

RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘Sovereignty is still the name of the game’: Indigenous theorising and strategic entanglement in Māori political discourses

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Abstract

In recent decades, sovereignty has come under increased academic scrutiny for being a Eurocentric notion antithetical to emancipatory politics, leading critical theory scholars to call for an overcoming or even abandonment of the concept. Paradoxical as it may seem, it nonetheless remains an appealing ideal for many colonised peoples. Indigenous activists and scholars have actively re-appropriated the language of sovereignty to encapsulate and advance Indigenous political aspirations. This paper discusses how Māori, Aotearoa/New Zealand’s Indigenous people, navigate their relations to the concept in their contemporary political discourses pursuing self-governance. Building on interviews with Māori leaders, scholars, and activists, it offers empirical insights into Indigenous political thought’s engagement with the idea of sovereignty. It highlights an ambivalence oscillating between rejection and rearticulation present both in Indigenous theorising and Māori politics. From an analysis of Māori contemporary conceptual strategies, this paper suggests that Yarimar Bonilla’s notion of ‘strategic entanglement’ offers a productive account to comprehend the approached Māori actors’ deployment of the sovereignty concept, and possibly that of Indigenous peoples beyond Aotearoa. This paper thus highlights the continued relevance of the sovereignty framework, both analytically and politically, to meaningfully engage with contemporary Indigenous politics.

Keywords: Indigenous politics; Indigenous sovereignty; Indigenous theory; Māori; sovereignty; strategic entanglement

Introduction

In recent decades, the concept of sovereignty has come under increased scrutiny from several academic disciplines and schools of thought. In particular, critical theory scholarship has called attention to the colonial roots of the paradigmatic sovereignty conception and to its antithetical relation to emancipatory politics. This widespread academic disaffection prompted many calls and proposals for an overcoming of the concept. However, and as paradoxical as it may seem, sovereignty stands out as a significant political aspiration and conceptual strategy in many Indigenous struggles and in Indigenous political theory. It continues to be appealing as a means to articulate and assert the distinctiveness and ongoing existence of Indigenous political communities whose political powers pre-existed colonial states and remain independent from them.¹

¹Joanne Barker (ed.), *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Kēhaulani Kauanui (ed.), *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths – Māori Realities* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2011).

Oftentimes, what Indigenous actors advance through the discourse of sovereignty is a modality different from the one encapsulated in the paradigmatic conception of modern state sovereignty.² Yet the weight of the concept's colonial legacies and the critiques directed at its inappropriateness for the articulation of emancipatory politics seem to leave little room for conceptual reappropriation. As a result, Indigenous conceptions and claims of sovereignty are seldom taken seriously or engaged on their own terms. Political debates, public imaginaries, and scholarship often either misconstrue or bluntly disregard them, thus revealing the limits of the paradigmatic modern political thought to comprehend alternative sovereignty models.

Therefore, from the standpoint of a decolonising Indigenous politics, this speaks to a long-debated issue in anti-colonial thought still topical today: what should be done with the language of the coloniser?³ On-the-ground political movements are often fraught with the same tension in the deployment of their own political praxis. On one hand, the normative categories of universalised political modernity contain more or less evident colonial legacies that will arguably reproduce the colonial condition if uncritically deployed and left unchecked. On the other, it may be possible to resignify and refashion said categories in order to make them work for alternative interests and projects. It is not so certain that the master's tools should be discarded altogether.

This article points out that the terms of this discussion similarly apply to the use of sovereignty in Indigenous political discourses and practices. The paper's concrete contribution lies in an exploration of how Māori – the collective label encompassing the numerous iwi (tribes/nations) and hapū (sub-tribes) making up Aotearoa/New Zealand's Indigenous people – navigate their relations to the concept of sovereignty in their contemporary pursuit of self-governance. From the results of an empirical study conducted with some sectors of Te Ao Māori (the Māori world/society), I suggest the place of the sovereignty concept in Māori contemporary politics is marked by what Yarimar Bonilla defined as a 'strategic entanglement', a political attitude defined by a simultaneous distancing and engagement.⁴ The reflections from Māori interlocutors presented below reveal the potential for a resignification of sovereignty precisely through an engagement with its language and practice. However, this paper does not explore the specific contents of the Māori reformulation but rather the complexities of their ongoing discursive relations to the idea of sovereignty. As such, it engages with a recurring tension in decolonial studies between the aspirations to escape Euromodernity's epistemic constraints, political ontologies, and metaphysics on the one hand and the often urgent needs to address on the other the practical socio-political realities of what Indigenous life in a colonised context means. The idea and practice of a 'strategic entanglement' is presented as a sort of in-between way avoiding a simplified dichotomy between the two. As a result, the article argues that an outright rejection of sovereignty as part of the language of a critical emancipation from the shortcomings of Western political modernity would represent an additional form of political and epistemic violence against Indigenous peoples. Indeed, and as the example of Māori contemporary politics will lay bare, sovereignty is still a significant lens of theorising for Indigenous struggles and resistance.

First, I briefly discuss the main critical trends directed at the sovereignty concept in international literature, with a specific interest in Indigenous scholarship debates over the use of the sovereignty language in settler-colonial contexts. In this context, I then suggest that the Indigenous literature's ambivalence between rejection and resignification can be read as an instance of discursive 'strategic entanglement'. Before delving into the analysis of empirical materials, the third

²Harald Bauder and Rebecca Mueller, 'Westphalian vs. Indigenous sovereignty: Challenging colonial territorial governance', *Geopolitics*, 28:1 (2023), pp. 156–173; Valentin Clavé-Mercier, 'Politics of sovereignty: Settler resonance and Māori resistance in Aotearoa/New Zealand', *Ethnopolitics* (2022), (Online First).

³Aimée Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays* (New York: Grove Press, 1967); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007).

⁴Yarimar Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

section offers a contextual introduction into the Māori politics of sovereignty and the Māori literature treatment of the concept. Finally, I critically explore Māori conceptual strategies regarding sovereignty and argue for the illuminating purview of the ‘strategic entanglement’ lens for understanding the place of sovereignty in Māori contemporary politics. By establishing the continued relevance of sovereignty in Māori politics, I then justify the importance of this concept in both political practice and academia for genuinely and accurately addressing Indigenous claims and aspirations.

The findings presented here are based on thirty semi-structured interviews conducted between 2019 and 2021 with key interlocutors involved in contemporary Māori politics of sovereignty.⁵ It should be noted here that the tino rangatiratanga idea – or Māori sovereignty – and the political project it encapsulates are themselves contested within Te Ao Māori. The present article examines the Māori politics conceiving and articulating tino rangatiratanga as a nexus of ‘radical far-reaching strategies for change’ as opposed to other conceptions adopting electoral or capitalist orientations, for instance.⁶ The profiles of participants varied from scholars to journalists, educators, lawyers, iwi workers and/or activists, and their age ranged from being in their twenties to seventies. They included 17 women and 13 men from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds, iwi affiliations, and places of residence.⁷ These interviews were conceived as spaces of political theorising between the researcher and the interlocutors themselves, thus aiming to facilitate a dialogical co-production of knowledge on the question of sovereignty.⁸ This follows Aboriginal scholar Tyson Yunkaporta’s description of conversation as a crucial tool in Indigenous knowledge production.⁹ Be they scholars or not, interlocutors were thus considered as theorists in their own right, actively constructing theoretical arguments through dialogue.

The overall research methodology was inspired by decolonial and insurgent research paradigms,¹⁰ especially in terms of prioritising an engagement with Māori worldviews, knowledges, and aspirations without validation on Western standards and of facilitating an active participation and relational interaction with my interlocutors in the research process. Accountability to my interlocutors was ensured through regular post-interview contact in which they were invited to comment and elaborate on the interview transcripts and my interpretation of their words. A final research report was shared with all of them and received generally positive feedback, especially for engaging Māori political thought and practices as central sources of academic discussion. However, I am a white, European scholar living and working in between Spain and the United Kingdom, two of the main strongholds of the Western imperial project. This positionality and the demands of the Western(ised) academic context have arguably somewhat limited the full application of decolonial and co-produced research. By simultaneously benefiting from the privileges of my whiteness and claiming to be engaged in decolonial work, I admittedly find myself in an awkward constellation of social configurations and power relations. However, I subscribe to Svirsky’s defence of the possibility of an anti-colonial study of Indigenous resistance in settler-colonial contexts from non-Indigenous researchers.¹¹ Empirical binarism can hardly be a decolonial solution. I refuse to abandon myself to this awkwardness in a way that recentres whiteness, committing instead to

⁵For more on the ‘politics of sovereignty’, see Clavé-Mercier, ‘Politics of sovereignty’.

⁶Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith, ‘The veneer is radical, the substance is not’, *Pacific Journalism Review*, 11:1 (2005), pp. 211–17 (p. 214).

⁷Most of my interlocutors came from Te Ika-a-Māui (the North Island) with an important representation of iwi and hapū from its northern parts.

