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Decolonising Digital Dreams: How can students respond to ways of being and knowing whilst becoming aware of their potential power/authority as designers?

Keywords: Intercultural Relations, Non-Indigenous, Communication Design, Decolonisation, Virtual Place.

Introduction

In this paper, the author describes learning experiences that occurred in the RMIT University Bachelor of Communication Design program since 2018. Specifically, the paper focusses on the development of a new *local-global* studio model which commenced in 2020, consisting of students from the Naarm/Melbourne and Singapore based cohorts and highlights key learning moments within the two studios. During this time, the University was undertaking a strategic change program called Bundyi Girri, designed for non-Indigenous staff to mature their response to Indigenous sovereignty and understand their role and responsibility as part of the University (McMillan, 2018). The author attributes much of her research experience and critical knowledge to her time working closely with the research team of Bundyi Girri, co-designing workshop tools and design narratives for Bundyi Girri from 2017-2019 and co-designing and facilitating a corporate pilot program with RMIT University and SBS called Bundyi Girri for Business throughout 2019.

Findings shared in this paper are based on analysis of class recordings, review of learning outcomes and documented student reflections.

The author is careful to distinguish the place-based design narratives discussed in this paper as intentional non-Indigenous acknowledgements of First Nations sovereignty, situating non-Indigenous knowledge generation and design outcomes 'in response' (Behrendt, 2003; McMillan, 2020; West, 2020) to inimitable Indigenous sovereign epistemologies and ontologies of Country (Morten-Robinson, 2015). In this context, the non-Indigenous notion of 'place' takes many sovereign forms, expressed and iterated through student centred learning.

On Unceded Lands

If you had the chance to dream up a story of where you are living and try to acknowledge the heart of this place, what might you say? This is a question posed by the author in the second semester of every year since 2018, as the studio lead of what was previously known as the 'Melbourne Study Tour' — a two week intensive for our Singapore cohort in the RMIT University Communication Design program. Singapore based students would complete 12 credit points 'offshore' at the end of second semester, whilst being exposed to a new place, new campus and new social freedoms.

And so, when the author was invited to be the industry engaged 'Offering Co-ordinator/Studio Lead', the intensive offshore studio was renamed 'Melbourne— Kulin Study Tour' as the first step of a shift in pedagogy and learning activities.

Details of Learning Activities

The RMIT University School of Design acknowledges the people of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the eastern Kulin Nations on whose unceded lands we conduct the business of the University.

Design thinking, processes and communication methods have been occurring on this land since time immemorial and continue today. In this studio, we respectfully acknowledge these pre-existing and continuing design systems. You are invited to share in active sovereign relationship with the knowledge, culture, heritage, and country of the eastern Kulin Nations with a view to further contextualising and deepening understanding of your own design practice. You will engage in activities that consider place, culture, and environment as part of a shared, reciprocal design process. These may include: producing creative material, discussion and critique, planning and evaluation, industry presentations and reviews, collaboration, site-visits, and presentations.

Throughout these activities, and within the School more broadly, we respectfully acknowledge the eastern Kulin Nations and their Ancestors and Elders, past and present.
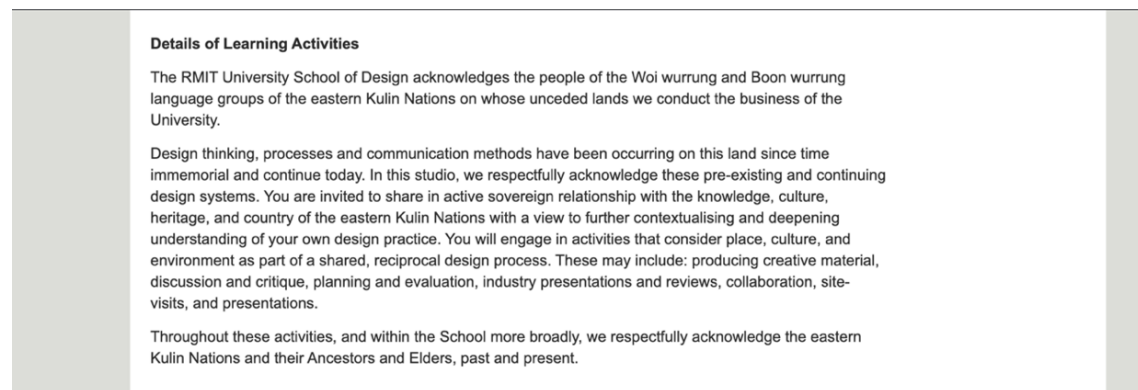
Figure 1: Part B of Studio 4 Course Guide, revised in consultation with the RMIT University School of Design, 2018.

