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Ontological security as 'being-with': Indigenous sovereignty and securing against the colonial nation-state

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ABSTRACT

The range and diversity of ideas that comprise the conceptual terrain of ontological security (OS) – the security of being – hold much value for understanding political geographies, and how hegemonic and oppressive relationships threaten our collective, multi-species being in the world. Yet, the directed study of (ontological) security has largely been framed through what Mignolo (2011) calls a 'coloniality of knowledge' that does particular kinds of work in the world, including a dismissal of the possibility of understanding OS as formed through a relational interdependence that is positioned against coloniality. This paper foregrounds Indigenous and decolonial scholarship on relationality as a means of articulating a framework for OS as *being-with*. OS as being-with is constituted by three inter-related themes: a) an ontological dis-embedding from modernist ideals of 'security' and 'autonomy'; b) confrontation with the ontological insecurities that are produced and sustained through the modern state; c) re-articulation of security embedded in a relational worldview that recognises a multiplicity of relations located in place and diversely positioned to secure against the colonial nation-state. As such, OS framed as *being-with* is also always co-constituted by *being-against* coloniality in anti-racist struggle. To illustrate this argument, the paper uses a case study of the Voice referendum in Australia in 2023, to discuss how this powerful example, in its long history of Indigenous sovereignty, is an attempt at more open-ended, critically attuned effort towards OS as *being-with*, with matters of justice and reconciliation at its core. Yet its location within the settler colonial nation-state means it is positioned at, and thwarted by, the 'crosshairs of imperial debris' (Radcliffe, 2017:436).

1. Introduction

"I looked at the Australian flags that had sprung up on fence posts and house gates the day after the referendum and it was like the country was signaling that it had won a war. No Australia, no, you just put a new lick of paint on the explorer's statue, regilt the form of the colonial massacrists, the old lie reupholstered in royal cloth, but merely wrapping the same old corpse. That body will continue to rot and pollute, soon to stain that rich brocade so that all the world will see our mendacity, our churlish meanness of spirit"

In the aftermath of the 2023 Australian Indigenous Voice Referendum, Indigenous Australian writer, and farmer Bruce Pascoe (2023) expresses visceral anger at the 'shameful victory' of the 'No' vote (Statement for our People and Country, 2023). The Referendum was seen by many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and non-Indigenous Australians as a key moment in Australian political history to chart a more robust and authentic course to reconciliation by

giving Indigenous peoples a constitutional 'Voice'. The painful disappointment at being rejected by most voting Australians has both shaken and solidified solidarities, and Indigenous sovereignty, which 'has never been ceded', has endured throughout (Uluru Statement, 2023). Pascoe's words are not representative but convey the post-referendum mood of hopelessness in the long durée of settler-colonialism. Whilst the example is located in a very specific moment, it echoes the political wrestling occurring in many settler-colonial and (former) colonial powers surrounding the denial of history, the flaunting of inequality and greed, the buttressing of borders, and the pervasive securitization of minority populations that defeats human being. These violent mechanisms support the ontological security (OS) of the colonial nation-state whilst simultaneously producing ontological insecurities of 'others' (Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). But as Koopman (2009:294) has argued, 'other securities are happening', other ways of being in the world, other nonviolent meanings of OS that align more directly to relational multi-species interdependence in defiance of regressive, individualist nation-building (De Leon, 2020; Escobar, 2020; Untalan, 2020). This

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paper extrapolates these diverse positions, both conceptually and politically, through a case study of the 2023 Voice Referendum and the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty in Australia.

The paper has three aims: First, bridging scholarship in human geography and international relations, the conceptual terms upon which OS is derived is critically reviewed, extending a post-colonial critique through engagement with Indigenous scholarship and responding to calls to 'decolonize' security (Adamson, 2020; Beier, 2016; Salter et al., 2019). Grounded in the assumption that multiple ontologies exist, the paper attempts to overcome what Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020:240) call a conceptual 'impasse' in the study of OS presenting an argument for OS as the security of *being-with*. Inspired in part by Gibson-Graham's (2011) plea for a 'feminist project of belonging' and Escobar's (2020) 'pluri-versal politics', I read OS through the lens of Indigenous scholarship on relationality as the basis for an autonomous, multi-species communal politics that works to secure *against* the colonial nation-state. Extending the post-colonial critique, I argue that dominant framings of OS rely on the liberal, autonomous self and its linear continuity as the bastion of OS. This limits the parameters of political analysis because it is compromised by its embeddedness in the logic of domination and oppression (heteropatriarchy, coloniality, racial capitalism). As such, the *directed* study of OS is inflected by what Mignolo (2011), drawing on Quijano (2000), calls the 'coloniality of knowledge' - the simultaneous suppression of Indigenous knowledges and hegemonic imposition of Eurocentric systems of knowledge that silence, extract or appropriate Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Escobar (2020:xxxi) stresses that 'most worlds live under ontological occupation'. In these worlds, it is impossible to rethink security in epistemically just ways whilst silencing millennia of (geo-) knowledge and erasing the violent histories of extraction, exploitation and securitization of Indigenous communities and people of colour (Chandler & Chipato, 2021; Escobar, 2020; Kuokkanen, 2019; Whyte, 2018; Yusoff, 2018), that continue into the 'settler-colonial present' (Simpson, 2017). In that sense, *being-with* also requires *being against* the securitizing colonial nation-state (cf. Chipato & Chandler, 2022). The aim here, then, is to show the *conceptual possibilities* of OS when underpinned by Indigenous meanings of relationality and played out through autonomous communal politics in settler-colonial spaces.

A second aim is to work with discomfort by reading Indigenous scholarship with a self-critical and accountable lens, acknowledging that my positionality requires being open to critique and that a central thread of the paper involves a process of disembedding and confrontation of my own biases and assumptions. The diversity of Indigenous thought is such that I have selected a specific case study, and specific texts to highlight the issues, but recognise that this is a partial, situated learning process. A third aim is to show the immediate relevance of this concept to responding to real-world problematics and what it can *do politically* in particular struggles. I focus here on the 2023 The Voice Referendum in Australia and analyse two short texts - the Uluru Statement from the Heart written as a proposal for the referendum, and an Open letter written after the referendum representing (some) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices. The texts illuminate how relational modes of OS buttressed the Voice proposal and how its rejection can be interpreted as the defensive continuity of the Australian state but also the refusal of some Indigenous spokespersons to work within the existing legal and political infrastructure of the settler-colonial state. This brief but important example of the struggle for OS for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians serves to highlight the application of OS (as *being-with*) to wider analysis of the dynamics of justice-seeking claims in 'the settler colonial present' (Simpson, 2017, p. 22).

