Creative Sovereignty

The In-Between Space: Indigenous Sovereignties in Creative and Comparative Perspective

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Abstract

Within Indigenous studies the concept of sovereignty has received a wide range of expressions, theories and realizations. Our article covers one part of this vast literature on Indigenous sovereignties by looking at how various books have centered Indigenous sovereignty within their analysis. This survey foregrounds our special issue on creative sovereignty by illustrating the breadth of how Indigenous peoples and scholarship have engaged the concept of sovereignty to both understand the present and imagine different futures. This introductory article for the special issue on Creative Sovereignties does three things: (1) it illustrates that Indigenous sovereignties exist in the in-between space between what is and what is possible, (2) it puts forward a three-part understanding of creativity, and lastly (3) it introduces each of the articles, notes from the field, and creative works featured in this special issue.

Keywords: Creative Sovereignty, Sovereignty, Native and Indigenous Studies
This special issue sets out to build upon the various expressions, theorizations and practices of sovereignty that have become fundamental to the field of Indigenous studies—a broad umbrella that we will refer to as Indigenous sovereignties or sometimes Indigenous sovereignty, which we believe is implicitly plural by definition. The focus of the special issue is on creativity and Indigenous sovereignty. There are three main contributions from this introduction: (1) it introduces a three-part framework of creativity that characterizes a majority of the analyses and enactments of Indigenous sovereignty, (2) it situates Indigenous sovereignty as always occupying a space between what is and what is possible, and (3) it introduces the various aspects of this special issue. Our framework understands creativity as being taken up in three ways: as a means or artistic practice, the ability to think outside-the-box and problem-solve, and the spiritual act of bringing something into being.

To foreground this special issue, we also want to provide some coverage of how Indigenous sovereignties are engaged within academic literature. The main thread we want to run throughout this exploration is that to properly research Indigenous sovereignties, one has to be comfortable with existing in the space between what is and what is possible, or what we refer to as the in-between space of Indigenous sovereignties. We believe there are a number of key indicators, both in the literature and also in this special issue, that point to the conceptually challenging, yet fruitful nature of this in-between space that Indigenous sovereignty occupies. After providing an overview of literature on Indigenous sovereignties, we deal with the various ways we can conceptualize and take up understanding the relationship between creativity and sovereignty.
Our understanding of creativity provides a platform in which we understand the multitude of physical, intellectual, and spiritual Indigenous engagements with sovereignty, while also situating itself in the in-between space. This is followed by a short overview of how we upheld relational practices in crafting this special issue and, finally, by a brief introduction to the articles, notes from the field, and creative pieces featured in this issue.

Our conceptualization of the in-between space of Indigenous sovereignties emerged from two separate angles that initially did not seem connected. The bulk of the literature on Indigenous sovereignty is not easily classified as normative or empirical analysis. We will detail shortly how the literature balances doing both simultaneously. With the help of a productive workshopping of this introduction at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame we also came to realize how creativity very much characterizes this difficult in-between space in which we find Indigenous sovereignties situated.¹

In exploring sovereignty and creativity, we often arrived at discussions dealing with spiritual expressions of Indigenous sovereignty. Wildcat brought up teachings provided by Elmer Rattlesnake in a video released by the Maskwacîs Education Schools Commission, where he states:

>This powwow belongs to the creator, you gotta remember, all these ceremonies that we have, they are from the creator. As individuals, as families when we want to do something, we ask the creator to borrow this lodge, it could be a round dance, powwow, Sundance. All these ceremonies they don’t belong to us, they belong to the creator.

If we take this seriously, we should consider the ways spiritual expressions treat Indigenous sovereignty as a gift from the creator, one that requires a constant bringing our sovereignties into being, in the present and future.

When thinking about creativity as creation, we take inspiration from Marisa E. Duarte’s (2017, p. 27) work *Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet Across Indian Country* and their reference to spiritual energies in relation to information and communication technologies, asserting:

>I had stumbled across a book by Mexican American philosopher Manuel de Landa in which he describes institutions as crystallizations of human ways of
communicating with one another and within dynamic, ever-changing environments. I most appreciated this idea for how it echoed Native concepts of creation, in which all forms that come into existence are understood as outcomes of cosmic dynamic, of which humans are a very small part. To create is to bring into being.\(^2\)

De Leon drew from the ways some Lakota speak about the significance of braiding hair into three strands and it’s coming together as representing unity and oneness, with each strand representing various aspects of human experience—mind, body, and spirit—that we also use as shorthand for our three part framework of creativity. The Potawatomi botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) describes the significance of braids as a reciprocal give and take, the weaving together of seemingly discrete elements into a unified whole. Braiding represents well-being and balance, the ‘bringing [of] intellectual learning together with embodied practices (hands-on physical learning) and with emotional and spiritual understanding’ (Atalay, 2019, p. 82). Our braided understanding of creativity points to an underlying unity and inseparability, a coherence that characterizes the Indigenous engagements of sovereignty we highlight below.\(^3\) More so, we view our three-part framework of creativity as evidence of how of Indigenous sovereignty pushes our analysis towards the space in-between what is actual and what is possible. While we might be tempted to say acts of creativity move us toward the realm of what is possible, these acts never stray far from the condition of living within settler societies that disrupt Indigenous sovereignties in profound ways.

