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Sovereignty

Frontiers of Possibility

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This collection offers readers a variety of ways into the fraught terrain of sovereignty and highlights the connections between them. Sovereignty’s many dimensions are approached from multiple perspectives and experiences: personal and theoretical, political and legal, historical and practical, Native and settler. Sovereignty is examined as imposed from above and as defended from below. It is deconstructed and—through alternative ways of conceiving and practicing it—reconstructed. It is viewed globally, as an international question; locally, as an issue contested between Natives and settlers; and individually, as survival in everyday life. Given its dominance and its limits, sovereignty remains a central site of intervention in critical intellectual and political projects, for those whose freedom it enables as well as for those whose freedom it circumscribes or denies. Moreover, law is not the only terrain on which to think through, imagine, and enact other ways of living justly together. Working both within and beyond law at once recognizes and challenges its thrall, opening up pathways to alternative determinations, to possibilities “other than the ones we have today.” In disciplinary terms, therefore, our contributors respond to critical developments within history, politics, and philosophy as well as law. The ability of disciplines to speak with each other is essential to understanding the past and how it both enables and fetters the pursuit of justice in the present. Through all this diversity, Sovereignty: Frontiers of Possibility aims to contribute to a reinvigorated politics that understands the power of sovereignty, that explores strategies for resisting its
lived effects, and that imagines other ways of governing our perforce coexistent communities.

To adapt the much-adapted Shakespeare, some are born sovereign, some achieve sovereignty, and some have sovereignty thrust upon them. Most of us are fairly clear as to the first and the last on this list. We know what kind of people are born sovereign, just as we know the people who have had sovereignty—which is to say, someone else’s sovereignty—thrust upon them. We also know that thrusting is a violent and invasive procedure, a fact that highlights the difficulties confronted by our median group, those who achieve sovereignty. How did they do it? Can their achievement be emulated by others, those who remain colonized and unacknowledged in the contemporary world? Or could there be other ways, as yet untried—even other sovereignties, as yet unachieved? In different ways, and from a range of viewpoints and approaches, the chapters in this volume address these questions.

In the case of the European nations whose sovereignties were reciprocally consecrated at Westphalia in 1648, sovereignty, as many have noted, was primarily an achievement of violence (or, at least, of violence-fatigue). In general terms, pace Mahatma Gandhi, the same can be said of the anticolonial achievements of nations beyond Europe, who—at least in formal political terms—threw off the alien sovereignties that had been thrust upon them and, in their place, asserted sovereignties of their own design, however derivative and newly problematic. What, then, for those colonized peoples for whom violence is not a plausible resort—the conquered, the outnumbered, the contained? What, as most of the following chapters ask, for Indigenous peoples in ‘post’colonial settler nation-states?

On the empirical ground of history, settlers’ seizure of Indigenous peoples’ homelands evinces a high degree of uniformity. Incursive would-be settlers seek to remove Native peoples from their land and replace them on it. Natives seek to repel them. Ubiquitously, the issue is resolved in violence. The empirical uniformity notwithstanding, there is variety in the ways settlers represent this foundational process to themselves and to the world. British colonial discourse furnished two cardinal formulae under which invaders acquired Native land for settlement. Under the doctrine of *terra nullius*, as instantiated in Australia, no Indigenous rights to land were acknowledged so that settlement could proceed as if there were no Natives present. By contrast, a concessionary variant, which acknowledged a limited set of Native rights that did not conflict with the rules and institutions
governing the settler polity, was instantiated in North America, where it found expression in Indian treaties. To the skeptical eye, conversant with the uniformity characterizing settlement’s founding events, such distinctions are postfrontier utterances, invoked to legitimate the settler takeover. Their address is internal to settler discourse. Thus it is a commonplace that the Doctrine of Discovery was primarily concerned with relations between European sovereigns rather than with relations between Europeans and those whom they colonized. Internally, the requirement for legitimacy is central to the establishment and reproduction of settler society. In this crucial requirement, this book finds strategic possibilities, even hope, for Indigenous self-determination.

