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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

Communicating Fire: working with land and designing for country.

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I acknowledge the Wiradjuri people as the traditional owners and custodians of the lands on which this paper was first presented at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga NSW Australia on 14 April 2016. I pay my respect to their Elders both past and present and to all Elders past and present that I have worked with since 1995. I express my gratitude for the experiences I have had during my participation in Indigenous led projects in Cobar, Cape York, Fregon in South Australia and Northern NSW as a participant designer and design researcher. In particular I acknowledge Dr Tommy George Senior KukuThaypan Elder from Cape York, and Victor Steffensen with whom I have worked with since 2004, the Firesticks network and my collaboration with Oliver Costello and Jason De Santolo.

Working in dialogue with land as a visual communication designer and researcher in contemporary Australia is a project of recognition. A recognition of the lived experiences, culture and knowledge of generations of Aboriginal people and the recognition that representation of landscape is a collective act of will in which practices of collaboration and co-creation are central to the materialisation of transcultural and transdisciplinary knowledges. My research through information and communication design projects is concerned with the maintenance of the health of the land, the well being of the people and the process of representing an Indigenous-led initiative. The discussion in this paper of the theoretical and the designerly perspectives alongside the shared Indigenous understanding reveals new and inventive ways to rethink the role of the designer in a contemporary context. I have come to know that in these acts of designerly transrepresentation, matters of relationship, responsibility, respect and recognition are disclosed in the decisions and choices of the designer.

A transdisciplinary dialogue between designer and landscape is determined by three interconnected elements: firstly, the affective dimension of the designer; secondly, the urge to effect change in the social context; and thirdly, the experience of place and the recognition of place as an active agent in the dialogue. Central to any discussion of the transdisciplinary are the acknowledgement of the affective

dimension of the individual (Kagan 2011; Nicolescu 2008; Nicolescu et al 1994) and the influence of the affective or emotional dimensions of the individual designer in the establishment of position and values. The affect of sharing experiences and knowledge with Elders and community members in Indigenous-led projects in land management contexts heightens the capacity for the designer to effect change in attitudes and actions, bringing into visibility the agency of the designer as advocate and participant rather than service provider. Finally, most importantly, the recognition of the shared experience with people on country provides an opening to the third element – the experience of place and the recognition of place as an active agent in the dialogue.

Dialogue is a social practice concerned with relational understanding through and across individual, social, disciplinary, material and cultural perspectives (Bohm 1996). In this paper I describe a designerly perspective on working with land and designing for country through the dynamic experiences of designing a video and poster for the Indigenous-led network Firesticks. My description of the designerly process of representation and communication in the making of these two communication designs is informed by a methodological critical reflexivity drawing on anecdotalisation (Michael 2012), transdisciplinarity (Gothe 2016; Nicolescu 2008; Kagan 2011), ecofeminism (Boehnert 2012; Spretnak 1993, 1997, 1999) and the project of decolonisation (Smith 1998), alongside literature and practitioner awareness of designerly knowledge (Cross 2007), participatory design, co-creation and collaboration (Sanders & Stappers 2014; Poggenpohl & Sato 2009; Bammer 2008).

As a designer working in Indigenous-led information and communication design practice I find myself continually challenged by the taken-for-granted actions that constitute design practice. These include the assumption that the designer directs the process, understands what the outcome should be and determines when it will be complete. This paper investigates how the imaginings of design, when constructed in dialogue with land or place and, more specifically, country in an

Indigenous led project, provide a reframing of the approach of contemporary designers to the processes of meaning making and visual structuring. Key to the investigation in this research are my experiences in Indigenous-led projects in which the qualities of listening and visual communication design practice become inescapably linked. Graphic designer Sheila de Bretteville (1998) describes a consciousness and a commitment to listening that she understands as an openness through listening, rather than antagonism and argument. Fiumara (1990) describes listening as nascent or an emerging skill and points to listening as the antithesis of the dominant culture of saying and expression. For a visual communication designer, although engaged in the production of a visual expression, a specific quality of listening is required. I describe this quality of listening as *visual hearing*. This listening materialises as a visual interpretation of the information or knowledge that is co-created. This act of visual hearing is a performative and relational process translated into a transcultural image as a transrepresentation. The process and the materialising mediation disclose the possibility of emergence alongside unintended and unforeseen erasure. A loss of fidelity alongside invention inheres in the process as a quality of the mediated representation that is connected to what is represented yet separate - simultaneously similar and different.