In 2018, the tour took some conscious steps in response to Kulin. While the progress seemed like baby steps to the author, the student work reflected a more conscious sense of Indigenous sovereignty, with a new set of learning activities written more explicitly in response to eastern Kulin.

The cohort attended the official launch of Bundyi Girri. They witnessed the important moment of a Wurundjeri Elder and a Boon Wurrung Elder offering the University the gift of Reconciliation. They read the words 'Ganbu Narrun, Ganbu Dorrong — one spirit, one heart' (Briggs, 2018) and talked in class about what this might mean for *Melbourne* on eastern Kulin and also what it might mean for the students as guests.

Figure 2: Boon wurrung language by N'arweet Aunty Carolyn Briggs, Image by Hilary Walker, Art Direction by Public Journal. Program from Bundyi Girri launch at RMIT University, co-designed by Public Journal and the Bundyi Girri team, 2018.

Off Unceded Shores

In 2020, the significant challenge for the tour was not just about operational delivery in a virtual environment. The tour was often a time for Singaporean students to bond as a cohort and experience a kind of social freedom away from home. How could we capture the energy of the tour? How could we evoke place? How could we encourage connections with *local* students? What was 'tourism' in this new COVID-19 world? In 2020, the author pitched a new model for the study tour that started with a 12-week *local* studio, where 'onshore' students in Naarm/Melbourne would be asked the same question the author asked in 2018 — if you had the chance to dream up a story of where you are living and try to acknowledge the heart of this place, what might you say?

Figure 3: *Local* studio Canvas online learning management system banner artwork. This 24-credit point studio was delivered as a 12-week online course with 6 delivery hours per week. Students presented their tours in Week 13.

Figure 4: *Global* studio Canvas online learning management system banner artwork. This 12-credit point studio was delivered as a 2-week intensive online course with 6 delivery hours per day. This intensive commenced in the *local* students' Week 13.

Like every other year, the 'emerging designer' studio environment had capacity to be a relational learning setting for student and teacher; it was a situation where the author could continue to consider their own journey as a design educator and, through the process of iterative material discovery illustrated in this paper, more effectively encourage responses to ways of knowing, being and doing (Martin, 2003) that were less overtly organised by the commercial and government tropes of Reconciliation and the consumptive norms inherent in corporate learning.

But the undergraduate virtual environment would offer a new set of challenges. The timing was acute: this particular studio model was moving to a virtual space as the #blacklivesmatter social movement was dominating the student scroll, which was, more than ever, a significant part of the students' contained environment. As those black squares were occupying significant space, critical race activists were also being centred on social platforms like never before. The black squares became white space on the scrolling virtual stage. Beyond the disparity of the inertia of these squares and the posts of empowered activism, there was another stream of content reaching some deeper scrollers with 'ways to be allies'. The author was aware that their role as an educator was to situate the studio model of practice-based, student-

centred learning by offering cultural prompts to support iterative development, redirecting the tendency to think of the 'other' and highlighting the importance of the student being able to express their own situation in response to cultural knowledge offered. The author likens the potential pitfall of 'otherising' as part of the #blacklivesmatter movement to critique encountered on 'cultural competence' or 'cultural awareness' when co-designing Bundyi Girri for Business. This critique informed a new pedagogical approach towards delivering relational, student-centred, studio content via a novel facilitation style in a socially distanced setting.

