




SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Relational Indigenous systems: Aboriginal Australian political ordering and reconfiguring IR

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Abstract

Ontological parochialism persists in International Relations (IR) scholarship among gestures towards relational ontological reinvention. Meanwhile, the inter-polity relations of many Indigenous peoples pre-date contemporary IR and tend to be substantively relational. This situation invites rethinking of IR's understandings of political order and inter-polity relations. We take up this task by laying out necessary methodological innovations to engage with Aboriginal Australia and then showing how conventional and much recent heterodox IR seek to create forms of 'escape' from lived political relations by asserting the powerful yet problematic social science mechanism of observer's distance. This demonstrates a need to take Aboriginal Australia as a system on its own terms to speak back to IR. We next explain how Aboriginal Australian people produce political order on the Australian continent through a 'relational-ecological' disposition that contrasts with IR's predominant 'survivalist' disposition. The accompanying capacity to manage survivalism through relationalism provides an avenue for engaging with and recasting some of mainstream IR's survivalist assumptions, including by considering an Aboriginal approach to multipolarity, without attempting 'pure escape' through alternative ontologies. We thus argue that while it is necessary to critique and recast dominant IR, doing so requires putting dominant IR and Indigenous understandings into relational exchange.

Keywords: Indigenous Political Theory; Systems; Aboriginal Australia; Relationalism

Introduction

Indigenous conceptions and practices of inter-polity relations pre-date contemporary international affairs by hundreds or thousands of years, depending upon the case. This may present challenges of language and definition within the idiom of International Relations (IR) scholarship, but the historical and anthropological records, as well as the accounts and continuing practices of Indigenous peoples, are unequivocal: Indigenous groups practised and continue to practise trade, diplomacy, regulation of transit and a wide range of other inter-polity relations that deserve the designation 'international'. These modes of inter-polity relations tend to be enabled and supported by sophisticated ways of knowing and constructing political order that are inflected through place and embed knowers and knowledge within the communities that sustain them. Despite this, Indigenous approaches to political order and inter-polity relations, and thus to how the oldest living human communities on the planet construct relations among polities, remain almost entirely unknown in IR scholarship.¹ Addressing this scholarly shortfall is necessary to expand knowledge of the dynamics of inter-polity relations and to consider how these relations can and should be practised by human communities.

¹Marshall Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places: Indigeneity, Cosmology, and the Limits of International Theory* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

Recent decades have of course seen the emergence of literature about Indigenous peoples and politics in IR and the social sciences more broadly. On the first count the work of Franke Wilmer,² Marshall Beier,³ Karena Shaw,⁴ Irene Watson,⁵ and Sheryl Lightfoot⁶ among others have contributed to understanding what is at stake in the positioning of Indigenous peoples in dominant IR understandings and the challenges and opportunities occasioned by speaking back to IR. Wider literatures from a range of cognate disciplines and fields have grappled with similar themes. These contributions, including the work of Robert A. Williams,⁷ Sandy Grande,⁸ Joanne Barker,⁹ Taiaiake Alfred,¹⁰ Jodi Bryd,¹¹ Leanne Simpson,¹² Audra Simpson,¹³ and Aileen Moreton-Robinson,¹⁴ attest to the thoroughgoing and persistent epistemological violence of racialised dominant social science. These and other authors help to establish a milieu into which we write, and yet continued efforts are necessary because IR scholarship that remains largely unreconstructed in terms of Indigenous political thought almost entirely frames our knowledge of inter-polity relations.

Our contribution to this wider Indigenous politics scholarship involves responding to how IR scholarship tends to obstruct attempts to understand and appreciate Indigenous international designs, politics, and relations not only in its dominant forms but also in vanguard scholarship that pursues relational ontological reconfiguration. The latter includes philosophy of science approaches such as those of Alexander Wendt¹⁵ or Milja Kurki¹⁶ as well as critical thinking that rails against conventional IR through notions such as pluriversal politics as considered and expounded upon in this special issue. A significant part of the problem, as we surely agree with post-, de- and anti-colonial scholars as well as the aforementioned Indigenous politics scholars, is the colonial entailments of IR and wider social science knowledge. However, a related and foundational difficulty derives from a pattern of knowledge production that mobilises the problematic assertion of observer's distance *vis-à-vis* the relations in which scholars are embedded, whether this results in acceptance of the status quo or critique that seeks to escape it to create new possibilities. Grappling with this foundational difficulty while engaging the colonial politics of contemporary IR knowledge and Indigenous approaches to political ordering and inter-polity relations is a key and underappreciated challenge.

In response this article foregrounds Aboriginal Australian relational principles both methodologically and descriptively. We demonstrate that Aboriginal Australian forms of political ordering and inter-polity relations – and their potential contributions to IR – are better understood

²Frankie Wilmer, *The Indigenous Voice in World Politics: Since Time Immemorial* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993).

³Beier, *International Relations in Uncommon Places*.

⁴Karena Shaw, *Indigeneity and Political Theory: Sovereignty and the Limits of the Political* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2008).

⁵Irene Watson, *Aboriginal Peoples, Colonialism and International Law: Raw Law* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2015).

⁶Sheryl Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics: A Subtle Revolution* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016)

⁷Robert A. Williams, *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought: The Discourses of Conquest* (New York, NY and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁸Sandy Grande, *Red Pedagogy: Native American Social and Political Thought* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

⁹Joanne Barker (ed.), *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

¹⁰Taiaiake Alfred, *Peace, Power, Righteousness: An Indigenous Manifesto* (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹¹Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis, MN and London, UK: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

¹²Leanne Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishaabeg Re-Creation, Resurgence and a New Emergence* (Winnipeg, Canada: ARP Books, 2011).

¹³Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

¹⁴Aileen Moreton-Robinson. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* (Minneapolis, MN and London, UK: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

¹⁵Alexander Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

¹⁶Milja Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020).

through a nascent form of Aboriginal Australian political theory that we introduce here rather than through extant IR and dominant social science approaches to knowledge. IR concepts are inadequate for grappling with ecological-relational Aboriginal approaches and, more fundamentally, efforts to understand human systems from the disconnected perspective of the social science observer suffer foundational flaws. These flaws fuel IR's elevation and reification of 'survivalist' tendencies and tempt critical scholars to engage in 'escape by ontology'. Aboriginal Australian political theory leans instead towards understanding systems from an emplaced participant-first perspective while accepting the entwinement of survivalist and relationalist human tendencies. Sustainable political ordering and secure inter-polity relations are achieved by the cultivation of the latter to manage the former. In our view, this relational approach should not lead us to set Aboriginal inter-polity relations apart from IR. Rather, we suggest that it is more productive to put Aboriginal political theory into exchange with IR to, *inter alia*, suggest the value of attending to connectedness and a grounded understanding of systems to better understand the hyper-connected inter-polity relations of the twenty-first century and to grapple with the challenging politics of climate change.

