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Reimagining co-design on Country as a relational and transformational practice

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ABSTRACT

Undertaking participatory work with Indigenous people requires a reflexive and critical reimagining of how non-Indigenous design researchers engage with place. This paper draws upon reflexive learnings from a co-design education programme with young adults from Ntaria, Western Arrarnta Country in the Central Desert of Australia. Co-designing with Ntaria youth involved deeper questioning of the dynamics of participation, catalysing a change of pace and a shift from engaging as a Design Researcher and Educator to a person open to different ways of relating. This embodied transformation required leaning into uncertainty and discomfort as a new practice of waiting and becoming relational, attuned to the temporal rhythms of people and 'Country'. While the stories are highly personal and contextually specific, the paper aims to inspire others to reflect and question alternative *ways of being* a design researcher. By shifting away from de-personalised accounts of research that emphasises roles, skills, processes, and methodologies, this paper reimagines co-design as co-ontological ways of becoming, which troubles research traditions of replicability and generalisability. For co-design to be reimagined this way, we argue the significance of onto-epistemes that are beyond dominant research orthodoxies to respect and embrace pluriversal ways of participating, learning, and teaching design.

1. Acknowledgement of design research on Country

We pay our respect to the Elders, Ancestors and Traditional Custodians of Western Arrarnta[1] Country, and Woi Wurrung and Boon Wurrung of eastern Kulin Nations where this paper was conceived and written. We also acknowledge the knowledge held in Country, and the way Country shaped our experiences shared here.

Undertaking participatory work with Indigenous people requires a reflexive and critical reimagining of how design researchers engage with places, cultures, and communities, because this collaboration demands more than just enabling equitable, inclusive input and avoiding misrepresentation as ethical design research. Several studies have identified ethical challenges with Western-centric notions that pre-define what 'participation', 'design', and 'knowledge' means and the vigilance needed by design researchers

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

so that Indigenous worldviews and onto-epistemes are respected as the foundation for collaborative work (see Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-schollum 2019; Kennedy et al. 2018; Rodil et al. 2019; Schultz 2018). Here, we acknowledge the important work developed by the *International Indigenous Design Charter* while also stating that this paper is not about Indigenous cultural representation. Rather, our paper complements and builds upon these growing bodies of work to reimagine co-designing as ontologically relational and transformational, grounded in place.

By taking co-designing as a fundamentally relational and place-based practice, our paper speaks to the sensitivities that mediate the ways in which non-Indigenous design researchers engage and transform on 'Country'. Our emphasis of the term 'Country' learns from and follows the way it is described by Aboriginal people, like Elders Uncle Charles Moran, Uncle Greg Harrington, and Professor Norman Sheehan (2018, 75):

> The relationship between a people and their Country extends beyond time and is recorded in stories laid down in Country that are the spiritual source of knowledge essential to generations. Country is alive and intelligent providing everything that its people need. As a conception Country exists outside as a living vital place that we inhabit and through learning culture and respect it also exists inside as a model for being human in a proper way.

This describes a relationship which, to us, is cosmologically profound. Yet, why is there so little in CoDesign that recognises the significance of 'aliveness' of place, let alone, this profound existence of Country, when arguably, many designers and researchers are living and working on unceded Indigenous lands across Europe, America, Africa, and Asia-Pacific? We later discuss colonial and universal scripts of Design (indicated with an Upper Case), lamented by prominent decolonising scholars, that may give reason to this omission. The paper aims to argue how co-designing is negotiated 'on' Country to catalyse a reimagining, not about the researchers' professional role, tasks, and skills, but their ontology through a relational, collaborative learning. For the non-Indigenous researcher (Nicola) whose accounts are shared here, the transformative process of coming to learn about the interconnectedness of Western Arrarnta lifeworlds and relationships with Country required an unexpected vulnerability in questioning their own ways of being and knowing. This transformation confronts settler-colonial histories and orthodoxies of teaching and researching in Design. Describing this ontological shift is an important focus for this paper, as it details how researchers can begin to un-learn (and de-link from) Eurocentric epistemologies to re-learn and re-think ways of knowing to become embedded participants 'in' relational and collaborative research.

