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**(Im)possible Co-existence: notes from a bordered,  
sovereign present**

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*This essay explores the question of co-existence in relation to the issue of Indigenous sovereignty. Co-existence, as articulated here, does not mean that we don't already co-exist in a spatial and temporal sense, but that the terms and conditions under which we do are fundamentally unequal. If white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004) frames our political, legal, economic, social and cultural arrangements, how can we think through a movement towards more egalitarian forms of co-existence? The scope of this paper is concerned with thinking through the implications of such a future, when in the present—both projects, Indigenous sovereignty as well as an egalitarian coexistence seem (im)possible.*

The attempt to articulate Indigenous sovereignty with co-existence in Australia emerges from a number of my experiences as an academic involved in the field of race, ethnicity and whiteness studies. Discussions of Indigenous sovereignty do not usually refer to co-existence, but co-existence, I would argue, is relevant to a discussion of Indigenous sovereignty. By co-existence, I do not mean that we don't already co-exist in a spatial and temporal sense, but that the terms and conditions under which we do are fundamentally unequal. Our political, legal, economic, social and cultural arrangements reference a white possession of nation or white sovereignty (Moreton-Robinson 2004). This white sovereignty determines the unequal terms and conditions under which we live. So, one of the questions that this paper addresses is: how can we think through the concept of moving towards a space and time when we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, may live under more egalitarian political, social, cultural and economic arrangements in Australia? This would require taking into account nothing less than the project of Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous rights. But it would also require an exploration of how alliances may be made between members of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities so we can work towards a coexistent future. The scope of this paper is concerned with thinking through the implications of such a future. The terms of white sovereignty inflect

current attempts to make alliances, especially across racialised communities. It seems that many disagreements between Indigenous and non-Indigenous/ non-white groups stem from having to negotiate within a framework governed by an indivisible, sometimes invisible, form of white sovereignty where Indigenous and non-white/non-Indigenous interests may be pitted against each other even as they attempt to critique racialised governmental or media discourses and practices. Furthermore, I argue that in the current post-Howard era, we are witness to an entrenchment of white sovereignty in political and cultural terms.[1] I critique this sovereignty through Derrida's theorisation of indivisible sovereignty and link it to the politics of an (im)possible Indigenous sovereignty and an equally (im)possible coexistence. To start with, I'd like to recount some incidents which pertain to the politics of alliances between non-white and Indigenous communities and the uses of Indigenous sovereignty which were part of my experience of organising as well as attending conferences.

### **Indigenous sovereignties: alliances and cooptations**

In 2006, a colleague and I co-convened a conference in the field of race, ethnicity and whiteness studies. As part of this conference, the Borderpolitics of Communities forum was organized by my colleague to address the event of the Cronulla riots in 2005. The event had involved racially and religiously motivated attacks against those considered 'Middle-Eastern' or 'Muslim' youth by self-identified 'white' Australian young people on the beach of a southern Sydney suburb called Cronulla. This event precipitated retaliation by those who were targeted at the beach. Much has been written about this event in Australian newspapers as well as academic writing.[2] A number of people from different community groups and academics at the conference attended the forum. What transpired at the forum became a site of trauma for many who were speaking at and participating in the event. In broad terms, the tension at the forum stemmed from a question raised by a senior Indigenous academic and activist about the place of Aboriginal religious/spiritual systems in the context of Muslim organizations speaking about alliances with Indigenous Muslims. This issue was raised in response to a speech given by a leader of an Interfaith organisation who spoke in fraternal terms of the relationship between non-Indigenous Australian Muslims and Indigenous Muslims. The disagreement and debate that ensued resulted in a scene where a Muslim woman spoke about the need for Muslim Australians to acknowledge colonialism and the concept of Indigenous sovereignty. At the same forum, an Indigenous Christian man spoke about his practice of Christianity existing alongside the practice of Indigenous spirituality—thus suggesting that Indigenous spiritualities did not exclude other faiths or beliefs. While the different perspectives of the speakers and the participants affirmed the notion of a range of beliefs and views within Indigenous and Muslim communities (these were not mutually exclusive but overlapped), the forum appeared to be a traumatic experience for many of those who spoke. Issues of faith, belief and colonialism that were raised

demonstrated the impossibility of communicating in such a forum, let alone building alliances.

Another speaker at the forum, Dr. Tanja Dreher, co-editor of this special issue, later discussed this forum with myself and the co-convenor and highlighted a need for discussions about these issues in closed workshops. Almost a year later, responding to the commencement of the Howard government's Intervention[3] in the Northern Territory, Tanja Dreher and myself decided to organise a series of closed workshops addressing how discourses of protection of women targeting Indigenous and Muslim communities serve the consolidation of white sovereignty in areas of government, law and the media. We wanted to also explore how some of these issues might be discussed in a safer, closed forum, and whether or not such a space might enable in-depth conversations about the problems which Indigenous and Muslim women faced. Could these conversations also enable the building of alliances? Could they provide a way of thinking through alliances on an unequal terrain? Far from a scholarly interest, this was an attempt, for me, as a non-Anglo migrant who is committed to the notion of transforming colonial conditions in Australia, to reflect upon the conditions of these possibilities. Having a space to converse appeared important in the light of the experience of the earlier forum. Apart from teasing out the complexities of protectionist discourses deployed against both Indigenous and Muslim women, the complexities of building alliances also became apparent. Some of the protectionist discourses are outlined and analysed, for example, in Tanja Dreher and Christina Ho's edited journal issue, *Not Another Hijab Row: new conversations around gender, race, religion and the making of communities* (2007). A few of the essays address how feminist agendas can be hijacked by contemporary governmental discourses of protection.[4] However, the question of negotiating alliances across the borders of communities remains and is the focus of this paper.