The first section of the article emplaces ourselves in our work and spells out the methodological innovation that our work requires. We then reconstruct key IR assumptions and knowledge claims about the 'international system' to reveal a series of highly constraining assumptions and a fundamental epistemological problem that subtends IR: an inability to adequately account for how humans are relationally involved participants in the international system that they produce, attempt to know, and may be seeking to alter. The third section considers how to gain analytical purchase on Aboriginal political ordering and inter-polity relations. It begins by experimenting with applying conventional IR understandings and a core IR concept (anarchy) to Aboriginal Australian inter-polity relations before briefly considering relatively more heterodox scholarship. We conclude that Aboriginal Australian political ordering deserves to be taken as an ancient international system on its own terms – a move that presents an opportunity to speak back to IR.

The fourth section demonstrates the centrality of place and landscape in Aboriginal Australian political ordering, glossing the accompanying complex and intertwined mechanisms as a 'relational-ecological' system. This relational system and accompanying ethos can be set in tension with survivalist tendencies that can be apprehended as structuring the conceptual constellations of mainstream IR. The latter include hierarchies, anthropocentric distance and hubris *vis-à-vis* landscape, the valuing of individualism and competition, and the motivational primacy accorded to utility maximisation. Meanwhile we suggest that heterodox (including some relationalist) approaches in IR may remain close to the epistemological pre-commitments of mainstream IR to the extent that they take up the observer's perspective in efforts to escape IR survivalism, at least when analysed from the perspective of Aboriginal Australian political theory. In contrast and in keeping with our commitment to the relational mode of inquiry, we do not adopt formal categorical distinctions to render differences between Indigenous and dominant European-derived IR approaches. Instead, our contention is that relationalism and survivalism are set in a relational tension in Aboriginal Australian political ordering, and that this appears to have arisen as Aboriginal people sought to mitigate and manage survivalist tendencies and phenomena as part of a *long durée*, co-productive experiment in human order making.

The final section considers the phenomenon of multipolarity to illustrate how the entwinement of relationalist and survivalist tendencies might provide a pathway for engaging with and recasting some of mainstream IR's survivalist assumptions while avoiding the recent IR proclivity to forge escape from dominant politics through ontological reinvention. This leads us to present an Aboriginal approach to multipolarity. We demonstrate that the relationalist mitigation of survivalist tendencies that animates *this* multipolarity story reconfigures constraints and possibilities for inter-polity ordering quite profoundly. In this respect, too, the ecological-relational ethos, which we argue characterises Aboriginal Australian inter-polity relations, raises both challenges to and unrealised possibilities for IR scholarship.

Relational emplacement and avoiding ‘escape by ontology’

To bring out Aboriginal Australian approaches to political ordering¹⁷ and consider them alongside European-derived IR approaches requires a methodological rebalancing and reprioritising that may be unfamiliar to some readers. We seek to bring the overweening presence of European-derived texts face-to-face (and into engagement with) the effects of the colonial violence that has enabled the proliferation of white (including IR) scholarship in Australia and many other countries. This requires some disruptive practice *vis-à-vis* the IR canon as well as conventional and (to some extent) heterodox social science methodology and philosophical preoccupations. Most broadly, we need to gloss the by now vast archive of IR scholarship to tap the shared epistemological and ontological understandings that subtends the plurality of approaches in IR. This task is complicated somewhat by a recent burst of interest within IR (broadly construed) in matters relational, cosmological, and ontological,¹⁸ which has significantly expanded at least the *conversation* that is IR even if it may not have yet sufficiently troubled what remains dominant within it. Nonetheless, we aim to operate on a large canvas upon which the differences within European political scholarship are less significant and marked than differences from their Aboriginal Australian counterparts. Our goal is not to diminish or deny the diverse scholarly IR archive or the valuable pluralising that has been a feature of IR in recent decades. Rather, our approach involves pointing out that a European-derived IR consensus becomes more readily apparent when working alongside the very different registers of Aboriginal Australian peoples.

Meanwhile, to adequately draw out Aboriginal Australian political ordering, including as these are now entangled with their European-derived counterparts, requires – given the destruction visited upon Indigenous peoples through colonialism – relying not only on useful white accounts (by settlers, enthusiasts, and anthropologists) but also on the oral history and cultural knowledge of Aboriginal people. We channel the latter as they are passed down to and arise through one of us, Mary Graham. Mary is a Kombumerri person through her father’s heritage and is affiliated with Wakka Wakka people through her mother. Kombumerri people are part of the wide Yugambah language group in contemporary Southeast Queensland (Gold Coast); the lands of Wakka Wakka people are to the immediate northwest of contemporary Brisbane. Both regions are part of the wider Goori society of contemporary Southeast Queensland. Martin Weber is a German-born political theorist working in Brisbane, and Morgan Brigg is a settler-descended Australian and long-term collaborator with Mary Graham on questions of Aboriginal political ordering. Together we operate as a relational constellation of thinkers attempting to represent Aboriginal Australian political theory in relation to IR.

We use ‘Aboriginal Australian political theory’ rather than referring more specifically to Kombumerri (or Wakka Wakka) approaches to avoid the false diversity that is sometimes attributed to Indigenous peoples as part of efforts at appropriate representation (to counter earlier inappropriate homogenisation). Overly specific attribution can serve to separate Indigenous groups from one another and underplay the extent of development of *systemic* inter-polity relations among Aboriginal Australian groups. On the continent now called Australia, it is certainly true that individual groups are autonomous, with non-immediate groups described to anthropologists as, *inter alia*, ‘wild blackfellows’.¹⁹ Equally, many leading analysts of Aboriginal Australia refer to the remarkable ‘pan-Australian uniformity or patterning’ of Aboriginal social organisation,²⁰ or the ‘almost complete identity, even in details, of certain tribal customs in places far

¹⁷By ‘political ordering’, we mean the organisation of human being together, from the interpersonal to the international to the cosmological.

