Title

'The Whitemosphere': Unsettling Western design epistemes through Indigenous sovereignty and the racialized logics of whiteness.

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Abstract

Design disciplines are being challenged through a particular critical examination as prominent theorists such as Escobar, Fry and Tonkinwise focus on the social and environmental impacts of designs production based, business as usual approach. The Western, Eurocentric nature of the design epistemes are further interrogated by the Decolonizing Design discourse seen in works from both local and International Indigenous researchers and doctoral students. This paper responds to these scholarly works by drawing upon the experiences of facilitating a series of pilot workshops within RMIT University's School of Design, Media and Urban Planning, in which Indigenous sovereignty and by extension Indigenous knowledge systems are posed as a challenge to Western design epistemes. The objective of these workshops was to challenge the foundation of the disciplines as the site of what has sought to invalidate and exclude Indigenous knowledges. The paper proposes the need for frameworks which support non-Indigenous scholars into moving beyond objectives of 'Indigenizing curriculum' which risk consuming Indigenous knowledges and shift into a critical awareness of their own knowledge systems as a practice of itself. Issues such as cultural appropriation, and the colonial systems of power and privilege are discussed as part of the necessary 'unsettling' of the Western design epistemes. This paper does not propose solutions to these complex issues but instead discusses the particular 'gaps' exposed in Western design practices, particularly when situated in relation to Indigenous sovereign knowledges.

Biography

Peter West is a non-Indigenous lecturer in RMIT's Communication Design program and co-lead of RMIT's Indigenous engagement initiative; Bundyi Girri.

West's doctoral thesis proposes design practice models that are situated in response to Indigenous sovereignty. West sees the Welcome from Kulin as an offer and obligation to respond to the conditions of being in a sovereign relationship. This is an ongoing practice and challenge to Western design epistemes and the racialised logics of whiteness.

West has been part of an 2013-16 ARC linkage focused on Indigenous Nation Building and is winner of the 2018 Good Design Award for Social Impact.

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Keywords: Sovereignty, whiteness, epistemes, design ontology

Introduction

I begin this paper with a brief description of who I am, as to position how I can begin to ontologically locate myself in response to Kulin sovereignty. I present this introduction as a necessary step in the design framework and critique emerging throughout this paper. I inscribe this sense of myself with an awareness that this acknowledgement is the first step of an ongoing practice *in response* to the Welcome from Kulin.

This paper considers a Communication Design studio (taught over three semesters) at the University alongside The Early Enabling Academic workshops, which involved twelve academics from five disciplines. These two 'case studies' or 'approaches' are pivotal to developing frameworks from which we might reposition the discipline of design, as also other disciplines, *in response to* Indigenous sovereignty. The concept and role of whitneess also permeates discussions throughout this paper, although I firmly locate the activites of whiteness as a form of 'deflection', to counteract the anxieties and 'not knowing' of, or passively avoiding, being in response to Indigenous sovereignty. Locating the students and staff on the Kulin Nation, the home of the Sovereigns, is one method by which the University has sought to negate these practices of deflection. In summary the paper seeks to highlight the tensions that emerge for non-Indigenous people (academics and students alike) of what it means to be in relation to Indigenous Sovereignty.

Personal Acknowledgement

I am a non-Indigenous white man born on Barapabarapa country in a town called Kerang. I was raised and educated on Yorta Yorta country in the towns of Cohuna and Echuca. And for the majority of my adult life I have lived on the unceeded lands of the eastern Kulin nations here in Melbourne / Naarm.

I met my partner Mark, a Wiradjuri man, on Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung lands. I am Welcomed into a Wiradjuri family. I am fortunate to form these relationships, but they are through Mark. They are not my relationships in the way in which whiteness would typically construct a relationship as an assumed friendship, as transactional exchange, as a construction of equals through similarities. I am not colour blind because of the generous ways I've been Welcomed. Aboriginal people welcome me as Mark's partner, a white man, because that's who I am. I have a place as long as I know who I am and how I get to be there.

