The Emplaced Designer

Jacqueline Gothe

Interviewed By:

Associate Professor Jason De Santolo

Dr Jacqueline Gothe is a Designer and Associate Professor in the School of Design at the University of Technology Sydney. Jacqueline has worked alongside Indigenous people on Indigenous led projects since 1999. During that time, Jacqueline has come to think deeply about the role of a designer, working on Country and lands where sovereignty has never been ceded.

For the past two decades, Jacqueline's work has focused on Indigenous land management and how non-Indigenous designers can work respectfully, reciprocally and alongside Aboriginal people to support the work. Jacqueline explains that the best place for her to sit is to be led by Indigenous people.

In this chapter, Jacqueline discusses her journey as a designer and design researcher and the work that she has done to adapt to support work with Indigenous knowledge systems that have been here for 120,000 years. As a researcher, Jacqueline changed her thinking about delivering her professional and personal expertise, bringing to the surface the habitual Western ways of a designer and thinking about how research and practice might change when working in contemporary Australia with land management.

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About Jacqueline

Dr Jacqueline Gothe is a design researcher in visual communication design in the School of Design at UTS. Her research approach emphasises research through design as a knowledge creating paradigm. Jacqueline has widely researched the application of communication and design principles in the natural resource management sector, investigating transdisciplinary approaches in projects dealing with the consequences of environmental flows and pesticide toxicity on the Hawkesbury Nepean River. Her doctorate, awarded in 2016, titled *Tracing Country: Visual Communication Design and Chorography*; *Towards a critical practice in Visual Communication Design*, investigates the role of the visual communication designer in complex interdisciplinary and cross-cultural environmental communication design projects.

JDS Could you discuss the relationship building that has happened throughout your research?

JG I was introduced to Victor Steffensen in 2003. Our first meeting was at the Australian Museum in Sydney. Victor was videoing Elder Tommy George's responses to items in the collection that had been collected in Cape York—photographs and objects.

We walked to DAB Building at UTS to meet Clement Girault, the Video Production Co-ordinator, and see the video and digital facilities. Victor invited us to his hotel in Glebe, where he and Tommy George were staying, to share the database of the recordings of traditional knowledge that he, Tommy George and George Musgrave had been recording and documenting. I realised that there was much work to be done to ensure this work was preserved, translated, interpreted and shared with mainstream Australia. I had some previous experience with catchment management authorities and natural resource management but I was suddenly aware of the gap in contemporary Western land management practices.

Victor and I began to make the database more functional for community use and ensured the archiving of all of the material. Some challenges were technical and we worked with the support of Cape York Development Corporation (CYDC) technology partner CISCO. There was no research question yet, and I didn't have an agenda. I began to realise that my idea of research was not matching with the Indigenous- led process. I worked alongside Victor and the Kuku Thaypan Elders for about six years and we were funded through an internal UTS grant called *Communicating Shared Traditional Knowledge*. It was very clear that I had a role as a mediator, translator, facilitator guided and led by the Elders' requirements.

In 2010, we realised that the work of archiving was not sufficient in making things change on the ground. We had focused on the needs of Victor's project, developed resources to communicate shared knowledge and supported the production of a video 'Water We Know'. Alongside the importance of water is the relation to fire and Victor understood this connection. The National Indigenous Fire Workshop was first held in 2004 in Cape York and by 2010, we were starting to get a sense of a cultural burning movement and the network was growing. We received philanthropic funding through UTS, and held a meeting with local New South Wales Elders, Traditional Owners and Rangers at UTS with Elders from Cape York, Victor and Peta Standley. It became clear to me during that meeting that UTS could host a community of practice for the Indigenous Fire network.

It was really hard to grasp where the research was in this project from a conventional research perspective as it was design research and practice led. I understood that my task was to bring into visibility, with the guidance of knowledge holders, the relational understanding of fire, water and Country. In terms of what we understand about impact now, it was very significant research, but the word impact was not in use in 2010. A group of designers began to form around the work alongside production co-ordinators, technical staff, admin and academics from UTS. We kept working, and we began to make films and design the identity for Firesticks. We began to think about communicating this knowledge through various media. I was definitely being given some authority as a practitioner to use my design skills to make work under the guidance of Elders and community regarding the messages and concepts of the value of Indigenous burning and cultural fire in contemporary land management.

