

***“I was worried about insulting Indigenous communities with my designs”:
shifting from fear to recognition to create a meeting place of sovereigns***

Mr. Peter West (RMIT)

peter.west@rmit.edu.au

Prof. Yoko Akama (RMIT)

yoko.akama@rmit.edu.au

Assoc. Prof. Mark McMillan (University of Melbourne)

mark.mcmillan@unimelb.edu.au

Biographies

Peter West is a Communication Design Lecturer in the school of Media and Communication at RMIT University. Peter is a Partner Investigator on the Melbourne School of Government Research Cluster Grant: “Indigenous Nation Building: Theory, Practice and its emergence in Australia’s public policy discourse” and a named Research Assistant on ARC Linkage Grant ‘Indigenous nationhood in the absence of recognition: Self governance insights and strategies from three Aboriginal communities’. The thematic of how we act with Indigenous storytelling and narrative, is a trajectory which runs through his PhD research.

Yoko Akama is an Associate Professor in communication design at RMIT University. Her design practice is informed by Japanese philosophy of between-ness and mindfulness, to consider how and what futures can be created together. She has won several awards for her research with communities to strengthen their adaptive capacity for disaster resilience in Australia. Her current work contributes towards the efforts of Indigenous Nations enact self-determination and governance. Yoko is a leader and co-founder of several design networks – Service Design Melbourne and Design and Social Innovation in Asia-Pacific – to support a diverse community of practice to tackle complex problems through design.

Mark McMillan is a Wiradjuri man, Member of the Trangie Land Council, and Associate Professor of University of Melbourne Law School. He is holder of a number of research grants and teaches in both the Juris Doctor and Melbourne Law Masters programs. Mark’s teaching experience includes Legal Method and Reasoning 2012 – 15, Principals of Public Law (2 streams) 2012 – 15, Human Rights and Indigenous Peoples 2013 – 15. Human Rights and Global Justice 2012. Gods to Genes; Same Sex Desire 2014 – 15. He is also a member of Melbourne Law School's Reconciliation Action Plan committee and the University of Melbourne Indigenous Scholarships Committee.

Abstract

This paper shares learnings from a design studio that addresses the continuing disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in higher education. The radical *adaptation* required for design education is significant to recognise Indigenous people as sovereign who have never ceded their land, rights or identity.

This is a necessary foundation for Indigenous self-determination, to build mutual respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and avoid ignoring and perpetuating colonial legacy. The authors argue that this recognition must be part of the foundational understanding of what it means to be a designer. The paper traverses across complex terrains of sovereignty, cultural identity and consciousness of lawful relations to discuss how design theory, practice and pedagogy can create a meeting place of sovereigns. Insights are shared from the teaching studio that assisted non-Indigenous design students develop their understanding of being in lawful relation with Indigenous nations, specifically the Wiradjuri. Through this, discomfort and transformation were experienced as the students designed *with*, rather than *for*, Wiradjuri Nation partners. This partnership, grounded on research in Indigenous Nation Building, was central to the design studio and pedagogy. The students were guided by their involvement in two Wiradjuri-led events, *Sovereign Weaving Treaty* and *Wiradjuri in Melbourne*, that connected Wiradjuri to gather, talk, share and connect in cultural renewal. We narrate how the students' understanding grew, and in turn, enabled our own understanding of design pedagogies to evolve through this rich, complex and confronting encounter.

Keywords: Indigenous cultural awareness, sovereignty, communication design, studio education

***“I was worried about insulting Indigenous communities with my designs”:
shifting from fear to recognition to create a meeting place of sovereigns***

Introduction

Relationships between communication design and Indigenous culture have always been fraught. Their engagement is often limited to ‘graphical depictions’ and cultural appropriateness in working with Indigenous imagery (Kelly & Kennedy 2016), indicating a deficiency of discourse, rife with fear, guilt and ignorance, leaving many designers to put this relationship in the ‘too hard basket’ (Kennedy 2007, 9). The issue is further compounded by the dominance of design-as-problem-solving paradigm (Bousbaci 2008) that sees ‘people’ falling into categories of a commissioning client or a passive audience where the communication ‘problem’ is located somewhere in-between for a designer to resolve. This is how Indigenous culture and knowledge can be dangerously framed as ‘content’ for a designer to use, represent and incorporate in ‘solving problems’ in the most ethical, efficient and creative way possible.