Research Approach – Critical reflexivity and anecdotalisation

Reflection and reflexivity are qualitative research approaches. In my research the specificity and uniqueness of experience are examined with ‘an openness on the part of the researcher in sharing this experience of practice and a recognition of plurality, openness, complexity and uncertainty as a necessity’ (Hannula 2009, pp.4-6). Critical reflexivity (Malpass 2014; Ledwith & Springett 2010; Bolton 2009; Steier 1991) is a reflective practice simultaneously turned inwards, towards self as the recognition of the construction of identity, and outwards, as a keen critical interrogation of the process and outcome. In order to focus the analysis in this paper through a strategy of critical reflexivity I turn to description and reflections of experience and the anecdote (Michael 2014). Michael describes the anecdote or ‘anecdotalising’ as bringing together ‘what might once have seemed distant and disconnected: past episodes that are marginal and trivial illuminate contemporary moments of critical reflection and reorientation’ (Michael 2012, p.33)

Working in contexts of complexity - the designer in cross cultural and interdisciplinary contexts

Place | country

In my practice the complex of designerly translation and interpretation characteristic of the interstitial space between design, science in natural resource management contexts and Indigenous perspectives is focused through the recognition of the importance and significance of land in Indigenous culture.

No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland... A different tradition leaves us tongueless and earless towards this world of meaning and significance.

(W.E.H. Stanner 1968)

For Aboriginal people connection to place and country is an issue of health and well being not only for the land but also for the people. The recognition of this connection to land not only brings responsibility for the land but also acknowledges that the

country needs the movement and sound of the stories, the songs, the dances and the life of people in an interconnection that recognises the agency of place.

For a non-Indigenous visual designer, opening to the Indigenous perspective on the primacy of place is challenging. My awakening to the *yet to be disclosed* significance of place contributes to my comprehension of the power of the agency of place. In opening to the power of place my commitment to attention, listening and advocacy is central. Not only am I *tongueless* and *earless*, I am also sightless in the face of the power of the specificity, complexity, diversity and sustainability of the interconnection between the cultural practices of Indigenous people and their homelands for thousands of years (Pascoe 2014; Gammage 2011).

The writing of philosopher Edward S. Casey (1997, 2002, 2008) reflects the resurgence of interest in place in Western philosophy in the late twentieth century and provides a bridge between my understandings of Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives on place. Casey claims that place is much more than locator; rather, 'place belongs to the very concept of existence' (Casey 1993, p.15). Place, according to Casey, is somewhere. It is a particular part of space that also holds what Casey refers to as the return to place, a philosophic conception of the primacy of place. Place is brought into being through a physical and perceptive apprehension and contains the functional, the visual and the symbolic (Scazzosi 2011). The European Landscape Convention (2000) refers to the physical and material value of landscape and highlights the importance of perceptual engagement, the visual and perceptive quality, cultural significance and the role of landscape in the formation of local cultures and identity. Place quality is considered to be the expression of the specificity of places, a factor in the identity of populations and essential to individual and social well being (including in the physiological, the psychological and the intellectual senses). A cultural dimension is attributed to the entire territory, which includes the social perception that people have of their living

places and historical and cultural perceptions. An important connection is made in the Convention between the necessity for the maintenance of these characteristics and individual and social enrichment.

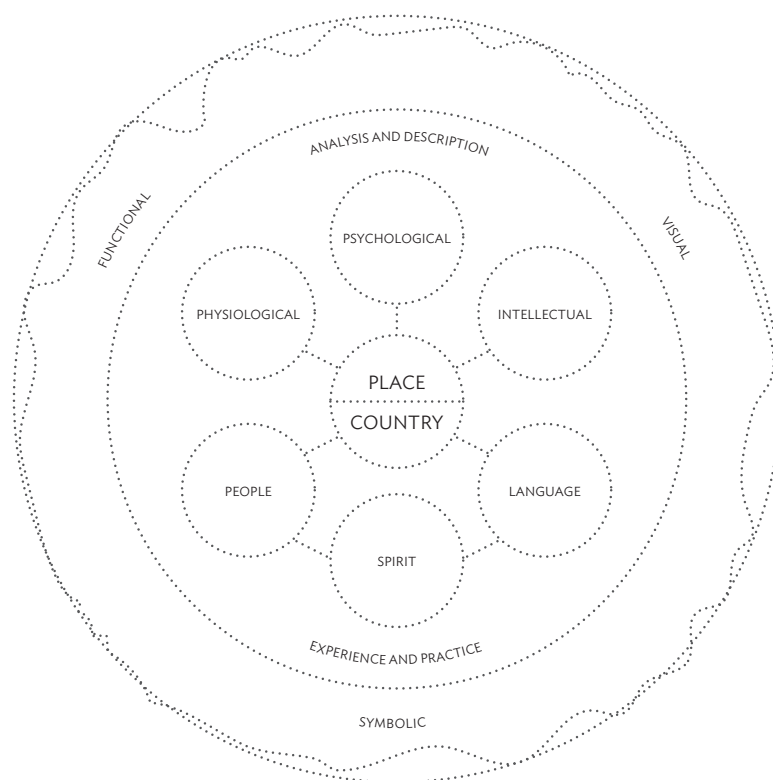


Figure 2. place | country.