¹⁸Indicatively, see Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*; D. L. Blaney and A. B. Tickner, ‘Worlding, ontological politics, and the possibility of a decolonial IR’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 45:3 (2017), pp. 293–311.

¹⁹D. John Mulvaney, *Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians, 1606–1985* (St Lucia and New York, NY: University of Queensland Press, 1989), p. 2.

²⁰Mulvaney, *Encounters in Place*, p. 2.

distant from each other'.²¹ One early study reports that '[i]n almost every camp are to be found members of strange tribes on visit, or taking part in ceremonies.'²² These links, including extensive inter-group relations, continue in the present. This leads us to use 'Aboriginal Australian', though not as a conventional social science device to claim that our representations apply for all Aboriginal Australian groups. Rather, our claim is that Aboriginal groups are *simultaneously autonomous and relationally resonant*, and that accompanying relational principles of Aboriginal philosophy inform the forms Aboriginal political ordering that we represent.²³

While foregrounding Aboriginal Australian relational principles positions us apart from mainstream IR, it *also* leads us – less obviously but equally importantly – to position ourselves apart from much (though not all) recent heterodox scholarship that attempts to escape mainstream IR through 'ontological reinvention'. Much of the recent critical IR scholarship taking up matters relational, cosmological, and ontological can be characterised as attempting to effect 'escape by ontology'. We use this phrase to refer to the notion that work (in research, and in political campaigning) that challenges premises of Eurocentric thought (identified as universalist, substantialist, or in other ways supremacist by virtue of certain ontological commitments) has the potential to transcend these Eurocentric premises, or otherwise comprehensively 'leave them behind'. This is a very suggestive idea, and appealing for many critical thinkers. However, within the Aboriginal Australian register of relational thinking that we introduce in this article, escape is not a plausible pursuit.

Relational thinking in the register we introduce here takes account of the world in a practical and grounded way; it does not seek to partition it, or to turn its back on one part of it no matter how problematic or egregious it may be judged to be. In the Aboriginal Australian political theorising of Mary Graham, the political (and IR) ideas that Europeans brought to the Australian continent *do* seem foreign and objectionable in many respects – especially so the scripts and practices of warfare, territorialism, acquisitiveness, and appetitive self-satisfying motivations in relation to land. But these ideas and practices *also do exist*. Moreover, Aboriginal people are not inherently peaceful by dint of strong commitments to relational ontology, and thus do not represent a straightforward (primitivist) alternative script ripe for reading (and appropriation). Instead, apparently opposed and contradictory scripts and forms of political practice are inflected through two ideal types of political disposition – the 'survivalist' and 'relationalist' – that *are related to and entangled with each other* and which frame the overall methodological approach we adopt in this article.

The strange (in Aboriginal terms) settler systems of political thought that underpin the violence unleashed through settler colonialism and around the world through colonialism are *survivalist*. In its extreme expressions, a survivalist disposition (or, more deeply, ethos) marks a human existence that is transient and un-grounded in the sense that it does not 'belong' anywhere or to, with or for anyone other than (first and foremost) itself. To exist, in this mode, is to survive 'others' (human and non-human), and to do that, all bets are off. A relationalist disposition, on the other hand, is grounded in regard²⁴ for others (human and non-human) and in negotiating the inevitable conflicts, misunderstandings, flaws, or fault lines that present themselves in interactive engagements. Crucially, for our reconstruction of Aboriginal Australian political theory,

²¹A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (Canberra, Aus.: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1996), p. xiii.

²²Gerald Clair Wheeler, *The Tribe, and International Relations in Australia* (London, UK: Landmarks in Anthropology, J. Murray Johnson Reprint, 1910), p. 74.

²³Our terminology is also relationally inflected in other ways: the autochthony represented through terms such as 'Aboriginal' and 'Indigenous', for instance, only gains purchase through the colonial encounter, and the adoption of collective pronouns for groups of peoples may be an effect of the coloniser's language structures. We also write in English rather than an Aboriginal language. For us this means that we – Indigenous and non-Indigenous – are related but it does not mean that Aboriginal political thought has been necessarily influenced by settler colonialism. We are, in short, together and different; '[t]ogether, but not mixed up.' Miyarrka Media, *Phone & Spear: A Yuta Anthropology* (London, UK: Goldsmiths Press, 2019), p. 54.

²⁴'Regard' as we deploy it here does not imply an absence of tension or conflict.

the Aboriginal Australian relational register developed over very long periods of time in full cognisance that being human involves ‘survivalist inclinations’, with all the problems this may comprise. The relational register, and its ‘grounding’ in relations with land and others (human and non-human) thus emerged in part to contain, manage, and attend to the problems that survivalism raises, while regarding it as ‘part of’ being and becoming human.

So while ‘escape by ontology’ may be very appealing to critical thinkers, and while Indigenous peoples represent an appealing vehicle through which escape might be fashioned, to attempt such an escape is not properly relational in the terms of Aboriginal Australian political theorising that we introduce here. Mobilising relational Aboriginal political theory in the present requires taking account of current play of political relations in a world very significantly inflected through European colonialism of recent centuries. Our goal, then, is not to fashion a pure escape from IR scholarship, but to both face it and introduce Indigenous principles to IR on Aboriginal terms. This approach allows us to highlight and grapple with some of the ways in which a thoroughgoing survivalism has problematically and consequentially subtended IR as conventionally practiced. It also raises challenges that some heterodox IR scholarship may have to find ways to engage with in more depth.

At the level of terminology, our task requires caution *vis-à-vis* the burgeoning of work explicitly using relations, relationality, or relationalism as a framing discourse, even as we also operate through this discourse. In general, these uses are *critical*, in the sense that they are directed at an *other*, such as dominant IR, that is considered to be constraining and constricting, and somehow complicit in preventing a relational imaginary to do more, proper and better work. We share this attempt at differentiation, but are concerned that the commonly used language in such efforts can betray the overall goal. In particular, because the language of ontology concerns fundamental claims about what is real, we consider the use of the term ‘relationality’ to be problematic. The suffix ‘-ity’ denotes in all of its uses a *condition*. As a *condition* ‘relationality’ is inescapable and fundamental when thought of ‘ontologically’, but it is not *plural* in the way (we assume) most of its proponents intend. Certainly, we do not propose to cast relations in such a fundamental way because we are invested in what we take to be the more important *political* question of how to keep *relations* open rather than to close them down. As tempting as it may be to posit something as particularly important and significant by declaring it to be an ‘-ity’ (as in ‘totality’), this may, rather than creating more space for better thinking and acting, be a step into the snares of an all too familiar Western metaphysics. We thus avoid the ‘ontologising’ move of making our call for reorienting thinking and action towards *relations* a ‘condition’ by deferring to the language of relations, the *relational* and relationalism rather than to relationality.