If the issue’s focus on creativity allowed for a deeper exploration of the in-between space of Indigenous sovereignty, it was the undeniable phenomenon within studies of Indigenous sovereignty to attach various terms, extensions, and qualifiers that led us to focus on this tension between what is and what is possible. We identify 15 books with academic presses in the last 15 years that attach additional descriptions to the concept of sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Ford, 2010; Coulthard, 2010; Rifkin 2017; Cattelino, 2008; Bruyneel, 2007; Kauanui, 2018; Nadasdy, 2017; Simpson, 2014; Deer, 2015; Rifkin, 2012; Raheja, 2010; Carlson, 2016; Duarte, 2017; Nichols 2020). Additional descriptors include visual sovereignties (Raheja, 2010), temporal sovereignties (Rifkin, 2017), and nested sovereignty (Simpson,
2014), to name a few. This practice stretches back to at least Robert Warrior’s (1994) articulation of Intellectual sovereignty within the analytic school of Indigenous literary nationalism, itself a formidable site of Indigenous sovereignty. As Daniel Heath Justice (2014, p. 1) describes ‘American Indian literary nationalism works more explicitly to produce literary criticism that supports the intellectual and political sovereignty of Indigenous communities and tribal nations’.

While sovereignty is a core concept in the field of Indigenous studies, it is equally central to the fields of law, political science, philosophy, history, and sociology, as well as gaining increased traction in fields like cultural anthropology (Kauanui, 2017). Yet, to the best of our knowledge, in no other fields has a practice of attaching descriptors to sovereignty been as widespread as in Indigenous studies. A second observation is that most treatments of Indigenous sovereignty move fluidly (for the reader at least) between empirical documentation and normative commitments. This makes the distinction between normative and empirical research insufficient when examining Indigenous sovereignties and opens new possibilities of analysis for all disciplines concerned with sovereignty. Calling into question this distinction or asserting that both can be accomplished at the same time, is not new. For instance, Charles Mills (1997, pp. 10-11), in his touchstone work, describes the need for both:

The Racial Contract seeks to account for the way things are and how they came to be that way—the descriptive—as well as the way they should be—the normative—since indeed one of the complaints about white political philosophy is precisely its otherworldliness, its ignoring of basic political realities.

This relationship of descriptive and normative is also captured in Audra Simpson’s concept of ‘nested sovereignty’, found within her 2014 book Mohawk Interruptus. Nested sovereignty indicates that one sovereign political body can exist nested within another sovereign political body. ‘Like Indigenous bodies, Indigenous sovereignties and political orders prevail within and apart from settler governance’, states Simpson (2014, 11). For readers unfamiliar with Indigenous peoples this may seem as a normative attempt to elevate the status of Indigenous sovereignty within North America. However, Simpson goes to great lengths to illustrate how in settler contexts nested sovereignty is a
political reality observed through enormous tensions created over how Indigenous sovereignties challenge the political legitimacy of states like Canada and the US. That is, even in the most militarily powerful Nation-state in the world, Indigenous nations prevent the United States from achieving perfect sovereignty in a conventional sense—supreme and exclusive authority in a defined territory. This is an empirical claim that is confirmed by other works, such as Shiri Pasternak (2017) and her focus on contestations over jurisdiction between Indigenous peoples and the Canadian state.

Although Indigenous sovereignties constrain settler sovereignties, Simpson (2014, p. 12) is clear that the establishment of settler sovereignties adversely impacts Indigenous sovereignties, suggesting, ‘Where sovereignties are nested and embedded, one proliferates at the other’s expense; the United States and Canada can only come into political being because of Indigenous dispossession’. Simpson (2014, p. 12) concludes by asserting, ‘Under conditions of settler colonialism multiple sovereignties cannot proliferate robustly or equally’. By showing these constraints, Simpson then walks us through not only the injustices that have been perpetuated against the Mohawks of Kahnawake, but the sense of injustice that persists in the people of Kahnawake—a sense of injustice that Indigenous peoples act upon every day in North America.

It is the phenomenon of attaching qualifications to sovereignty and the ability of a whole generation of scholars to move fluidity between empirical and normative analysis that allows these studies of sovereignty to imagine new forms and configurations, Indigenous configurations. From this view, it is clear that the breadth of writings on Indigenous sovereignties can teach us a great deal about how societies challenge, shift, and undermine a Westphalian conceptualization of sovereignty and, by extension, teach us about the dynamics of political power and authority in human societies. Moreover, the study of Indigenous sovereignties also implicitly motions to how settler states are able to draw upon, maintain, and enforce sovereignty as the exclusive and supreme authority over a bounded territory. Foregrounding Indigenous sovereignties as a productive analytical and political space requires understanding the qualified nature of sovereignty, the fluidity of research that toggles between normative and empirical, and its situated location between
what is and what is possible.

Proliferation of Indigenous sovereignties

The purpose of reviewing Indigenous sovereignties here is not to give an expansive account of either the vast literature exploring the concept or its manifestations in communities and on the ground. Such a task would involve significant time with various communities to capture an appreciation of how Indigenous people articulate and practice sovereignty (a useful effort, no doubt, but a project for another time). We also ask for forgiveness in bracketing stories and lived experience and focus our attention, rather, on recent literature. Despite these limitations, we find significance in covering multiple contemporary iterations of how Indigenous sovereignty has been expressed, imagined, as well as how it challenges settler sovereignties.