In 2010, Oliver Costello with the Nature Conservation Council (NCC) secured funding that enabled me to consolidate the team of designers to work on the website and print communications. This specific project was focused on the Northern Rivers. There were eight communities involved and the idea was to develop cultural fire plans and cultural fire calendars. Fire planning in land management is technical and focuses on operational risk management. We investigated ways to bring cultural values to that process. We considered

the idea of culturally significant species of plants and animals as a key element in planning for fire. The focus of the burning turned to the health of the Country, the health of species to restore the food, animals and the participation of people in that process. I worked with graduate Lyndal Harris, Mitra Gusheh and Sian Hromek to develop the website and templates for the fire plans, to be used in communities. Those templates were spaces for discussion around what was culturally valued with a focus on the cultural revitalisation of landscape and land management practices. In addition we created seasonal calendar and report templates for use by project teams and community. It was clear being led by Indigenous Elders and community was the way we were going to move forward.

In 2010 I started writing my PhD. I was having difficulty finding a voice for this work. I was activated by designing, participating and collaborating and I was learning a lot, but when it came to writing, it felt like I often was telling stories that I was associated with. One of the Indigenous project collaborators in Cape York read a piece I had written prior to starting my PhD. He suggested that my voice was not properly represented because I was trying to be like a Western researcher with a voice of authority, and that voice didn't hold any truth when it came to describing these circumstances that I was experiencing. Alongside this was the continuing response from non-Indigenous researchers who often categorised my work in the space of Indigenous knowledge which was incorrect. It became clear that my task in the research writing was to understand my contribution and responsibility as a visual communication designer working in Indigenous-led projects.

JDS Often we don't hear about the immense commitment it takes to work with communities in that way. It is often too difficult to achieve, given that we have different outputs that often do not match the aspirations or pace at which things happen in community. Could you share a little bit more about that idea of being an emplaced designer and how it manifests in your work?

JG I always knew the projects could never respond to the timeframes of the university. I saw my role was to buffer the community, partners and collaborators from the pressures of the university's requirements. The people who I was working with were working all the time and the additional weight of a deadline seemed arbitrary in the scheme of the bigger work that was being done and the community connections being made. Whether the deadline was for a grant or something else, I tried to hold the pressure off by not adhering to the institutional requirements and ensuring there was a lot of time and space embedded within the project expectations. This required attention to institutional conventions and expectations in order to ensure the projects had autonomy in an operational sense. This was an important learning experience.

Regarding your question about 'the emplaced designer', the key quality of the critical practice of an emplaced designer is the openness to emergence and poses the question: How can we come to understand what we don't know? This is a theoretical challenge and for a designer is significant when attempting to communicate differing worldviews. It is very important to develop the quality of opening to other worldviews.

The idea of the emplaced designer focused on that openness to emergence—the opening to differing worldviews. What I identified through a reflexive analysis of my experience as a designer in various cultural contexts was the experience of continual ambivalence and the recognition of a sense of being between. The designer's role is often characterised as interpreting and imagining what might be good for someone else. Ambivalence provides a reflexive counter to this view and is a fascinating and productive place for a designer and researcher concerned with creating an openness to multi-perspectivality and resisting the position of authority. The acknowledgment of the experience of ambivalence requires the designer to occupy the position of 'continual stranger'. Zygmunt Bauman, suggests the stranger is in a state of 'permanent unassimilability'—neither inside or outside, neither included nor excluded.