⁸Reciprocal rights and obligations were established through explicit ethical commitments overseen by the University of Aberdeen and by an on-field research supervisor from the University of Auckland.

⁹Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2020).

¹⁰Adam Gaudry, ‘Insurgent research’, *Wicazo Sa Review*, 26:1 (2011), pp. 113–36; Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

¹¹Marcelo Svirsky, ‘Resistance is a structure not an event’, *Settler Colonial Studies*, 7:1 (2017), pp. 19–39.

the responsibility of using said privileged position to dismantle its very structural and theoretical underpinnings. Dedicating my research activity to disrupting the privileged position of ‘the West’ and whiteness as ‘universal theoretical voice’¹² is an expression of such commitment.

Rejecting, overcoming, or re-appropriating sovereignty?

Modern state sovereignty remains a pervasive cognitive frame for contemporary scholarship and political praxis alike. However, international literature in International Relations (IR) and Political Theory has been increasingly marked by critical appraisals of sovereignty in its modern state form. Scholars from varying theoretical quarters have discussed its shortcomings and intertwinements with some of the main conundrums of political modernity.¹³ Grounded in an observation of the increasingly questioned status of the sovereign nation-state in the face of significant political and economic transformations in the new millennium, coupled with the apparent academic impossibility of consensually pinpointing the essence of what sovereignty is, several scholars have called for abandoning the concept altogether due to its inadequacy to encapsulate the world we live in.¹⁴

In a different vein but with similar results, critical IR scholars have revealed the Eurocentric and colonial roots and ramifications of the paradigmatic understanding of sovereignty. Both in public debate and mainstream academic literature, sovereignty has become associated with political models, ontologies, and values originated in the Western hemisphere and Euromodernity. What is more, the concept was historically framed by the colonial invasions and deployed as an instrument of colonisation itself.¹⁵ Via the naturalisation of a racial and civilisational divide within the doctrine of sovereignty, it was simultaneously asserted by settlers and colonial powers while denied to and rendered impossible for Indigenous peoples.¹⁶ More than a semantic twist, this was key in enabling and justifying Indigenous dispossession. In short, sovereignty ‘did not precede and manage cultural differences; rather, sovereignty was forged out of the confrontation between different cultures and, at least in the colonial confrontation, the appropriation by one culture of the powerful terms “sovereignty” and “law”’.¹⁷ Linda Tuhiwai Smith similarly denounces this ‘appropriation of sovereignty’¹⁸ by the West. On one hand, colonisation processes meant a political appropriation from Indigenous political communities. On the other, the naturalisation and universalisation of the Euromodern conception of sovereignty amounted to a theoretical appropriation.

The ramifications of this Euromodern appropriation even reached into the so-called decolonisation waves and the construction of ‘post-colonial sovereignties’. Not only did ‘decolonised’ countries access a second-class sovereignty different from that claimed by Western powers, but their construction of configurations of power, authority, and political identity was constrained by the metaphysical, political, and civilisational frameworks embedded within the paradigmatic Euromodern conception of sovereignty.¹⁹ The emancipatory promise that many colonised peoples saw in being recognised as sovereign thus revealed itself as a device maintaining dispossession

¹²Michael Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject: Race, Reason, and the Politics of Purity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), p. 14.

¹³John Agnew, *Globalization and Sovereignty* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); Dominic O’Sullivan, *Sharing the Sovereign: Indigenous Peoples, Recognition, Treaties and the State* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021); Raia Prokhovnik, *Sovereignties: Contemporary Theory and Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹⁴Robert Latham, ‘Social sovereignty’, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 17 (2000), pp. 1–18; Ian Ward, ‘The end of sovereignty and the new humanism’, *Stanford Law Review*, 55 (2003), pp. 2091–112.

¹⁵Antony Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty, and the Making of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Yarimar Bonilla, ‘Unsettling sovereignty’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 32:3 (2017), pp. 330–9.

¹⁶Joanne Barker, ‘For whom sovereignty matters’, in Joanne Barker (ed.), *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 1–31.

¹⁷Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty*, p. 311.

¹⁸Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, p. 27.

¹⁹Anghie, *Imperialism, Sovereignty*; Siba Grovogui, *Sovereigns, Quasi Sovereigns, and Africans: Race and Self-Determination in International Law* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

and imposition logics and reproducing the inequalities and exclusions inherent to the Euromodern conception. In settler-colonial contexts, left untouched by the 'decolonisation waves', the prevailing international legal order built on colonial legacies still reproduces Indigenous peoples as non-sovereign, a legal fiction often reinforced by national courts.²⁰ Due in part to this entanglement with coloniality, and for its construction and mechanisms of power, critical theory scholars have argued for the impossible reconciliation of sovereignty with emancipatory politics and for an overcoming of the concept altogether.²¹

As a result, a myriad of models and concepts has been advanced to reimagine and overcome sovereignty or to index political blueprints and realities different from its paradigmatic form. For reasons of scope, it is impossible for this section to fully discuss the ever-expanding sovereignty lexicon on offer. For illustration purposes, terms such as 'divided', 'parallel', 'multiple', or 'plural' sovereignties will probably come to the reader's mind. The main issue that Indigenous political claims and aspirations have with such models is that they often 'are predicated on the idea that state sovereignty remains unaffected by the addendum of new sovereignties'.²² Therefore, the colonially rooted and Indigenous dispossession-based state sovereignty is allowed to endure mainly unperturbed. Similar critiques can be directed at 'post-sovereignty' proposals²³ in that they do not engage in a profound philosophical and political transformation of modern state sovereignty but appear limited to an addition of sub- and supra-national normative orders to restrict and complement it. Alternatively, 'non-sovereignty' has been used to emphasise the inherent interdependency of human experience,²⁴ to encapsulate a relational normative horizon in which domination would be absent,²⁵ or to refer to forms of rule that do not – or cannot – adopt the sovereign-state form.²⁶ Finally, scholars have presented sovereign projects that explicitly pursue an alternative to the structures of authority and coordinates of paradigmatic sovereignty as 'counter-sovereignty'.²⁷ Unfortunately, this formulation tends to reduce resistance to a mechanical answer to domination and perpetuates binary thinking.

While these conceptual alternatives can be – and have been – used to encapsulate Indigenous sovereignty claims, there are important theoretical and discursive shortcomings in doing so. The main reason for this inadequacy is an underlying conflation of the concept of sovereignty with its paradigmatic conception, otherwise accurately differentiated by post-structuralist IR scholars.²⁸ Conceptions are multiple and differ in the kind of political work that is sought to be performed by deploying the concept. 'Sovereignty as a concept is political in that its very work as a concept

²⁰Valentin Clavé-Mercier, 'Revisitar la soberanía indígena: Los desafíos de una reivindicación excluida', *Relaciones Internacionales*, 38 (2018), pp. 99–119.

²¹Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998); Joan Cocks, *On Sovereignty and Other Political Delusions* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, 'What comes after sovereignty?' *Law, Culture and the Humanities*, 6:2 (2010), pp. 185–207.

²²Jessica Shadian, 'From states to polities: Reconceptualizing sovereignty through Inuit governance', *European Journal of International Relations*, 16:3 (2010), pp. 485–510 (p. 493).

²³Michael Keating, *Plurinational Democracy: Stateless Nations in a Post-Sovereignty Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Neil McCormick, *Questioning Sovereignty: Law, State, and Nation in the European Commonwealth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁴Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

²⁵Cocks, *On Sovereignty*.

²⁶Nikki Mulder, 'Stories of autonomy on non-sovereign Saba: Flipping the script of postcolonial resistance', *Etnofoor*, 30:1 (2018), pp. 11–28.

²⁷Nir Gazit and Robert Latham, 'Spatial alternatives and counter-sovereignties in Israel/Palestine', *International Political Sociology*, 8:1 (2014), pp. 63–81; Geoff Mann, 'From countersovereignty to counterpossession?', *Historical Materialism*, 24:3 (2016), pp. 45–61; Ben Rosamond, 'Sovereignty, countersovereignty, rangatiratanga', Master's thesis, University of Auckland, 2017.

²⁸Prokhovnik, *Sovereignties*; Karena Shaw, *Indigeneity and Political Theory: Sovereignty and the Limits of the Political* (London: Routledge, 2008); Rob Walker, *Inside/Outside: International Relations as Political Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

is intimately about the condition of politics, the content of politics, the context of politics, and the limits of politics.²⁹ Each competing conception is informed by and sustains certain political ontologies, aspirations, and implications orienting its own claims about the authority configuration and political ordering a certain political community ought to adopt. Paradigmatic (Euro)modern state sovereignty is but one historically and culturally specific articulation of the concept. While the specific philosophical and political resolutions offered by this conception may be deemed unsatisfactory – especially for the configuration of Indigenous systems of governance – this does not render the question of sovereignty altogether irrelevant. Indeed, the politics of sovereignty is a key site for political struggle, as the fixation of a certain conception is fundamentally linked to the definition and structuring of the political reality we live in.