Sovereignty is defined in a conventional sense as the exclusive and supreme authority within a defined territory (Jackson, 2007), also referred to as Westphalian sovereignty in reference to a series of 1648 treaties signed in the northwestern German region of Westphalia. Further, scholars of International Relations and law suggest the current global order is structured upon an anarchical system of sovereign states that are independent and equal. In response, others have argued that sovereignty is in decline or damaged, as evident by multi-state configurations like the European Union and the rise of globalization which has seen significant power move to multi-national corporations (Robinson, 2004). Sheryl Lightfoot (2016) has argued the global Indigenous rights movement is subtly changing global politics by articulating a definition of self-determination by peoples that does not necessarily manifest in the creation of a territorially defined, independent state.

We identify Robert Warrior (1994) through his work on intellectual sovereignty, as beginning the tradition of using a descriptor to articulate the distinctiveness of Indigenous sovereignty. While Vine Deloria (1969) used terms like tribal sovereignty, we see the creative work of scholars within the tradition of Indigenous literary Nationalism as cementing this practice. For Warrior (1994, p. 1), ‘The process of sovereignty provides a way of envisioning the intellectual work we [Indigenous peoples] do’. Instead of
academic debates focused on ‘identity’ and ‘authenticity’, debates that work to constrain and limit Native thought, Warrior (1994, p. xix) suggests that practice of intellectual sovereignty should encourage engagement of the ‘myriad [of] critical issues critical to an Indian future’. Similarly, Scott Lyons (2010, pp. 449-450) puts forward the concept of rhetorical sovereignty, or the ‘inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit’, as a means to ‘revive not our past, but our possibilities’. For both Warrior and Lyons, sovereignty acted as a productive space for contesting identity- and racial-based Indigenous constructions of knowledge and practice.

The past twenty years we have witnessed a rising and sustained production of literature that investigates Indigenous sovereignties. Paradoxically, the increasing attention on sovereignty begins with Taiaiake Alfred’s widely circulated call for Indigenous peoples to discard the concept altogether. The original critique by Alfred (1999) occurs in Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto and was expanded upon in his article entitled ‘Sovereignty’. Alfred’s warning is two-fold: first, sovereignty is a Western concept and, thus, it is unlikely Indigenous peoples can build a liberation movement around an idea so deeply ensconced in Western thought. One could, of course, point to Audre Lorde’s (1984, p. 112) assertion, ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house […] they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change’. Alfred’s warning is also drawing from prefigurative thinking (in a Gandhian tradition) that suggests in order to achieve the world you envision; you must model it in the present. This segues into Alfred’s (1999) second main critique: that we should be using concepts from Indigenous languages to describe Indigenous political authority and ways of being in the world, especially because the root of sovereignty in the European tradition lies in the notion of coercion (Munro, 2013).

Though this critique of sovereignty provides an important diagnostic, interestingly enough, it has been met with two decades of substantial intellectual production on Indigenous sovereignty. This is despite the central place Alfred’s critique occupies within the literature (Barker, 2005). The rise of scholarship on Indigenous sovereignty might appear as an indication that Alfred’s critique was
rejected, especially given how Alfred has recently been scrutinized for how he, as described in his own words, ‘embodied toxic masculinity and how I did wrong and harmed people’ (Creszenci, 2019). However, Indigenous scholarship on sovereignty is not an embrace of the concept but represents creative attempts to modify, shift and speak back to conventional understandings of sovereignty.

*Three groupings of Indigenous sovereignty*

We focus on 15 single author books in the last 15 years that conceptually expand our understanding of Indigenous peoples and sovereignty in significant ways (Bruyneel, 2007; Cattelino, 2008; Ford, 2010; Raheja, 2010; Rifkin, 2012; Coulthard, 2014; Simpson, 2014; Deer, 2015; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Carlson, 2016; Duarte, 2017; Rifkin, 2017; Nadasdy, 2017; Kauanui, 2018; Nichols, 2020). One of the most fascinating particularities about these contributions is the tendency (much like our own special issue) to attach descriptors to the term sovereignty. A practice so common within Indigenous studies that it often requires no unpacking. For instance, Goeman (2013, p. 70), when challenging static assumptions that fix Native peoples, borders, and gender in her important work, asks, ‘How do these [Native] women actively engage in the movement for representational, intellectual, and political sovereignty?’ The acknowledging of multiple dimensions of sovereignty is seen to be assumed by the reader.

We focus on these manuscripts, as opposed to edited volumes and articles, because they each put forward a distinct treatment of the concept of sovereignty. These books lean heavily toward empirical studies that demonstrate the qualified nature of settler sovereignty and its corollary, how settler sovereignty circumscribes Indigenous sovereignty. Each work has a unique investigation or conceptualization of sovereignty, including (to name a few more) third space of sovereignty, white patriarchal sovereignty, and sovereignty of the soul (Bruyneel, 2007; Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Deer, 2015).

Though these works avoid discrete categorization, it is worth pointing out some broad themes, of which we identify three groupings. The first group we identify
explores how settler sovereignty exercises coercive control over Indigenous life, or what might simply be described as: sovereignty as colonial. While settler authorities do exercise violent coercion, these works do an excellent job of showing how settler sovereignties are productive. That is, they seek to rewrite and influence operations of Indigenous sovereignties to better conform with settler frameworks.