The practice of an emplaced designer requires particular qualities of action between the trajectories of resistance
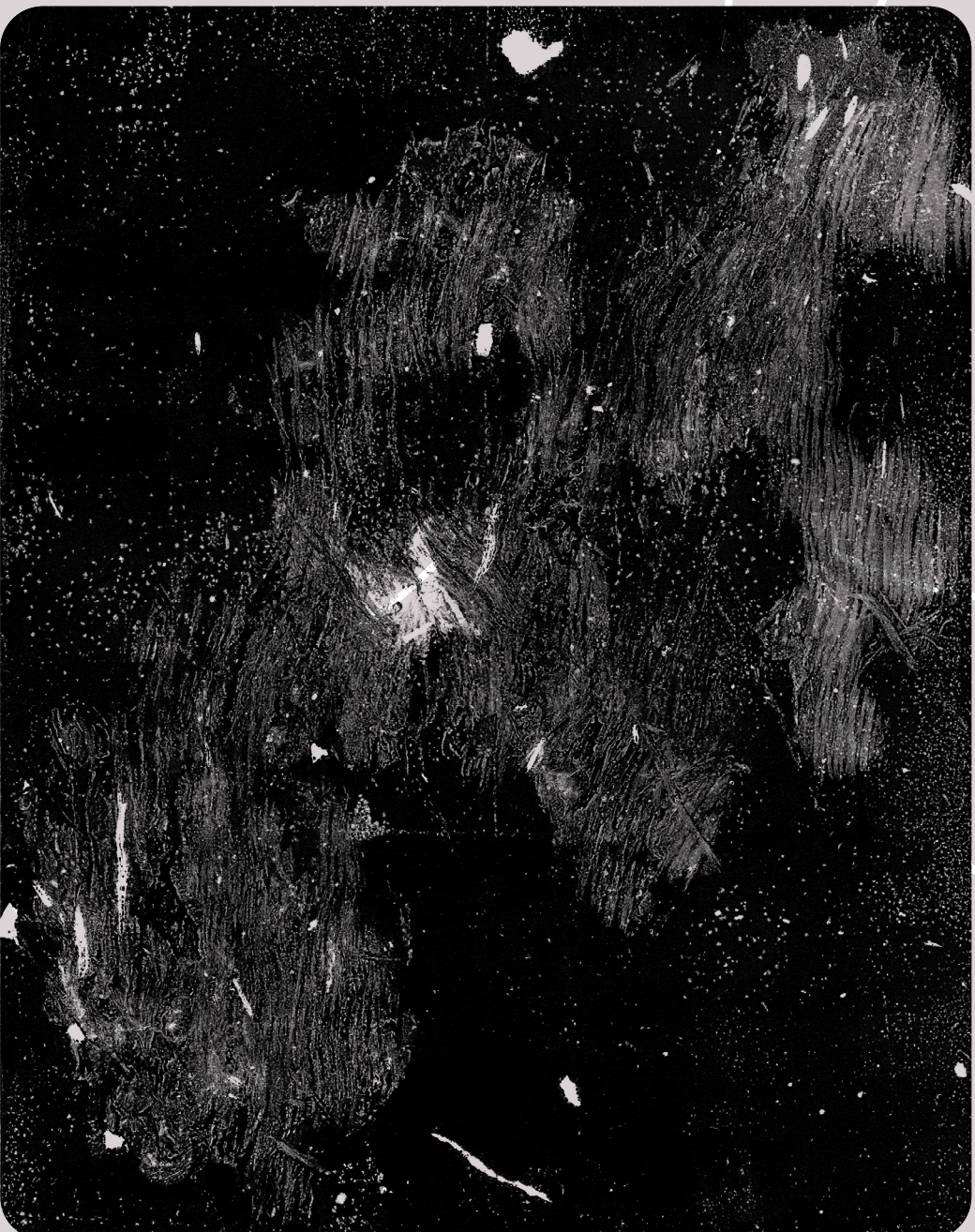
and openness, refusal and acceptance, non-adherence and listening, erasure and mimesis. Let's take for example the idea of mimesis. Mimesis has been derided at times in literature and art history as mere copying, and at other times it has been seen as a way of connecting empath-etically across difference. In the designerly movement between mimesis and erasure, the designer moves from understanding the significance of connection and meaning to the recognition that actions manifest in erasure. This movement between these exp-eriences is uncomfortable and involves critically engaging bet-ween the connected feelings and ensuring cultural leadership is embedded in the process. The emplaced designer offers a model of a designer who is open to what they don't know, recognising the importance of Indigenous leadership in order to work respectfully on un-ceded lands.

> *JDS   Could you share some of the outcomes of the work, in terms of how it serves or benefits the Aboriginal community, the land and the School of Design? We are a School of Design on unceded Gadigal land in the Anthropocene. What does that mean in action for us here?*

JG   I believe that on-ground outcomes are what is most important, and my commitment to the durational collaborations between the School of Design UTS with Firesticks, Traditional Knowledge Recording Project and The Living Knowledge Place attest to this principle. This work is always undertaken with the leadership and advice

of Indigenous collaborators and is informed by the notion of the emplaced designer. The most important thing for me as a visual communication designer and creative practitioner is that things are reflexively considered and the idea of emergence is strong as an ethos. As long as there is movement towards social justice for the people and the Country there is hope. The metaphor of fire is extraordinary when you think about the way fire moves across the land in a cultural burn. When the fire is moving in the right way, being led by the right people, the softness of the gentle burn moving gently across the landscape, through the grass and the plants around the trees, leaving the canopy unharmed and ensuring the animals and insects have time to move away.

The project is to ensure Indigenous land management practices are recognised in contemporary landscapes, and that Indigenous people on Country lead non-Indigenous people to manage Country. The most important thing for me is that the design I do, does not impede, misdirect, mislead or is not true to the meaning and the intent of this project. Design can be made to persuade and tell a particular story and often design and designers find themselves doing inappropriate designs due to insufficient attention to emplacement. It is a complex challenge—the question of responsibility as we design and responsibility as we work with people. Our responsibility to Country and to the practices on Country is central to my outputs and outcomes.

So much has been achieved—it is amazing how a term like cultural burning is now evident in the mainstream media, scientific journals and policy. I feel privileged to support cultural burning and am very pleased that cultural burning has found some traction as a practice and an idea. It is a powerful and complex idea. It is an Indigenous led practice that brings the word culture into the landscape. This is a very strange juxtaposition for most mainstream land managers and scientists. Culture often signifies art and the idea of land management as art requires the emergence of a deep understanding and a commitment to the sustainment of relation between entities in the landscape. How to communicate this connection is the project for design, and that is why enabling the emergence of understanding and connection in audiences through representations and

information design to enable a sensitivity and awareness of relational connections in the landscape.