Articulating concepts relying on a negation of sovereignty may obscure its continued relevance in framing the political world we live in and thus takes attention away from the necessity to challenge and confront modern state sovereignty in order for alternative political horizons to materialise. Semantically speaking at least, ‘post-sovereignty’ and ‘non-sovereignty’ may inadvertently function in the same way as arguments preaching the demise of sovereignty by letting modern state sovereignty off the hook of theoretical and practical questioning. Additionally, these reformulations may actually contribute to the disregard and dismissal of Indigenous sovereignty claims by discarding the idea of sovereignty altogether. I argue that they obfuscate the comprehension of the Indigenous politics of sovereignty and their interventions in the sovereignty debate, praxis, and theorisation. Indigenous alternative sovereign projects are ossified into essentialised forms, and the complex relations they maintain with the concept of sovereignty, discussed below as a ‘strategic entanglement’, are obscured. Overall, by implying the demise and overcoming of sovereignty altogether, or the need to pursue a political project antithetical to it, the adoption of these labels curtails the space and possibilities – both theoretically and in political praxis – for the articulation of emancipatory forms and conceptions of sovereignty.

Recent Indigenous scholarship bears testimony to the often complex and ambivalent Indigenous interventions in the sovereignty discursive and conceptual spaces. Navigating the tensions between the aspirational appeal of sovereignty and the disenchantment with the promises of post-colonial sovereignty due to the Euromodern appropriation of the concept, Indigenous discursive positions and politics face a double bind. On one hand, Euromodern conceptual appropriation means that adopting the discourse of sovereignty may straitjacket the expression of Indigenous aspirations, values, and political ontologies. On the other, socio-political arrangements falling short of a serious engagement with the sovereignty question are equally problematic, as they do not address the Indigenous de-authorisation enshrined in Euromodern sovereignty’s construction of its fundamental order. As Simpson aptly put it, the relation between indigeneity and sovereignty is ‘seemingly anomalous but insistent’.³⁰ In this context, Indigenous peoples have challenged said dispossession and de-authorisation of their ways of living, being, knowing, and deciding precisely through the articulation of their own discourses and practices of sovereignty. This conceptual re-appropriation functions as a refusal of both assimilationist and multiculturalist policies either erasing Indigenous distinctive existence or relegating it to mere cultural diversity. It is a claim for a special political status in relation to – or against – settler states. The proliferation of the sovereignty discourse in Indigenous politics has led to a broad use of the concept ‘to signify a multiplicity of legal and social rights to political, economic, and cultural self-determination’.³¹ It has been deployed in the context of social movements, decolonisation, and social justice agendas, local land struggles, anti-colonial struggle, governance claims, control of resources, etc. Not only does Indigenous

²⁹ Prokhovnik, *Sovereignties*, p. 169.

³⁰ Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 23.

³¹ Barker, ‘For whom sovereignty matters’, p. 1.

sovereignty cover a wide range of issues, but it has also been associated with the pursuit of diverging modalities of self-governance varying across Indigenous actors and time.

This proliferation opened an ongoing debate in Indigenous politics and literature about the adequacy and even possibility of pursuing Indigenous sovereignty. As Corn tassel and Primeau observe, the re-appropriation of the concept of sovereignty may ‘cloud the issue of Indigenous rights when it is unclear whether the term reflects the traditional international law interpretation, the notion of cultural integrity or another competing definition. The lack of clarity regarding the term’s application can have the unintended effect of preventing solutions.’³² Awareness of the constraining Euromodern hold on the concept led to concerns over an Indigenous use due to fundamental contradictions with Indigenous worldviews and traditions. For some, sovereignty is antithetical to Indigenous philosophies of power, and an uncritical adoption of the concept and its cultural underpinnings will necessarily preclude the full realisation of Indigenous aspirations and/or lead to a mimicking of its exclusion and violence patterns.³³ Indigenous expressions of sovereignty would be forced into and shaped by Western ideas and structures – i.e. state, territory, individual, liberal representative democracy, Euromodernity – and would thus result in a deformation, misrepresentation, and even marginalisation of Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, subjectivities, and understandings of law, governance, authority, rights, or of the political. Sovereignty is then exposed not only as a category emanating from Western thought, but as a political norm and ideological project. The debate surrounding the deployment of Indigenous sovereignties then reveals an acute consciousness of the metaphysical and political framework intertwined with the concept, one constructed upon Indigenous exclusion and de-authorisation by the paradigmatic Euromodern conception. As Pat O’Shane argued about Aboriginal sovereignty debates in Australia: ‘It seems to me that the reaction on the part of those who are caught up in these contentious issues is to define ourselves in terms of the law instead of seeking to redefine the law in terms of ourselves.’³⁴

However, these warnings about the pitfalls of an Indigenous mobilisation of the language of sovereignty appear to be directed at the paradigmatic Euromodern conception rather than at the concept itself. Indeed, even authors articulating such warnings seem reluctant to abandon altogether the sovereignty framework, leaving spaces and paths for a reconceptualisation *in terms of themselves*. Therefore, while the predominant conception of sovereignty is exposed and often rejected for its ordering and limiting of life, social orders, and political possibilities contradictory to Indigenous worldviews and aspirations, Indigenous scholars and activists construct a different theorising of sovereignty based on alternative visions and meanings. As a result, Indigenous discourses may at times seem confusing, even contradictory, as they rarely differentiate between concept and conception, thus leading to a simultaneous rejection and assertion of ‘sovereignty’.

Kanien’kehá:ka thinker Taiaiake Alfred has arguably produced one of the most famous articulations of this Indigenous ambivalence between a rejection of the predominant conception and a potential rearticulation of the concept. Alfred explicitly confronts the ramifications of a foreign colonial term in framing the socio-political conditions of Indigenous peoples: ‘Fewer [people] still have questioned the implications of adopting the European notion of power and governance and using it to structure the postcolonial systems that are being negotiated and implemented within Indigenous communities today.’³⁵ On his account, the settler state has dominated the production of

³² Jeff Corn tassel and Tomas Primeau, ‘Indigenous sovereignty and international law: Revised strategies for pursuing self-determination’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 17:2 (1995), pp. 343–65 (p. 361).

³³ Joanne Barker, ‘The true meaning of sovereignty’, *The New York Times* (15 September 2011), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2011/09/15/tribal-sovereignty-vs-racial-justice/the-true-meaning-of-sovereignty>; Vine Deloria, ‘Self-determination and the concept of sovereignty’, in R. Dunbar Ortiz (ed.), *Economic Development in American Indian Reservations* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1979), pp. 22–8.

³⁴ Pat O’Shane, ‘A treaty for Australians?’, in W. Renwick (ed.), *Sovereignty & Indigenous Rights: The Treaty of Waitangi in International Contexts* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1991), pp. 147–55 (p. 155).

³⁵ Taiaiake Alfred, ‘Sovereignty’, in Joanne Barker (ed.), *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 33–50 (p. 39).

what is understood by sovereignty, conflating it with an understanding of power and a dominance of the statehood form that are at odds with Native American political ontologies, therefore producing ‘assimilative definitions of sovereignty’.³⁶ This results in a problematic breakdown between the cultural and social values underpinning Native American collective life and the structuring of their political discourses by a foreign paradigm maintaining colonial oppression.³⁷ Adopting the discourse of sovereignty forces Indigenous political expression into the statehood territorial framework and into antithetical philosophies of power. Therefore, the ‘classic notion of sovereignty’³⁸ cannot adequately incorporate Indigenous political ontologies and results in self-oppression in the form of a ‘neo-colonial self-government in our communities’.³⁹

However, Alfred’s terminology of ‘*assimilative* definitions’ and ‘*classic* notion’ insinuates that a redefinition of sovereignty along Indigenous values is possible. Indeed, while at times arguing for an abandonment of the concept of sovereignty altogether to privilege Indigenous traditional notions, Alfred however calls to ‘de-think’⁴⁰ sovereignty and to rearticulate it away from its Euromodern conception: ‘The challenge for Indigenous peoples in building appropriate postcolonial governing systems is to disconnect the notion of sovereignty from its Western, legal roots and to transform it.’⁴¹ Alfred thus pursues a troubling of the reification of sovereignty as ‘the triumph of a particular set of ideas over others’⁴² and argues for its resignification along Indigenous philosophies of power and justice grounded in fundamentally different metaphysical underpinnings. Therefore, Alfred does not totally break with the sovereignty language, as he recognises its usefulness in highlighting inconsistencies in the state legitimacy narrative and in challenging its authority claims. However, he advances a conception strongly infused by a recovery of Indigenous political traditions in order to overcome the limitations for Indigenous peoples inherently contained in the modern state paradigm. ‘Until then, “sovereignty” can never be part of the language of liberation.’⁴³

Beyond ambivalence: The trans-contextuality of strategic entanglement

Instead of being read as a division within Indigenous scholarship between two antagonistic positions or as an internally paradoxical and incongruous stance, this paper proposes that the kind of Indigenous discursive relation with sovereignty explored above should rather be understood as an instance of ‘strategic entanglement’. Initially, Yarimar Bonilla developed this idea from her analysis of historical practices of marronage and her argument of a certain parallelism with Antillean contemporary political practice.⁴⁴ In the mid-20th century, against its prevailing characterisation as lawlessness and banditry, Aimé Césaire and other Caribbean thinkers resignified marronage as an ongoing practice of working both within and against the established socio-political system and its institutions. This historical practice inspired their contemporary political position, whereby they simultaneously made claims towards existing French colonial institutions while searching to radically transform and/or overcome them. This apparently incoherent stance – oftentimes criticised as such – constituted a strategic instrumentalisation in a context marked by asymmetrical power relations: in Bonilla’s words, a ‘strategic entanglement’ or ‘a way of crafting and enacting autonomy within a system from which one is unable to fully disentangle’.⁴⁵ Originally then, Bonilla’s notion served to describe a particular socio-political approach in which colonised peoples combine

³⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

³⁷ Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

³⁹ Ibid., p. xiii.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 63.