Within this fraught context, the authors have explored design as a way of *being with*, rather than to solve or speak for the 'other'. This paper weaves the authors' research and studio teaching that explored engagement between non-Indigenous communication design students and Indigenous nations. Through co-teaching this studio, *Design for Indigenous Nation Building*, the authors have come to know that in order for non Indigenous design students to be in mutually respectful relationship with Indigenous nations, design pedagogies must first enable non-Indigenous students to understand their own sovereignty and in turn, their sovereign relationships with Indigenous Nations. This emphasis on sovereignty became a fulcrum in our studio to foreground recognition of Indigenous sovereignty that had never been ceded, despite colonisation, to draw focus on how we attend to this consciousness as designers and as people living in Australia. Two key events *Sovereign Weaving Treaty* and *Wiradjuri in Melbourne* invited student input and shaped our mutual trajectories of knowledge discovery as we explored a meeting place of sovereigns through the projects designed. These are discussed further in the paper to consider implications in design and teaching.

Research context to this studio

The authors of this paper are participating in the emergent theory and practice of Indigenous Nation Building (INB) in Australia. INB in Australia has been founded on the work and scholarship of the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development and the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona¹. Our research is a component of several research grants² and multi-institutional partnerships to promote governance and capacity building for Indigenous nations to

¹ Founded by Professors Stephen Cornell and Joseph P. Kalt in 1987, the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development (Harvard Project) is housed within the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University. Through applied research and service, the Harvard Project aims to understand and foster the conditions under which sustained, self-determined social and economic development is achieved among American Indian nations. In all of its activities, the Harvard Project collaborates with the Native Nations Institute for Leadership, Management and Policy at the University of Arizona. The Harvard Project is also formally affiliated with the Harvard University Native American Program.

² Collaborations have been made possible in Australia through Australian Research Council (ARC) and the Melbourne School of Government. ARC has awarded two research grants led by the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, ARC Discovery Project (DP1092654), *The applicability of research and practice on nation rebuilding in North American Indigenous communities to Australian Indigenous communities* (awarded 2010); and the ARC Linkage Grant (LP140100376), *Indigenous Nationhood in the Absence of Recognition: Self-governance Strategies and Insights from Three Aboriginal Communities* (awarded 2014). Melbourne School of Government Research Cluster Grant has funded research within Indigenous Nation Building framework in Australia, *Indigenous Nation Building: Theory, Practice and its Emergence in Australia's Public Policy Discourse* (awarded 2013). Fundamental concepts that frame this paper such as 'nation building in the absence of formal nation recognition', 'mutual recognition of sovereignty between and among Indigenous nations', 'Indigenous sovereignty as a political argument', and 'diplomacy between nations' were developed within these three projects.

exercise jurisdictional power and self-determine economic development in accordance to Indigenous nation's identified goals (Gooda 2014; Hemming et al 2010). In particular, Cornell's (2015) work on ways for Indigenous Nations to 'Identify, Organize and Act as Nation' has been explored in emergent Wiradjuri consciousness and the activities touched on this paper.

Two authors among this team are designers who are exploring various mechanisms for catalysing and supporting Indigenous sovereignty. The team work closely with leaders and many members of the Wiradjuri nation, which has one of the largest territories on the Australian eastern seaboard. The Wiradjuri have experienced extensive dispersal of its citizens through forced relocation and the establishment of numerous missions. In spite of this geographic dispersal, many Wiradjuri individuals and groups possess a strong cultural identity and are actively exercising responsibility for their Country. Our research is designing a range of digital and creative materials as a participatory and methodological inquiry to mediate and manifest lawful relations among and between Wiradjuri and non-Indigenous people. Lawful means the recognition by the Australian legal system that its very existence requires respecting the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples, on who's land non-Indigenous people are located and practice their own sovereignty as being in relation to Indigenous sovereignty/ies. We all exist in a state of lawful relations with each other and this mutual acknowledgment or knowing of sovereignty is 'being' in lawful relations.

