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# Cultural Hybridity in Design with Australian Aboriginal Communities

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**Abstract**

Design is culturally-situated, and postcolonial computing advocates for a shift in perspective from understanding culture through taxonomic models, to culture as generatively-enacted through everyday practices. Border terms (e.g. 'Western cultures' and 'Australian Aboriginal cultures') are often discursively invoked to describe the differences in technology design and use in local cultural contexts. These terms are sometimes thought to be incompatible with generative views of culture, particularly when used to perpetuate colonial logics and uneven power relationships between "us" and "them". Yet, we suggest that border terms in themselves are not inherently harmful, particularly when advanced by the communities themselves with whom we work rather than proposed by the designers. We reflect on the border-making concept of "both worlds", and the important purpose it serves in describing the cultural hybridity of Australian Aboriginal communities and expressing aspirations for the future.

**Author Keywords**

Postcolonial computing; cross-cultural design;  
Aboriginal design; cultural hybridity; generativity;  
borders

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## ACM Classification Keywords

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## Introduction

*We acknowledge the Australian Aboriginal peoples and the Anindilyakwa people of Groote Eylandt, whose culture and knowledge date back countless generations.*

Design paradigms, practices and artifacts are culturally-situated. Since design is heterogeneous, enacted through and framed by local practices contexts, “difference abounds” [18]. Efforts to acknowledge and make sense of the differences between design in different local settings inevitably involves invoking “borders” in the terms we use to describe and discuss these differences. Many of these borders are characterised with respect to differences in cultural context. Examples of this include: the aspects of culture embedded in designed products and the practices of users within a particular (possibly different) context [18]; the cultural backgrounds of “designers” and “users” in UCD, and of different design participants in PD; and cultural contexts of technology design and use [18]. The circulation of designed products between cultural different cultural contexts has also given rise to local forms of innovation through practices of reverse engineering [7], technology appropriation [19], and design inspiration for new “consumer-specific products” [10].

The postcolonial computing movement advocates for a shift in perspective from engaging with culture through design on the basis of “taxonomic” cultural models, to engaging with culture as something that is “generative” and “dynamic, collectively produced, and enacted in

everyday encounters” [7]. A nuanced reading of the postcolonial computing literature (e.g. [7,18]) suggests that a “generative” and “hybrid” view of culture is not incompatible with acknowledging difference or with invoking borders. Certain border-making practices can be harmful when they reinforce colonial logics and perpetuate uneven power relations. Yet, articulating cultural borders can play an important role in reflecting the cultural hybridity of lived experience and voicing aspirations for the future, when they are framed by the communities with whom we work rather than imposed by the designers. To illustrate this point, we engage with expressions of cultural hybridity from Australian Aboriginal communities through the idea of “walking in both worlds” [17]. This is grounded in our experience of working with the Australian Aboriginal community of Groote Eylandt to develop a cross-cultural Digital Community Noticeboard [20].

## Unpacking A “Generative” View of Culture In Postcolonial Computing Literature

The concept of culture as “generative” has received much attention in postcolonial computing literature and design projects that engage with a postcolonial computing sensibility. Irani and colleagues have highlighted the pitfalls of inherently taxonomic cultural model’s such as Hofstede’s cultural dimensions that essentialise culture into quantifiable values, treat cultural traits as inherent, and use them as a way to classify people based on cultural difference [6]. In particular, they highlight that static perspectives of culture are increasingly questionable in light of technologically-facilitated globalization [7]. Yet, some scholars have remarked on the complexity of developing nuanced understandings of what is meant by cultural generativity, and how this perspective can

be operationalized in design practice [12]. A generative view of culture has been described in several different ways in the postcolonial computing literature, in terms of both individual cultural identity and collective cultural expression. These include culture as:

- a “*lens* through which people collectively encounter the world” [6]
- *positions* in relation to multiple flows of people, capital, discourses...” [6] and the process of “investing in a particular (subject) position” [12]
- the “cultural *experience* [emphasis added]” of an individual [7]
- a “*spectrum* along which a single person’s cultural identity may traverse over time [emphasis added]” in which “the temporal movement and passage [...] prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities” (Bhabha in [12]);
- “a “third space” where the subjectivities of both researcher and researched are mutually constructed, and meanings and interactions are also mediated, as is knowledge itself” [11].

However, as Philip et al. point out, our understandings of hybridity must be in themselves be hybrid: “All contexts are heterogeneous. Bricolage and articulation have always characterized technology design. We read ascriptions of hybridity and indigeneity as something other than originary and essential” [18]

### **Design and the Invocation of Borders**

Yet, a generative view of culture does not dissolve the plurality of cultural perspectives held by design participants. These differences have been described by

some in terms of tensions and “cultural collisions [that] impact the nature of the design process” [12]. Since postcolonial computing advances the notion of design as being framed by “encounters” between people [7], Philips et al. themselves acknowledge that cultural difference exists and can present “productive possibilities” and even “sites of creativity and possibility” [18]. To productively engage with these differences requires the ability to discursively invoke them by naming them, often expressed through the “border” terms used to distinguish x from y, while at the same time acknowledging that x and y are not mutually exclusive.

A postcolonial approach questions the assumptions between taxonomic models for presenting differences between “here” and “there” and the “self” and “other” as “apart”, “disconnected”, and “stably distanced” [18]. However, what if these borders are not imposed by the designer, but are instead proposed by the communities with whom we work? We explore this question through cultural hybridity concept of “both worlds” [17] expressed by Australian Aboriginal communities.