The second set of studies focus on how these two sovereignties constrain each other, albeit in dramatically different ways. In particular, settler sovereignty is unable to live up to ideal forms of exclusive supreme jurisdiction over a defined territory (in spite of being some of the more ‘powerful’ nation-states in the global system). Even if settler sovereignty is qualified, it continues to constrain Indigenous sovereignty in a host of ways. A paradigmatic example here is Kevin Bruyneel’s (2007) exploration of competing sovereignties of Indigenous peoples and the U.S. state. For Bruyneel, Indigenous peoples exist in a third space of sovereignty that resides neither wholly inside nor wholly outside the U.S. political system. Instead, Indigenous peoples exist on its boundaries, exposing both the practices and limitations of American colonial rule. This colonial navigation compels ‘indigenous political actors [to] work across American spatial and temporal boundaries’ (Bruyneel, 2007, p. xvii). In sum, these works deal with, in the formulation of Audra Simpson (2014), the enormous tension produced by unending discord between settler and Indigenous sovereignties.

Finally, we present a third group of works that focus on Indigenous configurations of sovereignties, acting as an invitation for new envisioned futures. These studies focus on Indigenous peoples’ ongoing practices and ways of imagining a different future. For example, Mark Rifkin (2012) suggests that focusing on Indigenous erotics provides a space to develop alternative visions of sovereignty and peoplehood. Popular representations of Indigenous erotics create a productive space in which to ‘challenge the obviousness of models and mappings inherited from and imposed by the United States’ (Rifkin, 2012, p. 4). While there is a sizable group of books on Indigenous configurations of sovereignty, academia in many ways may be hard pressed in keeping up with the various expressions of Indigenous sovereignty that are regularly invoked today. For instance, in the period of preparing this introduction, we saw
declarations and events around representational, plant, structuring and knowledge sovereignty, as well as the creation of a television show (Sovereign by Ava DuVernay and Bird Runningwater) and an Indigenous clothing line (Sovereign by Urban Native Era) focused on various aspects of sovereignty.

Starting with the first two groupings—those that point to the coercive and constraining nature of settler sovereignty—what’s important in these works is how they painstakingly demonstrate settler states’ inability to exercise their full sovereignty (in the conventional sense of supreme indivisible authority) as a result of constraints put forward by Indigenous sovereignty. These are not primarily normative studies, or what sovereignty should be, but rather, they show what sovereignty is. Presumptively, however, normative concerns over what should be are never far from mind, since these authors are clearly interested in demonstrating the injustice of settler sovereignties.

Five books hash out the controlling and coercive nature of settler sovereignty. Starting with a defining work, Aileen Moreton-Robinson’s (2015, p. xi) White Possessive focuses on the ‘possessive logics of patriarchal white sovereignty’. These logics are codified through discourses and conventions about ownership and the nation, illustrating ‘inextricable connections between white possessive logics, race, and the founding of nation-states’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2015, p. xiii). The subjugation of Indigenous sovereignty, therefore, becomes an extension of perpetual Indigenous dispossession and reaffirmation of settler ownership and control. Moreton-Robinson asserts that this disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty (as well as its attendant racism and exclusion) is materially and discursively linked through settler historical and political constructions of possession.

Lisa Ford, in her 2010 work Settler Sovereignty, produces an outstanding comparative historical study of how settler sovereignty is able to consolidate itself in the American Southwest and Southwest Australia. Ford puts forward an important conceptual frame for how we can track the rise of settler sovereignty over a territory. It is not merely the presence of settlers or settler authority, but rather it is the criminalization of violence within Indigenous communities that marks the consolidation of settler rule in an area, a practice that has to continue in the present through the denial of Indigenous legal orders (Denis, 1997).
Glen Coulthard (2014) describes the process of settler colonization arriving in Denendeh (NWT) in his book Red Skin, White Masks. Here, settler colonization did not arrive until at least the 1960s and even then was slow to take hold. Coulthard illustrates how within negotiations between the Dene and Canadian government, Canadian authorities were unwilling to budge on two key pillars: the supremacy of Canadian sovereignty over Indigenous sovereignties and capitalist modes of production. Coulthard (2014, p. 151) uses the shorthand, colonial sovereignty to describe these two pillars, suggesting, ‘State sovereignty is still colonial insofar as it remains structurally committed to the dispossession of Indigenous peoples of our lands and self-determining authority’. Coulthard suggests that within this highly asymmetrical field of power, the ability of Canada to override these requirements has a productive effect on Indigenous subjectivities. Over time, Indigenous peoples come to slowly identify themselves with Canadian nationalism and capitalist modes of production (Coulthard, 2008; 2014).

The book Reconciliation without Recollection? was released while we were writing this article. Similar to the above, Joshua B.D. Nichols details the shaky ground of crown sovereignty in Canada, arguing that Section 35 of Canada’s Constitution Act of 1982 called on Canada to legally reconcile two sovereignties with their own distinct sources, Crown and Indigenous. But in attempting to do so, Canadian courts have only created a bewildering ‘labyrinthine [of] corridors’ as the judiciary attempts to reconcile the independent sovereignties without discarding the presumption that the Canadian state already has an unlimited sovereignty over Indigenous peoples (Nichols, 2020, p. 15). In Nichols’ (2020, p. 16) summation, ‘In other words, this framework presupposes the very sovereignty that it is supposed to be reconciling’.

Finally, looking at the productive nature of settler sovereignties on Indigenous sovereignties, Rifkin (2017), in his work Beyond Settler Time: Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination, argues that settler constructions of time has a significant impact on Indigenous life. Producing its own temporal formations, settler colonialism creates ‘particular ways of apprehending time, and the state’s policies, mappings, and imperatives generate the frame of reference (such as plotting events with respect to their
place in national history and seeing change in terms of forms of American progress’ (Rifkin, 2017, p. 2). The lack of interrogation of settler temporal formations, therefore, acts to ‘normalize non-native presence, privilege, and power’, (Rifkin, 2017, p. 13). The imposition of settler time denies Indigenous temporal sovereignty in ways that fall short of full integration, as well as complete erasure. Rifkin points to the subsuming effect of settler sovereignty, constructing convenient frameworks of how society thinks about progress narratives, contemporaneity, and change. It constitutes understandings of norms and even what is considered ‘common sense’ (Rifkin, 2014).