This paper draws upon reflexive learnings from a co-design education programme with young adults from Ntaria on Western Arrarnta Country, in the Central Desert of the land now termed Australia. Teaching communication design in Ntaria required learning about how Indigenous young people enact design from their own worldviews, and the value design education can have to them and their own community. As Communication Design education in Australia is entrenched within Euro-centric traditions compounded by legacies of colonisation (St John 2020; St John and Edwards-Vandenhoek 2021), alternative ways to teach and learn design were critical, catalysed by a deep commitment to listening to and learning from Western Arrarnta students and community to develop meaningful and relevant design-based experiences and outcomes.

Austin-Broos (2009) explains that for Western Arrarnta people, knowledge is shared through trust and caring, relatedness and looking after another or a place. A leading Goenpul professor in critical race theory, Moreton-Robinson (2015) argues that Aboriginal peoples' relationship to Country is in stark contrast to Westphalian frameworks that see land as something to be owned, bought, and sold and an asset to live off or on as a 'home'. This colonial construct of owning, controlling, and exploiting extends into Design. According to a respected Wiradjuri scholar of design, Norman Sheehan (in Uncle Moran, Harrington, and Sheehan 2018, 73), colonialism disregards human, biological, or environmental diversity and connections, and warns how Design can be exploitative and denaturing if it continues to be controlled by colonial forces. Deep respect for Country and Indigenous onto-epistemes therefore requires a fundamental transformation for non-Indigenous researchers to engage on, and in relation to Country. By acknowledging differing positionalities (Suchman 2002), histories, and cultural sensitives, design researchers can be emplaced in respecting and re-entangling relationalities that have been, and are still, violated through colonisation. This also means respecting 'thresholds' when entering into spaces and relationships with Indigenous people and being ready for uncertainty and contingent encounters (Akama and Light 2020).

Building on the work of critical race scholars in interrogating the seen, unseen, and unforeseen possibilities and consequences for researchers when they do not attend to their own and others' cultural systems of knowing (Milner 2007), for Nicola, one of the authors and design researcher with a settler heritage, this led to question pre-conceived roles, plans, and privileged positionality of an academic, and to learn how to 'be' with, and on, Western Arrarnta Country. The paper steps into unsettling terrains as evidence of transformation that became a necessary part of learning design together in Ntaria. In doing so, co-design is reimagined in ways that are constituted by the rhythms and relationalities of Country and community as a transformational co-ontology.

1.1. Designing is always on Country

There is a growing movement of design researchers questioning the universality of Design knowledge, who offer alternative practices that are social, participatory, critical, reflective, and imagine other non-European-defined ways of designing (see Escobar 2018; Uncle Moran, Harrington, and Sheehan 2018; Schultz et al. 2018). Among these scholars, Sheehan (2011) explains how Country and connection to culture grounds the purpose and enactment of design for Aboriginal people. This is in stark contrast to colonial origins of Design which often erases identities, places, and cultures to promote a universal, homogenising ontology for Design to be an object, process, solution, or profit-making endeavour (Schultz et al. 2018). Sheehan has been a guiding pioneer in sharing how design is embedded in Indigenous Knowledges of Australia based on a deep respect for Country (Uncle Moran, Harrington, and Sheehan 2018; Sheehan 2011). He explains that 'on-Country' design means 'how all living beings co-operate to co-create' where design is a natural constant power in environments (in Uncle Moran, Harrington, and Sheehan 2018, 73). The interactions that result from designing on Country can build relationships with knowledge that lives within Country and has partnered with human designers from the beginning, as 'our design has always been nurtured and informed by this natural intelligence' (ibid, 76). We interpret this to mean that cultures have a distinct

standpoint or philosophy of design, as each arises independently of localised knowledge of Country (Uncle Moran, Harrington, and Sheehan 2018). Designing on Country has direct implications and impacts not just for what and how design is taught and approached, but also how non-Indigenous people engage lawfully and relationally as the premise for designing and research to take place. The experiences shared here by a non-Indigenous researcher/teacher are specific to protocols and obligations of Western Arrarnta Country, and this is one among diverse and nuanced ways in which relationships between Indigenous, non-Indigenous people on and off Country are taking place as designing (see, for example, Akama et al. 2017; St John and Edwards-Vandenhoek 2021; West 2020).