I would like to reflect on Indigenous sovereignty and its emergence as a limit at the Borderpolitics of Communities forum as a way of thinking about its wider implications in relation to alliances. When the co-convenor and myself thought of a name for the forum, we had not realized that it would literally demonstrate some of the borders that arose between some Muslim and Indigenous participants especially around the question of Indigenous sovereignty. We were referring to the borderpolitics that were produced between 'white' and 'Muslim' communities during the Cronulla event. I place apostrophe marks around the term 'Muslim' as it served as a shorthand term for a range of racialised identities such as 'Arab', 'Lebanese' or 'Wog'. I discuss the forum on this event a few years later in order to think through the notion of non-hegemonic borders and sovereignties precisely because this issue, to my knowledge, has not been adequately theorised. And in forums or conferences where solidarities with Indigenous issues are expressed, often the interests or legitimations of those expressing such solidarities also need to be taken into account. For example, the leader of the Interfaith organisation could be perceived as expressing

solidarity with Indigenous communities in order to legitimize the anti-racism or anti-Islamophobia interests of that organisation without any genuine recognition of Indigenous rights. I place this in the realm of perception as this was how the leader was positioned by one of the Indigenous participants. From this context, a few questions emerged which were important to think through. Were Muslim Australian and Indigenous concerns competing interests even as they seem united under the banner of 'anti-racism' and 'anti-Islamophobia'? Were the spokesperson's statements a performance of asserting Muslim sovereignty and the demonstration of a limit in relation to a recognition of Indigenous spirituality? This is a difficult question as it brings to fore the seemingly incommensurable ways in which faith and belief function. How can they be read in relation to political and sacred questions of Indigenous sovereignty—if the sacred and the material are indivisible and inform Indigenous politics? I want to clarify here that I am not talking about Islam and its diverse manifestations across the world, but about this specific speaker's politics in the Australian context in relation to Indigenous sovereignty. Could it be that what transpired at the forum was an exercise in asserting a non-hegemonic sovereignty on the terms of a white Australian sovereignty? Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, for instance, suggest that sovereignty is also a performance 'embodied in citizens sharing territory and culture, and sharing the right to exclude and punish "strangers"' (2005: 11). This kind of performance is also intertwined with ideas about belonging (2005: 11). The Cronulla riots were a textbook example of the performance of this sovereignty, and that event was the context which framed the speaker's presence at the Borderpolitics of Communities forum. Therefore, it is necessary to think through how groups who are at risk of exclusion and punishment—and indeed are excluded and punished—negotiate with this performance of sovereignty. The reaction of some of the racialised youth was to fight back, to enact revenge on the 'white' inhabitants of Cronulla. However, the speaker at the forum appeared to be in a mediatory role, asserting the 'belonging' of those youth to Australia as part of his anti-racist, anti-Islamophobic agenda. Between these positions, both of which are reactive, I would argue that a kind of loss occurs. There is an inability, in critical terms, on the ground as it were, to point to the larger structures of colonialism which informed the Cronulla events, apart from discussions of Muslim or Arab others. While this larger structure was articulated in some academic writing (Perera 2006, Moreton-Robinson and Nicoll 2006), it was largely absent in public media discourses. If the speaker was invited because of his credentials as a mediator between youth groups in the aftermath of the Cronulla race event, could it also be that the assertion of Muslim *Australianness*, for this speaker, could not function through a recognition of Indigenous sovereignty. Indeed, on the basis of being a spokesperson for 'Muslims' (not a homogenous entity) and bridging relationships with 'Australians' (often coded as white), Indigenous sovereignty and spirituality became a contentious issue even as the speaker did recognize the struggles for justice of Indigenous people in relation to the Australian state. Would a recognition of Indigenous sovereignty have crossed a limit where

acknowledgement of the state's continuing colonialism could begin? Would this be an even greater political struggle for Muslim Australian communities to deal with? Were Muslim Australian interests, for the speaker, limited to negotiating with white Australian sovereignty?

There are other questions about the ways in which Indigenous sovereignty is recognized when it is. I would argue that the practice of acknowledgement of country has been appropriated in such a manner by all kinds of organizations, secular and religious. Distinctions of secularity and religiosity may not be as clear once the binaries between the secular and the religious are deconstructed, especially in relations to questions of governmentality. Talal Asad (2006) makes this point about the history of secularism in the 'West'. I make this distinction as a way of referring to self-identified religious and secular organizations for the purpose of examining their uses of Indigenous sovereignty. In fact, while emphasizing the importance of acknowledging sovereignty as it interrupts a colonial 'history of denial', Irene Watson suggests that it is also at risk of becoming a 'customary practice' when it 'invokes nothing in terms of recognition or more importantly a call to action' (2007a: 38). Furthermore, it is necessary to register what interests are at stake in the customary practice of acknowledging Indigenous sovereignty.