This paper offers a few examples of where the author was able to shift discourse, visual representations and narratives away from an assumed Indigenous image through the iterative process and how the *local* material works became the catalyst for matured intercultural relations with our *global* cohort. However, throughout the iterative process, it was common for students to lapse in and out of designing actively in response to Indigenous sovereignty. As an educator in an institution built by 'Establishment Men' (Lee, 2017) – conscious of a perceived authority, subject position and the dominant institutional pedagogy of mind-body dualism (hooks, 1994) that makes relational sovereignty near impossible – it was important to the author to bring humility to the class by acknowledging their own lapses and moments of learning. Bringing an awareness to these lapses and defusing assumed standpoints was often a useful way of continuing the relational design process.
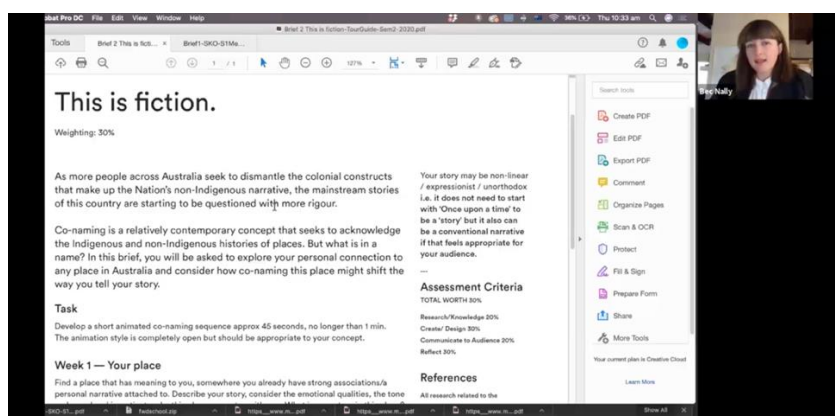
The Flow of Fiction

Figure 5: *Brief 1: This is Fiction* for the *local* cohort asked students to consider potential meanings in place names, developing their practices of co-naming by building their personal narratives in response to Country in the form of a short animation.

In the first brief of the *local* studio, students were asked to develop a co-naming animation, sharing a personal narrative about a place in Kulin that resonated with them, whilst finding ways to acknowledge the First Nation or Nations the story was a part of. The author wrote this brief, conscious of the constraints of the virtual world we were living and learning in and with a deliberate attempt to develop an 'active' sense of storytelling through the animated medium. The delivery was carefully staged, based on the pedagogy learned through Bundyi Girri, starting with stories that were personal and centred in the student's memories and experiences, as a way of trying to develop the non-Indigenous student's sense of their own sovereignty:

> 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. (Akama, West, McMillan, 2016).

In the second stage of development, students were asked to look for 'Traditional Knowledge offered' that they might respond to in their briefs, which might make them think differently about how they tell their personal story:

> It's really easy to take the knowledge and just want to apply it — 'oh look what I've just learned! Now I'll tell this whole story about that.' That's not what this is. So what we want to do, and it is nuanced, is to think 'OK… now I know all of these extra details and how I see this is different now.' And that's what I want you to communicate. So that it is coming back to you. (Nally, 2020a)

As students considered Traditional Knowledge, there was sometimes an assumption that there was certain knowledge to be found that could be neatly applied to their animation — a question with an answer, a problem with a solution, a search field with a well-oiled algorithm to fetch the appropriate link. For example, a student remarked 'I can't find the Aboriginal name for this park' as if the construct of the park is what defines the student's sense of place and that this knowledge must be lost. Commonly, students assumed an endpoint or competence was achievable (Rudd, Sim, Hayward, Wain, 2013) and the author often found herself prompting students to consider their questions rather than the determined answers they might be seeking.

As emerging designers, often with tendencies to want to problem solve and work towards determined outcomes, this trait was quite apparent and relapsing. Akama and West attribute this to how students are conditioned upon entry into the program (Akama, West, 2016). At this point, early in their development process, it was useful to remind the student of their own response and signal 'self-awareness' to understand their desire to 'problem solve' by finding a 'certainty' as being potentially detrimental to their own learning journey. Discussion would often lead into the student developing an awareness of feeling a discomfort in not knowing the answer. At this point the author would suggest:

> How can we sit in discomfort?
> What does this 'tension point' offer you?
> How does 'learning' often feel?
> How can you sit with questions? (Nally, 2020b)

These prompts were offered to highlight development stages of the student's creative practice where ambiguity might not feel comfortable.

