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Designing in response to Indigenous sovereignties

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Abstract

This paper presents 'gaps' or limitations within the Western Design episteme as the author explores the requirement of Design to position itself in response to Indigenous sovereignty, specifically through the sovereign practice of Welcoming. The author argues that these gaps are created by, denied and deflected through racialized, capitalist logics. However, Indigenous sovereignty remains, presenting the opportunity and responsibility of the non-Indigenous Designer to reposition into practices of Designing lawfully on Country. This paper is written in Melbourne or Naarm therefore the author responds to Kulin practices of Welcoming; Womin Djeka. This sovereign practice locates Design ontologically and epistemically as 'the visitor'; dependent on and distinct to the Indigenous sovereign host. This paper may also serve as an example to non-Indigenous Designers, in global contexts designing, researching and visiting on unceded lands. The paper's central argument emerges through a critique of the universalising logic of whiteness in Design, which by its nature replicates globally, therefore this critical reckoning has global applicability. On Kulin lands, the sovereign practice of Womin Djeka addresses the guest or visitor and may include the laws of Bundjil. I contend that Womin Djeka is the foundation from which to Design lawfully 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 Design on the unceded lands of the eastern Kulin Nations (Melbourne as Naarm). I've heard colleagues and friends refer to themselves as 'uninvited' guests, settlers or visitors. I refer to myself as invited in recognition of the sovereign practice of inviting and welcoming guests. However, I also acknowledge the value in the term 'uninvited' in recognition of the ways I have been taught to misinterpret or ignore the sovereign invitation. Therefore, I also see the term 'uninvited' as a recognition of my starting point and unrealised design practice response.

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 Design events, meetings or gatherings. While these are often tentatively, awkwardly expressed, it is nonetheless a significant step forward as recognising the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples. Until it no longer is. Until it is performative or a barely noticeable social nicety; a, 'how are you?' 'Good thanks,' ritual. I contend that the Acknowledgement of Country captures a complex amalgam of tensions for many non-Indigenous Designers; it is an enactment that reveals what we've not been allowed to know or what we've wilfully ignored. It triggers the anxiety of feeling inept and exposed. This nervous apprehension is the first hint at the realisation that Western Design has never substantially matured into a sovereign relationship by understanding the lawful connections and separations between knowledge systems. So in our incapacity we often 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 lost our footing. These circumstances are so well Designed that we struggle to recognise the Design itself.

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 without progressing by understanding the relationship between knowledge systems as an obligation of a lawful Design practice. 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.

Designing in response to Indigenous sovereignties

I argue for an approach to Design that is grounded by or consciousness of being in response to Indigenous sovereignty. This prioritises 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'.[1] These

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1 I use the term country as Indigenous people use it, to refer to the land to which they belong and is their place of Dreaming (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). The Indigenous use of the term country is much broader than that of standard English.

relationships are at times explicit, demonstrable engagements, such as acknowledging the sovereign or acknowledging 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 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 by the non-Indigenous Designer through challenging Design logics in order to be lawfully 'the visitor'. This is to wrestle with the discomfort or white fragility (DiAngleo, 2011) of not being the owner or expert of Design knowledges which ontologically emerge from here.[2]

"Welcome": Positioning the Western Design episteme

For the non-Indigenous visitor Indigenous sovereignty sets the foundation of the relationship between knowledge systems 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 Kulin as sovereigns. 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 yourself and your Design practice as framed by and within the socio-political and in relation to the sovereign. I argue that this that obliges the visiting Western Design epistemes to contour in relation to Indigenous knowledge systems, expressed as distinct sovereignties across Australia. Western Design can only be practiced lawfully by knowing itself as being in relation to multiple systems of law (Balint et al., 2020). In Melbourne or Naarm I am in relation to the laws of Bundjil, as a system of laws that exist with me and outside of my complete translation.[3]

2 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.

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

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. Prior to first contact, Indigenous sovereignties operated through distinct systems of trade, sharing and knowledge transmission, therefore we must deduce that these practices were Designed and continue to be Designed. However, the offer of being 'the visitor' can elicit an adverse response in the non-Indigenous, especially white Designers. The perception is that the term 'visitor' minimises their particular relationship to place. However I contend that the term 'visitor' contextualises what Moreton Robinson refers to as a personal, nostalgic or sentimental connection (Moreton-Robinson, 2003). My practice repositioning begins by asking: what are the attributes of being the visitor that Western Design can practice lawfully? I ask myself, what does the Design practice leave behind and as a visitor, it has come from elsewhere; what are Designs origins and the impacts of its ongoing movement and 'elsewhere-ness?'. I argue that the offence emerges through the authority of what Moreton Robinson refers to as the 'white possessive'. I direct this towards the prioritised logic of whiteness in Design such as property ownership, nostalgic connection to place, spiritual romantisism, temporal modernity and the omnipresent dominance of Western knowledge measures (Nakata, 2007; Foucault, 2013).

Womin Djeka is a statement and practice of Kulin sovereignty. It situates by stating to the non-Indigenous visitor; I am from here. Where are you from? This is a question that can't be solved or answered through a person to person exchange. It is an offer to understand your whole being in lawful obligation; within the laws of country (Nicolacopoulos & Vassilacopoulos, 2014). The Acknowledgment is your reply, accepting of the terms, laws and commitment to engaging with the sovereignty of

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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.