I use the typographic glyph placelcountry in my discussion as a means of recognising the First Australians' connection to place and their use of the term 'country' to denote connections between people, language and spirit, alongside a western perspective on place and landscape.

thinking country speaking

I am standing in the Boree Valley in 1980 in Yengo National Park, New South Wales, with a baby on my hip. I am watching a bulldozer dig a large hole in the floor of the valley for a dam. I can hear a scream. Is it my scream? I cannot hear it out loud but it is in my mind. I am confused. This silent scream heard in my head as my own is confused with the noise of the machine and the need of the baby. I turn to the men around me. Speaking over the noise of the bulldozer and the screaming in my mind I ask whether it is really necessary to dig up the floor of the valley? They reply with certainty. It is a good thing. We will have water.

Is this experience a first sign of awakening to country speaking?

Since that moment, my recognition of the environment, and more specifically of place or country as participant, with agency, has become strong. From an Indigenous perspective the connection between place and people is very clear and I am learning about the power of place through sharing in Indigenous-led projects. My learning is supported by an emerging recognition of this perspective in non-Indigenous Australia (Rose & et al 2002; Laudine, 2009; Suchet-Pearson et al 2011; Suchet 2002; Gammage 2011). Christopher Tilley, a phenomenological archaeologist working in Britain, also acknowledges the potential of a dialogic relation between person and place:

Experiencing the landscape allows insights to be gained through the subject's immersion in that landscape. This is to claim that landscapes have agency in relation to persons. They have a profound effect on our thoughts and interpretations because of the manner in which they are perceived and sensed through our carnal bodies ... This is to accept that there is a dialogic relationship between person and landscape. (Tilley 2008, p.271)

This understanding is significant for me as a designer in the co-creation of a transformed perspective on the representation of the environment. This sense of

connection between place and self has been heightened through experiences on country with Traditional Owners.

One is water. One is the tree. A group of people is a people mob. A group of trees is a tree mob. There is real kinship here and deep identification. Here Bob is talking about a primary conception of unity that is not familiar in non-Indigenous Australia. It might be said that it indicates that all things are primarily conceived of in terms of their unity (whilst difference is fully acknowledged it is not emphasised) and that this unitary association is understood to be very deep so that when it is successfully internalised then the person's self-image incorporates a view of country as intimately linked with self.

(Laudine 2009, p.158, interpreting Bob Randall)

My perspective on the relationships between place and people is also informed by a Western understanding of landscape as a complex dynamic artefact (Janz 2005; Scazzozzi 2011, p.10). Landscape is understood to hold cultural meaning that is produced by the intersection of the experience of people and the knowledge of place in place. However, the Indigenous view describes connectedness that does not position the landscape outside self as artefact, but resonates with the emergence of an understanding of connection between place and self. I have come to call this conjunction of identity - emplacement. Emplacement provides a ground for the designer to make decisions and take action. Central to this is the notion of the 'ecological self' informed by the deep ecology movement and eco psychology: [T]he ecological ego matures towards a sense of ethical responsibility toward the planet that is vividly experienced as our ethical responsibility to other people.

(Spretnak 1997 p.76, quoting Roszak 1992, p.321)

To be emplaced as a designer initiates an orientation towards place and requires two things. Firstly, it requires an understanding of the relational qualities of place as the intersecting ecologies of the social, the biophysical and the artificial, understood as people, knowledge and experience. Secondly, it requires the recognition of place as

an active participant with agency. These perceptions for the designer allow a turning away from design and the designed object as central to the designer's appreciation of their role. Instead, the focus becomes an expanded framing of responsibility for the designer, where place, as an entity, requires attention, listening, advocacy and representation (Figure 3). This relational understanding of emplacement or ecological embeddedness produces a:

profound reorientation of self in relation to the environment and ecological identity emerges from a process of learning to perceive connections and relations with natural processes.

(Boehnert 2012, p.124)