IR’s ‘international system’: From orthodoxy to the challenges of ontological reinvention

When conventional IR scholars speak or write of an international system, they typically invoke a number of assumptions. Like all of the key terms in the social sciences, the meaning and analytical load of the concept of international system is contested, but these contestations occur against the backdrop of some shared assumptions. Some of these assumptions are relatively apparent, yet others remain implicit. Here we reconstruct some of these assumptions to reveal the basis of the knowledge claims that IR makes about and through the ‘international system’. This analysis lays the foundations for our later claim that the political constitution of Aboriginal Australia involves significant qualitative differences from how Western social science knowledge has construed and constructed the meaning and institutional reality of systems.

When mainstream IR scholars refer to the international system, they typically have in mind a conception of a whole that coheres independently of how or what its parts, (nation) states, perform.²⁵

²⁵We reconstruct the premises of the *constructive* use of the concept of an ‘international system’ here, and limit our account of conventional IR to such usage. This implicates social theoretic approaches in IR that have enjoyed disciplinary

References to 'balance of power', for example, articulate this by suggesting an interplay of forces and counter-forces (arms races, perceptions of threat, or diplomatic pressure, for example) that 'co-produce' order.²⁶ Order, on this understanding, is the inadvertent outcome of equilibrating behaviours, of attempts to 'counter-balance' against dominance (real or perceived) among the units in question by forging strategic alliances, for example. This enables a wide spectrum of research foci, including, for example, Randall Schweller's supplementary theorisation of 'under-balancing' behaviours in the international system.²⁷ The promise of systems-thinking for such approaches is that it explicates 'conditions of possibility', or sets of constraints which, though malleable, allow only limited kinds of relations to become realised in international relations. Diplomats, representatives, or organisations operating in 'international affairs' may not refer to an 'international system' in their practical ongoingings, but IR scholars see them reproducing such a system nevertheless. In other words, the system frames, enables, and constrains their activities,²⁸ and does so in significant ways behind their backs. Taking unilateral action to advance what a state representative perceives to be 'the national interest' will result in other actors from other states reacting and realigning. The 'system' compels all actors to do this in certain ways only, constrained and enabled by its 'self-reproduction'.²⁹

The most striking feature of this way of knowing a system is its claim to construct analytically valid knowledge along the lines of the 'laws of nature' per the natural sciences. IR scholars thus have often tended to think of the 'laws' governing the international system as akin to the laws of physics. The promise of the scientific paradigm, and, by extension, the social scientific one that wants to extend the former's logic to international politics, is the general validity of the knowledge gained by observation. The logic of this social science-IR way of knowing runs as follows: Anyone stepping into the observer's perspective, and following the prescribed procedures (called methods) for disclosing 'what states do' in forming an international system, will be compelled to come to the same conclusions. This guarantees the *objectivity* of science, and it means that the knowledge thus produced is thought to be 'uncontaminated' for instance by *ethics*, or moral ideas about right conduct. The laws that social science, when modelled on ideals of *natural* science, seeks to identify, disclose and compel independently of any questions of right and proper conduct by humans among each other, let alone among and with the rest of the world. In other words, these laws that the Western social scientist discovers always already 'govern' the real (world) and human perceptions of it.³⁰

Observation guarantees a distancing that is coextensive with an abrogation of responsibility in the sense of being answerable for the system, for one's conduct, or for the arrangements through which such conduct is validated and perpetuated. To see a system in this way is thus to see constraining and enabling laws that simultaneously prevent certain modes of conduct among

dominance, such as neorealism in its various versions (see below), but also less dominant theoretical traditions, such as the English School. Indicatively, see Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012); Barry Buzan and Richard Little, *International Systems in World History: Remaking the Study of International Relations* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2000). For more recent attempts at embellishing IR systems thinking with more social theoretic supplements, see Mathias Albert and Barry Buzan, 'On the subject matter of International Relations', *Review of International Studies*, 43:5 (2017), pp. 898–917. For the purposes of our argument here, we set aside reconstructions of critical approaches to rethinking systemic theorising. Some such work, specifically with reference to complexity theory and open systems thinking (indicatively, Erika Cudworth and Stephen Hobden, 'Complexity, ecologism and posthuman politics', *Review of International Studies*, 39:3 (2013), pp. 643–64) is to an extent cogent to our project, but not centrally relevant to the aims of explicating Australian Aboriginal ecological-relational multi-polar inter-politics, as we will see below.

²⁶For an overview, see Richard Little, *The Balance of Power in International Relations: Metaphors, Myths, and Models* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁷Randall Schweller, 'Unanswered threats: A neoclassical realist theory of underbalancing', *International Security*, 29:2 (2004), pp. 159–201.

²⁸Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1979).

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Martin Weber, 'On the history and politics of the social turn', *Review of International Studies*, 30:2 (2015), pp. 693–714.

humans from either occurring or persisting, and permit others to circulate. This enables a key IR foundational story: Human societies are and have always been divided by difference and competition, with conquest and destruction clearing the path for new things to emerge.³¹ In the process of increasing ‘contact’ on a world scale (a searing example of the observer’s self-serving euphemistic abrogation of responsibility from the perspective of colonised peoples), history has delivered what is to date the most *universal* international system. This is a social and political world of nation states that, despite their ‘self-interested’ constitution, coheres around an identifiable set of institutional constraints (including ‘sovereignty’) that structure what the different actors may want to, or be able to do, whether these actors like it or not.³² The system itself has ‘evolved’ as a result of the constitutive units’ attempt to shape it to their individual advantages, and running into the resistance of others in doing so.