This research context, its aims and methodological exploration percolate through the design studio where both research and teaching mutually inform one another. The studio is taught at RMIT University in Melbourne, on Wurundjeri country on Kulin Nation. Majority of our design students are non-Indigenous Australians and a handful of international students, which represents a typical cohort in most design programs. Students are taught in a vertical integration of 2nd and 3rd year students, who have elected to undertake our studio in *Design for Indigenous Nation Building*. This studio was shaped and informed by key Indigenous leaders and Elders from Wiradjuri Nation. The insights shared through this paper mainly focus on this studio, taught over 14 weeks in 2016, even though there is a larger body of research and teaching experience that had inform this work and is not included here due to space.

Our studio also addresses the continuing disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in higher education. It takes on the recommendation by the Behrendt Report that universities ‘continue to develop and implement a range of strategies to... improve the cultural understanding and awareness of staff, students and researchers within their institution, including the provision of cultural competency training’ (Behrendt et. al. 2012, 11). The Behrendt Report also argues for so-called ‘Indigenous strategies’ to be institutionalised as the universities’ core business of teaching, learning and research so that responsibility for achieving parity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is shared by all who participate in higher education. Currently, the dominant method of delivering Indigenous content is through special Indigenous studies units, which are typically electives and restricted to particular courses. This has the effect of ensuring that only those students who already see value in Indigenous perspectives are exposed to them. And for many designers afraid of cultural appropriation, there is a ‘self-regulated “apartheid in design” that ‘further widens the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous culture’ (Kennedy 2007, 9).

Sovereignty as everyday act and personal being

Our studio confirms findings that undergraduates often have limited knowledge of particular Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, including the nations where they live and study (Higgins-Desbiolles 2007). Many Australian Universities tend to speak of Aboriginal communities as one single amorphous group (Herbert 2010), reinforcing deficits in students’ knowledge. These were brought into stark view in week one, where many students were unaware of the existence of the Indigenous Nations map of Australia. There was confusion between Wiradjuri (research and studio partners) and Wurundjeri (traditional owners of the land where RMIT sits). The phonetic similarity could be a superficial explanation, but this speaks to a deeper deficiency in general civic education. Majority of the students responded with a combination of guilt and resentment of the deficiencies in their education. *‘I know that I don’t know much. We didn’t learn anything about Indigenous culture in (high) school’* (Student K).

Interestingly, many elected this studio because of their interest, curiosity and a desire to learn more about Indigenous culture, art and image making. Being visually cued, some suggested they wanted to *‘work with dream time imagery’* (Student R) or to *‘know more about symbols and painting’* (Student S). Even though ancient,

mystical aspects of Indigenous culture was clearly an enticing visual touchstone and an entry point into their Indigenous learning, we were also concerned about this narrow focus on visual imagery alone that turns Indigenous cultures into 'objects' of curiosity, exoticism of the 'other' (Said 1978; Escobar 2011) and 'content' for their work. In order to reorientate and centre their learning towards developing their relationship with Wiradjuri, we spent several weeks exploring personal, emotive and cultural dimensions of their own sovereignty. For international students from Pakistan, Indonesia and Singapore, or those whose family retained strong cultural heritage as Italian/Australian or Maori/Australian, this occasion enabled them to recognise their cultural acts through language, tradition, history and religious festivals which were enmeshed in their life and routine. However, for students with Anglo Saxon heritage, this proved challenging, perhaps due to the desire to find unique Australian cultures that commonly became stereotypes or judged as trivial and 'unworthy'. They found their own sovereignty to be less easily definable and proved to be more elusive. Here, we encouraged them to consider how sovereignty feels like through self-analysis. Through an exploration of 'home' and what evokes comfort, safety and belonging, the students responded with visual expression of sovereignty as something found through their personal connection to the places of living or growing up, to recall family gatherings and special occasions, to bring forth sensual experiences of ritual, conversations and thoughts. One student described holidays spent on the beach with friends; *'The strong connection to place and people I had that time was something I drew upon in my research and understanding of sovereignty'* (Student D). This expanded the notion of sovereignty beyond a lawful act, to one that an individual could express, through doing and 'being with' relationally. This enabled the entry point to understand Indigenous sovereignties from a personal expression as a 'given', every day enactment of being. Their expressions invited feelings of strength, comfort and belonging, and were readily accessible but not political. This reflected their privilege and dominance of their 'whiteness', making many *'afraid to speak'* (Student S) due to 'white guilt' (Maddison 2011), fear of cultural appropriation and offending Indigenous communities. Working through their discomfort and fear by visualising and discussing these issues, the students began to recalibrate their sovereignty placed among the broader notion of Indigenous sovereignty.