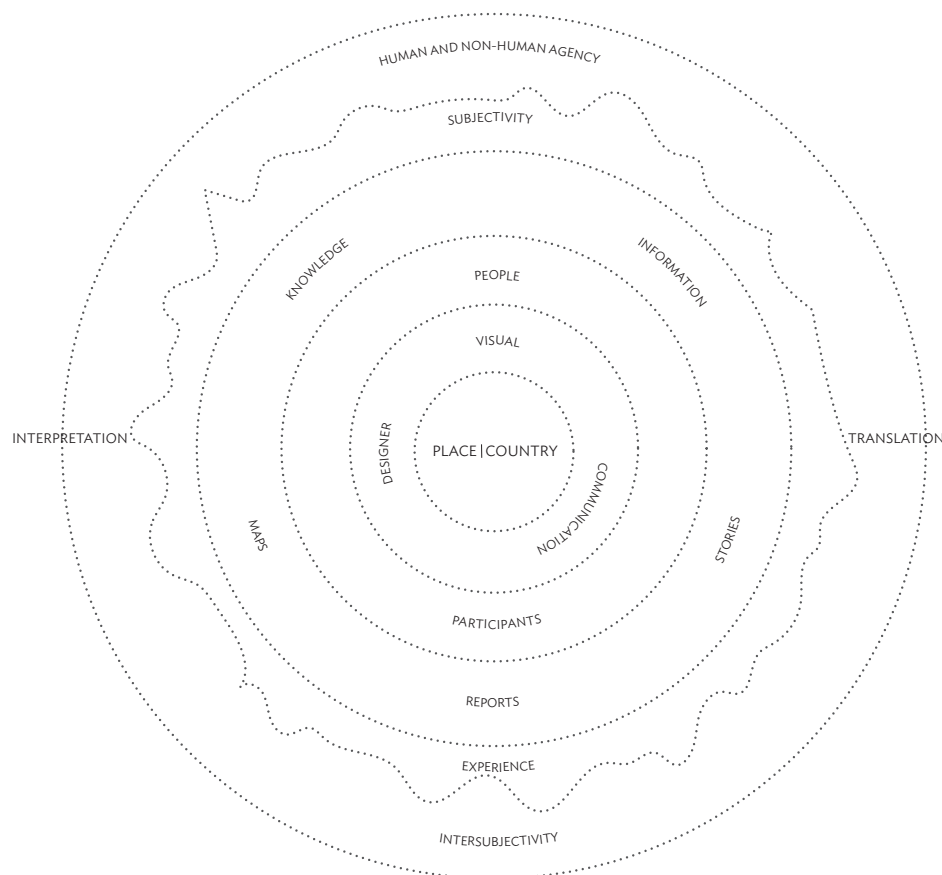


Figure 3. The emplaced designer.

Experiencing communicating fire

My experience in dialogue with place/country is a line of exchange and collaboration that demands consideration of responsibility. The cross cultural and interdisciplinary contexts of the environmental communication design projects materialise as the video (<https://vimeo.com/61313379>) and poster 'Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change' (Figure 1) in which Indigenous and scientific perspectives turn together towards a recognition of the connection between health and well being of land, people, and spirit. My knowledge and ways of understanding place and country through experiences, people, stories and knowledge are augmented through knowledge artefacts and mediated representations such as books, documents, maps, reports, photographs, videos drawings and diagrams.

The video and poster discussed in this paper constitute a presentation that stands at this intersection of science, design and Indigenous perspectives on ecological knowledge, created through design in a collaboration concerned with making explicit and advocating for Indigenous understandings of fire in a scientific context of contemporary land management. As a critical designer and a participant in the Indigenous led Firesticks network, the visual representation of the communication design and the quality of the representation of the message are not the results of individual action; rather, they are a collaborative participatory acts of co-creation. My responsibility in this process of co-creation is to materialise the perspectives in an artefact that gives voice to the values and knowledge of the participants and can communicate to scientists and mainstream audiences.

The conventional and professional role of the visual communication designer is to critically hear the project outline or brief and respond to a particular set of circumstances in a visual form. In an Indigenous-led context I have learnt that the relational certainty of conventional design practice is open to question. The embedded taken-for-granted processes that I understand as professional design practice, and which Tony Fry (2009) describes as 'teleological', 'instrumental' and 'decision based' practices, are complexified through my connection with Indigenous perspectives and my lack of scientific knowledge. These two aspects of what is not

known to me contribute to a sense of awareness and openness to *the emergent in formation* (Maze and Redstrom 2007). My attention to the openings between the worldviews of design, science and the revitalisation of Indigenous cultural practices is central to my experimental investigation of a speculative design practice that is concerned with transformation through openings to multiple perspectives or worldviews (Gothe 2016). My participation in this project, as I have indicated, is not singular; rather, the dialogue between my apprehension of Indigenous perspectives, science and the languages of natural resource management is dependent on guidance in my collaborations with participants in the Firesticks project.

In this personal and social transformation, the material outcome is not the primary goal. Instead, alongside the consideration of visual communication design outcomes, my focus has turned to the development of design practices that recognise a complex of responsibility, authorship and reciprocity in the intercultural context that are focused on social change as an affective experience and an effect of the work.

[T]ransformative action has to focus on changing us, especially by transforming the worlds we make for ourselves as they design our modes of being.

(Fry 2009 p.112)

This transformative action is concerned with the movement between and across subjectivities, disciplines, cultures and languages from the perspective of a visual communication designer. The consideration of movements through, between and across internal and external realities experienced in practice brings attention to the psychic dimension of experience. According to Jane Rendell, the 'psychic dimension' of the experience of working between and across materialises in the transdisciplinary project, in part, in the relational and emotional aspects of research and practice (Rendell 2013, p.128). Subjectivity is central to transdisciplinary practices through the 'recognition of the knower in the process of inquiry' (Kagan 2011, p. 207). For the visual communication designer this encounter with complexity requires paying attention to her levels of perception of connection, relations and subjectivity

materialising in the transdisciplinary object in this case as a transcultural representation.

My experience of affective emergence in the materialisation of a transcultural representation is constituted as the dialogue between a material practice and a recognition of place/country through historical and contemporary mediated representations including stories, reports, maps, histories, information and knowledge. In my attempt to reconcile the epistemologies of Western science and Indigenous perspectives, my concerns are manifest through tracing the connections between land, country and the complexity of the designer's role in the medial space between people, place and spirit.

Tracing knowledges, tracing stories, tracing representations.