Settler colonialism has a dual mission. In addition to disencumbering its expropriated territory of the Indigenous counterclaim, the invading society has to establish civic institutions that are capable of securing a viable level of consent among its own immigrant populace. In the wake of the frontier, when Indigenous societies have been conquered and contained within settler society but have not been eradicated, settler society finds itself obliged to extinguish a refractory alternative sovereignty that persists in its midst though grounded independently of the settler social contract (which, as many have noted, is inherently monistic and exclusive). In the postfrontier era, however, open resort to the homicidal techniques of the frontier disrupts the settler rule of law and is counterproductive. In this more genteel environment, elimination need not involve territorial removal or the termination of individual Natives’ lives. The contrapuntal sovereignty whose extinguishment is sought being a phenomenon of consciousness, it is possible, in Colonel Richard Pratt’s famous exhortation, to kill the Indian while saving the man.

Assimilation reveals sovereignty’s unboundedness with particular clarity. Rather than rendering sovereignty an outcome of the people, the reflection of a general will, assimilation renders the people an outcome of sovereignty. As Carl Schmitt ominously provided, the sovereign determines who is to be included and who is to be excluded. Assimilation goes further, not merely excluding unwanted subjectivities but producing new subjectivities, reconstituted (“bred white”) by sovereignty’s demographic alchemy. This power is of an order entirely different to that which determines the details of public policy. It is constitutive, pre-axiomatic power. For the sovereign to compromise, share, or withhold its power, it must do so at this constitutive level. The level of detail does not intrude on the limits of state power.
showing how the Australian government’s apology to the “Stolen Generations” of Aboriginal people and their natal families remained confined to the level of policy, one of us, Alexander Reilly in chapter 10, reiterates the profundity of sovereignty’s extent. In the absence of a constitutional departure that would prevent future governments from repeating the enactments that the Australian Prime Minister promised would never happen again, they can be re-enacted time and again. Legislation is amendable. Words cannot bind the future. As Reilly puts it, the apology misread Australia’s child-abduction legislation as misconceived—as a policy error—rather than as exceptional, the sovereign exercise of state power. Moving beyond intentionality, he explains how nothing short of constitutional change can safeguard Aboriginal people from abuses of state power. Sovereignty enables. Only sovereignty can limit. This is not a matter of party politics.

As a strategy of elimination, assimilation is more effective than either homicide or a spatial device. Unlike homicide, it does not threaten settler social order, since the policy is invariably presented, in philanthropic terms, as offering Natives the same opportunities as are available to Whites. Correspondingly, unlike the spatial techniques of removal and/or confinement, assimilation is seen as permanent and not susceptible to the settler land-hunger that sooner or later arrives at the boundaries of the Native enclave. Above all, though, assimilation is total. In neutralizing a seat of consciousness, it eliminates a competing sovereignty. Confined Natives, relatives and descendants of killed Natives, remember their dispossession. That memory inscribes the foundational illegitimacy of the settler state. Assimilated Natives, by contrast, do not even exist. There are only White people, settlers, bereft of memory.10

Or so might the Native Administrator’s wish be fulfilled. Natives can see things—and, more to the point, act on things—in other ways. In her chapter, Davina Woods recounts a kitchen-table history of resistance, an enduring refusal to forget, staged in the minutiae of everyday lives, that nurtures a bright germ of Indigenous memory down the generations of settler-orchestrated amnesia. Sovereignty, like the devil, is in the details. Holding onto one unyielding detail, a name commissioned to posterity as a time capsule, Woods finally deciphers the enigma that her ancestor entrusted to that name, a revelation that promises to lead her and her Mother back—and back is the word—to a river that they have never visited: “The long awaited journey will be our homecoming; our feet will walk on the land of
our ancestors, the people of the country will be able to tell us the true name of the river that the colonisers call Hodgkinson and from where Grandfather’s name came.”

The name that carried Great-Grandfather’s secret down the oppressive assimilated years was not Ngarrabullgan. It was Hodgkinson, a White man’s visitation, hard to dissociate from other pathologies. Usurping the intentions of its namers, however, the Hodgkinson River flowed faithful to an Indigenous purpose.