For some *local* students in their first brief, understanding *Australia* not as one nation or country but as a continent of hundreds of First Nations started to shape cultural perspectives and the way students approached Nation-based referencing techniques. However, this could also simply act as a new label and a missed opportunity to be in relation. For most students, developing their sense of place and maturing their own stories around this place became a means for the student to ground their responses to Indigenous sovereignty.

Student A, a *local* student, remembered a time in their childhood where they learned to celebrate the public holiday of *Australia* Day by gathering with their friends and floating along the *Murray River* but that now they don't do that anymore (Student A, 2020a). When Student A first shared their personal story in our virtual Zoom room, to an intimate audience of students in their home settings, their story was heartfelt and considered. The author watched the other faces respond, leaning in, as if a gap in their own knowledge was being filled and a connection, longed for in their isolated settings, was being formed. The author realised her role in this moment was to offer a response that would instil confidence in Student A's story. That these feelings were valid and real. And that perhaps now was a good time to try to listen to Traditional Knowledge as a way of maturing their expression in the next stages of development

— why was this day known as Invasion Day and what might the river be to the Traditional Owners of the land on which they grew up?

Whilst Student A's new understandings had started to form in their early adult years and were apparent in the first stage of development, it was during the stage of researching Traditional Knowledge that the student demonstrated a deeper awareness of their own shifting perception. Student A sourced Traditional Knowledge that started to shape their own reasoning around why they no longer floated on the *Murray River* on this day*:* "For the traditional owners, nature is not just nature, it is also culture; and culture is not just culture, it is also nature" (Weir, 2009). Student A shared in class how they had learned in recent years that '*Australia* Day' was also known as 'Invasion Day' and this had influenced them to stop floating on the river on this day; however, it was not until reading work by Traditional Owners of the First Nation in their hometown and their concerns about this 'dead river' (Weir, 2009) that they were able to 'understand to acknowledge' (Student A, 2020b) and find ways to describe their personal response to the shift in social norms, from their teenage to early adult years, through their material work.

In the author's response to class discussion, she was conscious of mirroring the obvious energy that had emerged as means to continue student learning, whilst trying to find ways to highlight the presenting perception which had the potential to result in a deficit narrative (Rudd, Sim, Hayward, Wain, 2013). Deficit or loss was a common concern in class discussion and was often apparent in early conversations and figurative representations of Indigenous peoples and places as 'the impact of colonisation'. Whilst the author believes it was important not to gloss over the 'truth telling' that students might wish to avoid or were trying to grapple with, a useful response was to prompt students to consider not just what was lost but also the ongoing work of Traditional Owners in the present. Her intention here was to talk to the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and deflect potential perceived 'problems' that might lead the student to want to 'help' or 'solve'. This deliberate deflection enabled the author to posit:

> How might [Student A] convey their own mixed feelings and the stories/knowledges that colour her own experiences and choices now at the river? (Nally, 2020b)

Figure 6: animation stills by Student A, 2020.
Local student co-naming animation for *'Brief 2: This is Fiction'* titled *'Mallewa, The Murray River'* illustrating the student's changed perception of the 'celebrations' that occur along the river on '*Australia* Day'.

Whilst there was an obvious heightened emotional quality in the way this animation was designed, Student A's iterative process enabled material evidence of their changed perspective and hinted at their ongoing relationship to, and new appreciation of, this river.