Describing this ‘naturally evolved’ system from the observer’s perspective allows IR scholars and analysts to make a series of extraordinary analytical moves. It enables a conception of the international system to be made while putting aside any considerations about whether: (a) such a system may require active work or maintenance to ‘keep working’; or (b) this system is as comprehensive as the theoretical account suggests; or (c) it is just or proper *vis-à-vis* diverse peoples and traditions of the globe. Furthermore, extant assumptions about the system lead IR scholars to conclude that it is: (d) indeed composed of the units (nation states) attributed to it by the observer and (e) *a singular* and overarching system rather than one among many systems in a wider environment. Finally, it is worth underscoring that this ‘naturally evolved’ approach enables IR scholarship to bypass conveniently its entanglement and complicity with European imperialism and colonial expansion including the accompanying decimation of other peoples and traditions.³³

The foregoing analytical moves are possible within the standard practice of social science because the distance between observer and observed is taken for granted. The accompanying task of producing authoritative accounts of the observed, and validating these accounts, is comprehensively assigned to the observer’s perspective (including through the methods prescribed for how to observe in order to ensure ‘objectivity’). Moreover, this commitment to observation is itself very flexible. It is *consistent* with, and not somehow fundamentally called into question by non-foundationalism and contingency-thinking. In a world of ‘a thousand plateaus’,³⁴ giving an account of the plateau as a contingent starting point is enough to enable ‘observation’, though with ‘relative’ validity.

These and similar self-authorising moves have troubled the social sciences since their inception.³⁵ When placed under scrutiny they cannot be taken as compelling by any reasonable measure. A key weakness of this self-authorising way of knowing emerges when we acknowledge that human knowledge making is necessarily a *participant-first* activity, and that observation with a participant’s perspective in mind works very differently to the version of observation favoured

³¹See Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968); a reformulation of the ‘differentiation’ story as a backdrop to answering the question of ‘what is IR [about]?’ is in Albert and Buzan, ‘On the subject matter’, pp. 905ff.

³²Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; see also Barry Buzan, *From International to World Society* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

³³See Gurminder K. Bhambra, ‘Historical sociology, international relations and connected histories’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:1 (2010), pp. 127–43; John M. Hobson, *The Eurocentric Conception of World Politics: Western International Theory, 1760–2010* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Naeem Inayatullah and David L. Blaney, *International Relations and the Problem of Difference* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2004); Benjamin De Carvalho, Halvard Leira, and John M. Hobson, ‘The Big Bangs of IR: The myths our teachers still tell of 1648 and 1919’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 39:3 (2011), pp. 735–58.

³⁴Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

³⁵See Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), esp. pp. 1–16.

by conventional social science and IR. To 'be in a system' and to be, as human beings, active contributors to it as well as to ways of knowing it and claiming validity for such knowing, necessarily carries notions of quality, of better and worse, or rightfulness and wrongness, both of particular behaviours and the overall arrangements of the system. The Western social science and IR story has been one of forgetting the fact of participation – of neglecting that its elevation of the observer has depended on being participants first. Therefore, IR neglects that participation-first typically makes use of our limited perspectival commitments or understandings, and invariably makes demands on us as humans in our conduct with each other and with the world. These demands cannot be bypassed by creating an elitist fictitious story about the international system and how IR can know it.

This 'neat' social science account of international relations, based on the idea that systemic logics operate behind the back of actors (individual or collective) to constrain and shape the outcomes of inter-polity relating, has, of course, not gone unchallenged. Two recent strands have developed, both linked to the language of *ontology* (the question of 'what is and how is it real'), which have taken issue with the salient assumptions underpinning mainstream IR's ideas about systems. The first strand of ontological reinvention suggests that it is necessary to update the very understanding of *science* that has underpinned the projects of social science research. Broadly, proponents of this view focus on an ontological rift between the classical physics and cosmology (Newtonian and, broadly speaking, dualist), and the lessons about what the universe is made of drawn from *quantum physics* (now also extended to quantum biology).

In this strand of ontological reinvention, there has been a lot of work in recent years aimed at putting IR theory in touch with what the authors consider to be vanguard accounts in the philosophy of science. From the quantum-side, Wendt has constructed a pan-psychoic (relationalist) account based on the premise that human brains have the capacity to elevate subparticle level 'quantum-weirdness' to macroscopic quantum processes ('decisions'; 'spontaneity').³⁶ From a more Einsteinian angle, attempts at reinstigating the project of a philosophy of nature in cosmological terms has found its way into the IR literature.³⁷ Common to all such works is the underlying idea that the *correct* (or, in any case, a *more* correct or appropriate) appreciation of physics-as-cosmology recalibrates 'us', and enables better social theory *and* improved political relations in turn.

However, a key problem with such ontological reinvention is that political projects or effects deemed as broadly problematic (colonialism or indeed, any form of domination) are ultimately the outcome of 'having gotten the science wrong', for instance by subscribing to dualist instead of panpsychist conceptual schemes, or by not acknowledging the contingency of 'observation'. Without wanting in any way to detract from the many fascinating insights that such approaches yield, these accounts raise more questions than they answer about *politics*. It may be tempting to see 'dualism' (and 'false' universalism) as a historical aberration of Europeans who reconstituted themselves as 'non-pan-psychoic' (while taking others' worlds away from them). However, following this reasoning then means that the 'return' to themselves via quantum theory puts the same people at the vanguard again.

In this first broad strand of ontological reinvention, those practising this European-derived form of observing and knowing (still) get to be ascendant, 'correct', and to avoid entering into relations with other peoples that would disrupt their ways of knowing. This strand exhibits some continuities with the *optimism* of enlightenment thinking. It remains, in terms of its *commitments*, if not in terms of the licenses it adduces from these, universalist.³⁸ In effect, this first broad strand recasts universalism through post-Newtonian physics-as-cosmology.

³⁶Wendt, *Quantum Mind and Social Science*.

³⁷Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*.

³⁸Indicatively, Kurki, *International Relations in a Relational Universe*; for an earlier version of a similar argument, see Heikki Patomäki, 'Cosmological sources of critical cosmopolitanism', *Review of International Studies*, 36 (2010), pp. 181–200.

The second broad strand of ontological reinvention takes a more sceptical position in relation to received ways of knowing by seeking to pluralise existing IR ontology.³⁹ This strand of work, informed often directly (and almost always indirectly) by postcolonial and decolonial thought, is more diverse and casts conventional IR's 'precommitments' as ontological assumptions with pernicious and destructive outcomes, as experienced by colonised peoples. Apparently *alternative* ontologies are then mobilised, demonstrating other ways of being in and orienting oneself to the world, thus disclosing political possibilities beyond those of conventional IR. This strand of work critiques both the conventional IR framing we discussed at the beginning of this section, *and* the enlightenment optimism of the 'this-time-we-have-the-right-science' neo-universalist strand invested in post-Newtonian physics-as-cosmology.