Five works illustrate how Indigenous and settler sovereignties are locked in a perpetual tension where they both constrain and produce the other. Related to this is the aforementioned work by Audra Simpson (2014) on ‘nested sovereignty’. Jessica R. Cattelino’s (2008) *High Stakes: Florida Seminole Gaming and Sovereignty* acts as a well situated segue to shift attention to books that focus on the tensions between Indigenous and settler sovereignties. Cattelino looks at Florida Seminole gaming and how tribal ownership and operation of casinos provide economic resources necessary to exercise sovereignty. However, once economic power is exercised, the legitimacy of that sovereignty is brought into question. Cattelino (2008, p. 100) states, ‘American Indians enjoy political autonomy under conditions of economic dependency, but indigenous economic power undermines their political status’. Cattelino (2010, p. 8) puts forward the term ‘double bind of sovereignty’ to convey these tensions arising from Indigenous economic success, suggesting a damned if you do, damned if you don’t scenario—when Indigenous political sovereignty compels participation in modernity, it often results in ‘accusations that they are not culturally “different enough”’. Simply, even when Indigenous peoples gain economic and political power, settler states and societies impose an assumption that Indigenous sovereignty is only legitimate if Indigenous nations are impoverished and pre-modern.

The double-bind of sovereignty parallels Patrick Wolfe’s (1999) work on repressive authenticity. Here, Indigenous distinctiveness both buttresses Indigenous claims to sovereignty but is also used by settler society to undermine those same claims. The standards of cultural authenticity that settlers impose on
Indigenous peoples to gain legitimacy are so stringent that Indigenous cultural difference traps Indigenous nations in a straitjacket. The works of Paige Raibmon (2005), Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast, and Elizabeth Povinelli (2002), Cunning of Recognition: Indigenous Alterities and the Making of Australian Multiculturalism, also detail dynamics similar to the straitjacket of repressive authenticity.

J. Kehaulani Kauanui’s (2018a) book Paradoxes of Hawaiian Sovereignty also explores how settler colonization creates a lose-lose situation for Indigenous Hawaiians. Kauanui provides a vivid portrait of how Hawaiian elites in the early and mid-19th Century reconfigured the Hawaiian society in order to mimic European social and political norms in the hopes of creating conditions for the recognition of Hawaiian sovereignty by the International system, a system that consisted exclusively of European states. Kauanui demonstrates how Hawaiians paid particular attention to reworking their legal orders to reflect European norms of sexuality and gender. For Kauanui (2018a, p. 21), ‘The move to independence for the nation requires the subordination of women and the oppressive revision of sexual customs—at least in its current juridical straitjacket, which enabled Hawaiians to be seen as modern subjects in the first place’.

Moving to a northern context, Paul Nadasdy’s (2017) work Sovereignty’s Entailments: First Nation State Formations in the Yukon looks at the concept of sovereignty within the context of Indigenous peoples of the Yukon implementing self-government agreements with the Canadian government—or as Nadasdy describes it in the title of his book, ‘First Nation State Formation’. Here, Nadasdy is concerned with sovereignty and its entailments: territory, citizenship, nation, and time. Nadasdy draws his observations from being asked to work for and sometimes represent Kluane First Nation within self-government processes. From these experiences, Nadasdy argues that Indigenous governments have far more pressure to conform to the precepts of Western sovereignty in order to be recognized by the Canadian state than the ability to mold new governing institutions to conform to Indigenous understandings of power and authority. Sovereignty, therefore, acts as a precondition for politics, making ‘any effort by indigenous people to engage
with settler state officials in the political arena requires them to conform to the cultural entailments of sovereignty—a set of assumptions about the nature of space, time, knowledge, and sociality that is intimately bound up with the state form—or risk not being heard at all’ (Nadasdy, 2017, pp. 3-4). So while the Canadian governments do reform the federal order to accommodate Indigenous governments, the process of First Nation state formation profoundly transforms the way Indigenous peoples think and act in the world. Nadasdy’s work is an excellent illustration of Leanne Simpson’s (2016, p. 29) well-circulated phrase that when Indigenous peoples try to change the state, ‘the settler-colonial political system changes you more than you can change it’.

Focus on Indigenous configurations of sovereignty

The third grouping of works that draw upon Indigenous insights and lived experience emphasize Indigenous configurations and focus on the contents of Indigenous sovereignty. Each, in their own way, envisions new futures for Indigenous peoples. Duarte’s (2017, p. 37) work on Network sovereignty, discussed earlier, examines how Indigenous peoples engage with information and communication technologies in ways that are subject to colonization but also create forms of Indigenous sovereignty. To do so, Duarte must skillfully uphold and critique tribal sovereignty—the particular form of sovereignty held by tribal governments. Against a backdrop of tribal sovereignty and the wider efforts of Indigenous peoples to maintain relationships, Duarte shows how Indigenous control over communication infrastructure intertwines with Indigenous philosophies of communication and understandings in ways that helps to maintain the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples.