Woods’ story bodes ill for sovereignty’s monistic pretensions. Above all, Great-Grandfather’s name-messenger, like the Indian mutineers’ chapatis, points to sovereignty’s abiding fear, its inability to guarantee its own future. Alternative sovereignties may be extinguishable, but, in the process, they become reignitable. For all its illimitable pomposity, sovereignty is full of such holes. The chapters in this volume seek to reveal these holes, dig them deeper, show where they might become tunnels.

One way through is, of course, to point to sovereignty’s internal contradictions. The possibilities here are admittedly limited. After all, if human institutions depended on logical consistency, then capitalism could scarcely have survived the 1860s. Nonetheless, as a number of our contributors point out, inconsistency begets anxiety. At the core of sovereignty’s anxiety is the haunted awareness that the sovereign is not, in the end, alone. At its simplest, vainglorious sovereigns, brooking no ultra to their vīres, are compelled to live in a world full of other sovereigns, monads alike, their claims no less unlimited. “Standard-issue” sovereignty, as Peter Fitzpatrick puts it in chapter 9, “must surpassingly combine being determinate with an unconstrained efficacy.” In a secularized era, polytheism has its limits. Lacking the theological ceiling of natural law, which subjected sovereigns to a universal dispensation that was manifest in the order of Creation and legible to all, a disenchanted nineteenth-century positivism privileged source over content, rendering sovereigns supreme within their own realm and subject to no higher dictate, a Cyclopean etiquette. In the following century, wavering in the face of genocide, atomism succumbed to the quest for a new consensual ceiling, relieved of fractious theologies. Shades of Nietzsche’s lantern-waving madman, demanding to know quite how we propose to follow an act like religion. To some, however—again, Fitzpatrick among them—sovereignty’s exhausted religious predecessors did not disappear. Rather, their sanctity became displaced onto the political shibboleths of occidental modernity, demonizing
heterodoxy in the fertile vocabulary of despotism, fanaticism, and terror. “Does this mean,” asks John Docker in his chapter, “that conquest and destruction of pagans, those like the polytheistic Canaanites whom we see conquered and slaughtered in the book of Joshua, can be practiced on any pagans in world history?” Appallingly, the lesson so far is that maybe it does. For all its skepticism, however, Docker’s question touches off a sacredness that infuses the ostensibly secular rhetoric of the contemporary global order. The abstract category is vulnerable to the concrete instance. “Humanity” is vulnerable to human beings.

Hypostasized in the motherhood statements of liberal statecraft—sovereignty, democracy, citizenship, etc.—the secular gods of political theology struggle for luster. Hence the envy with which Indigenous spirituality is commodified in settler discourse. Nonetheless, the litany is out there, endlessly repeated, and its terms are demanding: freedom, equality, rights. Indigenous people may know better, but they are not the point—or, rather, they are not the address. The address is civil society, whose consent is dependent on the level playing field. In the civic domain, the bare life of the Native, baring its inescapably shared humanity, can disrupt order. Addressing the Union, for example, U.S. President Ulysses Grant justified his “Peace Policy,” which institutionalized Indian reservations, on the ground that “a system which looks to the extinction of a race is too horrible for a nation to adopt without entailing upon itself the wrath of all Christendom and engendering in the citizens a disregard for human life and the rights of others, dangerous to society.”\(^{14}\) Grant could hardly have identified the twin sources of settler anxiety more aptly. “All Christendom” was, of course, other sovereigns, whose judgments still weighed heavily on the calculations of a yet-emergent global power. Correspondingly, in a post–Civil War context of rapidly expanding immigration, “society” itself was by no means secure. In this coupling (Antony Anghie’s “external” and “internal” dimensions of sovereignty in chapter 2), Grant acutely betrayed the limits of settler sovereignty, limits that, for Indigenous strategists, can become resources for change. This collection aims to identify some of these limits.