The critique of conventional IR in this second broad strand aligns substantively with the insights into the dangers of 'survivalism' that we share, though it often adopts the language of alternative and 'incompatible ontologies', which, as we have argued above, is not plausible in the Aboriginal Australian political theory we are introducing.⁴⁰ The critique of neo-universalist social science pretensions points to ontological plurality, stressing the violence inherent in the suppression or assimilation of diverse ways of being as this arises through the epistemic and practical consequences of universalist claims. Relationality, within this second strand, tends to be an orientation belonging to *some* ontologies, but not to others, and, notably, rarely (or not) to those of moderns, or of Eurocentric inclinations.⁴¹

Both broad strands of ontological reinvention in heterodox IR tend to seek 'reconfiguration' at the level of ontology as the precondition for a new, better, more defensible, or more authentic and relational politics – 'escape by ontology', in short. Both are at least partially invested in *redemption* – in the idea of 'becoming new' (or being born again). Redemptive themes circulate through *both* the universal and much of the pluriversal versions of the critique of mainstream IR. Both suggest that some sort of escape from dominant (survivalist) IR ontological commitments is possible and a condition of better knowledge and 'better politics'. Of course, they do so in different ways: While the former appears to remain strongly committed to a philosophy of history (possibly with stages and ladders), the latter is openly very critical of such approaches. Nonetheless, both suggest that innovation in IR requires recognising that extant and dominant approaches are either false, misleading, 'relationally challenged' or otherwise politically egregious. This is significantly different to the approach suggested in the Aboriginal Australian political theory we reconstruct here. In this approach, survivalism is not 'escapable' but requires relational resolve to 'keep it in its proper places', to process its implications, and to moderate its influence in shaping systems.

³⁹Indicatively, Arturo Escobar, *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018); Cristina Rojas, 'Contesting the colonial logics of the international: Toward a relational politics for the pluriverse', *International Political Sociology*, 10:4 (2016), pp 369–82; David L. Blaney and Arlene B. Tickner, 'International relations in the prison of colonial modernity', *International Relations*, 31:1 (2017), pp. 71–5.

⁴⁰We are cognisant that the broad gloss applied here necessarily understates important nuances in many contributions, including some that in many respects align with the approach we take. In the context of this Special Issue, see Navnita Chada Behera and Giorgio Shani, 'Provincialising cosmologies: The relational cosmology of Dharma in a pluriversal IR'. More generally, the relational imaginary we present here resonates with some of the work in post-, de- and anti-colonial registers including indicatively Meera Sabaratnam, *Decolonising Intervention: International State-Building in Mozambique* (London, UK: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), Olivia Rutazibwa, 'What's there to mourn? Decolonial reflection on (the end of) liberal humanitarianism', *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 1:1 (2019), pp. 65–7, or Robbie Shilliam, *The Black Pacific: Anticolonial Struggles and Oceanic Connections* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2015), and *Decolonizing Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2021). This is particularly pertinent where such approaches index relational politics to 'place' (see Shilliam, *The Black Pacific*).

⁴¹Troublesome in this context is that such approaches often overlook that 'survivalism' produced its own versions of the *pluriverse*. The 'arch-catholic' (and Nazi-sympathiser) Carl Schmitt uses this concept in what could well be a manifesto for survivalism, *The Concept of the Political*. See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 53.

Overall, the Aboriginal Australian political theory we are introducing in this article provides a means of problematising both conventional IR conceptions of an international system and the strands of recent ontological reinvention that seek to correct or rail against the canon. Both are challenged by how humans are, as participants, relationally involved in the systems they produce and attempt to know.⁴² This manifests in different types of attempts at ‘escape’. Conventional IR adopts a tightly constrained and untenable set of ontological assumptions, standing apart from ethical and moral dilemmas of being embedded in international relations by deferring to the scientific phenomenon of ‘system’. (This understanding professes amorality even as it reproduces and facilitates survivalist European understandings of political ordering and European colonial expansionism.) Many ontological reinventors, in turn, seek to stand apart from the dominant (survivalist) version of IR that they are necessarily engaged and implicated with in order to establish a more defensible or recast approach to knowing and/or politics, in some cases by aligning with relationalism. Both tend to mobilise the self-authorising circularity of the observer’s distance *vis-à-vis* the relations in which they are bound. This powerful social science way of knowing is highly productive, but it is not clear that it is sufficient for knowing Aboriginal forms of political ordering and inter-polity relations or their potential contributions to IR.

Knowing Aboriginal Australian political ordering through IR?

While it seems likely that IR’s way of thinking about systems differ from Aboriginal Australian conceptions of political order and inter-polity systems, it remains necessary to ask if IR, as the dominant approach to thinking about inter-polity relations, might be of value for understanding Aboriginal Australian political systems. In this section, we therefore begin from *within* IR, temporarily accepting its assumptions in order to test them in relation to Aboriginal Australian inter-polity relations. To do so we ask: Do the inter-polity relations among Aboriginal Australian groups constitute an ‘international system’? A similar method is adopted by Neta C. Crawford in her analysis of the Great Law of Peace of the Iroquoian confederacy considering if Indigenous peoples and groups exhibit forms of ‘international organisation’ that can be recognised by IR.⁴³ Following this approach, one obvious entryway for considering Aboriginal Australian inter-polity organisation lies with the IR concept of anarchy, and particularly the understanding that each entity within an international system is not subject to any overarching ordering force. Indeed, anarchy appears to offer immediate analytical purchase for understanding pre-contact Aboriginal inter-polity relations. At the time of European arrival, there were a large number of interacting yet autonomous Aboriginal groups across the continent. Historical records document no overarching political authority (continent wide or regionally) alongside systems of inter-group trade, conflict management, and diplomacy.⁴⁴

Yet while the idea of anarchy appears to resonate, even limited scrutiny reveals that the political life of Aboriginal Australian peoples was and is not characterised by key IR precepts accompanying the notion of anarchy. Security dilemmas, wars of conquest, or the play of power or utility maximisation do not feature. Instead, there is relative peace, and contra prejudices that cast Aboriginal people as violent savages, ‘[n]othing is further from the truth than the state of constant hostility described in the average account.’⁴⁵ This is not to argue that Aboriginal

⁴²Though once again, see Behera and Shani, ‘Provincialising cosmologies’ for an approach to the observer’s perspective that is quite close to the one we take here.