I attended a Hindu nationalist conference for the purpose of research in April 2008 at the University of Western Sydney where one academic speaker spoke of the importance of commitment to reconciliation in Australia. Using a map of Australia which highlighted all Aboriginal sacred sites, he put up a map of India as showing a plenitude of Hindu sacred sites. The speaker was thus arguing for a vision of India as a Hindu nation. Given the resurgence of Hindu nationalism in the Indian context which attempts to exclude and punish Indian Muslim and Christian communities, this was an insidious move. The Indian branches of this organization have been found responsible by the National Commission for Minorities (2008) for inciting violence against Indian Muslims and Christians. So Aboriginal spirituality and the discourse of reconciliation were appropriated by this speaker for an extremely dubious agenda. Furthermore, I use the term insidious, as a Hindu nationalist agenda has deliberately sought to erase tribal philosophical/religious cosmologies in the Indian context by campaigns of 'reconversion' thus constructing diverse Indigenous tribal communities as originally Hindu (Sarkar 1999). The attempt to conduct an erasure of Indigenous cosmologies in the Indian context, by legitimizing Aboriginal sacred sites in Australia is duplicitous in its supposed commitment to justice for Indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, the emphasis on 'reconciliation' and not Indigenous sovereignty signaled the desire for a negotiation with an existent white Australian sovereignty rather than an acknowledgement of Indigenous sovereignty.[5] In State institutions whether it be Universities or other public service spaces, there are other forms of appropriation which we do need to pay attention to. Acknowledgement of country does appear to have become a song and dance routine, as Watson (2007a) suggests,

while some Indigenous departments in universities, for example, may remain under-resourced or government initiatives such as the Intervention overtly engage in assimilative programs.

Conversely, progressive non-Anglo, non-Indigenous interests or commitments to anti-racist agendas or transformations of colonial conditions often figure as a risk taking the attention away from Indigenous issues or even a silencing of those issues. As Irene Watson notes, 'How is it that some commentators can speak of a colonizing violence in one location and ignore that same violence in the space in which they occupy' (2007: 37). Watson rightly speaks, for example, of the African American struggle for justice in the U.S. context which ignores Indigenous issues there, or the recent struggles in Australia against 'the inhuman treatment of refugees in detention centres' while the 'ongoing cultural genocide of Aboriginal peoples is a whisper' (2007a: 37). But Watson is also right in pointing that this is the manner in which *some* commentators operate. In other words, there are other commentators in Australia, who have spoken out and theorised about, for example, both Indigenous and refugee issues--linking the issues as part of a common struggle against the differential ways in which a colonial white Australian sovereignty operates (Birch 2007, Moreton-Robinson 2007b, Kelly 2006; Pugliese 2005; Tascon 2004; Stratton 2004; Hage 2003; Perera 2002a; Perera 2002b; Schlunke 2002). The citations above are not comprehensive or exhaustive in this field. Furthermore, the literature linking non-Anglo migrant relationships to Indigenous struggles in the context of white Australian sovereignty is quite huge and seems to be proliferating. So, I have limited myself to mentioning a few examples of studies that have discussed anti-asylum seeker policies and politics to Indigenous struggles in the context of white sovereignty. I do not mention these commentators as a sign of the success of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty. I am certain that there is much more to learn and much more work to do, and that there are unequal relationships of all sorts that characterize these relationships. But I signal the efforts at linking these struggles to note that they exist. Much of this research appears directed against the racialised sovereignty that is at play in the Australian context. And this racialised sovereignty is directed both at Indigenous and non-Indigenous bodies thus necessitating alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous non-white anti-racist agendas.

### **Sovereignty: Australia Indivisible**

This racialised sovereignty operates through the reason of what Derrida calls the 'indivisible' element of sovereignty; this indivisible sovereignty is that which generates the borders that we experience as essentialist in the marking of racialised communities. In Australia, this indivisible sovereignty has taken the form of white sovereignty. White sovereignty, as a number of theorists have pointed out, is performed through the continuing legacy of the contiguous relationship between

race, nation and nationalism, territory, identity, body and law (Moreton-Robinson 2007a, 2004; Perera 2007; Giannacopoulos 2007; Hage 1998). If the Howard years were characterised by the reconsolidation of white sovereignty in the face of earlier multicultural policies, in the current era, Australian political policies appear to be building on that reconsolidation. In fact, I would argue, in governmental terms, there is a further entrenchment of white sovereignty through a number of moves. The Howard era's assimilationist agenda, for example, appears to be carried on through the social inclusion policy of the current Labour government. Andrew Jakubowicz has pointed out that the social justice rhetoric and agenda of the 1970s and 1980s has now all but disappeared and current governmental leaders promote the idea of social inclusion (2008). Social inclusion, Jakubowicz suggests, assumes that marginalised, cultural 'others' can be included on the terms of an Anglo-Australian notion of national identity and success (2008). In relation to Indigenous populations, the entrenchment of white sovereignty has taken the form of further erosion of Indigenous sovereignties. The Northern Territory Emergency Response Bill (2007) or the Federal Intervention, which I mentioned earlier, entrenches white sovereignty. The quarantining of income and welfare payments among other measures, enabled by the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and in the name of protection for Indigenous women and children against sexual abuse and domestic violence, has reconsolidated a white sovereignty through its assimilative and paternalist stance, revitalising the protectionist and destructive approach of earlier legislations of white Australia which have historically targeted Indigenous communities.[6] The current Labour government continued the previous Liberal government's policies in relation to the Intervention in 2008, but promised to review its operation. However, in 2009 the Labour government has announced its plan to continue the Intervention for the next three years (Karvelas 2009).