The following section extends contemporary discourses in Co-Design and decolonising to critique dominant conventions around knowledges, methods, and the evacuation of place and personhoods to explain the importance we give to plural and relational ontologies.

1.2. Positioning co-design

Decolonising is a political activity to critique historical and hegemonic structures of colonialism, modernity, and power to bring many epistemologies and diverse principles of knowledge to the foreground, while emphasising narratives and self-representations that reflect the complexities and plurality of localised and relational experiences within specific contexts (Mignolo 2007). This plurality also means decolonising design is varied and complex according to its own politics, so in our paper, we follow pioneering Aboriginal scholars who guide our work in Australia, such as those already cited, for the authors to ground co-designing that respects the laws of Indigenous sovereigns of this Country. In other words, rather than focusing on the structures of coloniality as the only political focus, we premise Indigenous sovereignty that long precedes modernity. Starting with this premise is to de-centre colonising and re-centre respect for Indigenous sovereigns. This means we acknowledge that we are on unceded lands, invited to work alongside community and Traditional Custodians, and to accept the laws and obligation to relationships on and with Country (West 2020) as the foundational practice of all designing in Australia. We learn from, and join forces with, many First Nations and non-Indigenous people working together with a heightened awareness of such relationalities of co-designing on many unceded lands all over the world (e.g. Albarrán González 2020; Hernandez Ibinarriaga 2020; Aho 2016; Relative Creative n.d. and more).

This co-designing then engages with the politics of decolonising through entangling with the existing relationalities of its place to become co-ontology where knowledge, socio-materialities, place, and our whole-selves are relationally entangled (Akama 2021). This allows us as design researchers to attune to how we are already participating in worlds 'transforming itself' (Ingold 1993, 164) to intervene ethically and reflexively, to being part of this changing. When co-designing forges obligations with relationships and place, it can no longer be a transportable 'methodology' (Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-schollum 2019) where knowledge and processes can be moved and 'used' like an object by a 'generic' nobody from nowhere (Suchman 2002). Norms of Co-Design is challenged as

another act of decolonising to explore dimensions that are not replicable, in turn, highlighting the need for its discourse to re-consider what can be legitimated as 'knowledge'.

In sharing his knowledge of yarning and relational research engagements, Yuin Nation scholar Stuart Barlo argues researching with Indigenous peoples requires establishing and maintaining genuine relationships that affect you as a person (Barlo et al. 2021). The unfortunate legacy of Research often uses the term 'Data', but these are in fact people's stories, lived experiences, and knowledges that are gifted specifically to the researchers within the relationship. This is a humbling and personally transformative experience, because it also obliges the researchers to question dominant academic customs to appreciate such offering that happen 'outside' conventional research contexts. Those that write and participate in knowledge creation need to be accountable for their own positionality because Western/settler Designers continue to remain 'invisible' and unaccountable to relationships with participants (Uncle Moran, Harrington, and Sheehan 2018). Living (and researching) through relationships centres a worldview that considers establishing, maintaining, nurturing, and being accountable to people as individuals, as members of communities, and extends to the knowledge that participates in and with other entities in the environment (Smith 2005). Indigenous academics continue to argue that non-Indigenous researchers must go 'beyond the rhetoric' of participatory methodologies, to foreground the creation and maintenance of reciprocal, respectful, and accountable relationships with people, community, and knowledge (Wilson 2001, 176). Building genuine trust does not happen according to pre-set schedules, while co-designing does not start and stop with a 'research project' or 'methodology' framing. Instead, we aim to make visible and acknowledge our positionalities and worldviews, and from here, begin to reimagine our approaches in design research and practice.[2] A relational worldview welcomes different onto-epistemes to come together to create new ways of doing and becoming through design, while modelling a way for researchers to articulate being emplaced in the enactment of co-design practice. It also acknowledges how Country is fundamental in maintaining relationships, holding and sharing knowledge, and shaping research practices at the intersection of design and everyday life.