History provides resources for change. Premised as it is on a contradictory derivation of right from might, settler sovereignty constructs alternative genealogies for itself. As Kent McNeil’s chapter exemplifies, these genealogies can be challenged on their own terms, in ways that have the potential to advantage Indigenous people within the settler legal system. Delving inside
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colonial law, McNeil shows that even on its own Eurocentric terms, *de jure* declarations of dominion are not enough to secure the acknowledgment of sovereignty in international law. An effective level of *de facto* occupation and control of the territory is also required, a requirement the historical fulfillment of which McNeil convincingly disputes in the case of the nineteenth-century northern plains, where Euroamerican power proved incapable of disrupting Natives’ control of their territory. In the outcome—and even apart from the fact, which McNeil also argues, that *de jure* declarations could not apply to peoples who were not subject to European law—his chapter furnishes a historical resource that Native peoples (in this case Lakota, Cheyenne, Crow, Blackfoot, Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Cree, and others) can potentially employ to advantage in U.S. and Canadian courts.

McNeil’s analysis demonstrates the need to work within as well as beyond settler discourse, critiquing as well as developing alternatives. In her chapter, Larissa Behrendt also concentrates on critique, though the corollary—positive Indigenous alternatives—is explicit. “The starting point for recognizing Aboriginal sovereignty,” she states, “is to ask the question: ‘when Aboriginal people say they want to exercise their sovereignty, what does that mean in practice?’” Like McNeil, Behrendt takes settler discourse to task on its own as well as on wider human terms, repeatedly pointing to inconsistencies whereby Aboriginal people are uniquely disadvantaged in a system that pretends to impartiality. Thus Australia’s Racial Discrimination Act has only ever been suspended in order to single out Aboriginal people for discriminatory treatment, while a legal system that accommodates and balances competing interests in the same property (“landlords and tenants, mortgagor and mortgagee, body corporates, holders of easements”) becomes uniquely disabled when it comes to balancing Aboriginal interests against settler competition. This deleterious imbalance is compounded by official double-talk over Australia’s disastrous Indigenous welfare statistics, whereby the wholesale failure of service provision to Aboriginal people in health, education, and other vital areas is blamed on the victims. It is in these areas, Behrendt’s “small details of people’s lives,” that sovereignty is revealed not just as a juridical concept but as an on-the-ground determinant of everyday existence. Given Indigenous control over service delivery—setting the agenda, incorporating the personnel, managing the context—Indigenous people learn better, stay healthier, and get arrested less often. Such are the practical outcomes of sovereignty from below.
But sovereignty from below may not look like sovereignty at all. The challenge is not merely to spread European-style sovereignty more thinly. When left to their own devices, why should Indigenous people choose to mimic the ways of their conquerors? In a footnote whose understatement belies its implications, Nin Tomas notes in chapter 11 that the Aotearoa New Zealand system of Maori parliamentary representation can force those who are on the Maori roll “to vote for someone to whom they have no kinship link.” This is hardly a concern that has troubled liberal-democratic theorists. But Tomas has other concerns. Her chapter sets out to “usurp ‘sovereignty’ as the natural starting place for discussing Maori relationships within the territory of Aotearoa New Zealand by carving out a conceptual space for Maori based on rangatiratanga.” Rangatiratanga may overlap with sovereignty. It may even share some of sovereignty’s goals. Its axiom set is, however, distinctly Maori: “the aspiration of Maori leaders to achieve the highest standards of leadership for their peoples’ welfare at local and national levels.” On this basis, Tomas eschews the word “sovereignty” in favor of providing a practical Maori answer to Behrendt’s question as to what it means when Indigenous people say they want to exercise their sovereignty. In citing the 1995 Waikato-Tainui Raupatu Settlement to illustrate how rangatiratanga works and might be extended, Tomas walks a pragmatic line between utopianism and resignation. The settler state has to be dealt with, though not from a position of inferiority. On this basis, rangatiratanga is much more than some abstract sovereignty-in-waiting that it has pleased the settler state to concede. Rather, as Tomas shows, it comprises a real measure of autonomous governance and productively works to enlarge its own jurisdiction. Nonetheless, there remains the problem of the forked tongue. As Fitzpatrick notes in chapter 9, European sovereignty’s claim to universality entails that even the excluded should be included. Yet including them “would undermine the ‘whole’ basis of sovereign settlement, undermining its surpassing completeness.” Hence Natives cannot “really” be included, in the fullness of their alterity, and settler concessions typically seek to reconstitute the Native domain into conformity with Europe. Thus a number of our chapters explore the deceptions of the settler confection termed “native rights.”