I also am committed to a creative practice led investigation. This media practice holds drawing as tracing at its centre and addresses the challenge to find a visual language for place and Country informed by Indigenous recognition of relationality and connectedness mediated through Western cartography. These works document a sense of connection that I am discovering through the long term on ground engagement and a growing understanding of the places that I live and work in—Gadigal, Wongal and Ngunnawal Country.

Alongside these projects is my continuing learning and the opportunities to share. In particular I have been working with Jason De Santolo for the last three years developing curriculum and delivery for Emergent Practices in Visual Communication Design. Working with Gadigal Elders Auntie Rhonda Dixon-Grovenor and artist and designer Nadeena Dixon, community educator Uncle Jimmy Smith, researchers and practitioners Robynne Quiggin, Kirsten Thorpe, Peter Wildman, Lauren Booker, Tristan Schultz and the studio leaders. It has been an amazing experience to share with students the processes and protocols that respect the value of cultural knowledge.

Institutions do not always value and respect the contribution that people provide. Like the media, institutions consume content, often without respect and the proper protocols and processes for cultural knowledge. When we think about sustainability, we need to recognise the planet and each other's values. Working in Emergent Practices in the School of Design with Gadigal Elders during the Anthropocene, we realised that there are other ways of being together in the institution. Being together, with respect, in the curriculum development has been amazing for me as we challenge the conventions of the system. Bringing the richness of 'being here' into that space is inspiring. It has been incredible to be a teacher in that space with the leadership of Indigenous academics and Elders in the school to create the learning experience and to share with students. This demonstration of curriculum development and delivery has an impact on the School of Design, bringing to light the

value of Indigenous leadership, mentorship and cultural understanding. This supports Indigenous postgraduate students as leaders and future scholars.

JDS   Is there anything specific around the ethics process that you feel has enhanced your process or do you feel there are some challenges or ways that we can improve the ethics process here at UTS?

JG   The ethics process during the time that I have been working on this project has changed significantly. There has been a big change in the universities around responsibility, reciprocity, and the recognition of the human relations that are engaged in the process. It used to be seen as a demanding expectation and an additional barrier that got added to a project. Now it is recognised as contributing to the strategic and responsible thinking about ethics that helps us understand what we are doing, when we are doing it and supports the development of a responsible research project. I am excited about this because it is important that we are clear about what we are doing. The ethics processes give the researcher an opportunity to imagine why and how the research is to be undertaken. There is a great benefit to engaging in the formal ethics process.

Bringing autonomy, authority and independence to all of the voices present in a research process is a complex task. We are still learning out how to do this respectfully and without harm. I was excited when I was invited to speak at a conference 10 years ago where Bawaka, the Country, was named as an author in the presentation. Country being recognised as a participant in the making of the research was significant. We need to go back to our documentation and referencing systems to think about how to acknowledge people, materials and processes in the authorship and referencing practices. When we think about Aboriginal people who made something that was taken from them years ago, what is it important to understand? How do we give reference among many things—to place, the material and when in the seasonal cycle that material was chosen? The reference hold stories that require conversations and engagements to draw out.

The other day during a conversation about ethics we suggested that even working with materials could be negotiated through an ethics application. The way we make things may need an ethics application that considers where that material is coming from, what responsibilities we have if we are using materials including how we will be working with the material, the lifecycle of the material, how you are ensuring sustainability. There are factors that have not yet been identified if we consider how we ethically engage in the world. I understand ethics as an open, emerging area as we imagine what we will consider in the future that places importance on sustainment.

> *JDS   Is there anything that you would like to finish on in terms of what you see as part of a broader ethical consideration of what we do given the UTS 2027 vision policy and strategies to achieve Indigenous led, community driven, on Country work?*

JG   I am excited that there is an emphasis on Indigenous-led, community driven and on Country change in the UTS 2027 vision. I am over-whelmed with a sense of opt-imism—a wave that moves me out of my rational mind and into an emotional re-sponse of 'how in-cred-ible —

I am hopeful'. However, I do understand the complexity. If the alignment between the strategy, the engagement on the ground through processes and protocols to enable respectful relationships the strategy and the work can be activated, it will be meaningful and change creating. The university is a privileged place to be. I always imagined UTS as a culturally safe place in the Firesticks network holding relationships and enabling communities through the resources available at the university. I feel excited that we are doing the work and thinking about how to do it properly and the University has come some way to recognise the importance of supporting these efforts. And I am here and will continue to be committed to supporting Indigenous leadership for the health of Country and the people.