The following section now shifts to Nicola's account, of being and becoming attuned to the rhythms and relationalities of Western Arrarnta Country. Presenting a first-person account draws upon concepts of emic (insiderness) and etic (outsiderness) in negotiating positionality and relationality throughout the research and illustrates how researchers engage in spaces between contradictory worlds and conflicting perspectives (Beals, Kidman, and Funaki 2019). We seek to shift away from detailing the application of replicable methodologies to move towards accounts of ontological designing and detail 'how' spaces and relationships of respect and trust were created. Personal reflections enable an assessment of 'the influence of the researchers background and ways of perceiving reality, perceptions, experiences, ideological biases, and interests during the research' (Chilisa 2011, 168). Reflexivity needs to be examined at the personal level, with lived experiences producing a kind of personal and practical knowing, and a means for which insights can be drawn from the practice of co-designing on Country. The following is Nicola's story and written in first-person account.

2. Teaching and learning design in Ntaria

I am a woman with Anglo/Celtic heritage, born on the lands of the Wodi Wodi people of the Yuin Nation (South Coast of New South Wales), Australia. The value of education has been strongly advocated within my family, yet Indigenous histories, knowledges, and perspectives have largely been ignored and absent from my own training and professional practice. Motivated by a social design agenda whilst at university, I experienced working cross-culturally across Peru, South East Asia, and India early in my Design career, before working as a Communication Designer in an international non-profit aid agency, Oxfam, for several years. Working together with Aboriginal colleagues on First Nations health and political campaigns, I became aware of the lack of Indigenous voices within Communication Design and Design education. My standpoint developed through these experiences to consider the social and political power of who is being represented, by whom and how.

I was introduced to Ntaria School through a Western Arrarnta colleague and friend from Oxfam, who had heard school staff were seeking digital literacy skills training for senior students and knew about my PhD on designing with First Nations people. Explicit permission is required to visit (and stay) on Western Arrarnta Country, established under the Land Rights Act across Ntaria and surrounding homelands. From our conversations, the School requested an introductory visit so I could to learn what the students wanted to gain from this initiative. My visit in September 2016 was spent chatting to students and staff, becoming known, listening, and slowly developing a plan centred on students' aspirations, and what useful skills I could bring. The initial plans for a design education program were formed from these conversations and students interests in digital modes of expression, which were approved by Ntaria School and the Northern Territory Department of Education.

These beginnings became 4 years and more of immersing in Western Arrarnta ways of teaching and learning design. It involved a group of 16 young adult students from Ntaria School who collaborated in the development of a series of design workshops and subsequent entrepreneurial activities and outcomes, which all responded to sharing Western Arrarnta knowledge and story (St John 2020). Work commenced in April 2017, yet the collaborative teaching and learning design became an iterative, negotiated process, mediated by Western Arrarnta Country.

3. Becoming relational, waiting, and being on Western Arrarnta Country

Ntaria is an Aboriginal community, home to around 700 people, located on Western Arrarnta traditional lands within the Central Desert of the Northern Territory (see Figure 1). It's a 2500 km 5-day drive from my current home in Melbourne across desert landscapes of red dirt, purple ranges, and rippling hills. Ntaria is a unique cross-cultural heritage site characterised by its Lutheran mission history, while Western Arrarnta language, ceremony, law, and complex kinship relations remain at the forefront of everyday life.

Figure 1. The Ntaria community.

Being in Ntaria, everything became personal. Next, I share my embodied practice and transformation, how being uncomfortable, waiting, and becoming relational was essential before anything 'happened', further catalysing a transformation of my own perceptions and Design knowledges.

3.1. Being uncomfortable in the personal

In the first few months of being in Ntaria attempting to collaboratively Design a workshop programme with a group of teenage students, I was frustrated and exhausted. None of the students spoke to me. I was often stressed about the collection of 'data' and questioning the relevance of all those frameworks and methodologies I had read. I tried maintaining control over how and when the research proceeded, with my early experiences feeling like a series of interruptions to 'my' schedule. A rare arrival of a dentist, family demands, funerals, and sports carnivals were all taking precedence over any planned Design activities. I couldn't plan what could happen on any given week or hour. I was also navigating and educating myself on the complex legacies of

discrimination, inter-generational trauma, and the manifestations of the educational divide within Aboriginal communities. It was personally challenging and emotional in ways I didn't expect.