Victor Steffensen and Kuku Thaypan Elders Tommy George and George Musgrave from Cape York have been practising cultural burning as a land management practice consistently for many years. Since 2004, there has been a concerted effort to share these practices with other interested Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities across Australia. Alongside Victor and the Elders in Cape York, Peta Standley, a non-Indigenous researcher, has been working with the Kuku Thaypan Elders and Victor as a bridge between Western land management practices and IEK. Through a process of co-generation, Victor, Peta and the Elders have experienced and documented the knowledge systems and approaches to cultural burning in the Kuku-Thaypan Fire Management Research Project: The Importance of Campfires (KTFMRP). Firesticks is a partnership between this team and the Communicating Shared Traditional Knowledge Project (CSTK). This collaboration involves Victor Steffensen, director of Mulong and Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways (TKRP), Peta Standley KTFMRP, UTS Design through myself and Clement Girault, and the Jumbunna Indigenous Research Unit with Jason de Santolo and Oliver Costello, who also had a role as the Indigenous Officer at NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NSWNPWS). The Firesticks project aims to support the use of Aboriginal knowledge in natural resource management, with a particular focus on cultural

burning practices. This ambition was supported by the granting of monies by Perpetual Philanthropic Trust to UTS to support travel and mentoring between Traditional Owners in NSW and Cape York in 2010 and 2011.

This funding provided the opportunity to organise a meeting in early 2011 at UTS. This meeting, attended by 40 people including Traditional Owners, community representatives and rangers from NSW, was hosted at UTS Design in Harris Street, Sydney and documented on video by UTS Media Lab. This recording became the central material for the video 'Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change' (<https://vimeo.com/61313379>). The script was co-created by Victor Steffensen, Oliver Costello, Daniel Bracegirdle, Peta Standley and Miguel Valenzuela.

In July 2011, the Firesticks team was invited to present at the Nature Conservation Council of *NSW Bushfires in the Landscape Conference: Different Values, a Shared Vision Conference 2011* in Sydney. This was the first opportunity for the work of the partnership between UTS Design, UTS Media Lab, Mulong, Traditional Knowledge Revival Project and Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Research Project to be presented by the Indigenous and non-Indigenous collaborators in a natural resource context under the identity of Firesticks.

This invitation to present came at the end of the grant cycle from Perpetual Philanthropic Trust. At this conference Victor Steffensen presented the keynote speech with the support of the short pilot video, 'Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change' (2011). Peta Standley and I submitted the abstract *Carrying and Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change*, which described our experience working in the liminal spaces between scientific approaches to land management, visual communication design and Indigenous cultural burning practices. Highlighting our sense of responsibility and advocacy, we called for alternative ways of working including collaboration, communication and co-generative approaches. The abstract was not accepted to be

presented as a paper but rather became the foundation for a poster for the conference poster session.

THE FIRESTICKS POSTER: COMMUNICATING FIRE

Today fire is seen as a destructive force, which most Australians fear. This fear disconnects society from the land and its people. Fire is a powerful natural element. Fire illuminates life and provides culture with ceremony, medicine, food, warmth and above all a lore that the land taught the people. We must respect this as an inherited responsibility to be passed on in our changing world. The challenge today is to keep this respect alive, not only in terms of looking after the land but to heal the differences between people and their relationship to country.

(Text written in the workshop funded by Perpetual Trust held at UTS, February 2011)

The poster, *Firesticks Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change*, was co-created by myself, Victor Steffensen and Lyndal Harris (UTS Design alumni and creative director), with Peta Standley supplying and advising on photographs and text. The making of this poster demonstrates the complexity of cross cultural translation and brings into visibility the ambivalence I experienced as failure and misrepresentations seemed inevitable when faced with the complexity of interpretation and translation in cross cultural contexts, with time limitations and across distance.

Tracing the knowledge transfer triangle and the knowledge system.