We are Welcomed to share home on the unceeded lands of the Woi Wurrung and Boon wurrung languages groups of the eastern Kulin nations. I acknowledge this welcome and the generosity and patience of Kulin elders. I am a design researcher / practitioner practicing Western Eurocentric design contoured in response to the conditions of the Welcome from Kulin.

Womin Djeka: 'Welcome'

This is a practice of and *is,* Kulin sovereignty.[1] The Welcome from Kulin - Womin Djeka poses the question: 'What is your business or intention'? This question positions the relationship between the sovereign and the guest; it is not needing a definitive answer but rather it is a request and obligation to focus on the sovereign practice of invitation as one which grounds the non-Indigenous guest's ontological and epistemic position.

In this sense, Womin Djeka locates the non-Indigenous 'guest' and guides their practice intention through and as a sovereign reltionship. Being in response to the laws of country is an ongoing practice and is a condition of being lawfully on country. As I acknowledge the Welcome, I acknowledge the sovereignty of the Kulin Nation and in this we both signal the activity and obligation of this particular relationship.

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[1] The Kulin Nation consists of the five language groups who are the traditional owners of the Eastern Victorian region. The Kulin Nation consists of the peoples of the Boon wurrung, the Dja Dja Wurrung, the Tanungurung, the Wathaurung, the Woiwurrung.

Responding to Indigenous sovereignty.

For Indigenous people, sovereignty is known, it is lived and inherent, it is knowledge, it is in and of and through country. As Moreton-Robinson states:

> Our ontological relation to land, the ways that country is constitutive of us, and therefore the inalienable nature of our relation to land, marks a radical, indeed incommensurable, difference between us and the non-indigenous (Moreton-Robinson, 2003)

For non-Indigenous people Indigenous sovereignty cannot be known through the Western thinking frame. I would argue that the desire to have Indigenous sovereignty explained or proven mainly from non-Indigenous white people is further proof of that. This supports the Foucauldian position of the Western knowledge systems exerting dominance through the mastery of knowing and scientific understanding of 'truth' (Foucault, 2013).

What non-Indigenous people can know and acknowledge *is* the existence of Indigenous sovereignty. The Mabo decision is a clear structural signal of this. This is a Western legal admission and framing of Indigenous sovereignty for non-Indigenous people. Non- Indigenous people can 'know of' or 'know about' Indigenous sovereignty but they can't 'know' it (McMillan & Rodgers, *Indigenous Sovereignty and Indifference*; *beyond refusal.* pending 2020).

This paper goes on to explore how the non-Indigenous designer might be able to respond through the challenge of not being able to 'know' or consume Indigenous sovereignty / knowledges. In other words, what does this illuminate as a knowledge 'gap' in the design epistemes? And what is the framework of a design practice that jexplores this gap as revealed by Indigenous sovereignty? Do these gaps reveal epistemic boundaries? This isn't to valorise the space of uncertainty, a grey area or a wicked problem (Kolko, 2012). Rather, this is an active response: as an obligation to practicing design lawfully, on country.

The important work of the Decolonising Design Group is a logical link and underpinning here. Being an International group, they speak to the destructive, consumptive experiences of colonisation across the globe. This group of scholars all argue for a necessary and critical reorientation of design practice, and "on the politics

of the artefacts, systems and practices that designerly activities produces" (Schultz et al., 2018; 2019:128). To this extent, they argue for an identification of "possibilities and conditions that will give us alternatives to the now" (2019:130) and which in turn counter "longstanding systemic issues of power" (2019: 130). Such issues are clearly located within a historical trajectory of industrialisation and modernity as inscribed through the colonial project and mentality, that subsumes and consumes difference under an all-encompassing and global system of power structures.

In this paper I propose questions and provocations that position Western Eurocentric design, *in response to* but not claiming to do the work of Decolonising Design Group. The decolonising design discourse shines a light on practices that might be hard to see within the white habitus (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, & Embrick, 2006). My ability to 'be' and to practice and to teach design lawfully on country is emerging through an understanding of the racialized logics of whiteness. I return to the 'know yourself' / stand forward aspect of Womin Djeka.