It is hardly an accident that an Australian federal government first legislated for Aboriginal land rights in 1976, when the national liberation struggle in what remained of colonial Rhodesia, soon to become Zimbabwe, was at its
height.\(^5\) Surrounding ‘post’colonial nations that were not only Asian but independent, the White man’s paradise in the South Pacific could ill afford to maintain its insistence that the Natives were too lowly for their relationship to their country to qualify as proprietorial. But what else is involved in concessions over territory? As Henry Reynolds has argued, the acknowledgment of a pre-existing ownership implies acknowledgment of a pre-existing owner, a sovereign category.\(^6\) Australian native title legislation, belatedly generalized for the whole country in 1993, retracted the denial of native title only to provide, in the same breath, for its extinguishment.\(^7\) Now you see it, now you don’t. As Ben Silverstein perceives in chapter 4, this sleight of hand betrayed a telltale sensitivity to an Aboriginal sovereignty that the native title legislation pre-emptively dismissed. Once domesticated into settler jurisprudence, native title, as Silverstein puts it, “contradictorily signifies a no longer present but now incorporated Indigenous sovereignty,” a wild card whose insertion into settler law crucially indigenizes the settler state. Silverstein’s analysis recalls settlers’ historical insecurity over their own precarious tie to the land. They are a diasporan offshoot of the European metropolis; what binds the nation’s blood to the antipodean soil? Having displaced empirical Natives on the historical ground of settlement, the colonial fragment finds itself reduced to recuperating indigeneity on the symbolic ground of national identity, smugly adorning settler sovereignty with the emblems of a dispossessed Aboriginality.

Settler nations’ hypersensitivity to Indigenous sovereignties contrasts strikingly with the promiscuity of the global order, in which, as observed, limitless sovereigns concede their mutual limits to each other. At this largest of levels, there is isometry with the marketplace, where smaller individual freedoms jostle. Why not, then, at the intervening level of the nation? In chapter 7, Richard Pennell maps out a nineteenth-century world of overlapping imperial sovereignties as he uses criminal trials to illuminate the intricate web of cross-cutting Anglo-Ottoman jurisdictions that prisoners on trial sought to permute to their own advantage. Pennell’s archival reconstructions will seem exotic to those accustomed to the subnational confinement of settler-Native contestation. In an era of Ottoman capitulations, the balance of sovereignties was by no means equal. Nonetheless, even the sick man of Europe could take for granted prerogatives that were utterly foreign to the diminished condition of domestic dependent nationhood. In contrast to the Cherokee, for instance, Turkey could bring cases before the U.S. Supreme
Court. Pennell’s global narrative sets in stark relief the degraded—or perhaps desublimated—sovereignties that settler states have condescended to Native nations of their own domestication. It prompts us to go beyond “native sovereignty,” to imagine modes of mutuality and reciprocal accommodation that confound the monism of occidental statecraft. As Docker recounts in chapter 5, Martin Buber and Walid Khalidi, settler and Indigene respectively, both sought to imagine viable mutualities that might avert the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. We should succor such imaginings.

Confronted with the problem of occidental sovereignty’s monistic exclusivity, it is tempting to see it as autochthonous to Europe, a monarchical invention that was subsequently projected onto the colonized world. But the Treaty of Westphalia was sealed more than a century and a half after Columbus had first set foot on Hispaniola. Few sixteenth-century European monarchs could have dreamed of the absolutism that their successors would subsequently come to wield. In the dominion they asserted over the new golden lands that had been discovered across the Atlantic, however, these sovereigns already claimed homogeneous and unconditioned sway over whole territories and their human contents. The possibility (which awaits research) that European monarchical absolutism was a colonial invention lends support to Anghie’s historical critique of the imperialist underpinnings of international law (as the discovery-era “Law of Nations” came to be called). As Anghie pointedly notes in chapter 2, post–World War II decolonization may have accorded sovereignty to previously colonized nations, but this did not dismantle the discursive framework under which their sovereignty had initially been negated. In the postcolonial era, the question still remains of “how non-European states were determined to be non-sovereign in the first place. Who decided this issue? Using what principles?” And what, he incisively asks of the present, “is the relationship between those principles and the major doctrines of international law?” Anghie’s question disputes the passing of colonialisms that weigh like a nightmare on the present. The West remains the global subject of sovereignty, the Mercator behind the projection. This book seeks other determinations, other possibilities.