Sovereign Weaving

The *Sovereign Weaving* event was led and organized by Wiradjuri Elders to bring weavers across the vast Wiradjuri country to gather on Wagga Wagga, NSW, as one of the major urban centres of Wiradjuri Nation. This event provided a meeting of sovereigns to practice lawful relations, and the act and outcome of weaving to be considered as an embodied artefact of healing, connection and sovereignty. A Wiradjuri Elder and master weaver, Aunty Lorraine Tye, invited our students to design a visual identity for this event. While she was unable to be physically present in the studio due to distance and time, the classes felt her presence through video interviews and artworks that communicated her cultural knowledge. She shared how *'weaving is about gathering, connecting and healing, then there's the importance of the string we weave it's about reeds combining, to make something stronger'*. During these engagements, it was also important for students to understand that her weaving practice was as an expression of her Wiradjuriness and sovereignty, and not to see her work as a cultural 'object'.

Undertaking the visual identity for the event was a struggle for most students who grappled with issues like, *'How do I visually represent Wiradjuri culture, as a non-Indigenous student. How do I present a visual that is representative, without appropriating culture?'* These questions came from a place of self-identified fear and ignorance but it was also an opportunity to see the visual identity as a vehicle to learn about Indigenous sovereignty. Despite guest lectures by Mark McMillan, a key leader from Wiradjuri community, the students felt bereft of knowledge specific to Wiradjuri and distanced from country and people. Students resorted to research on the internet for answers and many responded timidly and literally to style their work using 'pan Aboriginal' colour systems and markings. Instead, we showed examples of Wiradjuri artists, geographic references and knowledge systems, and their emerging understanding gradually begun to shape their work.

A selection of work was exhibited at the *Sovereign Weaving Treaty* event where Wiradjuri participants were invited to give feedback (see Fig. 1). Comments ranged from resonance with the visual identity, like, *'... the fingerprint feels like it's about us as individuals and it looks like a water drop too'*, *'... this says family to me, people coming together'*, yet others expressed concerns of non-Indigenous students speaking as, or on behalf of, Wiradjuri people. The assumed default relationship is one of power imbalance, where 'white' colonial behaviours intrude and speak to and

at Indigenous people. These concerns were put before knowing the context and cultural protocols that we respectfully followed, guided by Aunty Lorraine and Mark McMillan, which highlights the historical and omnipresent tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships. However, most significantly for our teaching studio, we realised that by focusing the visual identity on Wiradjuri, it had inadvertently erased any traces of the students' own sovereignty in the work. In other words, by being a visual identity *for* the *Sovereign Weaving Treaty* event, this defaulted to the familiar model where designers (non-Indigenous) created work for, and on behalf of others (Wiradjuri). The critique highlights how the sovereign relationship we attempted to nurture in class was absent in the tight rendering of a logo, due to our own shortcomings in guiding the students. This was a pivotal moment of recalibrating how we viewed our role as design educators in this relationship.



Fig. 1 Handful of student's work exhibited during Sovereign Weaving Treaty event.