There were strange affordances in the *local* studio that the author attributes to the novel setting of our first long lockdown, with few control factors that we might otherwise actively seek to contrive. But what this time reminded the author is how the deconstruction of societal norms, in a safe space, can make room for relational empathy. The author is conscious as they make this point about the 'unsettled' conditions leading to empathy also point to the comfort which they, as an educator, often offered students in learning moments, deliberately 'using techniques that lead people to recognise their unconscious biases in a nonthreatening environment' (Burgess, van Ryn, Dovidio & Saha, 2007). Whilst it can be a common assumption to describe designers or creatives as sensitive and able to work through empathy, the author noticed in certain moments of the *local* studio how empathy did support this pedagogy by understanding differences through 'feeling' rather than 'thinking' (Escobar, 2020). However, these 'feelings' could be, and were at times, misdirected back towards 'the other' as a potential power imbalance without careful attention. And this is where the nonthreatening environment, that was useful for the fertility of empathy, revealed a detrimental liberty, a liberty the author had witnessed often in the corporate learning setting. When this became apparent in certain moments of reconsidering or acknowledging, these questions were offered:

Does your approach as a designer support you to understand differences as 'other' or 'in relation' to where you are in your work? How can you respond to ways of being and knowing whilst being aware of your potential power/authority as a designer? (Nally, 2020c)

Unlike the consumptive corporate learning environment of applied content, the material form became an interesting marker of the student's ability to situate their power during this inquiry and the author noticed, through the iterative process, the students who most effectively grounded their research, were also the students that started to think about how to communicate their changing perceptions through working detail.

Figure 7: animation stills by *local* Student B, 2020; *Brief 1: This is Fiction* co-naming animation titled 'Merri Merri'.

Both Student A and Student B chose to situate their work around the rivers they had grown up with. Their love for these rivers was built through activities with family and friends. At first, they knew the waters as cleansing and fertile, witnessing renewal through seasons, with the leaves and silt that flowed from the land they lived on. As they grew into young adults, they both witnessed moments of social and environmental change at the river. And as they faced new truths and living histories in the *local* studio, the flow of their own stories took shape.

Floating Digital Dreams
In Week 4, *local* students were introduced to the major brief of the studio. The brief was to develop a tour of a place in Naarm/Melbourne for the global cohort to experience virtually. In this moment the author is prompting students to start to reconsider their local image:

How do we create a sense of place for people who have never been here before? What's exciting is that you can offer these alternate perspectives. So just like we have heard some of our international students who come to Melbourne and don't learn anything about Indigenous perspectives or Indigenous culture because it's not offered to them in their experience — this is a chance for us to actually make it a feature of the experience and highlight it. (Nally, 2020d)

Whilst the *local* students now had valuable experience of locating the offer of Traditional Knowledge and developing their material response, there was a tendency for students to assume culture as static and not acknowledge diversity within groups (Carpenter-Song, Schwallie, Longhofer, 2007). Partly this is based on a student tendency to fixate on the impacts of colonial settlement and assimilation policies, intertwined in a sense of loss, grief and guilt. But it also comes from a tendency to know Indigenous 'history' through a westernised episteme and an associated static canon without awareness of the aesthetic guise this may take in the now. This would continue to hinder some students as they tried to find ways to acknowledge the Country and First Peoples of the places where they were building virtual narratives. Often the author's role as an educator was to offer ways for students to consider how they might sit with a story they knew and understand it can only exist as is in this place, offering prompts such as 'locating a living history' and starting to develop a sovereign practice in response to 'Country now'.

Figure 8: studio material reflection by *local* Student C, 2020;
Brief 3: Studio Knowledge Object.

The Current

The design of the *local-global* studio model offered students a safe testing ground, to determine how they might start to recognise potential power in their design outputs through intercultural design relations and – in recognising this power through responses offered to them – how they might continue to acknowledge and communicate their changing sense of place.

Figure 9: Iconic 'Fitzroy' graffiti presented in *local* group tour of Ngár-go/ Fitzroy on Day 1 of the *global* study tour; '*Brief 2: Virtual Tour',* 2020.

Figure 9 shows stills of one *local* group's final virtual tour of Fitzroy/Ngár-go, which acknowledged a range of traditional and contemporary Indigenous perspectives as part of the cultural epicentre of Naarm's northside. The students carefully designed the tour to weave in and out of the Wurundjeri Council's Fitzroy Aboriginal Heritage Trail as explicit acknowledgements of the area and also offered more implicit moments of activities that exist now in Ngár-go on Wurundjeri Country.