For Indigenous peoples in settler states, however, the problem presented by international law is not only its occidocentrism but the difficulty of gaining access to it at all. Ultimately, the two problems coincide, since Indigenous societies’ access to international tribunals is inhibited by the monolithic nature of global nationhood—one seat per nation. Thus the quality, grade, and
scope of sovereignty available to different peoples continue to depend on the history of their colonization. Those whom Europeans once chose to settle-colonize do not have a tile in sovereignty’s global mosaic. Rather, settler invasion continues into the present in the form of attenuated domestic sovereignties or less. By contrast, where Europeans’ historical choice had been exploitation rather than replacement, national independence not only meant that the faces on legislative benches changed color (pace the Irish). At the global level, independence also signaled the new nation’s ascent to sovereign status. In other words, the settler-colonial frontier remains a key organizer of international relations in the contemporary world order. The requirement for member-state homogeneity dictates that those over whom the frontier has passed are un-decolonizable and, accordingly, non-sovereign, lacking access to a higher law.

What, then, for those over whom the frontier is still passing: Palestinians, Tibetans, Hawaiians, West Papuans, and their companions in invadedness? Here, we need to qualify the term “frontier.” Hawai‘i’s coastal boundaries (as opposed to those of the Ceded/Seized Territories) are manifest. The boundaries of West Papua/Irian Jaya are partly coastal and partly (where they abut Papua New Guinea) political. In places, Tibet’s boundaries are clouded in dispute. Nonetheless, the idea of a political frontier, albeit a partly contested one, is not controversial. As in the case of Europe, the political frontier is territorially delimited, a line over which the adjoining sovereign nation lies. In contrast to the ever-moving settler-colonial frontier, which sporadically and discontinuously consumes and disgorges Indigenous space, the political frontier is capable of precise identification and representation at any one time. The difference can be drawn in terms of sovereignty. A precise boundary is possible when there are two or more sovereign entities that recognize each other. When sovereignty is asserted unilaterally, boundaries are simply imposed. They have the appearance of solidity and impermeability, and as such are a powerful symbol of territorial stability, with an allusion to the boundaries between nation-states. In the Palestinian case, there has been no indication that Israel regards its territorial expansion as complete, so its emergent boundaries are a settler-colonial frontier rather than a European-style border. Indeed, the three primary zones of Israel’s colonial occupation evince three different formulae whereby invasion is represented to Israelis and to the world. Whereas the so-called “annexation” of occupied East Jerusalem recalls the Australian discourse of *terra nullius*, under which Indigenous
sovereignty was comprehensively denied, Israel’s military occupation of the West Bank is represented by means of a formula that recalls the concessions to Indigenous sovereignty that characterized Britain’s colonization of North America. By contrast, Israel’s putative withdrawal from (or “de-occupation” of) Gaza represents a mode of settlement in denial that differs from either of our cardinal formulae. So far as sovereignty’s external dimension is concerned, however, the point is that none of these discourses of conquest have been realized. Indeed, the fact that Palestinian sovereignty remains undomesticated is registered at the global level, where Palestinians have representation at the United Nations and other international bodies from which Indigenous peoples are otherwise excluded. Thus not only is it misleading to suggest, as many have, that the process of decolonization has been effectively completed. The case of Palestine demonstrates that even the process of colonization remains incomplete.