⁴³Neta C. Crawford, ‘A security regime among democracies: Cooperation among Iroquois nations’, *International Organization*, 48:3 (1994), pp. 345–85.

⁴⁴F. D. McCarthy, ‘“Trade” in Aboriginal Australia, and “trade” relationships with Torres Strait, New Guinea, and Malaya’, *Oceania*, 9:4 (1939), pp. 405–38; Sylvia J. Hallam, ‘A view from the other side of the Western Frontier: Or “I met a man who wasn’t there...”’, *Aboriginal History*, 7 (1983), pp. 134–56; Wheeler, *The Tribe, and International Relations*, pp. 81, 95, 101–03.

⁴⁵Wheeler, *The Tribe and International Relations*, pp. 46, 74.

Australian peoples are intrinsically peaceful, a move that would slide into primitivist accounts of Indigenous peoples living ‘close to nature’. Killings, raids, and feuds are documented in the ethnographic record,⁴⁶ as is the use of physical violence to process disputes and restore personal or clan dignity.⁴⁷ However, wars of conquest seem unknown and it appears that ‘large-scale organized violence is ... contained in a range of ways to balance high degrees of individual autonomy against societal pressures to return to a state of relative peace [building] on concepts of relatedness, balance or harmony, and a living cosmos’.⁴⁸ In short, the foundations of Aboriginal Australian political ordering and inter-polity relations apparently elude conventional IR.

The unsuitability of the IR concept of anarchy as an entryway for understanding Aboriginal Australian politics and approaches to inter-polity relations highlights a wider problem with applying IR’s concepts to Indigenous peoples. As David Bedford and Thom Workman show,⁴⁹ Neta C. Crawford’s analysis of cooperation among Iroquois nations as an example of an IR security regime is a ‘praiseworthy effort to introduce aboriginal experience to contemporary international relations scholarship’ that founders because an ‘opportunity to explore sensitively a thoroughly non-modern text was lost in a Pro-crustean affirmation’ of IR.⁵⁰ The problem, familiar enough to Indigenous people, is that ‘the interest that the author finds in The Great Law of Peace does not lie in the uniqueness of the Iroquoian confederacy but rather in its supposedly (Western) democratic character’.⁵¹ The pattern, commonplace in European-derived social science, involves scholarship returning to its own terms of reference rather than seriously engaging difference.⁵² There is, then, a need to move beyond the application of IR concepts that shoehorn Indigenous peoples into a European register/s⁵³ and to understand the subtle yet powerful ways that Indigenous peoples and ideas are beginning to reconfigure global politics.⁵⁴

Equally, while many Indigenous people justifiably maintain that theirs is an autochthonous difference unable to be assimilated to European(-derived) conceptions of politics, it is unhelpful to prosecute a claim that Indigenous peoples are characterised by a pure or incommensurable form of difference. Two phenomena are worth noting. First, it is contact *with* Europeans that produces the category of autochthony.⁵⁵ Second, several centuries of colonial exchange have seen Indigenous peoples’ identities and ways doing politics become entangled with those of colonisers, especially as these are defined by states and the modern states system. These phenomena precisely demonstrate engagement across difference, and thus the possibility of traffic across very different ways of practicing and conceptualising political ordering and inter-polity relations. Aboriginal Australian political ordering eludes IR, and this requires taking Aboriginal Australia as an ancient

⁴⁶W. Lloyd Warner, *A Black Civilization: A Social Study of an Australian Tribe* (New York, NY: Harper, 1958), ch. 6, pp. 144–79.

⁴⁷G. Macdonald, ‘Where words harm and blows heal’, *Australian Dispute Resolution Journal*, 1:3 (1990), pp. 125–32.

⁴⁸Morgan Brigg and Polly O. Walker, ‘Indigeneity and peace’, in Oliver Richmond, Sandra Pogodda, and Jasmin Ramovic (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 259–71 (p. 261).

⁴⁹David Bedford and Thom Workman, ‘The great law of peace: Alternative inter-nation(al) practices and the Iroquoian confederacy’, *Alternatives*, 22:1 (1994), pp. 87–111.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁵²See Karena Shaw, ‘Indigeneity and the international’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 31:1 (2002), pp. 55–81.

⁵³For recent efforts in this direction, see Hayden King, ‘Discourses of conquest and resistance: International relations and Anishinaabe diplomacy’, in Randolph Persaud and Alina Sajed (eds), *Race, Gender, and Culture in International Relations* (Milton Park, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2018), pp. 135–54; Justin de Leon, ‘Lakota experiences of (in)security: Cosmology and ontological security’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 22:1 (2020), pp. 33–62.

⁵⁴See Lightfoot, *Global Indigenous Politics*; Manuela Lavinia Picq, *Vernacular Sovereignities* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2018).

⁵⁵Marcia Langton, *Well, I Heard it on the Radio and I Saw it on the Television ...: An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and About Aboriginal People and Things* (Sydney, Aus.: Australian Film Commission, 1993), p. 32.

international system on its own terms in order to speak back to IR. Nonetheless, this effort can – and, we suggest, should – proceed on the basis that mainstream IR and Australian Aboriginal conceptions of politics and inter-polity relations are simultaneously different and mutually comprehensible.

What, though, of the possibilities of ontological reinvention in IR for gaining analytical purchase on Aboriginal inter-polity relations? As already signalled, some strains of these recent developments are valuable for opening up the conversations about difference in IR and thus creating pathways for registering and engaging with Aboriginal political ordering and relations. However, the pluriversal forms of ontological reinvention discussed in the previous section require, on their own terms, both engagement with diverse forms of political ordering and holding open the possibility that relational ontological reinvention cannot apprehend all such forms. To do otherwise would be to reproduce an attempt at ontological hegemony that pluriversal critiques lay at the door of conventional IR. Moreover, as we also discussed in the first section, the proclivity for ‘escape’ in recent forms of ontological reinvention is at odds with the mutual interplay of survivalist and relationalist political dispositions that is engaged with and embedded in Aboriginal political theory. For these reasons, it seems that Aboriginal Australian political ordering likely eludes both mainstream and recent heterodox IR understandings, despite its likely resonance with many of the latter. This requires us to turn to Aboriginal political ordering on its own terms.