Jessica Deer (2015), in her book on sexual violence against Indigenous women, theorizes a ‘sovereignty of the soul’. Deer outlines how sexual violence is so deeply embedded in the colonization of Indigenous peoples that work aimed at achieving sovereignty must include a strong response to rape and the self-determination of survivors of gender-based violence. ‘Self-determination for individual survivors and self-determination for tribal nations are closely connected’, asserts Deer (2015, p. xvi), continuing, ‘It is impossible to have a truly self-determining nation when its members have been denied self-determination over their own bodies’. Thus, sovereignty of the soul is a call to
pay attention to the traumatic impacts violence has on individuals and calls on Indigenous nations to both prevent and heal trauma. Sovereignty of the soul is an invocation that the collective sovereignty of Indigenous nations is dependent on the bodily sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

Turning to creative expressions, Michelle Raheja (2010, p. 194) explores the notion of visual sovereignty as a way to open space for video, film, and new media as a ‘creative act of self-representation that has the potential to both undermine stereotypes of Indigenous peoples’. Artists, through the distinctly unique medium of new media technologies, are able to capture individual and community articulations of self-representation and sovereignty and present them back to communities in ways not possible through conventional political channels. Opening a space for these possibilities ‘strengthen[s] what Robert Warrior terms the “intellectual health” of communities in the wake of genocide and colonialism’ (Raheja, 2010, p. 194).

In Imagining Sovereignty, David J. Carlson (2016) calls for a discursive intervention that situates sovereignty in a way to motivate radical decolonial praxis. Carlson (2016, p. 7) suggests that sovereignty is a ‘threshold concept’ that holds significance because it ‘represents a vital, evolving point of contact between colonizer and the colonized’. The historical instability of the term, in fact, makes it a productive front for contestation. Carlson (2016, p. 8) suggests, ‘Sovereignty transforms over time by being brought into relation with new ideas (like the “nation”) or by being deployed in new contexts (like settler colonialism)’. Calling on what he refers to as ‘word warriors’, Carlson points to the potential for dialectic change in colonial structures through engaging this threshold concept. These five works (Deer, 2015; Rifkin, 2012; Raheja, 2010; Carlson, 2016; Duarte, 2017) emphasize the ways new configurations of sovereignty respond to the challenges facing Indigenous peoples.

These three groupings—sovereignty as colonial, settler and Indigenous sovereignties constrain each other, and an emphasis on Indigenous configurations (see Figure 1)—point to how we broadly characterize the proliferation of engagements with sovereignty since Alfred’s 1999 call for Indigenous peoples to avoid the concept of sovereignty altogether. As we see, these 15 texts point to how Indigenous sovereignties occupy the in-between
space of what is and what is possible.

Figure 1
Graphic we created in our writing process trying to map the literature.

Creativity and sovereignty

These introductory remarks offer three conceptualizations of creativity: (1) as a means, (2) conceptually, and (3) as a bringing something into being. This framing allows for a creative understanding of sovereignty that moves beyond a conventional understanding of Westphalian sovereignty towards new envisioned futures. Creativity as a means points to the way we express our lived-experience in the world. This form of creativity engages the body, as well as other material modes of expression. Secondly, conceptual creativity requires the involvement of the intellect and imagination to recast social structures and their possibilities. ‘Imagination enables people to rise above their own circumstances’, explains Linda T. Smith (2012, p. 263), ‘To dream new visions and to hold on to old ones’. It allows you to think outside the box, to analyze bodily, material realities and think about differing arrangements. As Lyons (2000, p. 449) asserts, ‘The pursuit of sovereignty is an attempt to revive not our past, but our possibilities’. Conceptual creativity requires finding solutions
to old problems, to analyze and transform systems that bind and constrict.

Finally, thinking about the spiritual components to creativity requires looking at the root word create, from the Latin term creo or creatio, meaning creation from nothing or bringing into being. Creative expressions have long been viewed in many Indigenous communities as reflections of spiritual realities of the great unknown (Wildcat, 2010, pp. 54-60). ‘The project of creating is not just about the artistic endeavours of individuals’, Smith (2012, p. 263) suggests, ‘but about the spirit of creating that indigenous communities have exercised over thousands of years’.  

These three conceptualizations of creativity are not mutually exclusive but, rather, they are dependent and embedded within each other. It is precisely when they are paired, combined, and woven together as one, when the full potentiality of the concept comes to fruition. Taking care not to overextend the braid analogy, we also offer that the above mapping of three types of Indigenous engagements of sovereignty lays nicely onto our understanding of creativity. Each grouping involves some aspect of bodily engagements (whether coercive or constraining), the requiring of problem-solving and thinking outside-of-the-box and are also working to bring new forms into being. They engage the body, the mind, and the spirit.

You may ask why we have paired creativity with sovereignty? We feel it brings something new into the conversation by allowing room for the multitude of ways Indigenous peoples critique, experience, and enact sovereignty. Creativity, as we see it, provides a scaffolding or housing in which to comprehend Indigenous engagements with sovereignty, to explore the in-between space, and to think against and beyond settler sovereignty. We also see it as a simple roadmap for our own thinking about ways our research encounters settler sovereignty—to describe how it operates to control, to reconfigure or constrain each other, or to offer new envisioned futures of sovereignty. Though we sketch three distinct groupings of creativity and sovereignty, all of these treatments supplement and rely upon each other, weaving together a complex understanding of how various experiences and understandings of Indigenous sovereignties occupy the space in-between.
Contents of special issue

This special issue explores various dimensions of Indigenous sovereignty through a multitude of approaches, drawing upon scholars and artists throughout North America. We hope that the following four articles, five including this introduction, two notes from the field, and two creative pieces provide a glimpse of various ways to envision creative sovereignty in practice.