1.1. Ontological security: A multi-scalar concept

Since the Scottish psychoanalyst R.D. Laing (1959) introduced *ontological security/insecurity* as a conceptual dualism to understand sanity and madness, a flourishing, interdisciplinary subfield of

Ontological Security Studies (OSS) has evolved linking international relations, political geography, sociology and psychology. Laing (1959) understood the ontologically secure person as having *autonomous* identity and agency, a sense of one's own reality *in relation* to others and the external world. Conversely, ontological insecurity, he claimed, is characterised by a disconnection from the external world and a precarious sense of autonomy: 'The individual in the circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question' (Laing, 1959, p. 41). Mapping this onto world politics is not immediately obvious but scholars in OSS have skillfully worked to theorise how states, political elites and groups invest in actions to preserve their 'self-identity' and 'security of being', countering a preoccupation with 'physical security' concerns. In IR, OS has been read primarily through Giddens' (1991:92) critique of modernity, where he deploys OS to explain how individuals navigate the perennial uncertainties and risks of modern life through a 'protective cocoon' of OS and the 'the continuity of their self-identity'. Key works that are highly relevant to the current political conjuncture as far-right populism continues to rally against minority rights across the world are: Mitzen's (2006) essay on the strategic security alliances made among EU member states to preserve the stability of collective self-identity as a 'civilizing power'; Kinnvall's (2006) detailed analysis of Hindu nationalism has been mobilised in India in the context of insecurities produced through amorphous globalisation; OS and populism (Browning, 2018; Steele & Homolar, 2019; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022) and OS in the struggle for state sovereignty (Krickel-Choi and Ching-Chang, 2022). This wide-ranging scholarship offers a comprehensive analysis of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic security-seeking actions in international politics (see also: Steele, 2008; Croft, 2012; Rumelili, 2018; Della Salla, 2018).

In political geography, OS has largely been engaged with by feminist scholars focusing on the 'finer' and entangled scales of security (Hyndman, 2001, p. 219) where global and state security are expressed through (and inscribed on) bodies/minds as fear, violence and anxiety (Pain & Staeheli, 2014; also Philo, 2014). For example, geographers have drawn attention to the embodied ontological *insecurities* produced through global regimes of asylum, detention and incarceration (Conlan & Heimstra, 2017; Hyndman and Giles, 2017; Noxolo, 2014); everyday racism and Islamophobia (Botterill et al., 2020; Hopkins et al., 2017; Nicolson, 2023); housing inequalities (Genz & Helbrecht, 2023); and through the stigmatisation of place and communities (De Backer, 2022; Sullivan & Akhtar, 2019). The focus on political agency and its potential for social justice across these scales is an important counterpoint to the state-centric analyses in classical geopolitics and IR, centering the interactions, resistances and confrontations with systemic injustice (white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism) that 'animate' social change (Williams & Massaro, 2013). In order then, as Hyndman (2019:4) suggests, to 'consolidate a thoroughly feminist and anti-racist political geography', there is a need to upend and expand ontological politics rather than 'succumb to Orientalist rescue narratives or produce regimes of care and security that subjectify ...'. It is in this progressive space that an alternative conceptual vision for OS as *being-with*, undergirded by an ethic of relationality that simultaneously prioritises multi-species care with a politics of refusal and resistance, is required.

1.2. Moving beyond the 'impasse': Posthumanist and Postcolonial critiques

More recently, a series of critical challenges has been mobilised in IR around the way OS is theorised (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). First, the 'scaling-up' of Laing's individuated self is seen as problematic because states do not have the same kinds of psychological needs as individuals, and treating states as monolithic institutions obscures the myriad relations that constitute them (Lebow, 2016). Moreover, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi and Chen (2023:882)

argue that the 'pathological' insecurity of Laing's schizoid patients does not translate accurately to the behaviours of states as analysed in IR and there is a considerable conceptual slippage to be resolved (also see Ehrkamp et al., 2018). As Laing (1959) himself noted, whilst 'we' all might experience some of the same existential crises momentarily, being ontologically insecure exhibits a much stronger force or persistence because of the quite particular existential setting at stake. A second challenge concerns the influence of Giddens in OSS which has produced a 'status quo bias' that is 'tilted toward fear' and precipitates 'conservative and reactionary effects' (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, pp. 248–249)¹. Rossdale (2015) has challenged the conservatism of OS suggesting it hampers political critique and masks the power relations that constitute insecurities. Combined, these critiques reject the anchoring of OS in the foundational subject, i.e. the European Enlightenment construct of the individual as autonomous, self-regarding and self-regulating positioned as the 'normal' baseline and the tendency to theorise along a linear temporality, subsumed by conditions of modernity and globalisation. Of relevance to Geographers, is the symptomatic territoriality of modernist analyses and nested hierarchies between different 'levels' or 'scales' of analysis (region, state, group) without much attention to their inherent entanglements, fluidities and resistances. Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020:240) and other critical IR scholars resolve this 'impasse' by urging us to look back and think beyond, albeit in different directions: towards the existential origins referred to by Laing, such as Heidegger, Tillich and Kierkegaard (see: Arfi, 2020; Berenskoetter, 2020; Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020); to the post-structuralism of Lacan (Eberle, 2017; Kinnvall & Svensson, 2022); and to post-colonial and post-secular readings of OS grounded in other non-individuated/relational 'ways of being' (See Cash & Kinnvall, 2017; Croft & Vaughan-Williams, 2017; Shani, 2017; Untalan, 2020).