Throughout this paper I refer to whiteness as behavioral and dynamic in its adaptive redesigning. As Critical Race scholar DiAngelo states, Whiteness is a constellation of processes and practices rather than as a discrete entity (i.e. skin colour alone). Whiteness is dynamic, relational, and operating at all times and on myriad levels. These processes and practices include basic rights, values, beliefs, perspectives and experiences purported to be commonly shared by all, but which are actually only consistently afforded to white people (DiAngelo, 2011).

Whiteness is illusive and is skilled in reinventing its invisibility. Arguably, it is whiteness within this particular colonial apparatus which sets up the conditions in which the opportunity to mature design into a sovereign relationship has been largely missed or obscured. Its omnipresent dominance is designed. As Professor Libby Porter states; "My whiteness proceeds me, it enters the room ahead of me" (2018). It is an ongoing project to find the ways in which whiteness escapes my view. It is so skilled in situating virtue (Nicoll, 2014) as a power that is hard to repudiate, that as I might claim to decolonise myself or my own design practices, I am at risk of colonising the term itself. It is enough that I turn inward and identify the design of my *whitemosphere.*

Similarly, but from a different position prominent Columbian Design and anthropology scholar Arturo Escobar eloquently tears apart neo-liberal modernity, patriarchy, individualism, colonialism and most of modernity, in *Designs for the Pluriverse* (Escobar, 2018). This is a broad reaching, thorough critique of the failures of the capitalist existence. Escobar points directly to Design and design theory, as being the enabler of expansionist capitalism leading to the fragile uncertain environmental state we now attempt to navigate. Thus, the crucial question: Can we rethink design with design thinking? Escobar argues that this would require a significant epistemic shift away from the default into the whims of capitalism.

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 it by stating, "It is not about 'expanding the range of choices" but is intended to transform the kinds of beings we desire to be" (reference needed). 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 (Escobar, 2018: 4)

In this paper I build from Escobar's concepts of the 'Pulriverse' with arguments that consider the possible slippage which may see Indigenous knowledges consumed by the practices of diversity and inclusion. Escobar also alludes to an awareness of this, with his range of choices qualifier, although Indigenous knowledges are at risk of being included or consumed unless the racialised logics of white patriarchal sovereignty aren't contented with as part of the Pluriverse's ongoing reflective groundwork. For the local context; I would build from Escobar's use of local worlds – to suggest Indigenous sovereignty becomes a reflection for reimagining and reconstructing the worlds of the non-Indigenous guest. Indigenous sovereignty cannot be one of the local worlds. Comparing the work of Escobar to Moreton-Robinson / The Uluru statement of the heart (McKay, 2017), whose work and words are previously cited, I hear the sovereignty of Indigenous people asserted within the local words but being of and from an entirely different ontological and axiological being. Also consider, that in this current state of environmental crisis, Indigenous knowledges are at times burdened with the responsibility of solving problems created

by Western capitalist thinking and practices. Inclusion or Indigenising often means Indigenous knowledges become an interim addition to Western disciplines. However an understaning of Indigenous sovereignty as a foundation brings the possibility of contextualising or contouring Western design through the particular relationship offered.

Methodology

This paper describes approaches aimed at developing practices which respond to Indigenous sovereignty through two key projects; a Communication Design studio taught over three semesters and The Early Enabling Academic workshops, involving twelve academics from five disciplines across the University. These are both pivotal in developing frameworks through which we might reposition the discipline of design *in response to* Indigenous sovereignty.

Approach 1 - Design for Indigenous Nation Building.

Run over three semesters and three years (2015-2017) the Communication Design Program at the University offered a studio course which guided non-Indigenous design students into developing an understanding of what Indigenous sovereignty might mean for them, as both designers and as individuals living on unceeded lands. The studio changed significantly throughout each iteration, although consistently centralising design as a gesture into the relationship with Indigenous nations. The notable shift in emphasis occurred through a developing understanding of what Indigenous sovereignty offers the individual living on unceeded lands and the designer, practicing design in response to Indigenous sovereignty.