### **“Both Worlds”: Australian Aboriginal Perspectives of Cultural Hybridity**

One perspective on a generative view that has received little attention in the HCI is the Australian Aboriginal expression of living in “two worlds”. For example, lawyer and activist Noel Pearson articulates an aspiration for Australian Aboriginal people to “walk in both worlds” in being “integrated in the national and global economies” while at the same time to “remain distinctly Aboriginal and retain the connection with ancestral lands” [17]. This two-worldness has been articulated in various ways both in academic literature

[5,13,14], and artistic productions such as the Bangarra Dance film "Spear" that explores "what it means to be a man with ancient traditions in a modern world" [16]. It is not clear where the terms "two-worlds" originated, though the "worlds" referred to have diverse meanings. These include interactions between Aboriginal community life and cultural identity and corporate culture [15], mainstream services such as the healthcare sector [8], and peer relationships within an educational setting [3]. The term "two worlds" does not imply the existence of two separate worlds and a crisp border between them, but this construction has been made to help think through these issues. We reflect on design and cultural hybridity from the perspective of Australian Aboriginal cultures, before suggesting the productive and necessary role of border making in expressing identity and designing futures. We reiterate that there is no one "Aboriginal culture" but a rich and diverse array of Aboriginal cultures in Australia, some of which have used the term "two worlds" or "both worlds".

#### *Australian Aboriginal Design*

As previously mentioned, definitions of "design" can differ between cultures and context. Nichols highlights *differences* between Western and First Australian concepts of innovation rooted in epistemological difference [14]. [14]. Knowledge traditions in Australian Aboriginal cultures are relational are "integrated, holistic, lived and performed [...] on country" [4], underpinned by creation knowledge and laws known as "the Dreaming" [14]. While Australian Aboriginal cultures consider innovation in terms of 'creation' and 'originality', some Australian Aboriginal cultures consider innovation as 'discovery' of "a feature that had always been there" [14]. Yet, these

perspectives are not irreconcilable, and Nichols proposes a definition of design that reflects hybridity both in terms of culture and approaches to design: *Design is the capacity to envision a non-existent or undiscovered material world to a level of complexity that is not obvious based on the local material environment and then to reify that non-existent or undiscovered world in material or symbolic semiotic form*" [14].

#### *Australian Aboriginal Cultural Hybridity*

The experience of living within and between two worlds has been articulated in various ways through concepts such as 'ganma' in the Yolngu culture [5] and research at the "cultural interface" [13]. Verran and Christie address this in their discussion of "bothways education", referring to "schooling that takes seriously both Indigenous and Western knowledge practices" and is strongly rooted in Yolngu concepts such as that of "ganma" [5]. This notion of hybridity also recognises that the "cultural interface" [13] between ways of knowing in Western cultures and Australian Aboriginal cultures (both plural) is "not clearly black or white, Indigenous or Western". While this can manifest as tensions in areas such as different cultural perspectives of time [20,21], Philips et al. point out the promise of these cultural meeting points as "sites of contestation and cultural innovation" [11]. Indeed the community we work with itself expresses a desire to "stand in both worlds" by enriching its traditional culture while engaging with the benefits of a 'modern' lifestyle [2].

However, these narratives of difference are not incongruent with a generative view of culture. As Akama et al. have discovered "While the geographic borderlines of Wiradjuri nation are clear, what it means

to be Wiradjuri is continuous and contingently emerging as living, dynamic practices, enacted in everyday encounters " [1]. Thus, while cultural borders are drawn between "Aboriginal" and "Western" practices, these categories are not internally homogenous, nor are they static representations of culture but represent the collective cultural "lens" enacted through the lived experience of these tensions and differences at the "cultural interface" [13].

This border making has two important implications for postcolonial and participatory design in cross-cultural projects. Firstly, the delineation of one "world" and another in Australian Aboriginal cultures serves as an expression of "sovereignty and legitimacy with the Australian state" [18], and reflects the desire of Australian Aboriginal communities such as Groote Eylandt to "speak to the outside world on their own terms" [2]. Thus, a key preoccupation of postcolonial design with is ensuring that these terms, and their epistemological basis, are privileged in the design process even when "perfect commensurability through translation is not possible" [7]. Secondly, the notion of "both worlds" voices visions for the future and the potential to bring about "the creation of new cultural possibilities" [11]. For example, the Digital Community Noticeboard project has sought to support the Groote Eylandt community's aspiration to "stand in both worlds" by strengthening and supporting different types of literacies through a multimodal interface [20].

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we have provided an overview of salient definitions of a "generative" view of culture in postcolonial computing literature, and highlighted that acknowledging difference and articulating borders is not

inconsistent with a postcolonial computing approach. On the one hand, borders can be considered useful for talking about cultural differences, and both the tensions and possibilities arising at cultural "seams" [18]. Our discussion has shown the expression of these borders by the communities with whom they work are consistent with local ways of knowing and play an important role in identity construction and voicing aspirations for the future.

On the other hand, these border terms can become "harmful" when they invoke colonial logics such as static perspectives of culture, and "a universal "self" who can observe and mark the difference "with the "other"" [7]. Recognising borders by marking the difference between "two worlds" in Australian Aboriginal communities should not be taken as communicating a reductive binary, but instead these border terms reflect richness and complexity in the experience of cultural hybridity. The HCI4D community has articulated the importance of reflexivity in "reflecting on our-selves and whatever perspective we're bringing, and how that shapes our conversations and goals is the bottom line for me" [9]. We encourage a reflexive approach to thinking about differences in cultural and design practices, the naming of these borders, and the exercising of agency and designing of futures through border-making.

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