Feeling my total insignificance helped me recognise that I am an outsider, also, because of my 'whiteness', privilege, and Eurocentric education. This was, and continues to be, uncomfortable and I still feel the tensions of how to make sense of contradictory ways of knowing. Seeking to 'participate' meant I had to find a way to lean into the discomfort and disruption of shifting the Design education programme from an initial 3-month plan to lengthy stays over 4 years of engagement. Having to let go of my own expectations allowed a reimagining of the purpose of being there – not as a teacher or researcher to collect data, but rather as a person finding footing in the everyday rhythms of this community.

Working within a Western Arrarnta worldview, knowledge is a privilege of acknowledged relationship – it is not freely available to those with the right tools or methodologies, as is often assumed in academic enquiry (Austin-Broos 2009; Smith, 1999). I didn't really understand what this meant until I experienced it. Becoming relational felt quite ordinary as it manifested in unplanned everyday actions, like being useful as a person, hanging out with students, downloading songs for their iPhones, attending local football games. Over time, these collectively led to moments where I had fun, laughed, connected, enjoyed our company, and time together. Once I realised that I too had to open up about my life, family, spiritual beliefs, I began to ease into personal conversations like chatting with female students about music, family, and boyfriends while painting each other's nails, plaiting hair, and taking selfies.

There were also periods of distress, heartbreak, and grief. Tragically, two students died by suicide, only months apart. I still find this time difficult to talk about. Cultural obligations were valued and respected, such as not entering spaces frequented by *Kwementyaye* (term applied by Arrernte people to those who have died) until smoking ceremonies could take place. I returned to Melbourne so the students and community had the time and space to heal without outsiders and stopped the research.

Over time, the students sent messages via Facebook – they had missed me and wanted to know when I was coming back. I returned to Ntaria after a 6-month break. I was slower and more careful, and as a result, the Design workshop at Ntaria School changed drastically. My mornings would consist of driving round to pick up students in the 'troopy' (4WD with 11 seats), do another lap, while kids were waking up. Then, we would detour. Look for bush bananas, onions, or tomatoes. Go and see if there was any water flowing in the Finke River. These trips broke down barriers of teacher/student or researcher/participant. We would come back to the classroom to make a 'cuppa', turn up the stereo, make some lunch, throw the footy. Our afternoons would be quiet, sometimes drawing, sometimes talking story, sleeping, and thinking.

This slower rhythm of engagement supported the expansion of our learning, meaning making and facilitated 'seeing more'. It entailed a different pace from the persistent expectations of academia, to one that is dedicated to creating spaces to show care and build trust, by listening to and learning from the young adults, their perspectives, and their world.

3.2. 'Waiting' to participate

The Western Arrarnta students use the word '*Anma*' to express giving space, waiting for the right time, being patient, and having time to think. The students' engagement with me was underpinned by this 'passage of time' and by slowing down and being mindful of '*anma*' to generate ongoing dialogue. While 'waiting' in lay terms could be perceived passively to indicate nothing is happening, *Anma* came to reflect a relational participatory process and an important temporal consideration. Hall (2016, 124) explains:

> It [Anma] is a way of thinking about time . . . as patterned, seasonal and emerging. It is not something that you plan for, but something that you pay attention to and allow to unfold. It is something that you meet with readiness only when the time is right.

We can learn from this that 'waiting' is an active space of reflection, respect, and readiness for an encounter.

Allowing room for contemplation, thinking, and conferring may be a challenging way of working, especially to those trained in a Euro-Western Design process and educational approach with its focus on action and outcomes. Yolngu teacher Yiŋiya Guyula (in Christie et al. 2010, 72) demonstrated how stories are shared when the time is right, because 'the land is talking to them, because their feelings and their knowledge is ready to be told'. We can sense from these accounts the importance of time as an invitation for thinking, musing, and reflecting. Allowing time, which in turn is combined with remembering stories and building relationships, provided a foundation to begin to participate in teaching and learning on Western Arrarnta Country. Traditional research reporting can often position these activities as 'pre-research' or 'research adjacent' processes, even when they are essential to accountable, rigorous, ethical, and participatory research practice.