Figure 10: work titled *'Undressing Fitzroy'*. *Global* group work in progress demonstrating contextualised decolonised artwork, produced in response to the *local* tour; *Brief 2: Virtual Tourist,* 2020.

Figure 10 shows an early moment of the *global* tour. Students were asked in their first brief to spend an afternoon crafting a response to their virtual experiences of Kulin presented by the *local* cohort. This particular response led to interesting class discussions around the potential to co-name through decolonisation and the power play of cultural memory.

This material output by the *global* group revealed a transference of knowledge offered by the *local* students and demonstrated how the *local* offering had shaped the perspectives of students in the *global* cohort. In this moment, the author could see a progressive design process playing out through these intercultural relations,one which could tackle the nuance, conflicts, ambiguity and potential beauty of intercultural relations through the likeness of this generation in the now. Materially, it was just a painted cardboard box, whipped up one afternoon in a crafting session. But the content of this image speaks so much to the potential of these student relations and also the potential of a more mature self-image of our nations. It was not dressed up design knowledge but it was material work, and whilst it might make less sense without context of the relationship, next to the original 'Fitzroy' graffiti, than an easy black square posted on Instagram might make to a sea of whiteness, this humble hand painted cardboard was the catalyst for our *global* cohort to confidently continue their own processes of decolonisation in response to the 'offer made' through intercultural relations.

Swimming in Squares

The key learnings from this novel studio model were developed further as we found ourselves back in lockdown in 2021. Our focus in 2021 was to build a more localised curriculum for the *global* cohort, with the prospects of a tour in Naarm not viable in the foreseeable future. *Global* students were once again presented with virtual tours of Naarm by *local* students but this time the *global* studio briefs asked the students to respond by considering how they might explicitly decolonise their own sense of place in Singapore (Joraimi, 2017) through their material design work.
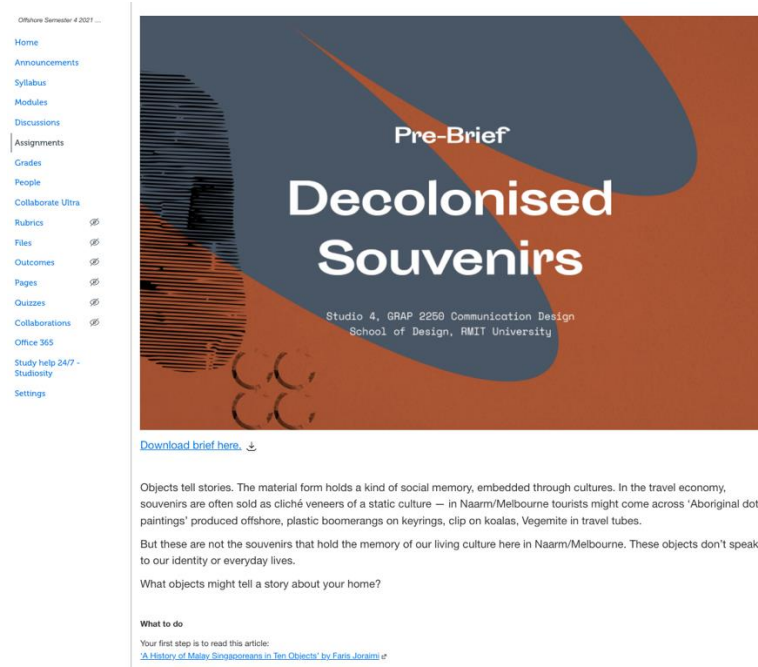
Figure 11: Pre-Brief titled *Decolonised Souvenirs*. Prior to the commencement of the virtual study tour, the *Global* cohort were asked to consider Joraimi's proposition of a non-definitive account of a decolonised Singapore through the potential narratives of objects, seeking to challenge perceptions in Singapore's popular imagination (Joraimi, 2017).

The pre-brief in Figure 11 prefaced student approaches to the second brief in 2021, as we returned to the scrolling virtual stage of Instagram, where the #blacklivesmatter campaign had started to change social media discourse — with more, albeit soundbite sized, resonance of social reckoning, where the black squares had been deleted, forgotten or tentatively expanded upon as 'inclusive' content. As an arguably democratic social media platform (Price, 2013), the author wrote the first brief as a small group project with an explicit requirement — how could *global* students develop content that offered public audiences decolonised, place-based narratives of experiences in Singapore?