Blaire Topash-Caldwell in her article ‘Sovereign Futures in Neshnabé Speculative Fiction’ explores how Indigenous science fiction is not just a leisurely activity, but rather a creative approach to sovereignty. Topash-Caldwell explores the Neshnabé oral tradition character of Weetigo and how it can be seen as a metaphor to describe the settler colonial state. Weetigo, a cannibal creature, consumes (much like the settler state) Indigenous bodies, knowledges, resources, and spirits.

Sierra Edd, in ‘Radical Traversals’, explores Indigenous sound artists and complicates notions of time and space. Engaging music and sound studies, as well as Indigenous studies, Edd puts forward a method of close listening that homes in on the notion of traveling indigeneity and unsettles colonial logic through sonic expressions.

In ‘Creative Sovereignties and Fiscal Relations: How “A New Fiscal Relationship” Between Canada and First Nations Might Take Treaty 6 Seriously’, Javed L. Sommers explores what fiscal arrangements between Indigenous nations and Canada might look like if Treaty Six were to be taken seriously. Sommers works from the premise that the signing of Treaty Six between Indigenous peoples and the British Crown is what gives Canada legitimacy to lawfully exist as a state in central Alberta and Saskatchewan, but this agreement does not substantially shape fiscal agreements between Indigenous Nations and Canadian governments today. Sommers makes six suggestions for how treaty six could be implemented today. Three straightforward and three that would require significant divergence from existing practices.

Justin de Leon in ‘Preserving Values: Militarization and Powwows’, ethnographically explores the presence of militarization in Lakota powwows,
suggesting that these markers associated with warriorhood are less about traditional explanations of military service and more about savvy navigations of suppressive colonial oppression. De Leon suggests that the transferring and adapting of traditional practices of bravery and warriorhood into practices deemed ‘colonially-approved’, represents a creative approach to maintaining cultural practices and sovereignty.

This special issue contains two notes from the field and two creative pieces. Kelsey Wrightson explores her experience as a white Settler of lived expressions of sovereignty in her field note ‘Generative Refusal: Creative Practice and Relational Indigenous Sovereignty’. Drawing upon experiences as the Director of Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning in Yellowknife, Canada, Wrightson shows how an innocuous gift of bear hide mitts led her to explore lived expressions of sovereignty and cultural learning. Wrightson puts together a powerful piece that speaks to other forms of sovereignty, as well as the importance of critical reflexivity (and refusability). Matthew Wildcat puts forward a summary of his dissertation ‘Replacing Exclusive Sovereignty with a Relational Sovereignty’. These notes are the opening remarks to his defense. Here, Wildcat argues that one of the primary effects of settler colonization on Indigenous political orders has been the rise of an exclusive sovereignty, where First Nations imagine their authority as discreet and bounded. Wildcat explains how the work of the Maskwacis Education was able to replace practices of exclusive sovereignty with a relational sovereignty where four Nations created a shared jurisdiction to create a Cree education system.

In ‘Extraction: Seeking Ways to Survive’, Tanaya Winder shares and reflects upon her poem Extraction, an intergenerational conversation between a young girl and her grandmother. Reliving multiple ills brought upon Native communities—genocide, boarding schools, and missing and murdered Indigenous women—Winder asks, ‘Can we un-suicide, un-pipeline, un-disappear our dear ones?’ Grandmother teaches granddaughter to knit while softly sharing the ways of the past, engaging the audience to think beyond colonial violences through an intimate moment of learning and connection. We are reminded by Winder, ‘There is no word for undo but many ways to say return’.
In ‘The Deer with 3: Expressing Indigeneity Through Experimental Hip Hop’, musician Talon Ducheneaux shares thoughts about a recent song The Deer with 3 from his newest album Mastincala, which is Lakota for rabbit. Ducheneaux blends genres in his piece, engaging and drawing upon apocalyptic film, Indigenous relations with the natural world, and even cathartic creative expressions of healing.

**Conclusion: Relational scholarship**

We suggest a relational approach is at the core of Indigenous knowledge creation, touched upon by almost all of the works outlined throughout this introduction. Knowledge and learning does not take place in a vacuum, rather, it comes from our relationships with our communities, family, friends, as well as other scholars and pieces of literature. It comes from our lived-experiences and interactions with the natural world. This recognition is at the center of how we view epistemology and motivated us to be intentional about our relational approach to crafting this special issue.