This is not only to strike an optimistic political note (an incomplete process can yet be reversed or transformed). Analytically, the case of Palestine reveals that the relationship between the external and the internal dimensions of sovereignty is not a priori but contingent. Settler colonization converts external into internal, rendering Indigenous sovereignties either nonexistent or domesticated. Annexation does the same thing, only it is illegal. The difference, again, is sovereignty: to annex is to practice settler colonialism in sovereign territory. Thus the frontier is a line in time as well as in space. Spatially, the frontier delimits unconquered Native territory. Temporally, it marks the conversion of outside into inside; it renders externality a thing of the past. In the global contest of settler colonialism, therefore, the internal and the external dimensions represent the state of “play.” The ultimate prize is state formation, with internationally recognized territorial sovereignty. Once the settler takeover is complete, the Native realm becomes a thing of the past, superseded and detoxified, reduced to persisting on the settler’s terms. Since, in the case of Palestine, this process remains incomplete, the situation can still go either—or potentially any—way. At the international level, this uncertainty is reflected in the ambivalent status of Palestinian sovereignty, which remains simultaneously both acknowledged and questioned. Locally, the stakes involved in the resolution of such international uncertainties could not be higher. Tibet represents a case in point. Despite significant informal deference to Tibet’s national separateness, its incorporation into the People’s Republic
of China is not seriously challenged at the diplomatic level. Tibetan repre-
sentation at the United Nations remains unimaginable. Yet even Tibetans
might count their blessings when they compare their situation to that of
the Uighurs, who, like them, are being officially colonized by Han settlers
in the so-called “autonomous region” called Xinjiang, a Chinese appella-
tion that could have been scripted in sixteenth-century Europe. It means
“New Land.” Being so much more firmly domesticated within the Chinese
state, however, Uighur sovereignty remains remote from global concern.

As the cases of Tibet and Uighur indicate, the implications of Sovere-
eignty: Frontiers of Possibility extend beyond the national contexts that our
contributors explore. Taken together, the following chapters show that Indig-
enous sovereignty is not an all-or-nothing ontology but a contingent dialectic
whose balance reflects the relative strength of the external dimension—
varying from, say, Palestine as very strong to Uighur as very weak. This is not
to be defeatist with regard to the emancipatory aspirations of peoples who
currently find themselves disadvantaged by this measure (though it is as well
to be realistic). It is, rather, to stress that for all its bombastic claims to com-
pleteness, settler colonialism is actually a matter of degree. To varying ex-
tents, it remains incomplete, provisional, amendable, and reversible. By the
same token, Indigenous sovereignty remains reignitable. Think of Kosovo, of
Timor Leste, of Eritrea. Think, even, of Manchuria.

But (re-)ignition is unthinkable without the internal spark, the against-
all-odds steadfastness that Palestinians call sumoud. Steadfastness, how-
ever, is a responsibility that should be left to Indigenous people. As Davina
Woods asserts, anticipating her return to the river she has never visited:
“In knowing the name that the river has carried from time immemorial,
we will have truly returned to country.”

Hawaiians have their own way of saying it:

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<th>English</th>
<th>Hawaiian</th>
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<td>Forward younger siblings</td>
<td><em>Imua e na pokī‘i</em></td>
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<td>And drink the bitter water</td>
<td><em>A i nu i ka wai ‘awa’awa</em></td>
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<td>Of opposition until we wear the lei</td>
<td><em>A loa’a ka lei</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Of Victory</td>
<td><em>O Ka Lanakila</em></td>
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NOTES

1. The exigencies of settler colonialism render nomenclature a vexed and contentious issue all over the world. In North America, Native (capital “N”) and First Nation are acceptable names for Indigenous groups, but “aboriginal” has become increasingly contentious. In Hawai‘i, Native is an acceptable term (along with Kanaka Maoli). In Australia, the term “native” has pejorative historical connotations, but the name Aboriginal (capital “A”) remains widely used. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the name Maori predominates. In this introduction, in order to acknowledge and reflect this diversity, when we are not using local names, we refer to both “Indigenous” and “Native” peoples.
3. “Be not afraid of greatness: some are born great, some achieve greatness and some have greatness thrust upon them.” Twelfth Night, Act II, Scene V.
7. See, for example, Fitzpatrick, this volume.
9. See Reilly, this volume.
10. The reference is, of course, to Renan’s famous remarks (“Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?,” 1882) on nationalist amnesia (“the essence of a nation is that all its people have a great deal in common, and also that they have forgotten a great deal”). Selected and trans. in Geoff Eley and Ronald G. Suny, eds., Becoming National: A Reader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 41–55.