Baz Luhrmann's *Australia* (2008), envisioned as a gigantic advertisement for Australian tourism, in effect, seems to visualize this entrenchment of white sovereignty through the medium of film. The film maps a kind of progress in white and Indigenous Australian relationships by presenting a feel-good narrative of a charismatic, magical young Indigenous boy who is abducted and taken away to a mission, but is rescued. Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's apology to the stolen generations anchors the film's ending, thus providing a 'real-life' moment of progress in racial relations. Yet, in the narrative of the film, the Indigenous mother of the boy is killed and the 'good' white parents perform the role of rescuing the boy from the evil force that is the boy's real white father. This distinction between the bad white father and the good white parents appears to offer a way of contrasting earlier destructive racial/colonial relations with a contemporary benign paternalism. The benign ethos of the film is also in evidence through the appearance of Chinese as well as Indigenous actors within the white pioneer narrative: for example, there is a Chinese cook and Indigenous drovers who work alongside figures such as the white drover and the white aristocratic woman (a cattle

station owner who embodies the spirit of the battler). But it is not surprising that in this narrative, Indigenous sovereignty is figured only as black magic or only a spiritual force—whereas the British aristocratic Lady and her claim to land ('Faraway Downs' the cattle station) is accepted happily by the Indigenous servants at the cattle station as well as the boy's grandfather, the source of spirituality and magic. In fact, she is heralded by the Indigenous inhabitants of the land as the possible 'white' savior of the boy, the Indigenous servants, and the land itself. In this sense, white ownership and 'good' management of land as well as its Indigenous inhabitants are translated into a feel-good narrative which performs white sovereignty as a good outcome for the 'natives', the land, and the white owners. Such an entrenchment of white sovereignty appears to be fairly unpalatable in the cultural politics of the film given the testimonies of the experiences of the stolen generations in the 1997 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report, *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Many of these testimonies demonstrated the violent psychic and bodily effects of the assimilationist policies of stealing Indigenous children away from their parents.

Given the further entrenchment of an indivisible white sovereignty in the current era, I see the need for Irene Watson's citation of the Derridean notion of a 'politics of the impossible' in her discussion of Aboriginal sovereignties. The 'impossible' for Derrida is not a negative concept. Watson cites Derrida's discussion of the 'experience of the impossible' in relation to the aporetic structure of the possible and the impossible. The point of impossibility is the point at which 'one starts thinking' (qtd. in Watson 2007a: 25), perhaps even converting what is perceived as impossible to be possible. Watson begins at this juncture to discuss the political concept of Aboriginal sovereignty, something that remains at the level of (im)possibility in the political and cultural spheres of Australian life. I discuss the notion of Indigenous sovereignty as a 'politics of the impossible', not because this sovereignty does not have a presence in investments of politics, feeling, thought and deed. Indigenous peoples have been working with the question of sovereignty perhaps since the invasion of their lands (Moreton-Robinson 2004; Nicoll 2004). But a discussion of Indigenous sovereignty does not appear to be articulated in mainstream political debates in Australia. Moreton-Robinson points out that, '(i)t is not that Indigenous sovereignty issues are not covered by the media within Australia. Rather, the issue is the restricted political terms on which this coverage rests' (2007a: 3). She suggests that Indigenous sovereignty is the threat against which 'conservative ideologues' are given 'extensive coverage' in the press (2007a: 3). So, while the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty is not articulated, the idea that 'terra nullius was a judicial fallacy' or the representation of Indigenous issues as a continual problem, continually figures it as a threat (Moreton-Robinson 2007a: 3). In other words, Indigenous sovereignty is the invisible threat that informs much of the conversation around Aboriginal issues. Perhaps describing this

phenomena, Watson states, 'It is in thinking through how to engage with Aboriginal sovereignties that Australian society in the main becomes 'stuck', where the ground of 'impossibility' lies, but it is this ground "exactly" where our thinking should begin' (2007a: 25).