Wiradjuri in Melbourne

For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, sovereignty is situated and emplaced on Country. Country is a term used by Aboriginal people to refer to 'the land to which they belong and their place of Dreaming. Aboriginal language usage of

the word country is much broader than standard English' (Australian Museum 2015). However, the process of identifying as Indigenous can be fraught with confusion and confrontation, and this feeling can multiply significantly for those living 'off Country'. Individuals are subject to personal inquiry and often made to prove or explain their aboriginality, invariably through 'white' constructs to a 'white' audience (Heiss 2012). Physical attributes, cultural knowledge and geographic location all become examined as measures of an Indigenous person's compliance with the colonial construct of 'the aboriginal'. This is frequently an impediment to identifying and therefore gathering as a cultural group. Indigenous people can also engage in critiques of authentication, which can include claims that, *'I'm more "community" than you'*. Community members living a perceived notion of aboriginality on Country with strong cultural knowledge and direct familial connections can, at times, assume a position of power which can be used as a means of intimidation and exclusion of citizenship (Black 2011).

Wiradjuri in Melbourne was initiated as an event for *'Wiradjuri people in Melbourne, living 'off country' to gather, connect and 'be' Wiradjuri'*. This was the first attempt to find and invite Wiradjuri people, anecdotally known, living in and around Melbourne, to gather as a cultural group. The students were invited by the *Wiradjuri in Melbourne* management group, led by Mark McMillan, to design posters and invitations for this event that placed themselves 'in dialogue' with the attendees of the event. This notion of being in dialogue means we were asking the students to communicate through design as a sovereign person, and bring themselves into ways they felt resonant and confident in evoking notions of place, finding, gathering and belonging and being 'home' (Melbourne). Visits from the *Wiradjuri in Melbourne* management group further emphasised this. Mark said, *'You are communicating with, not for Wiradjuri. You are engaging in a conversation, and there is no need to be fearful ... communicate with us, as we are here, now, in the studio in Melbourne. We're not in lap laps with spears. We're as Melbs as you are'*. Their presence and informal dialogue in class was critical in enabling the students to understand the tenuous notions of 'off Country' citizenship, as one that can be delegitimised and an identity still undergoing discovery. The group emphasized the importance to assure Wiradjuri people that this event was a safe and legitimate space, which welcomed all levels of Wiradjuri experience and knowledge. Many students spoke of their visit as a turning point in their understanding; *'The visit ... was really the assurance I needed ... and my fears towards this project were overcome. I was surprised at how*

approachable, passionate and lighthearted they were and the way they talked about their culture was inspiring’ (Student K).



Fig. 2 Wiradjuri in Melbourne event

In a distinct departure from the *Sovereign Weaving* visual identity, and combined with their maturing knowledge through class, they explored various visual languages outside of existing Indigenous tropes. As a Melbournian themselves, they drew upon characteristics, atmosphere and sensuality of the urban and cultural landscape that they felt would entice and speak to Wiradjuri people also living in Melbourne. Elements of the students' own story telling emerged as family photos in posters to create a nostalgic sense of home and gathering or hipster references to a cool, urban lifestyle (Fig. 2). For us as lecturers, *Wiradjuri in Melbourne* became a watershed to depart from previous notions of design and our role to support Wiradjuri nation in their nation building goals that suggest a service-provision relation, and instead to foreground our own sovereignty and attend to our consciousness of our lawful relations with Wiradjuri.

Relationship: design and Indigenous culture

This studio became a challenge to question the norms and paradigms of design for us all, students and lecturers. Design education, especially in programs that emphasises 'work-ready' graduates, uses standard industry practice of a contractual brief and the lecturer often acts a proxy for the 'client' to establish the problem context (Akama et. al. 2014). Technical knowledge, creative problem solving and design process is directed towards simplifying complex information and systems for an audience. Practice and methodology is developed on this model, taught within the precepts of industrialisation, based on 'growth, materiality and a fixation on the artefact' (Girard and Schneiderman 2013, p.132). This establishes a firm trajectory for a student learning that can only be charted in a problem-solution framework and measured by the artefacts they create. Students are conditioned in such ways by the time they enter our studio. They are then confronted by our critique of their conditioning and further confused by our proposals for an alternative, while we make clear that we are also uncertain about our approach and outcome, but to trust in our guidance as we mutually explore this together. Our design pedagogies are continually evolving, learning and responding to the collaboration with our Wiradjuri partners. Designing with Indigenous people, cultures and knowledge means that we must continue to develop our own understanding in contested and uncharted territories so we learn how to engage and facilitate students through their own conceptualisations of sovereignty and design.