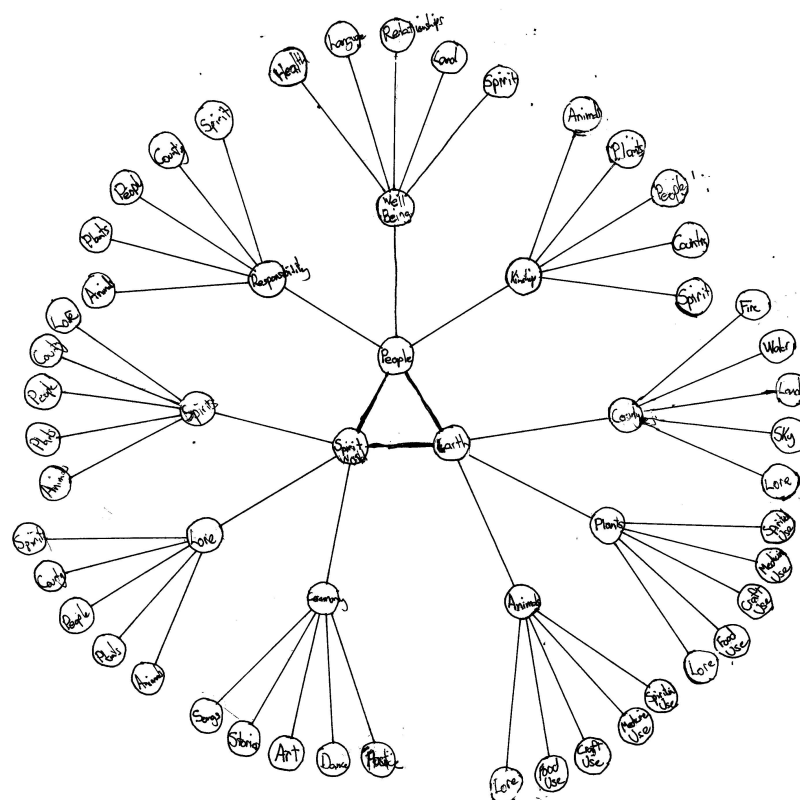


Figure 4. Knowledge map drawn by Victor Steffensen in 2010.

Two significant events contributed to the form and structure of the poster. First, in late 2010, Victor had drawn the representation of the knowledge system (Figure 4) and the knowledge transfer triangle (Figure 5). Victor, Peta, Jason, Oliver and I discussed the potential of the diagram and the triangle as the foundation for a visual structure for the Firesticks poster. These became the key images on which the poster relied for its structure and have come to provide a continuing source for the visual language of the Firesticks project.

These diagrams are initiated with KukuThaypan Elders and shared by Victor Steffensen with Peta Standley during the writing of her PhD, 'The Importance of Campfires', and the research project Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Research Project (KTFMRP). The drawings by Victor were in response to the interpreted representation and conceptual model of the interactive components of the Traditional Knowledge Recording Project (TKRP) and the KTFMRP and 'The Importance of Campfires' developed by Peta Standley in her work with Kuku Thaypan Elders (Figure 6). During a discussion with Peta about this model in 2009 at Victor's house, Victor explained that it is more like a triangle and you 'have to understand the three sides to Traditional Knowledge to use it as a baseline ... Knowing what it is, knowing what it does and knowing how to do it.'

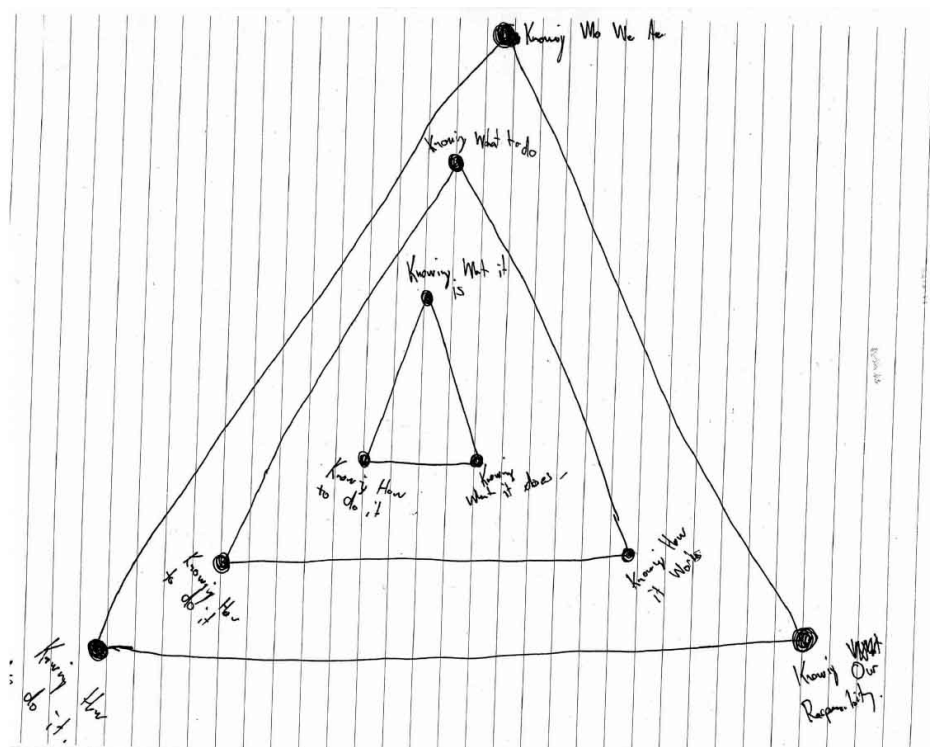
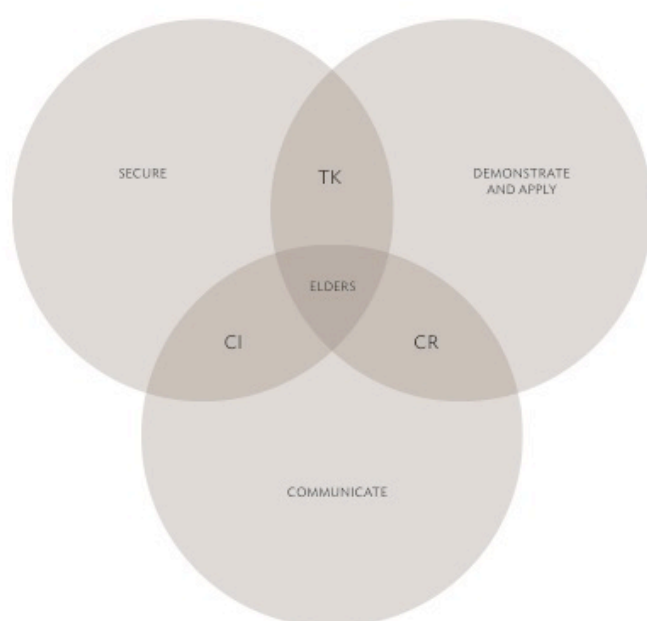