The first iteration of the course in 2015 operated primarily through the direct application of the discipline. The design student, co-designed, with Wiradjuri Nation citizens[2] positioned as a client, within a design education framework[3] (Akama et al., 2017). Despite this being a mostly successful semester, I exited this studio with

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[2] Wiradjuri Nation has one of the largest territories on the Australian eastern seaboard in central New South Wales that stretches from Nyngan in the north, the Blue Mountains in the east, Albury to the south and Hay in the west. Wiradjuri Country is described as the 'land of the three rivers'. Wambool (Macquarie), Kalare (Lachlan) and Murrumbidgee or Murrumbidjeri rivers.

[3] Akama & Evans, Keen, McMillan & West (2017). 'Designing digital and creative scaffolds to strengthen Indigenous nations: being Wiradjuri by practising sovereignty'. *Digital Creativity,* 1 (28), pp. 58-72.

complex discussions with Wiradjrui man Professor Mark McMillan as to how immediately and directly we should situate Indigenous sovereignty in the studio teaching model. Mark is a constitutional and human rights lawyer. As an Aboriginal man, for him, it has always been about sovereignty. At the time, I was conscious of the adverse reaction sovereignty garners in non-Indigenous, mainly white, people. Because for me and many others, I have the privilege of what Geonpul, Quandamoka woman Professor Aileen Moreton Robinson calls; patriarchal white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015). This is an omnipresent yet invisible sovereignty which sets up the world around me and the conditions by which I need little consideration of how I come to be here. I have heard from colleagues, and continue to hear, everything from; why would you mention sovereignty? That will just confuse students, it's not that relevant and you will spend far too much time explaining it. Despite this we continued to work with the concept of sovereignty by acknowledging its complexity. These discussions were threaded alongside explorations of power, privilege and cultural apporpriation, throughout the three iterations of the studio

The following two iterations of the studio were taught with Associate Professor Yoko Akama. In each case design remained as the central gesture into the relationship with Wiradjuri with both of us grappling with the augmentation of sovereignty into a design pedagogy, while trying to make sense of it ourselves.[4] The apprehensions that students grappled with throughout the 2016/17 studio is explored further in the West, Akama and McMillan publication (2016) 'I was worried about insulting them with my designs' Throughout each semester issues such as cultural appropriation, access to cultural knowledge, accuracy of information, 'speaking on behalf of', race and power, trust building, alongside the guilt and discomfort of ignorance were common themes in studio discussions. Many of these important, potential stumbling blocks are challenged and practical ways forward are offered in the important work of Kennedy and Kelly and the International Indigenous Design Charter (Kennedy, Kelly, Greenaway, & Chatfield, 2017).

Cultural appropriation is notable for its immediate focus and uptake by many non-Indigenous design students. In some groups, within the studios, there was a

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[4] See link here for a full report on the efficacy and evaluation of the Indigenous Nation Building Studio: http://acuads.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Designing-with-Indigenous-Nations-Studio.pdf

hyperawareness to 'call it out' and a consciousness of getting it wrong as a source of worry and embarrassment (West et al., 2016). Kennedy and Kelly explore similar concerns as being an avoidance technique in the non-Indigenous (Kennedy, 2007). Apart from Kennedy's work, it is intriguing to note the willingness of non-Indigenous people to call out cultural appropriation, perhaps in keeping with more recent commentary which sees pop music stars and fashion designers 'called out' for borrowing or stealing from cultural imagery at will. However, the conversation is less likely to address the structural power that allows it to occur in the first place. In this sense, Kennedy and Kelly's work is a notable execption. In light of these stumbling blocks, and subtle froms of resistance, the design studio shifted emphasis, towards critique of the socio-political conditions of designing.

In the third iteration of the course, a significant shift in our pedagogic emphasis occurred through the positioning of Kulin sovereignty as the starting point of our semester. Previously by focusing almost entirely on Wiradjuri, this allowed sovereignty to be something of a distant, abstract concept. Without first placing the students and ourselves here, on Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung lands, there lacked a consciousness of our homes, our everyday, the spaces we take up - as to ***how*** and ***why*** we are obliged to be in the sovereign relationship.