In IR, a more expansive reading of OS as '*security of becoming*' has taken shape, evolving in relation to social and political change rather than something that an individual might possess unequivocally (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). These developments inspire a *relational* reading of OS that pushes at the boundaries of subjectivity (Elbe, in Salter et al., 2019; Pratt, 2017). For some, this leads to a distinctly posthumanist relationality where the individuated, autonomous subject is dismissed in favour of synthesis, assemblage and the entanglement of minds, bodies and matter (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Bradiotti, 2008). For example, OS has been discussed through Judith Butler's reading of relationality and the non-autonomous subject as a proxy for *ontological insecurity* (i.e., the lack of a stable self-identity) (Rossdale, 2015). For Rossdale, the radical potential of *insecurity* is an important space of deliberation and resistance, rejecting OS as the end goal. However, in doing so, a dialectic of security-autonomy/insecurity-nonautonomy is

¹ Giddens' thesis on OS has been a rich conceptual resource for the analysis of statecraft and nationalism in IR and political geography. Giddens proposed that existential anxiety is mitigated through the 'reflexive project of the self' and the maintenance of stable (biographical) narratives through everyday routines and rituals as the traditional 'certainties' of social life are eroded (Giddens, 1991, p. 6). Firmly couched in theories of modernity Giddens' conceptual framing has directed multi-level analysis of how the modern nation state states preserve OS, materially and emotionally. This analysis is both 'exogenous' (the intersubjective behaviours of states) and 'endogenous' (the state as provider of stable narratives for its citizens) (Kinnvall et al., 2018). Yet, the key critique offered by Kinnvall and Mitzen (2020:240) is that OS is grounded in a 'politics of fear' precisely *because* of the need to invest in the status quo through stabilizing narratives and practice, which mutes the possibility of radical change, whilst keeping underlying anxieties intact. This critique has important implications for challenging Westphalian understanding of sovereignty - as a formalized, legal instrument of protection and 'framework for existence' for the state (Krickel-Choi & Chen, 2023, p. 12). If sovereignty is foundational for state OS, then the rejection of indigenous sovereignty, as well as the ascription of misjudged 'rights' vis-a-vis claims for sovereignty, is an existential threat to indigenous futures as I go on to discuss in this paper.

produced that is too simplistic and one that is underpinned by a contention that ontological insecurity can (and perhaps should) be a radical choice. This critique is hard to accept in the context of the detailed psychoanalysis of Laing on the conditions of ontological insecurity - the feeling of implosion, petrification and depersonalisation experienced by the ontologically insecure individual, in my view, is not a radical choice. Rather, it can be a desperate, dreadful and unjust condition which has been empirically detailed through accounts in the geographies of incarceration and detention, for example (see Conlan & Heimstra, 2017).

This paper aligns more directly to the postcolonial approach to OS, which provides a vital critique against the bordering discourses and practices of the (settler-) colonial nation-state and foregrounds post-colonial resistances in diverse locations of South Asia (Kinnvall & Svensson, 2017), South America (Viera, 2018), North America (De Leon, 2020), Europe (Cash, 2017; Innes, 2017) and the Pacific region (Untalan, 2020). These critiques have highlighted the limited conceptual vocabulary of mainstream OSS and argued for more diverse articulations of self-other relations. The absence of this, they argue, reproduces Westphalian hierarchies and is preoccupied with analysing dominant state imaginaries for 'Self' preservation over the resistances of postcolonial 'Others' (Untalan, 2020). Shani (2017), for example, discusses the possibility of a postcolonial form of *human* security that is post-liberal, post-realist and capable of understanding hybrid understandings of security based on religious meanings of communal security in Sikhism. It is not enough, he argues, to incorporate 'local' perspectives in the management of security because 'colonisation re-articulated local cosmological identities into global narratives of religion and nation which became resources upon which post-colonial peoples could draw in their search for ontological security' (Shani, 2017, p. 283). Hybridity is also a focus of Untalan's (2020) critique of Ontological Security Theory using a case study of Okinawan resistance to US and Japanese state actors. Untalan (2020) bypasses Cartesian dualisms to centre the transformative potential of postcolonial Otherness as a basis for understanding OS as 'mutual coexistence' and 'interstitiality'. 'A post-colonial ontological security', Untalan (2020:48) argues, 'is not derived from binaries but from their dissolution'. Rather, an ambiguous 'third hybrid' (Ling cited in Untalan, 2020, p. 48) is produced where Self and Other co-exist, androgynous and unsettling the 'essentialising gaze' of the oppressor through interstitial, everyday practices of resistance.

Recognition of 'other securities' (cf. Koopman, 2011) is a key mechanism for re-articulating OS, and postcolonial approaches have centred 'other' voices in places beyond the Global North and provided a potent critique of Westphalian geopolitics and its conceptual repertoires. Few OS scholars, however, have engaged with Indigenous knowledges to articulate these critiques and this paper argues that rethinking security requires a more radical ontological disembedding so that 'security' could be understood as constituted by emplaced and 'situated' relations. As De Leon (2018:33) has discussed in research exploring meanings of security among Lakota communities in the Great Plains in North America, there are 'glimpses into new constellations of being' through learning with Indigenous knowledges. Security here is understood as spiritual existence and resistance, unity and balance, and multigenerational continuity that provides a 'sense of Self through time' (Delahanty and Steele cited in De Leon, 2020:39). This re-articulation of Self-Other relations is demonstrated through new forms of power in Indigenous resistance to extraction and land dispossession, with De Leon starting his piece with a powerful account of Indigenous protest against the Dakota Pipeline when ten people held together in prayer stood peacefully against riot police. Security arises here through other formulations of time and space based on Indigenous ontologies with notions of justice front and centre.

It is this reading that inspires the re-working of OS that follows. Having reviewed the conceptual terms on which OS is based, the paper now presents a framework for OS as *being with*. First, I extend the

postcolonial critique, some of which still remains conceptually rooted in Giddens (e.g. Untalan's use of Giddensian 'reflexivity'), by arguing for a complete *disembedding* of OS from its ontological scaffolding towards a 'more attuned politics of belonging' (Gibson-Graham, 2011, p. 3) which 'de-links' security from its modernist ideal (Mignolo, 2011). This is not to deny the possibility of security per se, nor is it to accept biographical incompleteness and insecurity as emancipatory vis-a-vis a violent and controlling security state (cf. Rosedale, 2015). Thinking with Indigenous theories of relationality, OS is constituted through, and in tension with, multiple 'others', rather than achieved as an individuated, autonomous 'self'. This reading aligns with a 'coloniality of knowledge' approach that argues for 'epistemic disobedience' and a disembedding from hegemonic knowledge forms (Mignolo, 2009). Second, this attunement must involve the *confrontation* of the highly differentiated discursive and embodied insecurities and the circulation of different forms of injustice produced through the colonial-capitalist nation-state, as Hyndman (2019) and others make clear in their work on OS and displacement. The ontological *insecurity* produced through bordering ideologies and practices (often to preserve a State's pathological self-identity) might be understood as *being-without*, as a Lacanian 'lack', or precarious sense of autonomy in the Laingian sense. Examples of such might be the displacement and dislocation from place leading to a feeling on non-belonging; assimilation into (settler) colonial and racial capitalist modes of living; and the loss of intergenerational knowledge and denial of Indigenous relationality. Finally, OS as *being-with* involves a *re-articulation* of security vis-a-vis social and spatial justice that is grounded in notions of relational autonomy, political solidarity, and a 're-earthing' in place (McGeachan, 2014), a recovery of a place in and with the world. In the next section, I unpack further the conceptual framework of OS as *being-with* drawing specifically on Indigenous relationality as a core value for understanding the transformative security-seeking actions deployed against the (settler) colonial nation-state (De Leon, 2020; Kuokkanen & Sweet, 2022).