### **Sovereignties: Indigenous and (in)divisible**

I now turn to the theoretical question of the indivisibility of sovereignty and its relationship to borders as I think it may help us think through the relationship between white and Indigenous sovereignties. In his recent book, *Rogues: two essays on reason* (2005), Derrida works through the aporias or conundrums that attend the philosophical structure of sovereignty. Sovereignty, he suggests, in the history of western ontotheology has been linked with goodness. As Gasche explains in his review of the book[7], 'Derrida's reading of Plato's inquiry in the Republic' demonstrates that 'Plato not only grants the idea of the Good the sovereignty of a king that reigns over the intelligible visible world, he also establishes the Good's power as a superpower since the Good is beyond being and beingness' (2004: 293). This goodness is also unconditional, as Derrida reads it: 'For this idea of the Good, which at once orders and is itself ordered by the *logos* and the calculation that it exceeds, is an anhypotheton, the first figure of the "unconditional," the principle and anhypotheton archon toward which the soul ascends' (2005: 137-138). This unconditional goodness of the sovereign is likened to the power of the sun. Derrida quotes Plato's reasoning as follows: 'The sun, I presume you will say, not only furnishes to visibles the power of visibility (ten tou horasthai dunamin) but it also provides for their generation growth and nurture though it is not itself generation (ou genesin auton onta)' (2005: 138). Derrida quotes this reasoning in order to highlight the characteristics of sovereignty: 'It is the superpowerful origin of a reason that gives reason or proves right (donne raison), that wins out over (a raison de) everything, that knows everything and lets everything be known, that produces becoming or genesis but does not itself become, remaining withdrawn in an exemplary, hyperbolic fashion from becoming or from genesis. It engenders like a generative principle of life, like a father, but it is not itself subject to history' (2005: 138). Thus, in Derrida's deconstructive reading, the history of sovereignty and its link to unconditional goodness has constituted the 'reason' of western sovereignty. Glaringly obvious is the semen power of father and king—in whose name Plato declares sovereignty outside of history (Derrida 2005: 138). So, in his deconstructive reading, Derrida subjects this version of sovereignty, generated by solar power, to the inevitability of a black hole of deconstructive critique. Black holes, I'd like to remind readers, do not only signal the death of stars/suns, but can be a cradle for the birth of new ones.

Making a deconstructive move to challenge the link between sovereignty and unconditionality, Derrida suggests the need to distinguish between them. Furthermore, Derrida states, 'it would be a question not only of separating this kind of sovereignty drive from the

exigency for unconditionality as two symmetrically associated terms, but of questioning, critiquing, deconstructing, if you will, one in the name of the other, sovereignty in the name of unconditionality' (2005: 143). What such a move does is point to the divisibility as well as deconstructability of sovereignty--what is considered (im)possible in the logos or logic of sovereignty. If 'the rationality of reason is forever destined, and universally so, for every possible future and development, every possible to-come and becoming, to contend *between*, on the one hand, all these figures and conditions of the hypothetical and, on the other hand, the absolute sovereignty of the anhypothetical, of the unconditional or absolute principle' (Derrida 2005: 136), then hypothetically it is possible, Derrida suggests, to make reason reason with itself. In other words, the structure of reason is divisible as it contends between the hypothetical and the unconditional. This divisibility of reason also renders the structure of sovereignty divisible. As Gasche explains it, the indivisibility of sovereignty and its simultaneous universality renders the structure of sovereignty a paradox: 'sovereignty is incompatible with universality even though it is called for by every concept of the international, and thus universal or universalizable, and thus democratic, law' (2004: 299). The legitimation of the structure of the international system of nation-states, for example, continually generates demands for the divisibility of particular nation-state sovereignties. The entire history of anti-colonial/liberation movements is marked with calls for sovereignty, and hence sovereignty is continually divisible even as it posits itself as indivisible. What this deconstructive move highlights is the violence that sovereign power deploys precisely because of its universalisability. Or as Gasche puts it, 'because sovereignty's force is indivisible, absolute, and unconditional, the abuse of power is constitutive of sovereignty that as such betrays the very democracy (whether national or international) that it inaugurates' (2004: 299). But this force or violence does not render sovereignty indivisible even though it claims to be so, it simply highlights the paradoxical nature of sovereignty itself.

So sovereignty is divisible. However, this divisibility is also marked by its alignment with racial and/or religious constructions of difference. While many contemporary nation-states may not overtly articulate the alignments of sovereignty with these forms of difference, the legacy of the history of racial and religious difference and their articulation through the structure of sovereignty have manifested themselves in cultural and political assertions of nationalism (Goldberg 2002). In this sense, sovereignty is intimately concerned with borders—geopolitical and biopolitical. Territories and bodies mark the spatial arrangements of sovereignty (Perera 2007, Aileen Moreton Robinson 2007a). Henry Reynolds has paid specific attention to the divisibility of sovereignty in its legal and political sense in Australia prior to its moment of establishment as well as after its consolidation. This divisibility is related to racialised borders. Reynolds critiques Edmund Barton's 1901 Prime Ministerial claim that 'for the first time in history there was a nation for a continent and a continent for a nation' (2007: 61). In fact, Reynolds argues that even then 'external sovereignty still

resided with the imperial government' (2007: 61). Internally, 'the new federal administration in Melbourne was not in effective control of much of its territory, particularly in the tropical north. In actual practice it shared the internal sovereignty with independent Aboriginal nations, the members of which had rarely, if ever, seen a white person' (Reynolds 2007: 61). While Reynolds' critique is important in exposing Barton's claim, it is also important to remember, that the sovereignty of Indigenous nations has never been formally ceded. But the very language of colonialism and its relation to sovereignty threatens to dictate the terms of reference in speaking of Indigenous sovereignty. Phrases like Indigenous nations and Indigenous sovereignty necessarily emerge from the colonial experience. In other words, these terms are often mapped onto colonial terms of reference in relation to forms of sovereignty and governance. However, it is important to note that Indigenous scholars are asserting the difference of Indigenous sovereignty from its colonial forms. Aileen Moreton-Robinson's edited collection, *Sovereign Subjects* addresses this difference. Moreton-Robinson refuses to provide 'a quintessential definition of Indigenous sovereignty' (2007a: 2). This is a critical move, since providing a definition could only fall into an essentialist divisibility of a colonial form of sovereignty. Rather, Moreton-Robinson suggests that Indigenous 'sovereignty is carried by the body and differs from Western constructions of sovereignty, which are predicated on the social contract model, the idea of a unified supreme authority, territorial integrity and individual rights' (2007a: 2). Instead of predicating Indigenous sovereignty on a social contract model, the different writers in the collection of essays 'reveal its multiple manifestations' in different contexts (Moreton-Robinson 2007a: 2).