A relationship to Indigenous sovereignty in everyday, in relation to home, or discipline is rarely considered or explored. Not knowing an Aboriginal person is often positioned as a stumbling block into this exploration. **"I don't know any Aboriginal people" (**Early Enabling Academic Workshop 1, RMIT University, 2019). I would respond to this claim with: "how do you know you don't", and "why do you expect to?" It was important to respond to this claim by noting that not everyone has a relationship with an Indigenous person, but everyone has a relationship with Indigenous sovereignty by virtue of being on eastern Kulin land (Nicoll, 2004). This in part speaks to the practice of whiteness to insist on a relationship that is between people: To validate the engagement through a white reading of what is perceived, by the non-Indigenous, to be a reciprocal common ground. By focusing on place, and by specifically locating the students, here on the Kulin Nation, and the land of the Sovereigns, was one key tactic developed to ground the student's relationship with sovereignty, in the everyday.

We exited the design studios with a pedagogy which focused on the acknowledgment of Kulin as the sovereigns, before approaching Wiradjuri. This brought the students into a deeper understanding of who they share place with, rather than distancing the Aboriginal as a faraway, traditional, romanticised or problematic other. Alongside this shift in pedagogical emphasis was the critique of design practice actions. Although this aspect of the studio wasn't focused through Indigenous sovereignty and much (but not all) of this critique could have been achieved through work with any other marginalised group, we were closer to an equality through self-reckoning framework, rather than a practice which responds to Indigenous sovereignty.

Apporach 2 – The Early Enabling Academic Workshops.

This leads us to The Early Enabling Workshop Experience (EEA): How do you locate and situate yourself & your discipline – as a practice of the sovereign relationship? These workshops included a broad range of academics from the following disciplines / programs; Accounting, Urban Planning, Environmental Science, Creative Writing and Communication Design across the University. I signal the EEA workshops here, as the next step towards not only (non-Indigenous peoples) being in response to Indigenous sovereignty but also to critically outline this vital step in the University's Reconcilation Action Plan.

Many of the key ideas that have been previously outlined in Approach 1, were re-shaped to accommodate the EEA workshops. These ideas and concepts were posed as provocations into the discipline, in order to develop practices which would continually bring into view its boundedness through knowing its relation to Indigenous knowledge systems. Some provocations required visual representations as response, some resulted in heated discussions, others were explored through research tasks. All were based around the following themes:

- *What do you know?* (Define you)
- *What or why don't you know?* (What obscures you?)
- *Why do you know this?* (Epistemes/ Disciplines)
- *Why do you want to know? About Aboriginal people.* (Your privilege/opportunity)

These provocations were presented as *opportunities* to interrogate the frequent focus by non-Indigenous people, on Indigenous peoples and knowledges. In each workshop these were used repeatedly– in a less linear manner than presented here. The purpose of these was to continually ask where are 'you' as individual and as disciplinarian in the relationship? I return to the question posed in Womin Djeka – come with purpose and intention into the sovereign relationship.

The Early Enabling Academic workshops, which took place in 2019, led to the examination of the discipline; not to dismantle and decry it but to begin to develop a positional consciousness of its epistemic boundaries. This leads us to focus on pedagogic frameworks which guides disciplinarians into self-reflection and critique in order to develop a discipline specific practice of acknowledging the co-existance of knowledge systems and the possibility of responding without consuming.

Conclusion

Both of these projects reveal challenges for the non-Indigenous disciplinarian. A distinct tension arises in the realisation that Indigenous sovereignty (knowledges) can't be readily consumed or understood by the disciplines and then retold or presented as pedogogy or research. I conclude that the challenge for Western design is in designing ways that reveal this discomfort in order to progress towards embedded practices grounded in an understanding of ontological and epistemic boundaries. Herein, lies the greater challenge and opportunity for Western design; to step forward and to know itself, through the invitation of Indigenous sovereignties.

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