1.3. Who are 'we'? Indigenous relationality and the 'coloniality of knowledge'

For Zoe Todd (2016:17) Indigenous knowledges are 'a body of thinking that is living and practiced by peoples with whom we all share reciprocal duties as citizens of shared territories (be they physical or the ephemeral)'. Being is the basis for knowledge, so to deny Indigenous knowledge is to deny Indigenous being (also see Hunt, 2014). This echoes Arturo Escobar's (2020:xiv) contention that 'modernist forms of politics stem from ontologies that are deeply embedded in the negation of the full humanity of multiple others and the nonhuman'. In a cogent critique of posthumanism and decolonial accounts of relationality, Chipato and Chandler (2022) argue that a key problem in many accounts of relationality, which they suggest undermines the very basis of relationality as critique, is the claim to overcome the Human/Nature divide through an affirmative politics of belonging and non-hierarchical ethical encounters. For Chipato and Chandler, such a position is only ever possible if grounded in a modernist understanding of the 'Human', which depends upon the preservation of anti-Blackness and Blackness as 'non-being'. Following this logic, they argue for a 'paraontological' position that provides a counterpoint to the 'ontological cuts and imaginaries' of the modernist world, one that 'unsettles being, rather than affirming alternative ways of knowing and engaging' (Chipato & Chandler, 2022:290). They incisively claim that both decolonial and new materialist approaches to relationality do not go far enough in 'examining and critiquing the foundation of the world of modernity' because such idealist imaginaries remain firmly underscored by coloniality (ibid., 291). Extending this idea, through the modernist gaze indigeneity might also be articulated as a state of non-being in the settler colonial state, but Indigenous ways of being have always been, somewhere, they both precede and are enmeshed within (and against) the colonial nation-state, and in the Indigenous Australian case,

'sovereignty has never been ceded' (Uluru statement, 2023). In setting out a critical geography of indigeneity (articulated as *process*, not as subject), Radcliffe (2017:220) argues that there is a need to examine indigeneity not only as 'relational with nature' but as 'relational with deeply historical, institutionalized and power-inflected ontologies'. This is a useful heuristic for thinking through OS - to *disembed* OS conceptually from its modernist roots and read security as grounded in existing Indigenous struggles for (relational) autonomy vis-a-vis the modern nation-state, which this paper seeks to do.

Indigenous interpretations of relationality are not ontologically flat; rather, they are constituted in specific places and in tension with multiple others. Wildcat and Voth (2023:475–476) define Indigenous relationality in three ways: first, as a 'defining aspect of global indigeneity' that involves shared understandings of the 'multiplicity of relationships' between humans and the natural world - a 'global Indigenous' rather than pan-Indigenous experience. By comparing testimonies from Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia over land rights, they show how they hold similar reference points in the relationship to land and the concern for the wellbeing of multiple others in 'situations of scarcity' (ibid. 477). Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts (2013:21) uses the concept of 'Place-Thought' to express similar concerns in the North American context: '[it] is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts'. This is more than a symbolic gesture or universal abstraction - 'place thought' describes the act of thinking through sentient places (ibid.). Connections to Escobar's (2020) reading of the 'agency of place' and the 'pluriverse' could be made here. This particularity and 'personhood' of place deviates from universalist prescriptions of Human/Nature relations (Rosiek, Pratt, & Snyder, 2019), conceptualised most obviously through an Anthropocene dated with reference to generalised human imprints on the earth. Such universalism enables the destruction of land and people to be 'naturalized' and categorised (Rosiek et al., 2019:338). Conversely, Indigenous engagement with the long *durée* of anthropogenic climate change and its relationship to coloniality particularises the extractive and denigrative processes of climate insecurity, as Kyle P. Whyte (2018) has discussed in a critique of Anthropocene narratives.

This leads to Wildcat and Voth's (2019:774) second point on Indigenous relationality that it is 'ultimately located in specific languages, locales and intellectual traditions of Indigenous peoples' located in specifically defined territories. As Indigenous scholars located in the Canadian prairies, they refer to the specific Cree and Métis concept of 'wahkohtowin' - translated crudely to mean the reciprocal relationships between kin and how to conduct them with respect, honour, and responsibility (Campbell, 2007; cited in Wildcat and Voth, 2023). The local geographies and particular contexts of these relational worldviews raise questions about the politics of translation and the ethics of engagement. At the very core of engaging with Indigenous relationality to understand OS as being-with is to understand it in its specific context: what is being confronted, what is being re-articulated? That said, Wildcat and Voth (2023) argue that both the local and global can be thoughtfully balanced in the pursuit of solidarities and respect for difference, including dialogical relationships with non-Indigenous 'others'. Wildcat and Voth (2023) make a last point in defining Indigenous relationality as 'inter-Indigenous connections', the meso-level spaces of dialogue that unpick various boundary-making processes. Not only does this delineation avoid collapsing diverse Indigenous knowledges to a singular 'Indigenous Other' (Howitt, 2020), but it also *places* relationality and opens the possibility of critique against hegemonic relations and a disembedding from them. 'Relationality cannot be simply about prioritising or valuing relationships', they argue, 'it must be used for critical thinking needed to navigate politically fraught contexts' (Wildcat and Voth, 2023: 476). Furthermore, there is a clear distinction between the general understanding of relationality among the global Indigenous, formed through common philosophies concerning human-nature relationships, and how relationality manifests in and

across communities, with different languages, intellectual traditions and cultures and located in different time-spaces. Using this lens, it is possible to critique the speculative imaginaries of posthumanism that appropriate or instrumentalise Indigenous thought (Chandler and Reid, 2018) and take seriously the lived realities of Indigenous communities and their distinct OS-seeking actions against the colonial nation-state, yet also in dialogue with 'settler communities' and non-Indigenous people.

An example of how Indigenous relationality has been mobilised to live differently, and in opposition to regimes of modernity, is the *kichwa* concept of *sumak kawsay* - or *Buen Vivir*, translated as 'fullness of life in a community, together with other persons in nature' (Gudynas, 2011, p. 442). This concept is an 'alternative' platform made up of core ethico-political principles and rights that dissolve the human/nature binary through the extension of political rights to non-humans and accepts multiple temporalities rather than linear notions of time. For example, the embedding of *Sumak Kawsay* into the Ecuadorian constitution in 2008 represented a paradigm shift from neoliberal development to 'a new form of public coexistence' (cited in Radcliffe, 2012, p. 241). *Buen Vivir* has been used as an umbrella term to describe a set of values shared across different Indigenous autonomous movements in South America, although there are different Indigenous articulations (e. g., in Bolivia) and ongoing struggles. It has also been influential in anti-development critiques in the region as 'antidote to the metaphysics of separation and isolation and the ontologies of antiblackness, coloniality, heteropatriarchal social orders, and the devastation of the Earth' (Escobar, 2020:xxxii). At the same time, the instrumentalization of *Buen Vivir* principles into formal state politics has not fulfilled the aim of decolonization, and as Radcliffe argues in the Ecuadorian case 'practices, grammars and logics of neoliberal governmentality have been hard to shift' (Radcliffe, 2012, p. 248). The positioning of a relational ontology alongside political critique in the *Buen Vivir* movement is, however, an important example of how Indigenous relationality - as theory and practice - can destabilise dominant disciplinary frames in an effort to decolonize security studies (Adamson, 2020; Hudson, 2018). It is a matter of epistemic justice to 'de-link' security from its ontological roots and ground it in an anti-racist political ontology (De Leeuw, 2016; Escobar, 2020; Hyndman, 2019; Mignolo, 2009). That said, indigenous relationality continues to be located within and positioned *against* the colonial nation-state. In the next section, I engage with the empirical example of the 2023 referendum on 'The Voice' to locate struggles for Indigenous sovereignty as the pursuit of OS, conceived through Indigenous relationality.

1.4. Indigenous sovereignty as a basis for OS

Ontological Security has been readily deployed to conceptualise claims for state sovereignty through processes of nationalism and separatism (Grzybowski, 2021; Krickel-Choi & Chen, 2023; Skey, 2010; Zarakol, 2017). Less attention, however, has been paid to the struggle for Indigenous sovereignty as a key political process for understanding how dominant regimes of governance and security could be dismantled, confronted and re-articulated in pursuit of OS. Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee scholar Vanessa Watts (2013:28) argues that Indigenous sovereignty is 'an essential obligation in the continuation of our selves' where the Self is understood as comprising multiple temporalities and relationalities, it is cyclical with nature and, as Venne (1998) writes, 'woven through a fabric that encompasses our spirituality and responsibility' to the earth and its entities (cited in Watts, 2013, p. 27). Watt's (2013) article goes beyond understanding sovereignty as a form of global citizenship or one wedded to Westphalian geopolitics, rather her approach aligns clearly with a revised understanding of OS as *being-with*. Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, political activists and officials speak about Indigenous sovereignty in diverse ways depending on the context, aims and agendas (Shrinkhal, 2021). A key distinction is made between self-determination, which can be

understood as the 'power of the 'peoples' to control their own destiny' (Shrinkhal, 2021, p. 79), and sovereignty which involves territorial integrity. Whilst Indigenous self-determination has been enshrined in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) (2007), the protection of the 'host' State's territorial integrity places limits on full (Westphalian) sovereignty. As a legacy of post-WW2 international order, this restricts the full autonomy of Indigenous peoples and their territories, de-legitimising rights claims and treating them as objects of law within the existing state rather than autonomous actors affecting legal change. This produces a precarious sense of autonomy for many Indigenous communities vis-a-vis the state, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as I go on to discuss, but one that is often mitigated by an Indigenous sovereignty that is based on a relational ontology and 'has never been ceded' (Uluru statement, 2023).

UNDRIP is the central legal instrument for 'protecting' Indigenous rights. As a 'guiding framework' UNDRIP has been heavily criticised for its tokenistic, neoliberal, and assimilative approach (Ciupa, 2016). Writing in the context of the Arctic securities of Sámi peoples, Kuokkanen (2019:2) has argued that UNDRIP's central premise of individual rights is at odds with its scope as protector of collective rights. The embeddedness of UNDRIP in patriarchal settler colonialism and neoliberal capitalist logics, she says, does not do justice to indigenous articulations of rights as constituted through a web of relations. Central to her critique is the concept of *relational autonomy* as the scaffolding for restructuring relations, it is understood as the fusing of the individual and collective and a process of building capacity for action through which reciprocity and a 'norm of integrity' for land, individual bodies and collective beings are sustained (Kuokkanen, 2019, p. 13). Non-human agency is a core tenet of this relational ontology, alongside a commitment to ethical reciprocity of all things because human agency and autonomy starts in relation - with land, human and non-human elements (Kuokkanen, 2019). Unlike Lacanian articulations of the 'fantasy' of self, the Indigenous self is real but not separate or individuated. A relational and non-hierarchical notion of autonomy is grounded in ethical reciprocity between human and non-human agents. The diversity of Indigenous struggles for sovereignty is such that the precise meaning of autonomy for different communities varies as I go on to discuss, but Farah (2024:2) argues that 'Indigenous autonomy should be understood as multidimensional, territorially specific, relational, and dynamic'.

For OS to be conceived as *being-with*, then, autonomy must be understood not as innate to an individual subject who can be ascribed limited rights but as a process of relational co-existence of individual psychic registers and bodies, wider geopolitical processes and conditions, and their embeddedness in broader human-environment territorial relations. As Kuokkanen (2019) argues, the very basis for building constructive relationships as a core value of OS requires the *deconstruction* of the relations that sustain inequality, oppression and violence (cf. Chipato & Chandler, 2022). Kuokkanen's (2019) articulation of relational autonomy and the 'norm of integrity' aligns with Indigenous, decolonial and Black feminisms in other settler- and post-colonial worlds that offer variations of communal autonomous politics as a refusal of the individuated, racist and patriarchal structures of colonial-capitalism (e. g. Segato, 2016; Simpson, 2017). For Segato (2016), colonial-capitalism represents 'the first and permanent pedagogy of expropriation of value and its subsequent domination' (cited in Escobar, 2020:xxi). In his proposal for a pluriversal politics, Escobar (2020:xxi) goes on to argue for the dismantling of 'this ontological mandate' to enable relational and communal politics to flourish in diverse ways. Following this, OS as *being-with* might be formed through a communal politics of belonging (cf. Gibson-Graham, 2011), a deep, historicised *dis-embedding*, *confrontation* and *re-articulation* of what should be possible. There is no single example of this; the diversity of Indigenous struggles for self-determination and sovereignty means that OS will mean different things to different communities at different times and spaces. As with any relational process, not all relationships are easy, there are fractures, tensions and a complex politics of recognition and reconciliation.

Next, I unpack this in one specific context by discussing two short texts written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples concerning the issue of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia. On 14th October 2023, a referendum was held by the Australian Government for constitutional recognition of the First Peoples of Australia through the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice ('The Voice'). The struggle for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty in the Australian continent and its islands has a long history, with the first recorded political claims made in 1846. Significant work went into fostering intercultural communication, strategic planning and securing political commitment in the years preceding the vote. The 13 years of 'Dialogues' across the main territories of Australia that preceded the '[Uluru Statement from the Heart](#)' (2023) were key to the consolidation of this collective proposal that led to 'The Voice' Referendum on 14th October 2023 (Nakata, 2023). The first text analysed below is the 'Uluru Statement of the Heart', the manifesto for recognising Indigenous sovereignty written at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention seeking a First Nation Voice to be enshrined in the Australian constitution. The second text is a [Statement for our People and Country](#) (2023), an open letter written as a series of 'collective insights' to the Prime Minister and Parliament by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples and their supporters following the defeat in the Referendum. Rather than focus on the minutia of political campaigning on both sides and the 'event' itself, which has been widely discussed elsewhere², these two texts written by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are reflective of a wider politics of recognition in settler colonial societies. They articulate, first, the hope and desire for change, mediated by the long *durée* of settler colonialism, and second, the loss and grief of rejection and non-recognition. In different ways, they offer a (partial) lens to review the thorny interface of ontological security and insecurity in the long struggle for Indigenous sovereignty.

1.5. *The Uluru Statement from the Heart*

In the Uluru statement (2017), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples address the people of Australia as the first sovereign Nation of the continent, signaling, beyond recognition, the need for reconciliatory justice, self-determination and the capacity to 'flourish' and 'take a rightful place in our own country'. The arc of the Statement is 'Voice, Treaty, Truth', a message collated through the 12 Dialogues over 13 years across Australian territories with Indigenous Australians. Prioritization of each point was subject to debate during the Dialogues, with some Aboriginal spokespersons emphasising the importance of leading with 'Truth' to ensure that voices are properly listened to, and history is understood and accounted for (Veracini, 2023). Recognition without deep historical 'truth-telling' does not make space for pluralising ontological politics; it merely subsumes Indigenous sovereignty within the settler colonial state (Veracini, 2023) and exposes the dangers of misrecognition (Hopkins et al., 2017). Despite the final agreed arc relegating 'Truth' to third place, the statement makes clear reference to 'a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia', and 'truth-telling about our history' is a central pillar of the *Makarrata* Commission's aims, as discussed further below.

The statement is more than a 'claim' to sovereignty; it is more than asking for a voice; it is an expression of an ancient right, a sacred link to ancestors that has, in the 'last two hundred years' been beset by crises. Referencing Australia's First Nations people as 'the most incarcerated people on the planet' facing multiple dimensions of 'crisis' that are structural, the statement makes plain the disproportionate effects of incarceration, alienation and detention on Indigenous peoples and calls for redress. The Uluru statement, in one sense, *confronts* the ontological

insecurity of settler colonial domination - 'This is the torment of our powerlessness'. Referring to the multiple dimensions of 'our crisis', which personalises the effects of a deeply structural problem woven through colonial dispossession and violence. Simultaneously, the statement is a powerful expression of OS through a sovereignty that 'has never been ceded or extinguished', maintaining a right that has always been held but taken without consent. Sovereignty is expressed in the statement as 'a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestor'. This form of sovereignty emerges from a radically different ontology to conventional Westphalian sovereignty and speaks to the relational autonomy proscribed by Kuokkanen (2019) and others; it is an embodied, intergenerational, multi-species commons that is rooted in place. There is a risk that this is romanticised as a timeless resilience that masks the continued injustices facing Indigenous peoples (Chandler & Reid, 2018), but read alongside the forceful reminders of pervasive, structural inequalities that 'torment' shows that material and ontological insecurities must be reckoned with on the path to recognition.

There is, however, also a clear emphasis on 'reform', both constitutional and structural, rather than a more radical dismantling of relations of domination, as Kuokkanen (2019) argued for in her work with Arctic Sámi communities. This is a key moment in the Statement where the politics of recognition and working in dialogue with non-Indigenous settler communities are in tension with a more radical politics of refusal. For some, the centering of the Australian constitution in the statement was disappointing since it has been viewed by many Indigenous communities as an 'illegitimate document' (Maddison and Nakata, 2020:2). Audra Simpson (2017:19) has argued for a politics of refusal among Indigenous communities in North America as 'an option for producing and maintaining alternative structures of thought, politics and traditions away from and in a critical relationship to states'. Similarly, Mohawk scholar Taiaiake Alfred (1999:59) has called 'sovereignty' an 'exclusionary concept' that will ultimately involve the coercion and subordination of Indigenous peoples. Yet the expression of sovereignty in the Uluru statement does not conform to Westphalian design, as discussed above. Rather, Indigenous sovereignty that 'has never been ceded' and pre-existed the Australian State cannot be enveloped into marginalising structures because it always existed and will remain to be (Veracini, 2023). Arguably, Indigenous sovereignty is the very refusal to be subsumed and excluded. This is not to say that Indigenous sovereignty is not contested from within, nor that there is one single definition of it. Rather, it is an enduring feature of Indigenous life against the fantasy and lived materiality of the colonial nation-state and the international state system (cf. Kinnvall & Svensson, 2018).

The statement concludes with an agenda-setting call for a *Makarrata* Commission, a Yolju word for 'the coming together after a struggle', seeking a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history. Here, the importance of Treaty is emphasised, which is a reminder that Indigenous peoples are still waiting for a constitutional voice yet remain willing to navigate the difficult relationships of settler-colonialism in dialogue with the Australian government. It reflects a wider trend in Indigenous scholarship to explore the relations between Indigenous and settler communities rather than simply exploring the effects of colonialism on Indigenous folk or the mobilisation of Indigenous autonomous movements against the settler state (Maddison and Nakata, 2023). Writing from the North American context, Indigenous writer Nick Estes (2019) sees Indigenous freedom 'not as the absence of settler colonialism, but as amplified presence of Indigenous life and just relations with human and nonhuman relatives, and with the earth', which Veracini (2023:12) argues 'leaves the door open for authentic recognition'. This chimes with Untalan's (2020) notion of postcolonial OS as a third space of unsettling co-existence.

The struggle for 'authentic recognition', as read through the Uluru

² For further discussion on the Referendum debate, campaign and vote see: Anderson et al. (2023); McAllister and Biddle (2024); Parkinson et al. (2021); Gavin (2023).

statement, could be viewed as a route to OS as *being-with*, that is negotiated by disembedding from the settler-colonial logics of domination, confronting the 'torment' of multiple, structural crises that beset indigenous communities and re-articulating relations towards more dialogical and just securities through the Makarrata. A key tension that is part of any struggle for recognition is the lingering discomfort around reform rather than a more radical disembedding from the dominant structures of power. The risks of possible concessions made in the process of constitutional reform or of 'contractual thinking' (Simpson, 2017, p. 29) became one of the sticking points in the mobilisation of a Yes vote in the referendum. In an excerpt from the Broome Regional Dialogue about the importance of Treaty as well as Voice, the co-chair, Nolan Hunter, reflected that "change is not in the saying, it is in the doing, and that is the opportunity we have now" (Uluru Statement from the Heart.org). The Uluru statement clearly signals the appetite for reform through Treaty as a mechanism for recognition and reconciliation. Yet, as Simpson has argued in the North American context, treaties are 'the foundational document of colonial recognition' (Simpson, 2017, p. 26) and are central to the reproduction of oppression in the 'settler colonial present' (ibid, p. 22). At the same time, the denial of such also sustains the settler colonial nation-state. Whilst recognising critical positions of Indigenous Australians who opposed the Voice Referendum, some of which became leading spokespersons for the 'No' campaign, the desire for recognition as a constitutional right and a position of reconciliation was overwhelmingly supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who used the Referendum to confront the ontological insecurities produced through the status quo, and 'challenge ... the political and moral authority of states with the purpose to secure respect and recognition for 'difference and diversity' across different levels of governance (Keal, 2008; Shrinkhal, 2021, p. 73). In the following section, I turn to the aftermath of the referendum and offer a brief analysis of an open letter by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that stands in contrast to the hopeful reconciliatory tone of the Uluru statement.

1.6. After the referendum: An open letter

The Referendum did not pass, collapsing, momentarily, Indigenous recognition and reconciliation in Australia. In the aftermath of the referendum Nakata (2023) reflects that the outcome signals the ongoing political subjugation and marginalisation of Australia's First Nations' peoples - 'no longer historical legacy but a contemporary decision reinscribing centuries of paternalism: that we are not peoples deserving of a protected right to be heard on matters that affect us'. A week of silence was observed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples after the Referendum, a refrain from media commentary and a moment to reflect. On 22 October 2023, a Statement for our People and our Country (2023) was sent as an open letter to the Prime Minister and both Parliamentary Houses on behalf of (a sizable proportion of) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. The letter is a set of 'collective insights', an expression of shock, grief and dismay at a range of injustices: the result, the 'No' Campaign and its 'lies', the parliamentarians who derailed the success of the Yes campaign, and at the voters for the 'shameful act' of denial. This denial is not simply a matter of political negotiation; it is a denial of multi-generational work towards Indigenous sovereignty, a core dimension of Indigenous being. Such denial could amount to profound ontological insecurity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples if not read against the backdrop of the continued assertion of sovereignty:

'Australia is our country. We accept that the majority of non-Indigenous voting Australians have rejected recognition in the Australian Constitution. We do not for one moment accept that this country is not ours. Always was. Always will be. It is the legitimacy of the non-Indigenous occupation in this country that requires recognition, not the other way round. Our sovereignty has never been ceded'.

With a tone of exhausted dismay, the letter bemoans the 'scale of

disinformation and misinformation' that was 'unprecedented' and 'unchecked on social media' and 'unleashed a tsunami of racism against our people'. The authors hold 'conservative and international interests' to account for the spread of 'lies', arguing 'in different directions'. On the one hand, this refers to the alleged funding and resourcing of a 'progressive No' vote by the conservative lobby group Advance, whose campaign invoked a refusal to be subsumed in a weak contract with government under the banner 'the voice is not enough' (Carlson, 2023). On the other, the absence of civic responsibility in the No campaign slogan- 'if you don't know, vote no' - as giving 'expression to ignorance', emboldening racism and reflected a defensive paternalism to maintain the status quo (Carlson, 2023).

The rapid abandonment of 'truth-telling', a central tenet of the Uluru statement, in what was hoped to be a less toxic debate reflects efforts from different sources to preserve the hegemonic self-identity of the Australian state, denying, and perhaps internalising, the shame of 235 years of colonialism. Furthermore, it demonstrates clearly how ontological insecurity produces a fertile landscape for 'collective misrecognition' formed through the colonial imagination (Kinnvall and Svensson, 2018). As Veracini (2023:6) writes, a shift in perspective to the 'settler' in the Referendum debate, even briefly, exposes the 'neuroses and subjectivities' that guide the pursuit of OS through fantastical claims to State sovereignty on Indigenous lands and the denial of the 'Other'. With former conservative Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2023) proudly making claims that the referendum defeat signals the first rejection of the people on an issue of 'identity politics', it is not difficult to see parallels with the resurgent far-right narratives of ethno-nationalism that are slowly eradicating minority rights across the world in the phantasmagorical 'culture wars'.

The open letter laments the inefficacy of the Australian Constitution as a meaningful mechanism for justice that 'remains unchanged in our exclusion' despite multiple attempts for recognition:

'Our right to be heard continues to exist both as a democratic imperative for this nation, and as our inherent right to self-determination. The country can deny the former but not the latter. A 'founding document' without recognition of the First People of this county continues the process of colonisation. It is clear no reform of the Constitution that includes our people will ever succeed. This is a bitter lesson from 14 October'.

The letter at once implicates the 'founding fathers' of the Constitution and the 'No' voting publics of 2023 as sustaining, what Simpson (2017:22) has called the 'settler colonial present'. Having acknowledged the 39.2% support for the Yes vote and the 'resounding' YES among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the letter departs from the reconciliatory aims of the Uluru statement towards an alternative vision of Indigenous justice outside formal, rights-bearing institutions. The 'mean-spirited' outcome of the vote, the authors argue, has shamefully exposed the failure of the Australian constitution and a 'less liberal and less democratic' Australia. Articulating the impossibility of reform, the authors narrate a politics of refusal against the constitutional nation-state by upholding sovereignty and relational autonomy, ensuring the continuity of 'our law and our ways, as our Elders and Ancestors have done', and firmly re-stating the right to speak back to and away from Parliament.

The final paragraphs in the letter re-vocalise the route to justice as unequivocally independent and autonomous, closing down the language of collaboration and negotiation set out in the Uluru statement. Referring to the Uluru statement, the letter summons 'our people' and 'supporters' to 'take up the cause of justice for our people'. The tone is once again hopeful and offers a confident vision for a better future, making space for intra-Indigenous connections (cf. Wildcat and Voth, 2023), but mired by the 'ontological cuts and imaginaries' of the modern Australian state (Chipato & Chandler, 2022:290).

The struggle for recognition of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia is, needless to say, a complex process involving co-extensive forms of

political agency that are in friction with each other and resistant to ongoing colonial forms of knowledge reproduction and extraction. These two texts are presented here to illustrate the complexities of just one part of the indigenous struggle for recognition through the 2023 Voice Referendum. I firmly acknowledge this is not representative of Australian Indigenous autonomous politics, nor is it possible to transpose these ideas onto other Indigenous or non-Indigenous political struggles. For Indigenous 'No' campaigners, for example, the rejection of 'the Voice' does not signal failure, and many believe there are other ways to progress for justice. Amidst the rally for justice here, however, the 'real and palpable pain' of defeat is long-lasting, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner June Oscar, put it (Visentin, 2023), and the path to reconciliation looks bleak for some while indigenous communities still suffer the disproportionate effects of poverty, violence and systemic neglect. I draw on this example to show how a relational reading of OS as being-with might be mobilised in pursuit of social and spatial justice because it requires a disembedding and re-articulation of what constitutes security - a relational autonomy that consolidates an 'affirmative politics of belonging' (Gibson-Graham, 2011) whilst simultaneously confronting and challenging hegemonic and dehumanizing relations.

2. Conclusion

This paper has presented an original conceptual argument for the frequently deployed concept of ontological security (OS) in analyses of international politics. I have reviewed the terms upon which OS is based, from its psychoanalytical roots to recent post-colonial approaches. Extending the post-colonial critique against the conceptual weddedness of OS to a liberal, individuated subject, I argue that a deeper engagement with Indigenous scholarship is a much-needed intervention to move beyond the 'conceptual impasse' in OSS (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). The paper puts forward a *conceptual* argument that works through three core ideas and applies them to a specific *political* context of Indigenous sovereignty in Australia. First, inspired by a 'coloniality of knowledge' approach and particularly Escobar's (2020, xxxi) contention that 'most worlds are under ontological occupation' I argue for an ontological *dis-embedding* of OS from its modernist roots in order to open up lines of critical inquiry from different starting points. This is not meant to deny or bypass the effects of modernity in the negation and depersonalisation of 'other' humans and the fact that modernity rests upon that negation (Chipato & Chandler, 2022). Nor does it seek to romanticise other worldviews as prefigurative politics that uncritically affirm all manner of relations. It is a process of critical deconstruction to understand what it means to different people to *be* secure, which is always unfolding (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020; Kuokkanen, 2019). This is made clear in the empirical case through the tensions within the Australian debate on Indigenous sovereignty and the need for many to move beyond the politics of recognition and possible subsumption within the state apparatus or at least a more precarious sense of autonomy, to a politics of refusal that 'de-links' from the settler-colonial state as a 'deeply unequal scene of articulation' (Simpson, 2017, p. 22)

Second, this process of deconstruction also requires *confrontation* with the ontological insecurities that are produced and sustained through the modern state - in the case of the Voice Referendum, this is clearly expressed in the Uluru statement and the open letter through references to settler-colonial violence, as legacy and present reality, and through the defeat of the Voice proposal and its toxic aftermath. The injustice and insecurity they have produced for individuals and communities - the 'torment of our powerlessness' - are set out in unequivocal terms to recover a place in the world - to 're-earth' as McGeachan (2014) has put it, with reference to Laing. The week of silence observed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples immediately after the referendum might be seen as a symbolic space of recovery, of re-grouping following the bruising of the outcome. Third, OS as *being-with* requires a *re-articulation* of security grounded in Indigenous

relationality, incorporating relational modes of autonomy (Kuokkanen, 2019; Nedelsky, 2012), political solidarity and critique 'to navigate politically fraught contexts' (Wildcat and Voth, 2023: 476). Relational autonomy, as read through Indigenous scholarship, recognises a multiplicity of relations located in place and diversely positioned to secure against the colonial nation-state. As such, OS framed as *being-with* is also always co-constituted by *being-against* coloniality in anti-racist struggle.

Throughout the paper I have stressed the diversity of Indigenous knowledges and communities rather than generalising about a singular 'Indigenous Other' (Howitt et al., 2020). Whilst these examples are a limited illustration of a complex set of place-specific and unique relationships, they offer something in the way of a wider agenda for political geographers seeking to move beyond the 'impasse' of OSS. Without direct engagement with Indigenous communities and having access to only English language commentary on the Voice Referendum, I acknowledge the partiality of this account; it is a mere starting point for a deeper engagement with Indigenous scholars and activists with the potential of working towards more just securities. My contribution is the foregrounding of Indigenous relationality to re-orient OS as a challenge to the onto-epistemic grammar that underpins dominant analyses of security and sovereignty and the relationship between them. With a sharper focus on Indigenous political agency alongside the lived struggles for Indigenous justice and recognition, this paper challenges OS's 'status quo bias' following the already fertile direction of Indigenous scholarship towards more epistemically and politically just outcomes. Whilst the remit of this paper has been largely theoretical, it is imperative to draw out how these ideas could be applied to ethical collaborative research encounters (see Tuhiwai Smith, 2010; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021).

Declaration of competing interest

I can declare there is no conflict of interest in the publication.

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