Indigenous peoples. However, it is useful to note, as a positioning exemplar that the acknowledgement is inconsequential to Indigenous sovereignty itself. Indigenous sovereignty exists through an ontological and epistemic grounding apart from Western Design and therefore operates irrespective of the non-Indigenous Acknowledgement. This is a challenge to transactional Design logics which would prioritise a person to person exchange and be validated through interaction and response.

Plurality for the non-Indigenous guest or visitor

In Designs for the Pluriverse (2018b), Colombian Design and anthropology scholar Arturo Escobar eloquently interrogates 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 now navigate. 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 racialized, transactional, consumptive, possessive logic at 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 (2018b, p.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 (2018b, p.19).

There is significant complexity and tension here which Escobar is also alert to, evidenced by his range of choice qualifiers. 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 concerns emanate from what Critical Race and

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Whiteness scholar Fiona Nicoll names as white virtue (Nicoll, 2014). Through this theorising I am conscious of the ways in which offers of Indigenous knowledges to non-Indigenous Design practitioners are misread and consumed as 'good' virtuous, diversity work (Ahmed, 2012). This becomes a way of avoiding the critical, repositioning required to be within the logics of the pluriverse rather than hovering above, participating at will and appearing to approve. 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 (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Manzini & Rizzo, 2011; Parker & Parker, 2007; Sanders & Stappers, 2008). We are, in a sense diversifying within Design. More recent PD discourse is far more conscious of power dynamics, unequal ground and the uneven toll of inclusion (Akama et al., 2019; Akama & Light, 2018). The capacity of others to interpret and contribute, as Luck (2018) argues, is the basis of which Designers should treat participation itself as a matter of concern. I also draw from Ahmed's (2012) critique of institutional enthusiasm for diversity being incommensurate with the ability of researchers and practitioners to substantially respond to difference. I argue that without the necessary critical focus on race and whiteness, practices of inclusive participation can result in Design including Indigenous people as racialized other rather than as sovereigns.

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

Furthermore, Nicoll's theorising on white virtue plays out in the assumption that by including the marginalized other the Designer has politely, benignly included a voice that needed to be heard or elevated. In 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 (Nakata, 2007; Foucault, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 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 Akama et al., 2015; Shultz et al., 2018). A critical dialogue, which would speak directly to the imported nature and of Western Design as it is practiced in Australia is yet to be taken up extensively by white Design practitioner researchers. Yet this is often the challenge posed to settler researchers by Black and Indigenous scholars (Anderson, 2014; Heath-Justice, 2016). These racialised logics are omnipresent in the continent known as Australia and difficult to see, particularly for myself, as a non-Indigenous white man (Ahmed, 2013; Maddison, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). The challenges of being alert to and 'anti' something I am embedded in is not lost on the author, as is the allure of being the self-appointed, innocent 'good critical' academic (Macoun, 2016). I see this is not a deterrent but rather an impetus for 'staying with the trouble' (Harraway, 2016) of continually questioning what I can know and how I Design in relation to multiple knowledges 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-Indigeneity 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 specifically in response to local worlds. One such challenge is the realisation that Indigenous knowledges cannot be fully translated or explained into Western Design logics and yet that is often the demand and assumption of Design itself. Indigenous sovereignty sets a border or gap for the non-Indigenous Designer, which situates us within the Pluriverse. This is the critical reflective signal which Western can't smooth over as solution-based thinking or adapt to by including in diversity-based practices.[4] I argue that whiteness within Design must identify itself as one of the guesting or 'freewheeling' (Escobar 2018) visitor worlds. The critical examination of visitor whiteness is the global application of my argument, referred to earlier in this paper.

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

Design's capitalist logics and inability to practice in the sovereign relationship or knowledge systems in relation (Fry, 2013) is perhaps most blatantly revealed by the dilemma of 'cultural appropriation'. Design discourse focused on cultural appropriation tends to address this through management of the Western 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). My concern is regarding the 'call out' itself occupying a disproportionate amount of attention. Consequently, the opportunity to challenge the power structures which allowed it to occur in the first place might be missed.

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 statist, 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. Here the focus is on the person (Designer) to person relationship in what might be for the non-Indigenous, a transient, project-based exchange. This challenges the temporary, transactional nature of

project-based Design relationships. There is also a risk 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). Whereas the obligation to Design in response to Indigenous sovereignties is a constant, across the continent known as Australia.

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 fully grasp Indigenous sovereignty immediately casts an epistemic and ontological separation between the Indigenous and the non-Indigenous (Moreton-Robinson & Nicoll, 2006). Being an inherent or 'originary' sovereignty (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 can 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 systemic epistemological change. However, this can also lead to consumption as Design extrapolates and represent collaborative processes, categorises and reproduces complex relationships as simplified frameworks all in the name of Design offering solutions (Akama, 2019). I argue that these possessive, at times, paternalizing actions are indicative of the logics of whiteness in design. Invariably in non-Indigenous, Indigenous Design based relationships, it is Indigenous people or their conditions which need to be solved rather working through a critical examination of the role of Western Design has in creating and defining the problem itself.

The Western Design epistemes were not founded in the continent known as Australia through an understanding of Indigenous sovereignty. The

opportunity to mature design into practices of being in relation to multiple knowledge systems 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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