Currently, the level at which Indigenous sovereignty may be expressed is severely constrained by the fundamentally unequal terrain on which it operates. In his excellent essay "'The invisible fire": Indigenous sovereignty, history and responsibility', Tony Birch narrates the shocking story of how the Freeman family (relations of 'Cathy Freeman, the 2000 Olympic Games Gold medalist') had to pay '\$990 to a funeral company' so that 'a young member' of the family 'could be buried alongside her relatives' (2007: 105). As Birch goes on to note, 'the debt was not actually that of the Freeman family. It belonged to the Queensland Protector of Aborigines, who in 1950 reneged on his responsibility' (2007: 105). The original amount, Birch states, was 'two pounds and five shillings' (2007: 105). Birch comments on the absurdity of such a situation where the debt owed by a colonial authority was levied from the Freeman family—in effect, demonstrating how Indigenous people are literally paying for the debts owed to them by colonial rule. In this instance, Birch suggests, if 'Australian governments, multinational pastoral companies and individuals would each be forced to pay Indigenous people at least the same amount that the Freeman family were forced to hand over', then 'it would simply be a tangible expression of "paying the rent"—and an equitable point from which to negotiate a future of Indigenous sovereignty' (2007: 106). Clearly, there is a lot of work to be done—and the structure of an indivisible white sovereignty 'renders the

notion of sovereignty for Indigenous people a sad joke' (Birch 2007: 106). Yet, Birch also states, as many other writers in the collection do, 'sovereignty within Indigenous communities themselves is not reliant upon either European law or occasional state paternalism. It is maintained through pre-existing, pre-European models of governance. Such models continue to be culturally and politically sustainable, regardless of a lack of legal recognition by the Australian government' (2007: 107). Wendy Brady elaborates that her 'life is lived on two levels in relation to sovereignty: one is my *existence* within a nation (Australia) that regards itself as a sovereign state, and the other is as a functioning sovereign Indigenous being' (2007: 140). The emphasis on existence and function highlights the difference of having to endure white sovereignty and its different phases of malignant and benevolent (though still harmful) paternalism as well as the living reality of functioning in these contexts. Within the reality of living a colonized life, 'there is a sense and manifestations of being a sovereign nation, no matter how depleted or damaged, and carrying the sense of belonging to that sovereign nation despite the historical and current efforts of dominant culture and its remnant edifices of British imperialism' (Brady 2007: 141). Continually legislated for by the colonial state, this living sense of sovereignty, Brady suggests, 'is not indicative of a failure to be a good citizen of the nation; rather, it is a reflection of the extent of the conflicted nature of living with two forms of sovereignty' (2007: 147). These two forms of sovereignty are experienced through 'the communal, shared co-responsibility of living as a sovereign Indigenous nation member where there is a sense of belonging and nation identity' while 'living within a nation built upon European fantasies about good citizenship and the mythology of what it claims are sovereign rights that justify the occupation of Indigenous nations and lands' (Brady 2007: 147-148). In this sense, Moreton-Robinson suggests Indigenous sovereignty's 'existence and refusal within the everyday' illustrates that 'colonisation is a living process' (2007: 2).

Indigenous sovereignty, therefore, has the duality of both an everyday existence as well a promise of a future to come. The relations of power which characterize colonization as a living process are those that need to be overturned in this future to come. For Derrida, this future to come also suggests deconstructing sovereignty in the name of a democracy- to-come. As Gasche reads it, '*Rogues* argues for a democracy without sovereignty, in other words, without autonomy' (2004: 300). Autonomy is posited as the movement toward the self— 'the rotatory movement by which a self comes into being and is at the same time undone' (Gasche 2004: 300). In this version of democracy, 'the autos of autonomy, symmetry, homogeneity, the same, the semblable or the similar, and even, finally God, in other words everything remains incompatible with, even clashes with, another truth of the democratic, namely, the truth of the other, heterogeneity, the heteronomic and the dissymmetric, disseminal multiplicity, the anonymous, "anyone" (qtd. in Gasche 2004: 300). Indigenous sovereignty, in Wendy Brady's description, is communal and individual and is differentiated from the European model based on the

individual ceding of sovereignty to the state. So, it is uncertain whether all forms of sovereignty may be structured through the philosophical sense of autonomy that Derrida activates. Furthermore, while recognition of Indigenous sovereignty is a movement toward the truth of the other, that truth is related to responsibility rather than simply an incompatibility. At the very least, it entails 'paying the rent' on a squatted land. I say, at the very least, because in terms of justiceability, this rent is incalculable as Birch reminds us. And Derrida does recognize this responsibility. He suggests that it is 'hardly reasonable,' to 'combat, head-on, all sovereignty, sovereignty in general, without threatening at the same time—beyond the nation-state figure of sovereignty, the classical principles of freedom and self-determination' (2005: 158). In this reasoning—for after all *Rogues* makes reason reason with reason—reasonability 'would take into account the accounting of the juridical justness or exactitude' but it would also 'strive, across transactions and aporias, for *justice*' (2005: 159). In the context of a movement toward justice, a deconstruction of sovereignty cannot do away with a recognition of sovereignty for Indigenous peoples in the name of a democracy-to-come.