Figure 5. Knowledge transfer triangle drawn by Victor Steffensen 2009-2010.

This discussion between Peta and Victor informs the values and approach of Firesticks. This conceptual model, from Peta's co-generative research with Kuku Thaypan Elders, emphasises the need for recognition and respect for people's inherited knowledge systems (Figure 6). The transfer of this traditional knowledge

requires three things: firstly, the demonstration of traditional knowledge (TK) by Elders on country transferring traditional knowledge to younger clan members and applying their inherent adaptive management knowledge to the contemporary context; secondly, securing traditional knowledge through the community training and use of digital communication technologies (Community Informatics (CI)); and lastly communicating traditional knowledge through co-generative action research (CR).



KEY:
 TK - Traditional Knowledge
 CI - Community Informatics
 CR - Co-generative action research

Courtesy Peta Standley[®] 2009

Figure 6. This representation informs the protocol for the TKRP research project and the Firesticks initiative. (Courtesy of Peta Standley)

The second significant event was my personal experience in Cape York where I experienced cultural burning. I was told that it was unlike the burns of the National Parks and Wildlife and Rural Fire Service bush fire mitigation strategies which used hot fire that moved very fast and burned too high, often damaging the canopy and

animal habitats. Cultural burning involves cool fires trickling through the undergrowth and never reaching higher than hip height on tree trunks. Often the fire moves so lightly that there is unburnt leaf litter left behind, ensuring that insects have protection either under the surface or by climbing the trees.

Central to the aims of the Firesticks project is for Indigenous ecological knowledge (IEK) and contemporary environmental management to work together to provide holistic solutions to help manage and protect biodiversity. Indigenous approaches to burning help to ensure fire is applied in the right place, at the right time, for the right reasons, to support resilient functioning ecosystems.

The opportunity to present information from the Kuku-Thaypan Fire Management Project to a mainstream audience as a conference poster was a challenge in terms of visual language. The process of integrating a diagrammatic representation of the knowledge system with an information design approach that used photographs and descriptions of the relational connections between people, country and spirit provided a rich starting point.

The Firesticks poster, 'Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change' (Figure 1) is a tracing of the knowledge transfer principles drawn by Victor Steffensen. It has a central triangle with three requirements for appropriate action: knowing what it is; knowing what it does; knowing how to do it. Around this central element are the understandings of Kuku Thaypan Elders, documented with Peta Standley, through the co-generative action research project KTFMRP The Importance of Campfires. These understandings of the effects of fire on plants, animals and law as examples of 'knowing what it does'. 'Knowing how to do it' is recognising the importance of contemporary land management approaches with the reference to biodiversity, people and monitoring and evaluation along with the use of contemporary technologies. 'Knowing what it is' brings lore, people and country into focus with the important statement at the apex of the triangle:

Coming to know and understand fire requires guidance by Elders and

fire knowledge holders through various stages of cultural learning on country. Learning the knowledge through a written or even a visual medium without that learning process on country means that components of the embedded nature of that knowledge in place and people can be misunderstood.

(Text from poster provided by Peta Standley from a draft chapter of her doctoral research.)

This statement disrupts the role of the poster as a knowledge artefact; it becomes instead a communication about the process and values rather than instructions for cultural burning. Instead of providing a didactic set of instructions for burning the poster reinforces the message that the 'on country' experience is crucial to a traditional Indigenous knowledge transfer. The poster is not a knowledge guide for cultural burning. The image and text represent elements of knowledge with the acknowledgement that this knowledge system and practice can never be understood through written or visual media. An experience alongside knowledge holders is recognised as the only way to fully come to know.

In my role as designer, what can be made known to the viewer are: a representation of traditional burning practices as complex, social and participatory; the importance of fire to the landscape as a caring practice; and the commitment to a resilient, sustainable and sustaining network. This is demonstrated in the overall design that respectfully details examples of ecological indicators such as the dew, the way fire is needed for particular grasses, the use of fire to support animal life, contemporary monitoring processes, and respect for Elders. The choice of images, the hybrid language that incorporates scientific references and Indigenous ecological knowledge and the relationship between the text and images were guided by Peta Standley, who had gathered the images as part of the Kuku Thaypan Fire Management Project. The selection of images and content was discussed via email as text was developed.

