome guests. Bundjil asks what is your purpose for coming and understanding place? When you are on place you make a dhumbali (promise/commitment) to Bundjil and the land of the Kulin Nation.

(Reynolds, 1996) it cannot logically be known to those for whom it is not inherent or who are not the original peoples. Or as Aunty Mary Graham articulates, as cited in Schultz et al. (2018: 8), there is “no Aboriginal equivalent to the Cartesian notion of “I think therefore I am”. Instead she proffers if it were, it would be, *I am located therefore I am*”. Here Schultz further articulates of Graham’s relation to place and Dreaming that: “there are multiple Places so there are multiple Dreamings, so there are multiple Laws that equal multiple Logics that equal multiple Truths”.

Design and responding to Indigenous sovereignty & CRW

It could be viewed that Western Eurocentric design is well suited to repositioning and responding to Indigenous sovereignty. Design, in terms of its culture of experimentation, piloting, learning through doing and flexibility seems to be the perfect site for deep systemic epistemological change. However, I argue that this approach needs to be considered as also indicating a practice of outward consumption as Design attempts to problematise, extrapolate and represent collaborative processes, consume knowledge, categorise or reproduce relationships as frameworks (Akama, 2019). Design is also adept at expanding, consuming, adapting, which is characteristic of the inherent racialised logics of whiteness. The need for the IDC can be seen as recognition of this.

The Western design epistemes were not founded in the continent known as Australia through an understanding of Indigenous sovereignty. Instead the opportunity has been obscured or wilfully ignored in the privilege of passive observation. As Moreton Robinson argues it is patriarchal white sovereignty that has been taught and I would argue that it is designed and practiced. Design has a particular role in the obscuring and exclusion of Indigenous peoples and knowledges. I locate that the first and ongoing application of Western Design in Australia is terra nullius. This is to suggest (and justify) that Australia was unoccupied; an empty space to be designed, and a problem to be fixed by Eurocentric Western Design. The challenge for the guest design practitioner and the design discipline is practicing through a consciousness of the ontological and epistemic boundaries that are brought into view by Indigenous sovereignty. This is a design practice position and forms an emergent non-Indigenous ontology. Indigenous sovereignty reflects an ontological and epistemic possibility *back* to the non-Indigenous visitor. Non-Indigenous designers are being addressed by Indigenous sovereignty: ‘I am from here. Where are you from? In this sense, non-Indigenous designers are given a footing and an opportunity to know and to practise in a frame of response.

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