I'd like to subject the notion of a 'democracy-to-come' to further scrutiny to see what it entails. The democracy-to-come that Derrida suggests, 'is not to invoke a current, determinate and limited concept of democracy' (Gasche 2004: 302). This democracy is something that remains as a promise through the autoimmune structure of both sovereignty and autonomy. In questioning sovereignty in the name of unconditionality, 'the first thing to be unconditioned' Derrida states, 'would be the event' (2005: 143). As much of *Rogues* appears to be taken up by a post 9/11 context of attempting to 'save the honour of reason' (deconstructive reason which is also the legacy of the Enlightenment), the event is posited here as that which is incalculable or unforeseen by the sovereign power of reason. In this sense, the event ruptures the move to autonomy (that which informs the nation-state structure of sovereignty) opening it up to the structure and the logic of autoimmunity. Whereas in a previous interview, just after the 9/11 attacks in the U.S., Derrida had described autoimmunity as the logic of suicide in relation to a democratic nation-state, in *Rogues* autoimmunity is 'not an absolute ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to what and to who comes—which means it must remain incalculable' (qtd. in Gasche 2004: 298). This is the structure that enables democracy-to-come. And returning to the Greek roots of a discussion of democracy, arguing that 'there is 'an opening of indetermination and indecidability in the very concept of democracy, in the interpretation of the democratic', Derrida thus 'extends the democratic beyond the nation-state sovereignty and citizenship, including world-citizenship' (qtd. in Gasche 2004: 302). Democracy-to-come, therefore, 'is an injunction and an urgency that concerns the present itself' (Gasche 2004: 302). My trepidation regarding the promise of democracy to come (while I find it interesting) has to do with the experience of democracy for colonized peoples. I realise that Derrida is deconstructing western sovereignty, reason, and its autoimmune structure in theorizing a democracy-to-come. Yet, the

recent events of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the name of democracy, and in Australia, the establishment of democracy at the expense of Indigenous sovereignty, makes me fearful of what the democratic may mean if it is sketched in terms of the entry of an 'other'. Indeed, Derrida suggests that it can easily become a threat. For instance, Gashche cites Derrida as stating that 'democracy' is 'a promise that risks and must always risk being perverted into a threat' (2004: 296).

### **Responsibility and coexistence from a sovereign present**

Writing from a white sovereign present, and limiting myself to addressing questions of justice in relation to Indigenous sovereignty in the Australian context, I prefer to speak of the necessity of recognition for Indigenous sovereignty in the first instance. In this sense, a deconstruction of white sovereignty has to be made in the name of Indigenous sovereignty rather than the promise or threat of a democracy-to-come. Not so careful it seems are some no-borders advocates in the Australian context (Fernandez, Gill, Szeman and Whyte 2006). This is the intellectual and activist project on behalf of asylum seekers which has attempted to tackle the problem of sovereignty and neoliberal capital by raising a call to abolish borders in the context of nation-state sovereignty as their unit of analysis. However, this particular approach to 'no borders' does ignore, as Irene Watson might point out, Indigenous sovereignty. There is an attempt to speak on behalf of all 'oppressed' groups and their 'right' to move without attention to the Indigenous issues. The no-borders approach is not homogenous. Other theorists such as Nandita Sharma have referenced the notion of negotiations and alliances between Indigenous and migrant communities in the Canadian context. Sharma comments on the ethos of a conference she organized on this issue:

We wanted to build connections between the movements for Indigenous self-determination and land and the movements struggling for justice for (im)migrants. Of course, we recognized that there would be many tensions, perhaps even contradictions, in trying to forge such alliances. And these did indeed surface. We will need many more chances to meet and talk and share experiences and strategies. Yet, the hope remains that we can put an end to the typical 'divide-and-rule' politics played by the state - and, unfortunately, even by many in our own communities' (2002).

Sharma's approach speaks to the issue of responsibility in addressing borders. These responsibilities include addressing state colonialism and racism as well as racism toward Indigenous communities within migrant communities. Such a notion of responsibility appears to be a crucial one in any attempt to think through the conditions of the possibility of addressing colonialism and racism.

This responsibility is also articulated by Tony Birch in his vision of Indigenous sovereignty. Birch's vision of what recognition of Indigenous sovereignty might entail, I would argue, challenges both a neoliberal as well as a free for all no borders ethos. Rather than the 'mutual obligation' discourse of governance that white sovereignty seeks to impose which enables 'new regimes of colonial domination that bypass the potential of a post-colonial state', Birch offers a different set of protocols. 'Non-Indigenous Australia needs to reassess its place within an Indigenous nation, including a willingness to accede to the principles of Indigenous sovereignty, amongst which are a respect for Indigenous knowledge systems and the historical landscapes from which they were created' (2007: 114). Birch cites Muecke and Pugliese as working toward such an ethic in relation to Indigenous communities, rural and urban. Therefore, he suggests, 'the potential benefit for migrant communities is contained in the recognition of what is also held in common with Indigenous people: a refusal to accept the status of marginalisation' (Birch 2007: 116). Simultaneously, Birch suggests, 'it could also be argued that it then becomes important that Indigenous communities reciprocate, not only as an act of moral and political solidarity, but in recognition of the sovereign responsibility that they hold' (2007: 116). He goes on to say, 'it is vital that Indigenous voices speak out when crimes are committed on Indigenous land against the will of Indigenous people. If Australia is to become a genuinely post-colonial nation, we must first adopt a pro-active stance of anti-colonialism, achieved through ideas, alliances, and social and political action' (2007: 116).