⁴¹ Alfred, ‘Sovereignty’, p. 42.

⁴² Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, p. 62.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 54.

⁴⁴ Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

demands and practices oriented towards the prevailing political and economic systems with the pursuit of a certain extent of rupture, distancing, and construction of alternatives.

This form of political entanglement constitutes a significant shift from a traditional anticolonial ideology premised on complete rupture with the colonial system. Unlike previous models of postcolonial sovereignty, which hinged on the search for economic and political rupture, [strategic entanglement] is predicated on acts of selective engagement and strategic retreat.⁴⁶

Strategic entanglement is thus a way to negotiate these relations and the socio-political terms of existence beyond a simple acceptance of what is and with an eye on profound transformation. It speaks to the need to strike a balance between the everyday life's struggles of colonised peoples and their aspirations for radical transformation. Translated onto a discursive plane, I argue that strategic entanglement can be used to encapsulate Indigenous peoples' simultaneous distancing from classical political concepts and projects born out of Euromodernity and their need or will to keep engaging with them and to redefine these concepts' normative ideals.

But if we are to look at contemporary Aotearoa through the lens of theoretical tools forged in the Caribbean socio-political experience, a contextual discussion is required with particular attention to their diverging colonial realities. The Caribbean colonial experience has been defined by the needs and characteristics of plantation economics, which came to structure all aspects of life with ongoing legacies. In such a context of extractive colonialism premised on the creation of wealth and capital, coloniality was experienced through the Transatlantic slave trade, diaspora, and the necropolitics of plantation life. The contemporary Caribbean is conventionally framed as 'post-colonial' to refer to the political and theoretical struggles of societies that experienced the transition from political dependence to sovereignty. On the contrary, settler colonialism is precisely understood to be an ongoing structure.⁴⁷ It differentiates itself from other colonial modes for being oriented to settlement and based on Indigenous erasure from all the planes of existence (physical, political, epistemological, ontological, cultural). It constitutes a social, economic, and political structure and ordering directly based on and profiting from the total appropriation of Indigenous life and land.⁴⁸ 'Eliminat[e], in order to replace', through means ranging from deadly violence to amalgamation, is thus the fundamental orientation of the settler-colonial structure.⁴⁹ In the specific case of Aotearoa, this search for Indigenous erasure took the form of warfare,⁵⁰ blood-quantum policies,⁵¹ an assimilative native schooling system,⁵² and land dispossession⁵³ and is maintained through an underlying monoculturalism in New Zealand institutions and social life observable in contemporary recognition and reconciliation politics.⁵⁴ Māori resistance was articulated from the onset and took a myriad of forms such as petitions, legal cases, land occupations, cultural revitalisation, and armed conflict among others.⁵⁵ Although continuous Indigenous resistance means that the

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁷ Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism and the elimination of the native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4 (2006), pp. 387–409.

⁴⁸ Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang, 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1:1 (2012), pp. 1–40.

⁴⁹ Wolfe, 'Settler colonialism', p. 388.

⁵⁰ Vincent O'Malley, *The New Zealand Wars* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 2019).

⁵¹ Tahu Kukutai, 'Quantum Māori, Māori quantum: Representations of Māori identities in the census, 1857/8–2006', in R. McClean, B. Patterson, and D. Swain (eds), *Counting Stories, Moving Ethnicities: Studies from Aotearoa New Zealand* (Hamilton: University of Waikato, 2012), pp. 27–51.

⁵² Judith Simon and Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *A Civilising Mission? Perceptions and Representations of the Native School System* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001).

⁵³ David Williams, *'Te Kooti tango whenua': The Native Land Court 1864–1909* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 1999).

⁵⁴ Tiopira McDowell, 'Screaming from the shadows: Māori views on the treaty claims settlement process', *Te Pouhere Kōrero Journal*, 8 (2016), pp. 26–47.

⁵⁵ For more on settler colonialism and Indigenous resistance in the Aotearoa context, see Richard Hill, 'Settler colonialism in New Zealand, 1840–1907' (pp. 391–408) and Felicity Barnes, 'Settler colonialism in twentieth-century New Zealand'

settler-colonial project is ever fundamentally incomplete,⁵⁶ this logic of elimination is historically and contemporarily crucial to underpin the settler states' claim of existence and of sovereignty over colonised lands.⁵⁷

These differences in historical processes and in the resulting contemporary contexts undoubtedly resulted in different histories of sovereignty and different orientations of colonised/Indigenous peoples in their relations to the state, their political strategies of resistance, and their political theorising. However, while the specificities of settler colonialism and of the Caribbean colonial experience should not be downplayed, the 'lines between [forms of colonialism] are not hard and fast'.⁵⁸ Settler-colonial theory in particular has been criticised for failing to recognise how different forms of colonialism and exploitative formations such as slavery are often entangled and co-constituted.⁵⁹ On the other hand, by making plantation society the entry point into Caribbean history, many post-colonial scholars have assumed and reproduced Indigenous absence instead of establishing its roots in a previous Indigenous dispossession and elimination similar to settler erasure.⁶⁰ Moreover, settler colonialism is often presented as unique for being in a state of permanently unfinished decolonisation. Yet many Caribbean territories have not experienced formal decolonisation and exist in varying administrative relations to external states. What is more, modernity/coloniality scholars have convincingly argued that coloniality still perdures in the region and that decoloniality is a globally unfinished project.⁶¹ The 'post-colonial' label often applied to the Caribbean occludes these realities. Recent works have argued for the productive connections between Latin American and settler-colonial studies, especially when approaching Indigenous resistance.⁶² The assumption of a binary in conceptualising experiences of colonialism, they deplore, leads to hampering an otherwise productive dialogue between Global South and Global North.

In the wake of this critique, this paper explores how theory produced in the Caribbean context can potentially travel and be applicable to settler-colonial settings. For instance, creolisation scholars have argued for the trans-contextual contributions of creolisation understood as a particular mode of engagement and relationality.⁶³ In doing so, they demonstrated the successful translation and travel of originally Caribbean-rooted theories to the global and their applicability to other contexts with different socio-historical features. In the case of 'strategic entanglement', I posit that the international experience of the (often violent) encounter between colonised/Indigenous peoples and political (Euro)modernity enables its broader conceptual usefulness. Such a strategic entanglement in relation to the concept of sovereignty is for instance already visible in Native American literature. For instance, Dene scholar Glen Coulthard argued for a continued use of

(pp. 439–455), both in Edward Cavanagh and Lorenzo Veracini (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of the History of Settler Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 2017); Ranginui Walker, *Nga tau tohetohe* (Auckland: Penguin, 1987).

⁵⁶ Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A structure, not an event": Settler colonialism and enduring indigeneity, *Lateral*, 5:1 (2016); Svirsky, 'Resistance is a structure'.

⁵⁷ Andrea Smith, 'Heteropatriarchy and the three pillars of white supremacy', in Carole McCann, Seung-kyung Kim, and Emek Ergun (eds), *Feminist Theory Reader* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 141–7.

⁵⁸ Melissa Free, 'Settler colonialism', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 46:3–4 (2018), pp. 876–82 (p. 876).

⁵⁹ Kauanui, "A structure, not an event".

⁶⁰ Allan Greer, 'Settler colonialism and beyond', *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 30:1 (2019), pp. 61–86; Melanie Newton, 'Returns to a native land: Indigeneity and decolonization in the anglophone Caribbean', *Small Axe*, 41 (2013), pp. 108–22; Patrick Wolfe, 'Land, labor and difference: Elementary structures of race', *American Historical Review*, 106:3 (2001), pp. 866–905.

⁶¹ Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality', (2016); available at: <https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/outline-of-ten-theses-on-coloniality-and-decoloniality/>.

⁶² Bianet Castellanos, 'Introduction: Settler colonialism in Latin America', *American Quarterly*, 69:4 (2017), pp. 777–81; Lynn Stephen, 'Settler colonialism in Latin American and Native Studies', *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies*, (2022); Lucy Taylor and Geraldine Lublin, 'Settler Colonial Studies and Latin America', *Settler Colonial Studies*, 11:3 (2021), pp. 259–70.