3.3. Ntaria design learning on Country

> Design can connect you to community by showing you Country. By sharing your Country with other people. Through generations. By talking about the community. Design can act in the same way. Through culture. (Western Arrarnta student 2017)

For the Western Arrarnta students, their own lived experiences and knowledges of Country intersected with their personal narratives, contemporary identities, and digital design skills to create distinct Western Arrarnta design outcomes (St John 2018). Following many 'bush trips', students would tell me, 'I'm drawing my culture, my Country' as their designs emerged. I could sense their knowledge of Country becoming incorporated into their designing on screen (Figure 2). From knowing the waterholes to fish for boney brim and how to dig for honey ants; the students shared their stories and taught me the relevance and importance of design in Ntaria by engaging in learning both on and off the screen, in and out of the classroom (Figure 3). This way of observing how designing emerges, and is inseparable with Country, resonates with the teachings from Uncle Norm (Sheehan 2011, 71), who describes *Respectful Design*, informed by Indigenous Knowledge, that is a deeper, situational awareness of the natural systems and the social world; 'wherein making and sharing images is a deeply productive interaction – with each other and the world – that conveys significance and engages us

Figure 2. Western Arrarnta students learning digital drawing techniques on iPads.

Figure 3. On-Country learning.

relationally within the original shared cognisance of all *things*'. There is a clear contrast between this deeply situated activity and awareness of designing on Country with the dominant notions of Design that is about technologies, solutions, and problem-solving: 'The opportunity that production-oriented cultures miss is the one for informative engagement within natural systems relations, through the shared consciousness provided by visual philosophy' (ibid).

As soon as I left the comforts of the classroom, I often felt totally lost, with limited knowledge of the bush and no concept of navigation without my mobile phone GPS. I came to learn from the student's deep knowledge of Country, as they would tell me 'we don't need a map – we just know'. This was symbolic of my own transition of learning about designing on Country. Instead of just passively including Country as a backdrop or 'content' in my teaching approach, from design activities based on collecting bushfoods to photograph and create digital collages, I became aware of the active relationships and agency of Country through watching students designing. By sitting by the river, waiting for flood, watching students draw in the sand, digging for honey ants, visiting places for strength. Being on-Country also enabled spaces of deep listening and observing, which, in turn directed students' digital design outcomes – connecting to, learning from, and sharing stories and knowledge of Western Arrarnta Country (Figure 4).

This awareness catalysed a realisation that designing in Ntaria has always been taking place, rooted in local practices knowledges and localities. For me, it necessitated a way of becoming a committed apprentice of various ways of teaching and learning to celebrate pluralities of design and values of design education (Escobar 2018; Schultz 2018). While the students participated in the project to learn about tools, technologies, and entrepreneurial opportunities, premising Western Arrarnta design enabled the young adults to

Figure 4. Examples of the Ntaria student design outcomes.

recognise their own experiences and processes, engage as knowledge holders and protectors of culture and Country. It also meant opening up the classroom to community, as engaging and sharing with family also mediated a dialogue which was critical in bringing local knowledge and ways of learning into the classroom and for students to feel proud in sharing their family stories through design.

4. Discussion: transformative learnings

We discussed co-design as a way of being in relation to community, premised upon a respect for lawful cultural protocols. The embodiment of this work is an ontological practice, requiring a vulnerability, openness, and reimagining of how we engage, teach, and learn together. The discussion next offers a way for others to be able to speak to their own transformative experiences of co-designing and being accountable to research relationships, in the hope that this paper has value for those beyond working with Indigenous sovereigns on Country. We summarise our contribution as respectful practices of waiting and paradigm shifts needed for co-designing.

4.1. Respectful practices of waiting

Paying attention to *anma* allowed a readiness to engage, ethically, humbly, and reflexively *be present*, for native flowers to bloom, for bush tomato season, for rain, drought, for ceremony. Such practices include 'waiting' and attuning when to engage, when to ask questions, when to remain silent, when to leave and come back. This attentiveness enabled a way to attune to the subtle changes and rhythms of place, waiting for its stories and knowledges to emerge. Being present requires a deep respect while being patient, situated, and thoughtful to allow time for connection within the present and emerging moment.