I find these words heartening not because I want to dictate or prescribe the responsibility of Indigenous communities. Indigenous sovereignty as Watson says remains in the realm of an (im)possible politics in its Derridean sense. But this (im)possibility suggests that we may be able to think together. There is much work to be done, and many Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics and activists are engaged in this work. I want to point to the incalculability of Indigenous sovereignty, as I suggested earlier, because I think the forms it might take depend on the ideological, discursive and embodied positions and experiences of Indigenous speakers and activists. But if Indigenous Sovereignty is indeed different from current nation-state forms of sovereignty, as Moreton-Robinson (2007a) suggests, its political materialisation may challenge the contemporary pervasive formation of colonial/national sovereignty. And the work towards this goal which contains the anti-colonial work of building alliances and social and political action is something we can participate in. This is where non-Indigenous responsibility does lie. The Gender, Protection, and Violence workshops, for me, are part of this project. This was an attempt to think through the protocols of conducting conversations, making alliances, finding intersections of marginalisation, and an attempt to think through social and political action. During the course of this project, it became evident that these conversations need to continue. For example, governmental conferrals of legitimacy on chosen, often conservative, Indigenous and Muslim spokespersons were identified as a major problem for

both Indigenous and Muslim communities. These legitimacies relied on the notion that a few people—consonant with governmental agendas—could speak for whole communities. Much work in this arena still needs to be done. Many of these stakes and interests do need to be identified before we rush headlong into a romantic notion of alliances across non-white communities. There is a vigilance required here and the risks are many—pointing to the notion of (im)possibility. However, for me at least, it is this hard work from the ground up that will generate an ethics of co-existence. Co-existence, as I am attempting to conceptualise it in a preliminary way, therefore, requires labour. It is not an ontological condition or a sharing of space and time. But instead of a democracy to come, it may offer a more concrete idea of what we need to work on. It is in the first instance, a negotiation about what constitutes a progressive politics toward justice from the experiences of dispossession and marginalization. From hereon, we can only hope that our actions follow our negotiations

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### **Notes**

[1] John Howard was Prime Minister of Australia between 1996 and 2007. During this period, Howard was proactive in attacks against leftist agendas of social justice and multiculturalism. In 2007, for example, he renamed the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs as the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, thus signaling an assimilationist agenda (*The Daily Telegraph* 2007). Interestingly, in the same article, Tony Burke, a Labour official in charge of 'immigration, integration and citizenship' states, 'Labour has . . . kept multicultural affairs but added a specific focus on integration' (*The Daily Telegraph* 2007). Thus, the current Labour government which won the elections in 2007, with its focus on integration, builds on Howard's move toward reasserting an assimilationist agenda on the terms of white sovereignty.

[2] See Scott Poynting's essay, 'What caused the Cronulla riot' which documents the responsibility of the Howard government and the media in fomenting the attack on 'Muslim' and 'Middle-Eastern' enemies (2006). Suvendrini Perera (2005) traces the colonial formations of race and its spatialisation of the beach in Cronulla in 'Race, Terror, Sydney'. Aileen Moreton-Robinson and Fiona Nicoll (2006) discuss the Cronulla event as a culture of white possession of the beach. For account of the range of newspaper editorials from various ideological positions, see the Wikipedia source, '2005 Cronulla riots' (2007).

[3] The Intervention is a short-hand reference to the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill enacted in 2007. It was a legal response to the *Little Children are Sacred Report* (2007) which reported child sexual abuse and domestic violence among Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. However, rather than taking up the recommendations of the *Little Children are Sacred Report* which included consultation with Indigenous communities to build programs that would target these problems, the Howard government used the discourse of protection of women and children to apply a racially discriminatory set of laws for Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory. For a discussion of the manner in which these laws did not respond to a genuine crisis among Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, see Nicole Watson's essay in this issue, 'Of course it wouldn't be done in Dickson! How Affluenza provided fertile ground for the Northern Territory Emergency Response' (2009).

[4] For an analysis of protectionist discourse in relation to Muslim women, see also Christina Ho's 2007 essay, 'Muslim Women's New Defenders: Women's Rights, Nationalism, and Islamophobia in Contemporary Australia.'

[5] For a critique of reconciliation, see Deborah Bird Rose's *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation* (2004).

[6] For a discussion of the Intervention's relation with earlier legislation targeting Indigenous communities, see Osuri (2008) 'War in the Language of Peace, and an Australian Geo/Politics of White Possession.'

[7] Gasche's review quotes the 2005 translated edition of Derrida's text, but his page numbers reference the French version. I have quoted Derrida from both Gasche's review as well as the 2005 translation.

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