⁶³ Jane Gordon, *Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau through Fanon* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); Monahan, *The Creolizing Subject*; Kris Sealey, *Creolizing the Nation* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

the language of sovereignty in Indigenous theorisations and struggles, in spite of the associated dangers of reproducing state and capital in a way antithetical to his anti-colonial orientation. He argued for it not only because this is the language often used in Native American contemporary political praxis, but because it cannot be surrendered to modern state sovereignty and settler colonialism as structures of domination and dispossession precisely hinging on an appropriation and denial of Indigenous sovereignty:

In choosing to use the language of land and sovereignty, then, I not only aim to acknowledge that this is the language through which our struggles are most commonly articulated in our communities, but in doing so also register what Audra Simpson would refer to as my refusal to surrender this common language of contestation and resistance over to our enemies.⁶⁴

Nonetheless, his call for a re-appropriation is invariably grounded in a self-reflective revitalisation of traditional values, principles, and cultural practices. Dale Turner similarly defended a resignification of sovereignty from a traditional Indigenous thinking standpoint and explicitly defended the need for Indigenous intellectuals to engage the prevailing normative legal and political discourses – such as sovereignty – in order to do so and to defend their own worldviews.⁶⁵ However, the nature of the Māori discursive relation with the concept of sovereignty is a topic still arguably underdeveloped compared to Native American Indigenous politics. Many crucial discussions of contemporary Māori politics are circumscribed to analytical frames of self-determination or associated *te reo* (Māori language) concepts, thus somehow inadvertently sidelining the question of sovereignty. Through an engagement with the contemporary discursive practices of my interlocutors, the remaining discussion precisely aims to demonstrate that the idea of a strategic entanglement with sovereignty is similarly applicable to Indigenous politics deployed in Aotearoa.

‘Like waves in the sea’: Sovereignty issues in Aotearoa/New Zealand

Sovereignty is arguably one of the most contested political terrains in Māori–Crown relations since the 1840 signing of the treaty of Waitangi between the two parties. Two different texts were produced during this process: the Treaty of Waitangi (the English text) was signed by 39 Māori rangatira (chiefs) while about 480 of them signed *Te Tiriti o Waitangi* (the *te reo* text). Article 1 of the Treaty, on which hinges its predominant legal interpretation, declares that Māori ceded their sovereignty to the British Crown in exchange for the guarantee of their existing property rights as stipulated in Article 2. However, in *Te Tiriti*, signing rangatira accepted the Crown’s *kāwanatanga* – or their right to govern settlers in Aotearoa – while being guaranteed *tino rangatiratanga*⁶⁶ (absolute chieftainship) over Māori people, land, possessions, and *taonga* (cultural and material treasures). *Te Tiriti* is thus often interpreted as an assertion of Māori sovereignty, already recognised by the British Crown five years prior through *He Whakaputanga* (the Declaration of Independence).⁶⁷ However, by translating ‘*kāwanatanga*’ as ‘sovereignty’ and relegating ‘*tino rangatiratanga*’ to mere property rights, the Treaty performed a semantic erasure of Māori sovereignty that would subsequently be a cornerstone in the effective imposition of British – and later settler – sovereignty on Aotearoa. Therefore, as early as 1840, the treaty process stands as an illustration of the tense relation between sovereignty and *tino rangatiratanga* in terms of a contestation between

⁶⁴ Glen Coulthard, ‘Response’, *Historical Materialism*, 24:3 (2016), pp. 92–103 (p. 96).

⁶⁵ Dale Turner, *This Is Not a Peace Pipe: Towards a Critical Indigenous Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

⁶⁶ Literally composed of the emphatic modifier ‘*tino*’, meaning ‘best’, ‘full’, or ‘absolute’, attached to ‘*rangatiratanga*’ often translated as ‘chieftainship’ and referring to the Māori philosophy of authority. Both *rangatiratanga* and *tino rangatiratanga* are translated by ‘sovereignty’ in the Māori online dictionary and are often used interchangeably.

⁶⁷ Vincent O’Malley, *He Whakaputanga: The Declaration of Independence, 1835* (Wellington: Bridget Williams, 2017).

Euromodern and Māori conceptions. Ever since, 'sovereignty issues in Aotearoa are like waves in the sea; as one issue breaks another forms, sometimes predictably, sometimes not'.⁶⁸

For the past 180 years, Māori have been invoking Te Tiriti o Waitangi to call for a new relation with the settler state and the settler population in general. In the 1970s, social, political, and cultural Māori movements crystallised into a 'Māori Renaissance' that would profoundly mark the last decades of the 20th century.⁶⁹ Māori activists and/or communities articulated protests and initiatives centred on Māori needs and concerns, at times explicitly challenging Crown sovereignty and searching for the construction of an alternative configuration of authority. 'Tino rangatiratanga' and 'Māori sovereignty' rose as rallying cries for Māori activism and protest in the 1980s and 1990s, but the latter became increasingly charged as detractors progressively associated it with the straw man figure of 'radical Maoris' in a semantic fight still ongoing today. As a response to the Māori Renaissance, the settler state actively promoted a biculturalist agenda characterised by a cultural sensitivity in state affairs and policy, as well as politics of redress and reconciliation. Māori grassroots movements were able to use the state's bicultural official commitment to wrest some improvements in terms of economic empowerment and access to decision-making processes,⁷⁰ redress processes and devolution of services and resources,⁷¹ or co-management agreements⁷² among others. Nonetheless, state biculturalism has been criticised for being limited to accommodation and cultural tokenism and for falling short of and even curtailing Māori aspirations.⁷³ Promoted as a partnership between the Crown and Māori, it has been exposed for being a power relationship in which Māori voices are incorporated into a state-controlled, state-determined, and non-negotiable framework.⁷⁴ The dissatisfaction surrounding biculturalism originated in large part in that it left the sovereignty question unaddressed and perpetuated the marginalisation of Māori in an unchallenged settler-colonial structure.

Indeed, systemic inequalities affecting Māori are still observable across most of Aotearoa's social and political spheres.⁷⁵ New Zealand initially opposed the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples until the Māori Party got into a governing coalition in 2010. Yet the benefits of this formal endorsement have been seen as relative⁷⁶ since it did not change the fact that 'Māori are not in control of their own fate and that [they] are at the whim of the government of the day'.⁷⁷ As a result, Māori are increasingly questioning the state's authority and sovereignty claims.⁷⁸ Māori activists and politicians acknowledge that tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake, te reo notions

⁶⁸Peter Cleave, *The Sovereignty Game: Power, Knowledge and Reading the Treaty* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1989), p. 3.

⁶⁹Walker, *Nga tau tohetohe*.

⁷⁰Maria Bargh, 'Māori political and economic recognition in a diverse economy', in Deirdre Howard-Wagner, Maria Bargh, and Isabel Altamirano-Jiménez (eds), *The Neoliberal State, Recognition and Indigenous Rights: New Paternalism to New Imaginings* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2018), pp. 293–307.

⁷¹Ann Sullivan, 'The politics of reconciliation in New Zealand', *Political Science*, 68:2 (2016), pp. 124–42.

⁷²Catherine Iorns Magallanes, 'Maori co-governance and/or co-management of nature and environmental resources', in Richard Benton and Robert Joseph (eds), *Waking the Taniwha: Maori Governance in the 21st Century* (Wellington: Thompson Reuters, 2021).

⁷³Dominic O'Sullivan, *Beyond Biculturalism: The Politics of an Indigenous Minority* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2007); Jessica Terruhn, 'Settler colonialism and biculturalism in Aotearoa/New Zealand', in Steven Ratuva (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Ethnicity* (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2019), pp. 867–84.

⁷⁴McDowell, 'Screaming from the shadows'.

⁷⁵Maria Bargh, *Māori and Parliament: Diverse Strategies and Compromises* (Wellington: Huia Books, 2010); Ināia Tonu Nei, *Ināia Tonu Nei – Hui Māori Report* (2019); P. Reid, D. Cormack, and S.-J. Paine, 'Colonial histories, racism and health: The experience of Māori and Indigenous peoples', *Public Health*, 172 (2019), pp. 119–24.

⁷⁶Margaret Mutu, *The State of Māori Rights* (Wellington: Huia Publishers, 2011).

⁷⁷Malcolm Mulholland (ed.), *State of the Māori Nation: Twenty-First-Century Issues in Aotearoa* (Auckland: Reed Books, 2006), p. 12.