We fashioned our editing and writing processes to not only create an environment productive of meaningful scholarship, but also to put forward an academic production model that we want to be a part of. This includes more common practices, such as soliciting potential articles from scholars with whom we already have had meaningful interactions and friendships (as opposed to public calls for articles), integrating poetry and notes from the field with our peer-reviewed articles, offering the blind reviewers who were more junior in their academic careers official letters acknowledging their reviewing contributions for use in their promotion files, to more complex efforts such as carrying out a round of open community peer review, as well as the carrying out of a university symposium for the contributors to further develop their research and to build relationships with all the contributors in this issue. This is not to say that our process was totally unique, as we’re sure many of these practices regularly take place. It is, however, to point to the efforts we made to honor a relational model of scholarship, one that we wish to support and continue to be a part of.
Additional efforts were made individually to make this introductory piece accessible and useful. Nearing its final draft, de Leon used this introductory article as a reading for their class on Indigenous and Native American approaches to social justice. One particularly astute senior pointed out that even the conventional double-blind peer review process, central to most academic journals, acts as a technology for breaking the relational model—contributors are kept from knowing reviewers, many of whom pour hours of labor into bettering another scholar’s work. One Native student asked, if settler societies can always change the rules, ‘What is sovereignty?’ Their feeling of dejection, however, was quickly followed by them describing how sovereignty of the soul deeply resonated. This is to point to how Indigenous experiences of sovereignty are both frustrating and hopeful, all while taking place within a system whose aim is to break relationships. Also nearing its final draft, Wildcat worked with a filmmaker with whom he had previously collaborated in his community work with Maskwacis Education Schools Commission. Their goal was to make a teaching- and community-friendly short video as a way to be able to make our work useful and accessible through multiple mediums. Additional efforts related to this issue include the creation of a Creative Sovereignty Lab community apprentice program for the Canadian feature film Tenaya and consulting upon a sovereignty-themed clothing line with the Native-owned company Urban Native Era.

Another defining feature of our editing process is how we carried out peer review. Along with one standard double-blind review, each article also had an open review that enabled a broader and more communal review. In the open review, we created a space where authors were not only challenged to make their writing and analysis sharper, but to also prioritize relationships with community members and other academics working on similar themes. We received feedback from open reviewers about their excitement about the process and their belief that these approaches make academic spaces more humane and uplifting. These reviewers, similar to the double-blind reviewers, made significant investments in each of the author’s works and we are all grateful to Dallas Hunt, Kyle Wilmott, Maria Sonevytsky and Dana Dupris for their generous and productive comments. Though the approach to crafting this special issue may not be entirely unique, we thought it beneficial for readers to
be aware of our intention—the creation of spaces for relationships, mentorship, community-involvement, creativity, and for full engagement. We believe the knowledge generated through this issue is dependent on these many levels of relationships.

MATTHEW WILDCAT is an Assistant Professor of Political Science and Native Studies at the University of Alberta. He is a member of Ermineskin Cree Nation. His current research is the Relational Governance project, that looks at how First Nations create forms of shared jurisdiction with each other. Wildcat is a research fellow with the Wahkohtowin Law and Governance Lodge and is a director of the Prairie Relationality Network.

JUSTIN DE LEON is a Visiting Assistant Professor at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, at the University of Notre Dame, Indiana, United States. As an Asian settler, de Leon’s research interrogates intersectional puzzles created by colonialism, as well as Indigenous cultural and political resurgence. His work puts forward non-Western approaches to security, having published ‘Lakota Experiences of (In)Security: Cosmology and Ontological Security’ in International Feminist Journal of Politics (2020), and sovereignty through creative expressions and traditional cultural practices. His current research monograph, entitled Resurgent Visual Sovereignty: Ontological Security and Indigenous Film Praxis (University of Nebraska Press), focuses on Indigenous engagements with film and storytelling as creative acts of political and cultural sovereignty. De Leon is also an award-winning filmmaker whose most recent film collaboration—More Than a Word on Native mascotry (created with John and Kenn Little)—has screened at over 250 universities in North America. He also serves as the director of the Native Film and Storytelling Institute (which held a 2018 pilot program at University of California, San Diego) and whose current BIPOC community- and apprentice-based film project entitled Tenaya won the Audience Choice Award at the Toronto International Film Festival’s 2020 Big Pitch Competition.
References


Crescenzi, N. (March 8, 2019) ‘UVic Professor says his “toxic masculinity” prompted him to step down following a program investigation’, vicnews.com.


Introduction


Notes

1 Thank you to the Peace Research Education Seminar at the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame for workshopping this introduction and to Lisa McLean, a Visiting Research Fellow, who pushed us to think deeper about these connections. Also many thanks to Avery Letendre, Emily Proskiw and Will Kujala for their research assistance in putting together this piece.

2 Philosopher Rollo May (1975, p. 39) also points to this in The Courage to Create, suggesting that creativity in its authentic form is ‘the process of bringing something new into being’. See also de Leon (2020) on cosmology and ontological security.

3 The importance of a holistic Indigenous education has been noted elsewhere, particularly in Jo-ann Archibald’s (2008) Indigenous Storywork.

4 For a historiography of Indigenous sovereignties, Alfred’s chapter “Sovereignty” (2002, 2005) contains a useful literature review of research on Indigenous sovereignties to that point and time.

5 This does not include important edited volumes such as Joanne Barker’s (2017) Critically Sovereign: Indigenous Gender, Sexuality and Feminist Studies; J. Kehaulani Kauanui’s (2018b) Speaking of Indigenous Politics: Conversations with Activists, Scholars, and Tribal Leaders; and Lloyd L. Lee’s (2017) Navajo Sovereignty: Understandings and Visions of...
the Dine People.

6 Also see related text on creative theater performances of sovereignty by Julie Burelle (2018) entitled *Encounters on Contested Lands: Indigenous Performance of Sovereignty and Nationhood in Quebec*.

7 We try to avoid essentializing or romanticizing Indigenous spirituality, avoiding limitations of secular conventions common within academic threads. We move into this tension because we know Indigenous lived-experiences of sovereignty are more than just political or material.

8 The symposium entitled ‘Creative Representing Native American Symposium’ was sponsored and hosted by the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame (Feb. 6, 2020), the event included a ‘methods and muffins’ program focused on Native and graduate students wanting to engage in decolonizing research.