A key part of the knowledge transfer triangle is the statement 'knowing who we are'. Included in the poster is the list of people, language groups and organisations participating in the project of cultural fire workshops. This serves as a recognition of the development of networks in this project between 2004 and 2011, including the attendees at the fire workshops on country. This poster is an historical record of the mentorship by Elders from Cape York of Aboriginal communities in NSW through the Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways and the Firesticks Project. In 2014, at the fire workshop held in Cape York, the poster was pinned up and all the attendees signed their names on it as another layer of documentation of participation.

Lyndal Harris and I worked on the poster in Sydney and communicated with Victor Steffensen and Peta Standley by telephone and email. At our first evening meeting, early in May 2011 in a café in Paddington, I provided Lyndal with Victor's diagrams and two rough sketches that I had prepared for a suggested structure. The timing was tight. Lyndal was working in a full time position so we met in the evenings and communicated through email and telephone. The poster was designed by the end of May, with the artwork completed with permissions for the printer by mid June. After some adjustments to the proofs with the printer the poster was printed for the conference on 23 June 2011.

Working with Lyndal was in itself a complex translation process. I shared with Lyndal the perspectives from my experiences on country and listening to the discussions by fire knowledge holders about cultural burning practices. Lyndal and I engaged in a designerly translation of these understandings for the visual language development and poster design. My understanding of the qualities of fire in cultural burning practices is of a cool fire that burned in circles with people gathered around, birds wheeling overhead as light smoke drifted softly into the sky and the fire slowly trickling across the landscape.

These visual triggers were in contrast to the conventional images of fire and fire management of threatening walls of heat and rapid movement through the landscape, fire-fighters dressed in uniforms with trucks, and helicopters in the face of

the threat of wildfire to life and property. During this translation process, Lyndal and I moved from conventional visual languages related to fire as intense, hot and active, expressed through dynamic movement and high contrast images, to a softer and more gentle visual language.

THE FIRESTICKS VIDEO: COMMUNICATING FIRE

The designing of the interview scenography in the video 'Communicating Fire: Building Relationships and Creating Change' (<https://vimeo.com/61313379>) is an example of taking guidance and the need for a specific visual approach to ensure the visual representation of the connection between people and place is maintained.

My first experience in an Indigenous-led project in 1999 was working with the Keewong Mob in Western NSW and students in a Community Project that contributed to the publication *Yamakarra* (2011). In this task of representing an oral history we were asked by the Indigenous design advisor to keep two things in mind: firstly to have no white paper and secondly that any images of the Keewong Mob would always be placed 'on country' to demonstrate the power and importance of the connection between people and place. This meant either photographing people in the landscape or using collage to place them 'on country'. Victor too emphasises the connection between people and country.

In the video describing the traditional knowledge recording process, made by student Luke Sandford (<https://vimeo.com/52730508>) under guidance of Victor in 2006, Victor describes the importance of the relation between people and country and says: 'the country needs the people and the people need the country' (Steffensen et al 2006). My awareness of this understanding (initially learned in 1999 and evident in the videography of Traditional Knowledge Revival Pathways) has become a central consideration in all the work that I undertake. My awareness of the importance and power of the specificity and uniqueness of the country and the people resonates in my approach to representation.

During the UTS Firesticks meeting in 2011 there was an opportunity to interview participants and to record the feelings and thoughts about cultural burning and the

revitalisation of this practice. The set-up of the video interview was problematic. UTS is in central Sydney and is an urban environment. We could not find a tree or grass area within close vicinity and any recording became a representation of displacement. To come some way to address this breakdown we set up the recording space in front of a painting in one of the lounges at UTS (Figure 7). This painting became a signifier of the natural world. The painting of trees and roots provided a background that acknowledged a link between the interviewees and (a representation of) nature, thus maintaining, in a context of mediated representations, the spirit of understanding of the importance of people and place.



Figure 7. Still from interview with Peta Standley from *Firesticks: Communicating Relationships and Creating Change* video.

Conclusion

In my research and design practice the recognition of the emplacement of the designer is an important element in a designer's understanding of the relational qualities of the intersecting ecologies of the social, the biophysical and the artificial. This positioning orients the designer and their actions towards the fullness of placelcountry as an active participant with agency. This position brings a perspective to the project of sustainment and an expanded framing of responsibility for the

designer where placelcountry, as an entity, requires attention, listening, advocacy and representation.

This paper demonstrates some pathways to recognising the importance of an openness and a quality of listening that are essential in order to think and act differently as a designer representing placelcountry. In this case, listening as visual hearing initiates a shift from a focus on the instrumental outcome as a sign of efficiency, to the recognition of the presence of sentience everywhere. Within this move, for the designer researcher, is a realisation that learning comes in its own time and is a transforming experience. This paper outlines some of the learnings that I have experienced during my participation in the Firesticks project. In this project my capacity to sustain an openness to a dialogue with land, people and knowledge in an emergent trajectory has been particularly important in the transformation of my past designing self to a reconsideration, as a design researcher, of ways for visual communication design to address difference and complexity.

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