⁷⁸Ropata Paora, Teanau Tuiono, Te Ururoa Flavell, Charles Hawksley, and Richard Howson, 'Tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake: Nation, state and self-determination in Aotearoa New Zealand', *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 7:3 (2011), pp. 246–57.

encapsulating Māori sovereignty claims, are crucial axes of contemporary Māori political praxis.⁷⁹ In 2014, the Waitangi Tribunal⁸⁰ asserted in its conclusions to the Te Paparahi o te Raki inquiry (WAI1040) that Ngāpuhi – Aotearoa's largest iwi – did not cede their sovereignty by signing the treaty. Building on these conclusions, Māori leaders Moana Jackson and Margaret Mutu led Matike Mai Aotearoa – a Māori group advocating for constitutional transformation – to a groundbreaking proposal for a specifically Māori reconfiguration of prevailing authority arrangements.⁸¹

The debates surrounding the sovereignty question in international Indigenous scholarship have been similarly replicated in Māori literature since the 1980s. Donna Awatere's *Māori Sovereignty* explicitly placed the question of Māori sovereignty into the broader Aotearoa political scene.⁸² Although previously used by other authors, she may well have popularised the expression 'Māori sovereignty'. However, her cultural-nationalist project articulated against monoculturalism and white supremacy has been criticised by some for resting on an exclusionary and essentialist identity politics that did not challenge the existing political and economic frameworks but instead preached individual cultural immersion.⁸³ The imprecise and often confrontational nature of her political project converted the first book clearly focused on Māori sovereignty into a polemic product within and beyond Māori politics. As a result, many Māori authors prudentially distance themselves from her early work, which may partially explain why following generations have been progressively drawn away from using the phrase 'Māori sovereignty'. However, the Māori sovereignty discourse flourished during the 1980s and 1990s, with articulations encompassing projects ranging from integration to separation. Deployed by a variety of actors from activists to Māori MPs, these were marked by a reinforcement of the discourse of 'tribal sovereignty' – somehow opposed to a nationally encompassing 'Māori sovereignty' – especially boosted by the 1990s' initial reparation settlements with iwi.⁸⁴

Nin Tomas's more recent work exploring the relations between tino rangatiratanga and sovereignty demonstrates the continuing Māori academic interest in the idea of sovereignty in the 21st century.⁸⁵ Tomas questions the possibility of talking about sovereignty from a Māori cultural and philosophical context given the Western roots of the concept. Instead, she argues for the centrality of the Māori term 'tino rangatiratanga' in discussions of Māori political aspirations as conveying more faithfully their political demands, frameworks, and relationships. Following a similar position, others have refused to associate tino rangatiratanga with sovereignty due to fears of confusing the former with the paradigmatic conception of the latter.⁸⁶ However, Tomas maintains the need to consider tino rangatiratanga as equivalent to sovereignty and as encompassing the same kind of rights and questions of authority, while built on a Māori conceptual foundation articulated against 'a Western sovereignty paradigm'.⁸⁷ Once again, this ambivalence between a rejection of sovereignty because identified as a Western construct on one hand, and the need to keep talking about it and to place Māori principles as equivalents with differing contents on the other, clearly speaks to the distinction between concept and conception(s).

⁷⁹ Ibid.; Hone Harawira, 'Hone Harawira on Māori activism and sovereignty', in Kēhaulani Kauanui (ed.), *Speaking of Indigenous Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), pp. 32–45.

⁸⁰ Created in 1975 in the midst of the 'Māori Renaissance', the Tribunal is a permanent commission of inquiry investigating the Crown's breaches of the treaty of Waitangi.

⁸¹ Matike Mai Aotearoa, *He Whakaaro Here Whakaumu Mō Aotearoa* (2016), available at: <http://www.converge.org.nz/pma/MatikeMaiAotearoaReport.pdf>.

⁸² Donna Awatere, *Maori Sovereignty* (Auckland: Broadsheet, 1984).

⁸³ Evan Te Ahu Poata-Smith, 'The political economy of Māori protest politics 1968–1995: A Marxist analysis of the roots of Māori oppression and the politics of resistance', PhD dissertation, University of Otago, 2001.

⁸⁴ Hineani Melbourne, *Maori Sovereignty: The Maori perspective* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett, 1995).

⁸⁵ Nin Tomas, 'Maori concepts and practices of rangatiratanga: "Sovereignty"?', in Julie Evans, Ann Genovese, Alexander Reilly, and Patrick Wolfe (eds), *Sovereignty: Frontiers of Possibility* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013), pp. 220–49.

⁸⁶ Paora et al., 'Tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake', p. 250.

⁸⁷ Tomas, 'Maori concepts', p. 243.

Across Māori scholarship, traditional – although adapted – Māori principles are increasingly used to deal with the ideas embedded within sovereignty in a manner consistent with Māori culture and worldviews. As a result, different – but tightly interconnected – *te reo* terms are presented either directly as translations or as equivalents of the concept (but not of the paradigmatic conception) of sovereignty. Tomas herself asserts that ‘rangatiratanga is a principle that is viewed by many to be analogous with sovereignty’.⁸⁸ Awatere and Melbourne similarly weaved sovereignty and *tino rangatiratanga*,⁸⁹ while Moana Jackson, Fiona Cram, and Ani Mikaere all consider *tino rangatiratanga* to be akin to sovereignty.⁹⁰ Mason Durie privileges the language of *tino rangatiratanga* and *mana motuhake* (separate power) because he considers sovereignty to be constrained by a British conceptual framework, but he still recognises that they are equivalent in the issues they address.⁹¹ Finally, in his influential *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou*, Ranginui Walker alternatively juxtaposes ‘Māori sovereignty’ with *mana motuhake*, *tino rangatiratanga*, and *mana* (power, authority).⁹² Although not without debate, and as in Alfred’s and other Indigenous authors’ thinking, these *te reo* terms generally refer to concrete configurations of authority infused by Māori philosophies about the nature, functions, and exercise of power. In other words, they can be considered as specifically Māori conceptions of the idea of sovereignty, dealing with the same questions but building on an Indigenous metaphysical ground and political philosophy.

Māori conceptual strategies

Discourses of sovereignty thus do not necessarily adopt the language of sovereignty explicitly. They can be constructed around other conceptual strategies. This is especially crucial for claims of Indigenous sovereignty pursuing decolonising projects given their tense relations with the theoretical apparatus of the coloniser. Primarily based on the analysis of original empirical materials, this section now explores contemporary conceptual strategies deployed by Māori in their search for self-determining governance. Different Māori actors across time and space have used different concepts to refer to the same broad idea of sovereignty. Some of my interlocutors pointed out regional differences whereby *tino rangatiratanga* was more commonly used in Taitokerau, *mana motuhake* in Tūhoe, or *arikitanga* in Waikato-Tainui. While early explanations of this conceptual plurality suggested a generational divide,⁹³ all of these concepts are still found in contemporary Māori political thinking and discourse and respond to particular historical or cultural ties that certain *iwi* and *hapū* maintain with certain *te reo* concepts. Māori historian Aroha Harris considered these Māori conceptual variations as the result of both spatial and temporal distinctions, illustrating the evolution and creativity of Māori in articulating their claims although always referring back to the idea of *rangatiratanga*:

all these are the different languages that occur through the 19th century which we already talked about: *mana motuhake o Tūhoe*, *mana whakahare*, the *Kīngitanga* so the kingship ... Which again, you could say, it’s still in that realm of *rangatiratanga* cause it’s still about power and authority. ... And then of course you get into the 70s and 80s there’s a bit of a comeback

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Awatere, *Maori Sovereignty*; Melbourne, *Maori Sovereignty*.

⁹⁰ Moana Jackson, ‘Where does sovereignty lie?’, in Colin James (ed.), *Building the Constitution* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2000); Fiona Cram, ‘Backgrounding Maori views on genetic engineering’, in Joanne Barker (ed.), *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 51–65; Mikaere, *Colonising Myths*.

⁹¹ Mason Durie, *Te mana, te kāwanatanga* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁹² Ranginui Walker, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle without End* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2004).

⁹³ Edward Durie, ‘The treaty in Māori history’, in William Renwick (ed.), *Sovereignty and Indigenous Peoples: The Treaty of Waitangi in International Contexts* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1991), pp. 156–69.

in the use of that actual term, and specifically *tino rangatiratanga*. So not just rangatiratanga but underlying, underscoring it, *tino rangatiratanga*.⁹⁴

This idea of the ‘realm of rangatiratanga’ as encompassing the different languages of Māori sovereignty, or of *tino rangatiratanga* being ‘the umbrella or foundation’⁹⁵ concept for questions of Māori power and authority, appears to be widely shared. Most of my interlocutors used these te reo terms when asked about Māori sovereignty and used them interchangeably. Some even equated *tino rangatiratanga* with sovereignty before I explicitly introduced the topic. Similarly, several WAI1040 Māori claimants and experts argued that (tino) rangatiratanga’s most adequate rendering is ‘sovereignty’.⁹⁶ Where a few interlocutors used other concepts such as *mana motuhake* or *arikitanga*, they also at times used them interchangeably with *tino rangatiratanga*. This article thus uses *tino rangatiratanga* in this encompassing manner, without prejudice to the fact that notions of Māori sovereignty are conveyed by varying contextually dependent te reo concepts.⁹⁷ Independently of the favoured te reo concept, the significance of the idea and claim of Māori sovereignty is seen as something shared across Te Ao Māori and indeed uniting it: ‘At the end of the day, I believe that the one thing that thread us together as Māori is our understanding of what *tino rangatiratanga*, sovereignty, *arikitanga* means to us as a people. Variations, no question about that.’⁹⁸