Premising 'waiting' as a form of collaboration is undoubtedly challenging for designers and researchers with limited and pre-determined timelines for engagement. Yet, we could see 'waiting' as resonant with practices of readiness in contingent, dynamic participatory work. 'Waiting', like 'readying', is not about pre-fieldwork planning or preparation for research, but a state of being and becoming-with-many, to be responsive with others and emplaced in the flows, gaps, rhythms of change, and to contemplate how one is and acts (Akama and Light 2020). It is an openness and a reflexive awareness to be challenged, to notice change, and to transform. These are ontological and dynamic states that, by its very nature, are a relational and embodied practice. We invite others to give 'waiting' due importance in their collaborative practices to uncover attitudinal, situational, and altered hidden dimensions.

This invitation to attend to 'waiting' in co-design is also a refusal to see the individual 'self' as the epicentre of action, knowledge, design, or research. This is co-ontology of co-designing where the 'co', in both terms, is an accommodation of pluralities in-between, among people, materials, and ecologies that are all becoming together (Akama 2021). This makes us less interested in co-designing hedged in by methods and methodologies that can be applied by anyone, anywhere, anytime, which can trouble dominant epistemic orthodoxies, which we discuss next.

4.2. Decolonising co-design

The accounts of co-designing on Country attune to many approaches to and embodiments of practice as ontologically transformative. The vulnerability and discomfort as stories shared aim to encourage others to disclose their own, highly personal reflexive accounts of transformation. These are not 'lab controlled' user-testing experiments and even to entertain that idea seems morally objectionable. It is equally disturbing to assume that co-designing by Nicola with Ntaria students and Western Arranta community can be replicated by another interchangeable design researcher who possesses similar skills, capabilities, or mindsets. Decolonising Co-Design means we must question expectations for transferability of methods and theories as legitimate knowledges only when it can be detached from the specificities of places and people (Akama, Hagen, and Whaanga-schollum 2019; Schultz et al. 2018; Smith 2012) to short-circuit the pervasiveness of research that conflates neutrality and placeless-ness with rigour of impartiality by rendering the designer-researcher, and their positionality and personhood invisible.

In response to calls for evidence of applied forms of decolonising design (Taboada et al. 2020) and its contribution to Participatory Design (Smith et al. 2020), we have shared decolonising co-design as practice to encourage the kinds of accounts we need to start hearing. We must continue to invite accounts of practices by recognising that researchers bring particular sets of values, agendas, expertise, and make judgements as co-participants in design. Being accountable to one's positionality and ways of knowing is a commitment to engage as a whole 'self' grounded in place, time, and people, not just 'a' researcher, 'a' co-designer. Including such accounts is an ethical and political act to examine what happens when design researchers step into situations to alter it with others, and to acknowledge when they themselves are altered through co-designing, entangled within multiple ways of being, knowing, and doing (Akama and Light 2020). We hope our paper inspires courage for others to share experiences that continue to be situated as 'outside' or 'other' to dominant Design discourse, so we can join forces for plural understandings of co-design to flourish.

5. Joining pluriversal designing

The accounts were selected to challenge orthodoxies of Co-Design and Research to reimagine knowledges and practices that are fundamentally relational, embodied, and grounded in place. We hope our discussions on including the whole-self, positionality, waiting, and ontological transformations have relevance to those beyond working on Country. For those who have yet to activate a consciousness about designing on unceded Indigenous lands, we hope the importance we give to Indigenous sovereignty and onto-epistemic notions of Country are valuable routes in decolonising, by learning about custodianship, cultural knowledge, and community responsibilities, embedded within the rhythms and permeating presence of Country. Here, there remain substantial issues to consider. Some understandings are not possible, open, or welcome to those who are not invited into particular relationalities to Indigenous knowledges and Country. Rather than seeing this as a barrier, it means we must respect truths and wisdom without fully seeing or owning knowledge (Wilson 2008) and to embrace incongruent onto-epistemes

as an obligation to entanglement (Akama 2021). Extending this, the ethics and politics of relating (and decolonising) to onto-episteme within plural worlds (Escobar 2018) are challenging yet exciting, transformational, learning opportunities that await us all.

Notes

1. Arrernte (pronounced as 'Ah–runda') is commonly used in official and academic writings (Kral 2000). However, there is a growing desire among the Western Arrarnta community to spell Arrarnta and not Arrernte, which we follow in this paper.
2. The accounts shared here are Nicola's experience, so the worldviews of the second author (Yoko) are not explained in the paper, but they have been written elsewhere (see Akama 2021).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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