In 2021 the tour was carefully curated to demonstrate the value of a localised decolonising design practice. Decolonisation was a new word to many *global* students. The author was conscious of using this word in the tour lexicon and the critique many scholars have offered in the context of *local* Reconciliation and Nation Building practices; however, upon reflection on the *global* student experience in 2020, the utility of this word enabled a capacious relational approach through recognition of the Singaporean context. The word also offered duality — asking the

students to consider colonisation in order to understand what *de*colonisation might be, enabling the *global* students to think critically about the social current they were swimming in.

Working within the platform of Instagram in their first brief offered the students an opportunity to practice decolonising in the now; students were prompted to think about who their audience was on this platform and how they could engage them in this conversation. For some students, decolonisation became an opportunity to step out of the authoritarian and singular messaging they were often accustomed to and consider how to communicate plural perspectives. Some groups compared layers of history with present social norms. And some groups, who were both local and internationally based in their virtual settings, were able to question and define constructs within places that seemed insignificant until the mirror was held up.

After two weeks of progressive design responses to the virtual tour content, in the final *global* exhibition the author stated:

> In the second week of our tour, we were fortunate to talk with Faris Joraimi. Faris framed coloniality — denoting 'a set of unequal relationships that continue to shape interactions between groups of people, cultures, and countries patterned by the legacies of colonialism'. Faris described Singapore as a 'global city and a site of multicultural diversity not much less stratified than the colonial emporium it was before, and certainly a far cry from the polyglot port-city societies in Southeast Asia from which Singapore derives its pedigree'.

> He called for 'expansive relations', singing back to the polyglot as a kind of creole society and considered work, within the University and beyond, as a 'potential conduit for decolonisation'. (Joraimi, 2021a,b,c)

> It reminded me of the stories of my own Ancestors. I grew up not knowing I was living and learning on the unceded lands of Trouwanna and knew my home as 'Tassie'. But in recent years I have learned that I exist because of a functioning creole society that existed in Trouwanna prior to the colonial projects and the massacres of so many Tasmanian Aboriginals. My maternal Aboriginal Ancestors worked. They developed skills and adapted to the changing social landscape. My families were intertwined with the

establishment of towns and clearing of unceded land of *tyerrernotepanner* and the shore-based whaling industry in the unceded waters of *paredareme.*

So I'd like to acknowledge my maternal Tasmanian Aboriginal Ancestors, my English settler ancestors who they married and my Irish citizenship through my paternal bloodline. These expansive relations make me who I am. And I feel so proud to see the work we are doing here to express and think beyond the colonial constructs, applied with the untruth of Terra Nullius, across both of our new Nations.

I'd like to acknowledge that I am connecting with you all today, for the last day of our tour, from the unceded lands of Wurundjeri Country on the north of the Birrang-ga in a spot known as nyilumbik. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and pay my respect to Ancestors and Elders in their eternal now. (Nally, 2021)

After a second year of working in this intercultural *local-global* studio model, the author posits that this iterative material process of critiquing colonial constructs is a meaningful channel for small changes to tinker with the institution (Behrendt, 2003). The author's personal hope is that more tinkering through design, across a broader body of design disciplines, will offer non-Indigenous *Australian* students a more nuanced self-image and non-*Australian* students more mature intercultural relations, empowering *local* and *global* emerging designers to continue to design with a fuller sense of place, in a reality that allows a fuller range of relationships (Escobar, 2020).

based on their significant student-centred learning through iterative material design and development. The author acknowledges that this selection is biased towards exemplar student works in the interest of articulating viable pedological approaches for possible decentralised pedagogy.

All studio activity in *Australia* is denoted as *local* and in Singapore as *global*, with both cohorts consisting of local citizens and international students.

Place names are purposefully formatted based on First Nation's preference as opposed to an overlaid institutional formatting system. Colonial nations are denoted in italics as a sign of respect for First Nations.

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