Overall, Māori legal scholar Carwyn Jones underlined how te reo concepts such as *tino rangatiratanga* or *mana motuhake* dealt with the same ideas and concerns around the constitution of authority as sovereignty does. He actually presented a broad understanding of sovereignty, as a configuration of authority potentially adopting several forms, echoing the concept/conception distinction and the idea of the political work of sovereignty:

If you think about sovereignty as the kind of particular way in which authority, constitutional authority is organised from a kind of largely European tradition, then we might think about *mana motuhake* as being the way of describing how that kind of constitutional authority is organised in the Māori tradition. So I think they’re very much speaking to the same kinds of ideas ... You can think about sovereignty as a way of expressing no particular way of organising that constitutional authority but as a broader idea.⁹⁹

Tino rangatiratanga’s centrality in 21st-century Māori politics was unequivocally stated by Māori broadcaster Dale Husband, while he also introduced it as a claim of independent decision-making over Māori lives and affairs: ‘The Māori term, *tino rangatiratanga* is the catch cry, which is an ability to make your own decisions about your future ... And in many ways, that’s the Māori perception of what sovereignty is. So the ability to act of your own accord rather than being dictated to.’¹⁰⁰ Depending on the conversation, interlocutors thus alternatively construed *tino rangatiratanga* as a form of legal sovereignty pursuing the power to make and enforce law in certain circumstances, or as a form of ruler sovereignty claiming Māori authority over Māori lives and futures. However, it also often exceeded the field of governance to encompass multiple realms such as ‘cultural sovereignty’, ‘knowledge sovereignty’, ‘language sovereignty’, or ‘sovereignty of the

⁹⁴ Interview, Aroha Harris, 4 March 2020.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See Erima Henare (WAI1040, #D14[b]) or Ngāti Hine (WAI1040, #M24).

⁹⁷ For a different approach than the one presented here, discussing Māori sovereignty as *mana motuhake*, see Hemopereki Simon, ‘Te Arewhana Kei Roto i Te Rūma: An Indigenous neo-disputatio on settler society, nullifying Te Tiriti, “Natural resources” and our collective future in Aotearoa New Zealand’, *Te Kaharoa*, 9 (2016), pp. 61–2.

⁹⁸ Interview, David Ratū, 3 December 2019.

⁹⁹ Interview, Carwyn Jones, 25 March 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Dale Husband, 24 November 2020.

self'.¹⁰¹ More significantly, my interlocutors' discourses, independently of the conceptual strategies they used, explicitly questioned the political and metaphysical resolutions of modern state sovereignty embraced by the settler state and advanced the articulation of alternative ones resulting in a new configuration of authority. As exemplified by this comment on tino rangatiratanga, many of my interlocutors emphasised the need for the decisional framework to be based on Māori values and worldviews: 'it is not just being decision-makers within a system that's already set, but being decision-makers about what the system looks like to us'.¹⁰² For them, Māori sovereignty reached beyond consultation or advisory roles within a configuration of authority based on Euromodern political and philosophical resolutions.

Māori scholar and WAI1040 expert witness Merata Kawharu interestingly connected the broad meaning of the tino rangatiratanga claim, its relations with sovereignty, and its firm roots in Māori values and worldviews in a way that clearly revealed the divergence with Euromodern sovereignty, as well as a certain reserve towards the concept of sovereignty:

Māori would also say 'it's our sovereignty that needs to be acknowledged and recognised'. But you ask, what do they mean by that? I think it all stands on these sort of [Māori] values. ... I think today a common phrase that's used a lot is for instance 'by Māori, for Māori'. That's one way of maybe considering what sovereignty can mean. But certainly not the values of sovereignty from European thought and political actions and things.¹⁰³

This divergence in contents between the tino rangatiratanga conception and the paradigmatic and naturalised Euromodern conception of sovereignty led some interlocutors to insist on distancing those terms: 'I don't see them as an exact translation, certainly not as an exact translation in the sense that they come from such different philosophical, legal, political traditions'.¹⁰⁴ Overall though, the ambivalence discussed earlier about whether to use the concept of sovereignty in its English rendering when addressing Indigenous sovereignties was also observed in Māori discourses. Interestingly, interlocutors expressed differing views about the political value of using the language of sovereignty. To some, this was counterproductive. The fact that sovereignty in its paradigmatic conception is deemed to be pre-political, naturalised, and incontestable would make claims of Māori *sovereignty* impossible to be heard, understood, or properly engaged with. Not talking of sovereignty is thus a political strategy:

I probably don't tend to use 'sovereignty', partly because I think it creates a distraction for some people. It's not that I don't think the term is necessarily the right term, but you start talking about Māori sovereignty and people start to freak out a little bit. ... So I think there are kind of political reasons for why we might choose other terms as well.¹⁰⁵

Others actually saw this impact of the word sovereignty as something to be politically mobilised to force a questioning of the existing political arrangements, mentioning the 'shock value' of the term. According to this stance, talking of sovereignty is actually a way to convey an unmistakable challenge to the settler state and to Western political thinking; a way to circumvent the relegation of these Indigenous challenges to more limited claims of cultural diversity, minority rights, or multiculturalism, or to forms of authority carved out of the modern state's sovereign metaphysical and political resolutions. Instead of relegating to incomprehensibility, using the language of sovereignty is to be understood at the right pitch, even if not heard: 'sovereignty, in that context especially, was probably more challenging because people could understand what sovereignty means. But if you

¹⁰¹ Cleave, *The Sovereignty Game*.

¹⁰² Interview, Carwyn Jones, 25 March 2020.

¹⁰³ Interview, Merata Kawharu, 2 December 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Claire Charters, 25 May 2020.

¹⁰⁵ Interview, Carwyn Jones, 25 March 2020.

said rangatiratanga in the 90s, nobody would have understood what you were talking about.¹⁰⁶ Adopting the language of sovereignty is thus a conceptual strategy born out of a certain pragmatism: ‘the adoption of the word has really come about because we felt like the rest of the country didn’t understand what we’re on about. It was only if we used the language of, you know, the colonisers that they would get what we meant.’¹⁰⁷ Jason Pou, Māori lawyer in the WAI1040 inquiry, went even further and defended using the concept in English, as anything less than sovereignty would be untrue to Te Tiriti and to Māori aspirations:

I think we have to maintain the language [of sovereignty], otherwise if we don’t maintain the language we water down what our tūpuna (ancestors) signed up to. ... I think in the early 2000s or around the 90s, they equated tino rangatiratanga to self-determination. Self-determination can only exist if there’s a hegemon. Which calling it self-determination is the removal of the ‘tino’. So I think we have to talk about [tino rangatiratanga] in those terms [of sovereignty]. I think the Māori aspiration toward sovereignty is ongoing and it’s real. And I don’t think that’s anything that should be marginalised in any way.¹⁰⁸

Pou’s critique of other conceptual strategies such as ‘self-determination’ to encapsulate contemporary Māori claims is more widely shared. Māori scholar Valmaine Toki similarly argues against understanding tino rangatiratanga as ‘self-determination’ because the latter is derived from state sovereignty – instead of independent from it – and circumscribed by a Western international legal framework.¹⁰⁹ Politically speaking, using the vocabulary of sovereignty is to recognise and embrace the claim emanating from many Indigenous peoples to be considered in equal standing to the states they inhabit in terms of authority construction processes. It is to foreground the potential of Indigenous political discourses and projects to trouble and rearticulate the political work of sovereignty. Therefore, deploying the concept of sovereignty when addressing Indigenous claims, both analytically and politically, is to take a stance in the ‘critical language game’ surrounding it.¹¹⁰ It is to foreground the depth, scope, and transformational potential of such claims.

However, most interlocutors generally agreed that te reo concepts were more appropriate in contexts not dependent on communication with non-Māori. Seen as more truthful to the Māori worldviews and philosophies that infuse the Māori conception of sovereignty, te reo concepts are thus generally preferred as they represent visual and phonetic markers that their particular contents are different from those of the paradigmatic conception of sovereignty. To some extent, such a marked differentiation and distancing runs the risk of reinforcing the conflation between concept and paradigmatic conception. Yet this conflation is often nuanced by the affirmation that tino rangatiratanga constitutes the ‘closest term’ or an ‘equivalent’ to sovereignty. Both notions are presented as dealing with similar questions and issues, but diverging conceptions are emphasised by keeping a safe distance with the vocabulary used by the settler state. This ambivalence whereby Māori political thinking distances itself from sovereignty without fully turning its back on what the concept encapsulates is characteristic of Matike Mai Aotearoa’s discourse and emanated more broadly from the language used by most Māori in the community discussions nourishing the report:

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Aroha Harris, 4 March 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Interview, Moana Tuwhare, 5 March 2021.

¹⁰⁸ Interview, Jason Pou, 14 December 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Valmaine Toki, ‘Maori seeking self-determination or tino rangatiratanga? A note’, *Journal of Maori and Indigenous Issues*, 5 (2017), pp. 134–44. This is not to say that the language of self-determination is totally absent from Māori politics. But in the discourse studied here, sovereignty was privileged, and self-determination was at best understood as an internal aspect of tino rangatiratanga or Māori sovereignty.