Acknowledgements

The authors strongly acknowledge the Indigenous Nation Building scholarship as a body of work that has fundamentally influenced this paper and our project. We thank and acknowledge the Indigenous Nation Building collaborators, in particular: Professors Larissa Behrendt, Stephen Cornell, Miriam Jorgensen and Daryle Rigney; Associate Professor Steve Hemming; Dr Faye McMillan, Dr Alison Vivian, Ms Debra Evans, Mr Damein Bell and Tim Hartman. Specific acknowledgement of Dr Vivian's work both published and contained in her Honours Thesis for her Bachelor of Laws at Murdoch University in 2001 and her Doctoral Dissertation at the University of Arizona in 2014 (Vivian 2014) has been central to the development of Indigenous Nation Building in Australia. In particular Dr Vivian developed and implemented key concepts such as 'nations within the nation state', 'concurrent and overlapping jurisdictions of indigenous nations' and 'multiple sovereignties'.

Additionally the authors are eternally indebted to Wiradjuri, Gunditjmara and Ngarrindjeri Nations for sharing their knowledges.

References

AKAMA, Y, IVANKA, T, DUQUE, M, SANIN, J & JACOB, V 2014, 'Designing future designers: a propositional framework for teaching sustainability', *Learning and Teaching for Sustainability report*, RMIT University, Melbourne.

AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM 2015, Accessed 4th July 2016.
<http://australianmuseum.net.au/glossary-indigenous-australia-terms>

BEHRENDT, L 2003, *Achieving Social Justice: Indigenous Rights and Australia's Future*, The Federation Press.

BEHRENDT, L. LARKIN, S. GRIEW, R. and KELLY, P. 2012, 'Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People Final Report', Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, July 2012, 11.

BLACK, C. F. 2011, *The Land is the Source of the Law: A Dialogic Encounter with Indigenous Jurisprudence*. UK: Routledge Cavendish.

BOUSBACI, R 2008, "'Models of Man" in Design Thinking: The "Bounded Rationality" Episode', *Design Issues*, 24, 4, 38-52.

CORNELL, S. 2015, Processes of Native Nationhood: The Indigenous Politics of Self-Government. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal*, 6(4).

ESCOBAR, A 2011, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton University Press

GOODA, M 2014, Social Justice and Native Title Report. Australian Human Rights Commission.

HEMMING, S, RIGNEY, D and BERG S. 2010. 'Researching on Ngarrindjeri Ruwe/Ruwar: Methodologies for positive transformation.' *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 2:92-106.

HIGGINS-DESBIOLLES, F. 2007, 'Touring the Indigenous or Transforming Consciousness? Reflections on Teaching Indigenous Tourism at University', *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, 36, 108-116.

HEISS, A. 2012, *Am I Black Enough for you?* Biography. Random House.

HERBERT, J. 2010, 'Indigenous studies: Tool of empowerment within the academe' *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 23.

KELLY, M & KENNEDY, R 2016, 'Recognizing Appropriate Representation of Indigenous Knowledge in Design Practice', 50, 1.

KENNEDY, R 2007, 'Apartheid in design: Challenging the Too Hard Basket', *Around the Globe*, Monash University, 3, 3, 8-13.

MADDISON S. 2011, *Beyond White Guilt*. Allen and Unwin.

SAID, E. 1978, *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

VIVIAN, A. 2014, Aboriginal self-governance: Turning practices into rights in South Eastern Australia (Unpublished SJD dissertation). James E. Rogers College of Law, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona.