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Indigenous Sovereignty and Political Science: Building an Indigenous Politics Subfield

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Keywords

Indigenous politics, Indigenous knowledge, sovereignty, authority, settler colonialism

Abstract

Scholarship from the nascent subfield of Indigenous politics illuminates an enduring tension between Indigenous politics and political science. Settler colonialism continues to configure the contemporary politics of the United States, Canada, New Zealand, and Australia in profound ways that political science has been slow to grapple with. In a related concern, political science has little ability to engage in Indigenous knowledge production. This article reviews the structural exclusion of Indigenous knowledge despite increased inclusion of Indigenous scholarship and argues that Indigenous understandings of settler colonialism, sovereignty, and authority hold the potential to reconfigure political science's approach to Indigenous politics in research and teaching. This reconfiguration will not only impact the development of the Indigenous politics subfield but also expand the analytic potential of political science more broadly.

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INTRODUCTION

In one of the few previous *Annual Review of Political Science* articles on Indigenous politics, Evans (2014, p. 275) argues, "Political science research on Indigenous peoples fits comfortably within the discipline." Evans outlines how scholars can draw on political science conventions to study Indigenous politics and in doing so offer fresh analytical insights back to the discipline about political science's core preoccupation with political power. While we agree Indigenous politics has the capacity to inform the practice of political science, we argue that this is not due to the ability of Indigenous politics to find a comfortable home within the discipline. In our survey of the budding constellation of scholarship that constitutes the subfield of Indigenous politics, it is clear that a deep tension exists between Indigenous politics and political science.

This article explores the tension by looking at two main issues. The first is the inability of political science to grapple with Indigenous forms of knowledge production; the second is the inability of political science to recognize how colonialism continues to configure the contemporary politics of settler states. These are not simply areas of weakness. Rather, as Ferguson (2016, p. 1029) explains in the American context: "Native Americans have been structurally excluded from the discipline." In similar ways, this is also true in the context of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Ferguson 2016, Ladner 2017, Maddison & Strakosch 2019, Sanders 2015, Sawer & Curtin 2016).

Despite its marginal location relative to the discipline, Indigenous politics has gained a clear institutional foothold and body of literature in small pockets of political science. In order to move forward from this ambivalent space, we are motivated to think through the distinctive character, tradition, and qualities of Indigenous politics. Against the standard, historical position of Indigenous people in the study of politics, we focus on how Indigenous politics could reconfigure political science's approach to Indigenous knowledge and its understanding of empire, sovereignty, and authority. Like Evans (2014), we center the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous peoples in the settler colonial contexts of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the United States—a group also referred to as the CANZUS states. The reason for doing so is that Indigenous research in these contexts has given rise to the disciplinary formation of critical Indigenous studies and, drawing on Cattelino & Simpson's (2022) view in the *Annual Review of Anthropology*, this article is underpinned by an assumption that if Indigenous politics is to grow as a subfield, it must do so in deep and self-reflexive conversation with the field of critical Indigenous studies and with Indigenous communities.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES AND SETTLER COLONIALISM

The state of Indigenous politics in the university can be contextualized by two recent provocations regarding its location and function relative to the discipline of political science. First is Bruyneel's (2014, p. 2) prompt that "a legitimate case [can] be made for situating indigenous politics as its own distinct subfield of political science." Bruyneel understands Indigenous politics in a way that reflects the claims of Indigenous peoples for political autonomy globally, perhaps most famously expressed in Article 3 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): "Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (UN General Assembly 2007, p. 10).

The right to self-determination is part of a global history of Indigenous peoples around the world making a political claim to unique and separate political standing relative to imperial actors initially and relative to settler state formations subsequently. Indigenous assertions of self-determination rarely envision or focus on secession and the creation of a new state as a political

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outcome and instead seek to achieve a vision of self-determination redefining how separate but related political orders can coexist in relation to each other (see Lightfoot 2016, pp. 33–70). Approaches that equate self-determination with the claim to an autonomous nation presume the primacy of nation-state formations and do not reflect the nature or variety of Indigenous political traditions, which exceed nationalist imperatives and instead focus on questions of living well in relation to one another and to creation. Following this distinction, we should understand the call for Indigenous politics as a subfield to include a degree of autonomy for Indigenous scholars to determine conventions and standards of knowledge production that work in service of Indigenous political lives and decolonization.

The second provocation comes from Ferguson's (2016) dedicated interest in a variety of questions surrounding how to "Indigenize political science." While the inquiries of Bruyneel and Ferguson are imbricated, we distinguish between them by suggesting that an Indigenous politics subfield is concerned with the establishment of semiautonomous academic spaces, whereas the Indigenization of political science is focused on the transformation of the entire discipline, including its constitutive units and categories, to better engage with Indigenous matters and ontologies. We regard these two activities as complementary and understand the study of Indigenous politics as carving out new space in relation to existing disciplinary forms while also working to recast them. Moreover, Bruyneel's and Ferguson's provocations crystallize what have been long-standing concerns among Indigenous scholars working in political science and have helped to spawn a wider commentary on Indigenous people and the field—that political science has systemic barriers that exclude Indigenous people and Indigenous knowledge.

The exclusion of Indigenous peoples and politics is built on the disciplinary commitments of political science and its major subfields—an ordering that Bruyneel (2014, p. 7) refers to as a "constitutive absence." This absence has been and in many ways remains the case for Black Americans, women, LGBTQ2S+, and other minorities. The particular form of intellectual exclusion that Indigenous people experience must be contemplated in relation to the specific contexts and political positions that we inhabit relative to the constitution of settler states. These disciplinary commitments are intertwined with dominant political ideologies and practices of settler societies.

A brief history of the rise of settler colonial studies is helpful to understand the coloniality of present-day settler societies. The term settler colonialism was in large part popularized by Wolfe's (2006) article "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." The political and analytic aim of the work is to confront a tacit assumption among non-Indigenous people in settler societies that colonization was something that occurred in the past rather than a system that is ongoing. Wolfe argues that the irreducible element of settler colonialism is an eliminatory logic that configures its structure and aims. Elimination can manifest in many forms, from genocide to acts of legal assimilation, or the containment of Indigenous expression in order to limit assertions of sovereignty (Coulthard 2014, Maaka & Fleras 2005, Madley 2016, Povinelli 2002). For Indigenous scholars and people, Wolfe's scholarship does not reveal anything new about the nature of settler colonialism. Rather, the benefit is a parsimonious account of why countries like the CANZUS states remain actively colonial in the present, captured in his notable framing of settler colonialism as a "structure not an event" (Wolfe 2006, p. 384). Or, as Veracini (2011, p. 3) puts it, "settler colonialism works to cover its own tracks" so that it becomes the default to treat settler states as no longer colonial. Our discussion of categories and concepts of the discipline begins from a different premise: that Indigenous politics must be understood relative to historical and contemporary contexts of settler colonialism and should be engaged within this foreground rather than from a neutral starting point.

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INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

From its emergence, the discipline of political science has employed an understanding of "the political" that mirrors the treatment of Indigenous people by settler governments. The governance systems of settler states are constructed upon imperial, racialized logics that situate Indigenous peoples in a subordinate status due to our perceived lack of adequate systems and practices of law and governance. These logics also construct Indigenous people as incapable of intellectual and philosophical engagement with questions surrounding forms and practices of governance, political authority and legitimacy, negotiation, contestation, the framing of political problems and solutions, and other critical questions. Thus, not only our political lives but also the ways in which we think about and give meaning to "the political" are excluded. Indigenous people either remain absent from political dialogues and practices impacting our political status, such as the design of Indian policy, or are engaged as subordinate actors relative to settler states. That is, we are engaged as political subjects who perhaps hold rights that may be recognized and/or alienated from us through the exercise of our political practices and through the formation of political agreements, but who can also be denied the means for exercising agency in dialogue and policy decisions surrounding the future directions of those relationships (Nichols 2019, Stark 2016). We are continually regarded as state subjects, rather than the fully agential political partners that many of us envisioned we would be engaged as when entering into treaties and other political relationships and agreements.

This stance is reflected in the discipline of political science's treatment of Indigenous politics, where we have figured only recently and marginally as subjects of inquiry. Here, scholars might seek to understand, identify, and deliberate the existence of an Aboriginal or Indigenous right, but not necessarily relative to Indigenous peoples' own knowledge about our own inherent rights and responsibilities. Consider analyses of Indigenous sovereignty that assess whether Indigenous people have a right to sovereignty comparable to those of settler states such as Canada and the United States (Cairns 2000, Kymlicka 2007, Patton 2016), rather than on terms and contexts informed by Indigenous knowledge.

In contrast to the lack of attention from political science, Indigenous people and politics have received sustained study across other disciplines. Anthropology provides a useful point of comparison, as it is here that Indigenous people have historically been located as subjects of inquiry in our absence from political science. Cattelino & Simpson's (2022) *Annual Review of Anthropology* article argues that ethnography has provided a useful research method for Indigenous anthropologists who wish to engage with the nations they are part of or work in relation to (see Carroll 2015, Dennison 2012, Simpson 2014). Their position entails recognition of the role of knowledge production in processes of definition and meaning-making in a manner as yet unparalleled in political science. In the context of international relations, Beier (2009, p. 12) argues that "the attempt to make Indigenous knowledges present in International Relations paradoxically marks an absence of voices that have spoken them"; thus, the study of Indigenous political practices cannot be "rendered intelligible" within standard conventions but requires the unsettling of "those very terms." Simpson (2014, pp. 22–24) refers to this as the tight normative space that Indigenous peoples must operate within politically and epistemologically; that is, where Indigenous people may seek to employ culturally distinct approaches while also facing limits in our ability to step outside of forms of exchange with dominant modes of study. In the Australian context, Macoun et al. (2019) observe that part of the challenge of studying Indigenous politics is that one has to study politics in society while at the same time writing against, or in tension with, the conventions of political science if one seeks to also draw from methods of Indigenous knowledge production.

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Despite these challenges, Indigenous politics is beginning to receive increased attention across the existing subfields of political science, even if the increase in writings relating to Indigenous people and politics in recent decades has not been mirrored by evidence of structural change. At least seven different groups, in different regions and fields and over a wide time frame, have put forward edited collections directed specifically at Indigenous politics in political science. First was a reflections symposium within an issue of *Perspective on Politics* on Indigenizing political science (Wilmer 2016), which was similar in tone to the special issue edited by Maddison & Strakosch (2019) in its direct focus on how political science structurally excludes Indigenous peoples. Lucero et al. (2013) are the first group to have attempted a reference source, in compiling the *Indigenous Peoples and Politics* Oxford handbook, and Lightfoot & Maddison (2024) have just recently published the *Handbook of Indigenous Public Policy*. Witmer et al. (2022) published a special issue on Indigenous politics with a focus on analyzing Indigenous experiences with settler governments and society. These works are complemented by earlier edited collections on the Indigenous politics of international relations (Beier 2009) and political theory (Ivison et al. 2000). Finally, a number of works have focused on Indigenous politics relative to the subfields of political theory (Bruyneel 2007, Coulthard 2014, Moreton-Robinson 2015, Nichols 2019, Shaw 2008, Temin 2023, Turner 2006), international relations (Beier 2009, Keal 2003, Lightfoot 2016, Wilmer 1993), comparative politics (Altamirano-Jiménez 2013, Kuokkanen 2019), and American/Canadian politics (Green 2003, Kauanui 2008, Ladner 2003, Manuel & Posluns 2018, Wilkins & Stark 2017, Williams 1994). These scholars necessarily assume the additional labor of coming up against the expectations of their subfields as well as the added work of legitimation with respect to their methodological and epistemological choices.

Indigenous peoples' embedded knowledge systems actively challenge and hold the potential to transform the field's approach to sovereignty and authority. As we explain in later sections, it is within the place-based cultural context of Indigenous nations that the relevant legal and political foundations for authority can be found. Representative of that distinction, land provides a pivotal intersection for the aspirations of Indigenous and state politics. It also represents a conceptual marker of difference. Where the state interprets territory as something that can be bought, sold, and functionally controlled, Indigenous understandings of place have most commonly been defined as (and through) relationships. Even while strategically engaging the states' oppressive logics (Nichols 2019), Indigenous peoples writ large continue to define land "as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations" that expands far beyond the material (Coulthard 2014, p. 78).

Countering essentialisms of relationship, Starblanket & Stark (2018) advocate for nuance in land-centered narratives of political authority, even those invoking connectedness, and warn of the risk in "reifying statist notions of bounded space" (p. 190). They caution against the potential for land-reclamation narratives to reproduce Western property logics at the expense of our relational obligations, including those toward water, waterways, and other living beings. In protection of Indigenous worldviews and practices of relationality, Starblanket & Stark (2018) propose a reorientation of commitment toward creation and more-than-human relations, and a turning away from static constructions of land. As Indigenous people, our relationships to land and creation are contextual, plural, complicated, at times seemingly inconsistent, and in flux. What we are making a case for is a deeper understanding of the range of relationships we have to place, encouraging critical positionality and reflexivity within those relations. To account for how settler colonialism has impacted our understanding of how we relate to one another and to the living earth requires us to take greater care in understanding our engagement with place as illuminating the context underlying a series of meaning-making practices.

In response to this, we encourage relational, place-based ways of thinking and engaging with Indigenous political lives. Looking to knowledge systems emergent from place-based ways of life

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as a key indicator of cultural difference reveals the ways in which states (and the various arms of those states), akin to Indigenous nations, use their own cultural frameworks—with foundations in European worldviews—to give meaning to the political, including questions of who and what is deemed governable and how that governance functions. By applying place-based ways of thinking within a relational orientation in political science, Indigenous politics repositions Western presumptions about governance within their own cultural frameworks, both making space for critique and advancing different knowledge of key concepts.

INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY

In relation to the discipline of political science, Indigenous politics functions to demonstrate that knowledge produced is contingent and contested. Indigenous people have a lengthy tradition of resisting the central claims of political science, critically engaging its literature, and testing and interrogating normative accounts. Because our distinct political knowledge and experience configure our understanding and use of terminology, Indigenous politics offers a substantially different account of what a key concept like sovereignty means and entails. Sovereignty is an important entry point for studies of Indigenous politics because it is as critical to the maintenance of Indigenous politics as it is to settler colonial states (Bruyneel 2014, Ferguson 2016, Moreton-Robinson 2005, Simpson 2020).

Indigenous peoples conceive of sovereignty as performing varying theoretical and practical functions in our political lives and interactions. While it enables a range of political positions, assertions, and refusals, it is also a mode of critique, in that it comes up against and transcends standardized uses of the term in political science. In Indigenous contexts, sovereignty is relational and bears different meanings and usages across time and contexts, a multiplicity that has "steadfastly challenged the exclusivity of state-centered conceptions of sovereign power" (Goldstein 2014, p. 152).

To position Indigenous sovereignty as relational is not to suggest that prevailing treatments of sovereignty in the discipline are inevitable, static, neutral, historically acontextual, or autonomous. Research on settler sovereignty reveals the ways in which imperial authorities have, throughout history, recast conceptions of sovereignty in accordance with changing objectives of colonial rule and settlement (Ford 2011, Rana 2014), albeit through a shared reliance on Westphalian conceptions of sovereignty. Indigenous politics, on the other hand, reveals conceptions of sovereignty that are configured by varied contexts, meanings, and strategic aims to engage with settler states in efforts to protect and perpetuate Indigenous life, knowledge, and relationships (Coulthard 2014, Kauanui 2018, Simpson 2014). These understandings of sovereignty are given meaning, reconfigured, stretched, and tested in relation to one another.

Critical inquiry into the interaction of Indigenous and settler sovereignties prompts political science to revisit its understanding of political space and power. Indigenous sovereignty occupies an ambiguous relation to Indigenous people; it functions as a fluid concept to describe contested arrangements of authority and denotes aspirations to forms of Indigenous independence (see Wildcat & De Leon 2020). The intellectual and political limits, influences, and risks of the vocabulary of sovereignty have also been well established in the Indigenous politics literature (Alfred 1999, Coulthard 2014, Williams 1994).

Studies of Indigenous and settler sovereignty have demonstrated that Indigenous peoples must navigate a marginal threshold of engagement, variously referred to as the third space of sovereignty (Bruyneel 2007), nested sovereignty (Simpson 2014), and the double bind of sovereignty (Cattelino 2010). Bruyneel's third space of sovereignty collapses dichotomous constructions of Indigenous political life as entailing either "yes" or "no" (assimilation or freedom), identifying a "third space" of activism and scholarship that involves neither wholesale separation

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from nor integration within the United States. Indigenous sovereignty represents a multiplicity of claims and strategies that indicate the existence of an in-between space of struggle (Bruyneel 2007). In a similar vein, Simpson (2014) illustrates how one sovereignty can be nested within another by looking at how the Mohawks of Kahnawake narrate and assert independence in the face of settler states that attempt, but ultimately fail, to fully subjugate Indigenous political orders and citizenship. Recognition that Indigenous sovereignty occupies a place of inherent tension prompts political science to reconfigure its understanding of political ordering and space.

Collapsing purported divisions between culture, law, and politics, the vocabulary of sovereignty appears across disciplines to gesture toward a breadth of sites, sources, and forms of Indigenous political life. In education studies, decolonial methodologies critique the colonial logic of disciplinary divisions through which "academic disciplines work to discipline language and thought, as well as to institutionalize and legitimate knowledge" (Smith et al. 2018, p. 7). Representative of a conceptual embrace of multiplicities, Indigenous sovereignty resists academic disciplining by retrieving representations and visions of politics from the diverse margins of academia and rearticulating them within a framework of governance.

Out of anthropology, Simpson (2016) engages Indigenous sovereignty as a form of decolonial resistance located in the self, and specifically in the bodies of Indigenous women and girls. Indigenous feminist articulations of sovereignty also appear across the university in what are commonly depicted as depoliticized disciplines including education (Smith 2009), geography (Hunt 2014), environmental studies (Nelson 2017), literature (Byrd 2020), English (Raheja 2010), and history (Kauanui 2018). These works ground Indigenous political authority firmly in the body and conceive of sovereignty at the level of the self and our everyday, intersubjective relations (Hunt & Holmes 2015, Rifkin 2012, Simpson 2017). This relocation of political authority within the personal and private functions to trouble conventional treatments that locate political transformation centrally within collective visions, formations, and actions. Internally, too, Indigenous critiques of sovereignty prompt us Indigenous people to reflect on and engage in dialogue and contestation surrounding the key terms and categories through which we make sense of political life. Indigenous queer theorists have interrogated the concept's centrality and normative use in Indigenous politics to illuminate and trouble prevailing assumptions and frames within decolonial theory. Belcourt (2017), for instance, has interrogated the function and implications of the language of sovereignty, arguing that the vocabulary too narrowly determines and configures the field of decolonial thought, practice, and possibility for Indigenous peoples.

The field of critical Indigenous studies has fostered a broad spectrum of engagement with Indigenous sovereignty, engaging it as a "rallying cry," a "framework" (Teves et al. 2015), and an analytic (Simpson 2020) for the interests of Indigenous peoples. Barker's (2017) edited collection *Critically Sovereign*, for example, takes up sovereignty firmly as an analytic of "critique" (Simpson 2020). The editor ties key debates to Indigenous territory to avoid universalist engagements with sovereignty and engages with specific nations' particular understandings of the term to "provide the contexts necessary for understanding the social responsibilities and relationships that inform Indigenous perspectives, political organizing, and intellectual theorizing" (Barker 2017, pp. 5–6). It is our intersubjectivity and interconnectedness with place and creation that emerge as central. Rather than tying sovereignty to land as a singular material construct, contributors collectively demonstrate the need for frameworks of accountability grounded in people and place.

In Indigenous contexts, sovereignty performs a broad range of functions to articulate and enact Indigenous peoples' aspirations within and against imperial and colonial forces. Its contextual, place-based nature counters pan-Indianism and state-centric notions of exclusivity that have been mobilized against Indigenous governance. More than that, the diversity through which Indigenous sovereignty can be deployed challenges conceptual reification, which Nichols (2019, p. 5)

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warns can easily "[lull those reading] into believing that because a term is used across a range of contexts, that there must be some single, unified meaning undergirding them all." The origins of Indigenous sovereignty are as diverse as the peoples engaging it, and it finds ground in both likeness and difference from state sovereignty. The multiformity of Indigenous sovereignty makes it both a concept that is used interchangeably with other terminology doing similar work and an umbrella term that houses many discursive pathways toward Indigenous freedom.

Indigenous sovereignty offers a distinctly multifactorial position that defines the emerging field of Indigenous politics. Rather than tether Indigenous sovereignty to one static definition, we align with Moreton-Robinson's (2007) and Simpson's (2020) assessments of its foundational objective: the protection of Indigenous lives and the creation of Indigenous futures. With these objectives at the helm, nations define their own legal and political authority-making processes, rooted within their own knowledge systems. In law, anthropology, history, geography, gender studies, literature, and other disciplines, Indigenous sovereignty is employed as a marker of authority, agency, and jurisdiction relative to various scales and domains of Indigenous life. The concept foregrounds fluid sources of authority shaping the emergence of both law and politics within a framework of reciprocity. Simpson (2017, p. 16) explains that these sources of authority are made and remade within "intelligence systems that are continuously generated in relation to place" and simultaneously refuse the imposition of state systems. Indigenous sovereignty, from this standpoint, is not a way of dividing up territory and jurisdiction but is a set of processes by which Indigenous peoples identify the sources of political authority from a range of knowledges that get reproduced in relation with each other and the natural world.

Rather than measuring Indigenous authority-making against that of the state, we contend that Indigenous sovereignty is ontologically distinct from the state and must be conceived in a way that is informed by and oriented toward Indigenous knowledge systems. Accordingly, it is perhaps most useful to understand Indigenous politics as tethered to two types of language games within the discipline: one that operates as a strategy for resistance and one that serves to contextualize Indigenous knowledge.

The first political language game utilizes sovereignty to locate Indigenous political authority and jurisdiction in ways that exceed rights-based frameworks (Simpson 2020). Put otherwise, sovereignty is a weighted term used to convey Indigenous political authority outward, even if that authority is differently sourced and conceived. Indigenous authority and jurisdiction are discursively legitimized by use of a term that is largely reserved for settler states, situating us as interlocutors in a common space of engagement rather than subordinate or nonexistent actors. This situates Indigenous politics on a broad spectrum of engagement with (and against) the state, which depends on the form and severity of colonialism that Indigenous nations face at any given moment.

The second language game denotes the contextualization of Indigenous peoples' legal and political authority within their own cultural frameworks. Turner (2020, p. 181) utilizes the example of Indigenous spirituality to demonstrate how a "philosophical colonialism" takes place when Indigenous peoples are forced to fit their worldviews within common law frames and vocabularies, specifically the language of constitutional rights. Language and the everyday lives and customs that inform and configure its use provide critical context that informs meaning in the case of Indigenous politics. Turner (2020, p. 181) identifies the need to approach language with attention to sources of meaning in order to bring forth mutually respectful, and ultimately less colonial, forms of political dialogue and engagement. By advancing expansive and contextually informed understandings of sovereignty, Indigenous peoples challenge normative assumptions underpinning state legitimacy while advancing authority that is sourced from timeless relationships with the more-than-human and maintained through modes of accountability and reciprocity toward all living beings.

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It is through dialogue that Indigenous sovereignty holds a mirror to the state and provokes reflection on what knowledge authorizes state rule. Indigenous knowledge systems are grounded in our ways of life. These systems, by and large, are predicated on respect and reciprocity with land, water, animals, and more-than-human beings. Consequently, "our sovereignty is embodied, it is ontological (our being) and epistemological (our way of knowing), and it is grounded within complex relations derived from the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans, and land" (Moreton-Robinson 2007, p. 2). Beyond a choice of language, sovereignty for Indigenous peoples is widely characterized as a necessity of Indigenous life. Drawing on Moreton-Robinson (2007), Simpson (2020, p. 687) explains that Indigenous lifeways foster "an ontological position that requires sovereignty." It is the need to protect our broader web of relationships with place—including the more-than-human and human beings connected to place—that demands such heavy terminology.

AUTHORITY

To take Indigenous knowledge seriously and to effectively identify and address political science's normative settler-colonial ideologies, we advocate a broad approach to engaging with authority as a concept that is imbricated with sovereignty but free-standing. Often enveloped within discourses of sovereignty, jurisdiction, or power, studies of authority-making beyond contemporary electoralism and formal state processes of input and output have been limited. While scholars have highlighted micropolitics, the power of the commons (Ostrom 2000), and "hidden transcripts" of asymmetrical power dynamics (Scott 1990), most commonly Indigenous political authority has been theorized in state-linked alternatives of decentralization and pluralism. Almost invariably, engagements with authority have focused on Indigenous relations to political bodies such as society and the state.

Since its inception, political science has debated the scope of society's influence on the state, and vice versa, and theorized the limits of those influences. The field has witnessed consistent study of interest groups, minority or cultural groups, social movements, and international influences for their potential role in challenging the nucleus of power held by nation-states. From a state-centric perspective, Pierre & Peters (2020) argue that in many cases states have successfully collaborated with societal actors as well as transnational and subnational governance institutions, effectively re-enmeshing them into the state–society paradigm. That said, definitions of what constitutes the state and what constitutes society continue to shift in the literature. So too do the power and influence of international actors—though these are largely framed as nation-state or market-based interventions.

Beyond the more common study of social movements and international pressure, attention has also been paid to the role of fragmented politics and micropolitics in resisting, and sometimes undermining, state authority. It is in these sites of intervention that the field has seen the most pertinent challenges to the conflation of authority and legitimacy. Scholars such as Migdal (2001) have made valuable inroads by advocating the study of processes over institutions and challenging the state as a singular locus of power. Ostrom's (2015) alternatives to the state–market binary influence both Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches to resource management. Ostrom's advocacy for self-governance at local levels pushes beyond the state apparatus of pluralism and decentralization and, ideally, toward more fluid and adaptive models.

Also of note, Scott (1985, 1990) theorizes the "infrapolitics of the powerless," naming the everyday actions constitutive of the "offstage subculture[s]" developed in resistance to domination (1990, p. 118). Both overt and covert forms of everyday resistance have been central to Indigenous resurgence. Hunt & Holmes (2015, pp. 157–58), engaging well-established Black, Indigenous, and queer of color critiques, affirm that "[w]hile large-scale actions such as rallies, protests and

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blockades are frequently acknowledged as sites of resistance, the daily actions undertaken by individual Indigenous people, families, and communities often go unacknowledged but are no less vital to decolonial processes." Scott (1990, 1998) takes up themes similar to a thread we weave throughout this review: Alternative manifestations of political power are easily misunderstood within Western knowledge systems. Scott's, Ostrom's, and Migdal's interventions shift the way political science understands politics, and yet, identifying likeness to Indigenous governance has not been enough to transform how the field takes up Indigenous politics.

This epistemic burden transcends disciplines, and it is in the same vein that historian Ned Blackhawk (2023) contributes to the rewriting of Indigenous and non-Indigenous political histories by formulating a different foundation for authority-making in North America. Blackhawk's work reveals an intricate development of political authority that informs contemporary Indigenous–state relations. Far from a linear legacy of European conquest and Indigenous assimilation, Blackhawk (2023) provides painstaking detail of the contextual, place-based, and negotiated authority-making that form the foundation of the modern Americas.

One example of many is Blackhawk's (2023) account of the 1680 Pueblo Revolt, "arguably the first American Revolution" (p. 39), through which the Pueblo "extinguish[ed] Spanish sovereignty in the region" and, in the following decades, contributed to "Indigenous power [stretching] increasingly. . .across the continent," preceding robust renegotiations of power between Indigenous nations and Spanish colonizers (pp. 41–42). Examples of these refusals, resistances, and revolts across the continent define how North American states came to treat Indigenous political autonomy. Strategically maintaining an "incoherent" approach to Indigenous people and politics, nation-states reshape their diplomacies with Indigenous nations to accommodate their needs and relative power at any given place or time (Starblanket 2019). This is not solely a historical phenomenon; Indigenous sovereignty continues to push back, constrain, and reshape state sovereignty in North America to this day, not as an exercise oriented toward the state, but as an exercise of self-determination rooted firmly in Indigenous world-building. This brings us back to our assertion that sovereignty is a pivotal concept for Indigenous politics because Indigenous sovereignty both exceeds and is constrained by state sovereignty.

With this in mind, we advocate a broader relational understanding of authority and a shift away from institutional input and output processes that require primarily liberal individualist starting points for legitimacy. Zoomed out, we focus on practices of transparency, accountability, and consent as building blocks. This opens the door for thinking about how humans exercise authority in relation to each other and the natural world and how we take into account our relationships with the more-than-human. We use three inroads to demonstrate the need for this shift: First, more-than-human politics; second, collective authority and hostile analytics; and third, the consent-authority connection.

The nonhuman has been theorized extensively, most notably by critical race theory and Black studies scholars, who demonstrate the ways in which humanness has been utilized as an exclusionary category and the ways in which those deemed nonhuman have redefined what being human is and can be (Wynter & McKittrick 2015). Unsurprisingly, uptake of more-than-human politics has been limited in political science, reflective of the presumptions that not only did humans invent politics but humanness itself comes with social and cultural conditions. In political theory, Ferguson (2014, p. 182) challenges this mythology by reframing prehuman diplomacies and their production of the modern human, concluding that "the human brain is a consequence of political activity, not its cause" (see also Ferguson 2023). Today, the more-than-human component of Indigenous authority-making is a key point of distinction between Indigenous and state politics. Indigenous peoples do not simply take animal, plant, water, air, and land relatives into consideration in their authority; these more-than-human political bodies have an active role in the input

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and output processes of authority-making in Indigenous governance. The Whangunui River's legal personhood in New Zealand or the Buffalo Treaty alliance among 50 Indigenous nations in the United States and Canada are formal contemporary examples of this (Crosschild et al. 2021, Hutchison 2014).

In terms less cognizable for the Western worldview, many Indigenous nations maintain various political relationships with plant, animal, water, air, land, and spirit nations (Simpson 2017) and/or view themselves as a part of creation (Tynan 2021). In the input–output process of legitimation for the state, the more-than-human is likely to be viewed as a recipient of governance rather than a participant—for example, within formal democratic processes. Conversely, legitimation through an input–output process that includes the more-than-human is foundational to Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies (Atleo 2004, Basso 1996, Deloria 1973). Rather than make political decisions on behalf of more-than-human beings, Indigenous nations with these worldviews are equipped to undertake political decisions alongside or in conjunction with more-than-human nations. In many cases, these collective decisions have determined foundational laws (Daly 2004, Simpson 2017). These more-than-human foundations for Indigenous governance signal the need for Indigenous knowledge systems to be understood on their own terms.

This focus on individuals (humans) and the state as primary units of analysis has always been hostile to Indigenous peoples. In international politics, for example, the collective rights of Indigenous peoples holding distinct sovereignties in relation to states, and historical discrimination based not just on race but on political standing, were missed by human rights norms preceding Indigenous intervention (Lightfoot 2016). Domestically, the issue is even more pointed. In Canada, the "mythology of the 'treaty Indian'" shifted the nation-to-nation governance agreements from international diplomacy to a right-based paradigm by "linking the implementation of treaties to Indigenous individuals" (Starblanket 2019, pp. 448–49). Individual rights, in this case of treaties, violate the collective nature of authority-making brought into the agreements by Indigenous nations.

Tied up with conflicting processes of authority-making is the state's invocation of implied consent. The *Introduction to Politics* textbook favored by many progressive political science instructors in Canada, where we teach (Garner et al. 2022), serves as a useful reference point. Its Canadian editor has written dozens of references to Indigenous politics, including multiple references to Indigenous knowledge. Still, the following distinction is provided in the opening pages: "We could say that rulers are able to enforce their decisions either because they have the power to do so or because they have the authority to do so. The former implies some form of coercion," whereas authority implies consent (Garner et al. 2022, p. 5). The text is not without nuance, quickly adding, "In practice, no government enjoys full authority, even in a democracy" (p. 5). Still, tying authority to consent is widespread within political science. A later chapter elaborates on the authority–consent connection by suggesting that authority is the legitimate use of power by virtue of presumed consent: "Authority may be defined as legitimate power in the sense that rulers gain the acceptance of the ruled by persuading them to recognize the rulers' right to exercise power" (p. 42). This conceptual building block of political science presents a built-in preference to treat sovereign states, coded as domestically democratic and peaceful, as legitimate authorities.

Political authority is a critical concept in political science, though society, state, and market continue to define its engagement in mainstream politics. Akin to sovereignty, we suggest authority as an ideal site for intervention precisely because it represents the seemingly immovable epistemological underpinnings of political science. For Indigenous politics, theorizing has included showing how groups are capable of generating new forms of political authority that come to coexist, overlap, intersect, consolidate, diverge, or subsume each other.

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We must remain cautious about the potential for conceptions of authority involving consent, intimacy, the more-than-human, and relationality to become theory bound—that is, theorized in overly abstract or universal ways that are alienated from context and place despite their centrality to Indigenous sovereignty. There is a significant danger when pivotal concepts in Indigenous politics are not taken on their own terms and in context. Indigenous political traditions are reduced to something of a conceptual resource when decontextualized from the ways in which Indigenous people give meaning to and take up questions of governance across locations and moments in time. Indeed, the imposition of universal frames and concepts onto Indigenous political life, absent context or specificity, can contribute to a loss of meaning that increasingly marginalizes Indigenous knowledge in political science even within efforts to create space for it. Thus, the discipline may seek to engage Indigenous politics within its bounds but fails to create space for an account of knowledge production that takes the land relation, and our many relations with creation, seriously. This is not to deny the numerous political interventions relating to Indigenous people and lands both across and outside of the academy. However, this work frequently emerges from other disciplinary homes, which makes it institutionally disadvantaged within political science. Furthermore, the transformative work of Indigenous and decolonial scholars in political science often takes place independently, outside of institutional formations, and at significant cost (Green 2001). By and large, the ways in which political science scholars have taken up Indigenous politics have not pointed to the need for methodologies, processes of meaning-making, or forms of epistemological self-reflection that would transform the discipline in order to bring about greater mutuality and respect. Left unchecked, the problems that lie at the foundation of the discipline and that flow from Western conceptions of the political—such as the problems of classification between politics and culture, racial hierarchies, and anthropocentrism—continue to either exclude Indigenous people from the domain of political science, or to define and contain the terms of our inclusion.

CONCLUSION

As our discussion of sovereignty and authority reveals, Indigenous politics necessitates an approach that is attentive to and equipped to account for the multiple relationships that Indigenous people inhabit and that knowledge emerges from. A relational approach circumvents essentialist articulations of Indigenous relationships with land, allowing us to look at the often multiple contexts and knowledge bases that configure Indigenous political lives. It attends to the historical and cultural specificity of knowledge—facilitating greater consideration of how and why scholars of political science and Indigenous politics approach and understand concepts in distinct ways, and prompting important reflections surrounding the nature and limits of political positions and debates, effective political concepts, the normative use of those concepts (and whether it remains constant or is changing), and the stakes and implications of our theories and practices.

While the last decade has seen a change, we are not yet indicating or calling for the creation of a subfield but instead are acting on its nascent beginnings. The slight shift in orientation is important because we are not attempting to change political science but rather shape and advance these small gains by devoting some of our energy to giving form to the institutional and intellectual space discussed above. This is especially important because it appears that the Indigenous politics subfield will be sustained by faculty, methods, and analyses from outside of political science departments as much as from within them. Much like in our engagements with settler states, we must take care not to get caught in a form of recognition politics whereby the process of seeking institutional recognition, in the form of space and legitimacy within political science, reproduces logics and dynamics that produced and have sustained the omission and marginalization of Indigenous people over time.

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Taking Indigenous politics seriously requires us to interrogate the ways in which the field of political science contributes to the systemic marginalization of the subfield—as representative of the field's ontological and epistemological norms—and to intervene in those traditions. We have argued in this article for two intersecting approaches to take on this work. The first is to mobilize critical interrogations of the settler-colonial underpinnings of political science and all of its subfields. This work is already in motion, and the field of critical Indigenous studies in particular has influenced the trajectory of critique that the field has seen up to today. This will ensure that the developing subfield of Indigenous politics is not positioned or pressured to reproduce the current power dynamics that render Indigenous political thought peripheral to the field as a whole. The second approach demands that Indigenous knowledge systems be treated as deserving of a subfield that is able to legitimize itself on its own terms in order to articulate and validate the ways in which Indigenous peoples conceptualize and legitimize their own political research. Both of these interventions are meaningfully informed by the theory and practice of Indigenous sovereignty as representative of Indigenous authority and jurisdiction.

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