¹¹⁰ Simpson, *Mohawk interruptus*, p. 105.

when we were engaged in those conversations with Māori communities, they would use tino rangatiratanga and mana motuhake to kind of capture the kinds of ideas which I think are encompassed within the concept of sovereignty. I guess the point in Matike Mai, in the report, is that having this word ‘sovereignty’ in it ... In some ways is sort of premised upon a particular way of organising power. And so I think that’s why the report sort of shifts away from using that particular term.¹¹¹

The deployment of traditional, or at least historic, te reo concepts is thus a conscious move to distance themselves from the Euromodern philosophical and political resolutions of modern state sovereignty. As some interlocutors noted, tino rangatiratanga has not travelled through time without changes and a certain reconstruction. However, it firmly claims a recovery – and adaptation – of Māori political and philosophical principles that have been transmitted through generations and which now inform their contemporary Māori sovereignty project. Therefore, I argue that Māori contemporary politics is marked by a strategic entanglement with the concept of sovereignty itself. In the same way that Māori socio-political actors’ relations to the settler state combine refusal and engagement in the pursuit of tino rangatiratanga,¹¹² they also can be said to work both within and against sovereignty. Although the Māori political thought engaged with in this paper should not be conceived as an outright rejection of sovereignty, the transformative scope of their tino rangatiratanga politics should not be understated. As Bonilla argues in the Guadeloupean case, these Māori actors work against the metaphysics of political modernity but still have to think through its normative categories.¹¹³ This is what I understand by a strategic entanglement with the concept of sovereignty.

In the pursuit of tino rangatiratanga, Māori political thought exhibits the two elements of Bonilla’s definition towards the idea of sovereignty: ‘selective engagement and strategic retreat’.¹¹⁴ As seen throughout this paper, different Māori actors consciously mobilise the concept in a rearticulated form in accordance with their cultural and philosophical grounds, as well as their political aspirations. Many interlocutors and scholars distance themselves from the Euromodern conception, ideal, and practices without totally breaking with the language of political modernity. Yet, depending on contexts and needs, they also retreat from an explicit attachment to the sovereignty concept, especially when deemed too constraining or problematic. This complex relation between prudent distancing and engagement through productive rearticulation was distinctly present in my interlocutors’ thinking:

I wouldn’t throw the baby out with the bathwater. I don’t think there needs to be a movement to throw [sovereignty] out of the window and say it’s not applicable. Yes, it is. ... [But] I hesitate to be too strongly wedded to this term sovereignty because it’s distracting. Because it’s still so embedded in that value system from Europe, that political thought. And I think there’s more work to be done to understand Māori systems of leadership, which is really what we should be focusing on. If sovereignty, to adopt from Europe again, is going to help with that, ok. But it’s within that package of understanding what [Māori] leadership is about.¹¹⁵

This discursive strategic entanglement is grounded in my interlocutors’ awareness of the significance of the sovereignty concept and of the process of political definition it implies, and therefore, in an awareness of the dangers of giving it up and of fundamentally disconnecting the agenda for tino rangatiratanga from sovereignty. To borrow from Māori artist and curator Nigel Borell,

¹¹¹ Interview, Carwyn Jones, 25 March 2020.

¹¹² Te Kawehau Hoskins and Avril Bell, ‘Being present: Embodying political relations in Indigenous encounters with the Crown’, *Contemporary Political Theory*, 20 (2021), pp. 502–523; Ani Mikaere, *Colonising Myths*.

¹¹³ Bonilla, *Non-Sovereign Futures*, p. xiv.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹¹⁵ Interview, Merata Kawharu, 02 December 2020.

‘sovereignty is still the name of the game’.¹¹⁶ Māori are aware of the significance of – and to some extent inescapability from, at least for now – sovereignty in our contemporary world, structured as it is by political Euromodernity. They are cognisant of the need to address it, albeit to resignify it, if they do not want to be circumscribed by it. This claim was explicitly made by some of my interlocutors but was more generally implicit in the continued use by many of the language of sovereignty – even if significantly intertwined with *te reo* concepts. The Māori actors engaged with here may ‘play the game’ differently with a view to enacting different results but, willingly or not, they still recognise the significance of ‘the game’.

Conclusion

Strategic entanglement thus functions as what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls a ‘protective strategy’ through which Indigenous peoples simultaneously engage and disengage, learn and unlearn the Western system and its multiple components with an emphasis on creative imagination.¹¹⁷ Sovereignty, an apparently fundamentally Western notion interlinked with coloniality, is nonetheless appropriated, deconstructed, and reconstructed by Indigenous peoples in their efforts towards achieving decolonisation and control over their own lives. This paper has shown how such a dual dynamic of dis-/engagement with the vocabulary of political (Euro)modernity is a common strategy in the articulation of colonised peoples’ political theorising across the Caribbean, North America, and Aotearoa. Although not without political costs, Indigenous peoples continually ponder and make these discursive and conceptual decisions in the midst of articulating their struggles.

For the Māori socio-political actors included here, strategic entanglement is in part a response to the difficult question of ‘how to imagine themselves outside of the interstices of Empire while operating within it’.¹¹⁸ Contemporary Māori politics thus sits somewhere in between turning away from the language of sovereignty and engaging with it (in a transformative move). In part, this finding asks questions about the possibility for our political imagination to fully reach outside the sovereignty framework. Yet this paper also contends that this Indigenous insistence on contesting the Euromodern monopoly over sovereignty conceptualisation results from their awareness of the concept’s political potential and of its impact on their political possibilities. This complex orientation simultaneously recognising the integral – and almost inescapable – part that sovereignty still plays in processes of contemporary political construction, and the dangers of disregarding or discarding it, while asserting the need to transform it in order to enact more emancipatory, progressive, and plural processes, is a concern similarly found in the work of several non-Indigenous IR and political theorists.¹¹⁹ On the contrary, ‘those who would banish sovereignty as an outworn fiction are really only trying to shirk the whole problem of politics’.¹²⁰ Renouncing engagement with the question of sovereignty is renouncing engagement with the production and definition of the political.

Additionally, this paper has suggested that, out of the ambivalence of strategic entanglement, an alternative to the dichotomy between the status quo of settler sovereignty and ‘the fictions of postcolonial sovereignty’¹²¹ may emerge. Indeed, Indigenous claims of sovereignty contradict

¹¹⁶ Dale Husband, ‘Nigel Borell: Sovereignty is still the name of the game’, *E-Tangata* (27 June 2021), available at: <https://e-tangata.co.nz/arts/nigel-borell-sovereignty-is-still-the-name-of-the-game/>.

¹¹⁷ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, ‘Decolonising the sociology of tangihanga’, Keynote at the Sociological Association of Aotearoa New Zealand Conference, Auckland, 3 December 2019.

¹¹⁸ Simpson, *Mohawk interruptus*, p. 26.

¹¹⁹ Rob Walker, Karena Shaw, and Raia Prokhovnik all share this orientation. See also Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

¹²⁰ Robin Collingwood, *Essays in Political Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

¹²¹ Yarimar Bonilla, ‘Ordinary sovereignty’, *Small Axe*, 17:3 (2013), pp. 152–65 (p. 163).

the legitimacy claims of nation-states and unsettle the foundations of the politico-legal international order. The tenets of political (Euro)modernity are openly and profoundly questioned. The formulation of such an alternative is almost as significant for Indigenous aspirations of self-rule as it is to more broadly questioning and rethinking our modern political assumptions. Indeed, the naturalisation of the modern sovereign state as universal political form has not only allowed the forgetting and erasure of its founding violences and marginalisations, it has also limited our political imagination regarding how to construct and organise political communities. Indigenous political interventions in the sovereignty field confront both aspects. What is more, the Indigenous resignification of sovereignty contained in their strategic entanglement would most certainly entail a reconfiguration of the international mode of representation currently rooted in the paradigmatic conception of sovereignty. In this sense, it would contribute to the already ongoing efforts of global Indigenous politics to re-evaluate and complicate the international.¹²²

In conclusion, Indigenous political thought, produced both by academic and non-academic subjects, constitutes a significant locus from which to question and 'de-think'¹²³ sovereignty. This paper's observation of a strategic entanglement with sovereignty in Indigenous discourses should function as a reminder of the importance of not abandoning or sidelining the vocabulary of sovereignty when engaging with Indigenous politics, within both political and academic practice. Indeed, to do so may contribute to misrepresenting and thwarting their political aspirations. Furthermore, it would also overlook their contribution to the reformulation of the concept towards new political imaginaries and configurations. On the contrary, considering these Indigenous philosophical and political interventions as articulating different answers to the questions encompassed by sovereignty opens a path for the reversal of the historical epistemological relation between the West and Indigenous peoples, one where the lessons contained within the Indigenous politics of sovereignty may inform the questioning and transcendence of the predominant Euromodern political imagination and arrangements.

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¹²²Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (London: Routledge, 2016).

¹²³Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness*, p. 63.