Aboriginal Australian relational-ecological ordering

When outsiders ask where Aboriginal Australian people originally came from, Aboriginal people sometimes reply that they ‘became human’ in their particular ‘Country’, an Aboriginal-English term for land that is both sentient and deeply related to people.⁵⁶ Other Indigenous peoples give similar answers – for example, see Bernard Perley on coming from ‘this earth’.⁵⁷ In this view, personhood is not mobile. It springs from and is bound with Place. In the case of Aboriginal Australia, recent research provides evidence of physiological support for this idea of a profound tie between place and personhood through findings revealing regionalism in Aboriginal peoples’ DNA.⁵⁸

In the accompanying cosmological schema, peoples’ becoming-human is co-extensive with the feat of order making. This contrasts with the pattern in dominant recent European cosmological traditions in which order is realised through God or (more recently still) through the machinations of rational self-interested behaviours as revealed through the observer’s perspective. Because people become human in place in Aboriginal Australia, the ‘The Land is the Source of the Law’.⁵⁹ ‘Land’, capitalised to indicate its generative and sentient capacities, invented human beings and other life forms through ‘The Dreaming’, an ongoing ontogenetic phenomenon that suffuses all existence.⁶⁰ The Dreaming sees the ongoing embodiment in landscape of spirit or totem ancestors who came out of the earth, moved across it, and re-entered.⁶¹ Land in this form becomes the

⁵⁶W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Aboriginal territorial organization: Estate, range, domain and regime’, *Oceania*, 36:1 (1965), pp. 1–25 (p. 14).

⁵⁷Bernard Perley, ‘Living traditions: A manifesto for critical indigeneity’, in Laura R. Graham and H. Glenn Penny (eds), *Performing Indigeneity: Global Histories and Contemporary Experiences* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), pp. 32–54.

⁵⁸Ray Tobler et al., ‘Aboriginal mitogenomes reveal 50,000 years of regionalism in Australia’, *Nature*, 544 (2017), p. 180.

⁵⁹Christine F. Black, *The Land is the Source of Law: A Dialogic Encounter with Indigenous Jurisprudence* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011).

⁶⁰W. E. H. Stanner, *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays, 1938–1973* (Canberra, Aus.: Australian National University Press, 1979).

⁶¹Nancy Munn, ‘The transformation of subjects into objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara myth’, in Ronald M. Berndt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Anthropology: Modern Studies in the Social Anthropology of Australian Aborigines* (Nedlands, WA, Aus.: University of Western Australia Press, 1970), pp. 141–63; Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Oakleigh, Vic., Aus.: University of Cambridge Press, 1993), p. 32.

forementioned Country; it throws humans up into the world and into the imaginative ability to create society and culture, helping humans to (continually) form society and keeping human existence alive and creative through its resources, its changes and enabling capacities. Humans are thus inextricably and forever obliged to Land-as-Country for both existence and sociopolitical order.

With sociopolitical life ordered through an integrated Law in which Land-as-Country is foundational for being, Aboriginal people have no need for a state to secure political ordering. Instead, a flexible yet ordered universe supports individual and group being. This universe invites people to express their autonomy and regulate their selves in relation to the Law, Dreaming, and their accompanying relational-ecological responsibilities to Country, kin, and other-than-human beings. Each individual 'is his or her own law-bearer'.⁶² Individuals are highly autonomous, in contrast with out-dated assumptions that Aboriginal people are group-oriented.⁶³ Because people are grounded in Country with all the responsibilities that entails, there is no need for an apical body or force exerting command-obedience power relations. Country is thus the source of the Law and the foundation for sociopolitical ordering through self-regulation. This system makes each individual part of – and therefore responsible for – the continuation of sociopolitical order.

Within the moral/spiritual landscape of Country and the maintenance of the custodial ethic, the wildcard of the human ego is not sinful or bad. Rather it is like a potentially volatile substance to be treated with a combination of caring stewardship, referee-like supervision, watchful guardianship, measured persuasion, and prompts towards attentive self-regulation and self-management. Individuals are invited to 'scale' or measure their behaviour in a system grounded in Land-as-Country, the Dreaming, and the Law. Individuals and groups are simultaneously highly autonomous and connected, and this supports both self-sufficiency and lawful self-regulation. Expanding one's personal sphere of influence, or the influence of one's family or group by force or conquest does not confer security. Rather, it ensures insecurity in a number of ways, not least of which is the longstanding grievances of the 'conquered'. Coercion in relations eventually rebounds – the act of coercion is not forgotten. Large-scale wars of conquest, as noted earlier, are apparently unknown among Aboriginal Australian groups, likely in part because of resonating connections across and among groups through the relational device of 'skin' groups (a section or subsection system that divides Aboriginal society into groups or classes as assigned through the kinship system).

The foregoing system generates and is characterised by a relationalist ethos manifesting as the embrace of lateral organisational structures, integrated human-landscape relations, the valuing of autonomy and balance, and self-management (in the context of a loose regulatory environment). This relationalist disposition can be heuristically set in tension with the survivalist disposition of IR that manifests as the embrace of hierarchies, anthropocentric distance, and hubris *vis-à-vis* landscape and others, the valuing of individualism and competition, and utility maximisation (set against regulatory controls). We are, naturally enough, drawing a contrast with foundational IR precepts discussed in the first section, and this maps onto useful empirical observations. For example: The security dilemma is rife where a survivalist ethos prevails yet is not present where the relationalist ethos prevails. Furthermore, a relationalist ethos facilitates inter-polity system-wide relations through largely integrative rather than conflictual inter-group relations⁶⁴ – conquest does not arise when people are bound (related) to *particular* land, which also puts them into relation with other peoples and lands.

The Aboriginal Australian relational-ecological system does not necessarily generate 'peaceful' relations in the everyday European sense of an absence of conflict. While large-scale violence is

⁶²Mary Graham, 'On Correct Behaviour' (unpublished paper, copy held by the current author, 1990).

⁶³Fred R. Myers, 'Reflections on a meeting: Structure, language, and the polity in small-scale society', *American Ethnologist*, 13:3 (1984), pp. 430–47 (p. 431).

⁶⁴Wheeler, *The Tribe and International Relations*.

apparently unknown, interactions and relations among people and groups can be tense, difficult, frustrating, or conflictual, including because of the wildcard of human ego. The embrace of autonomy means that individuals may at times behave with disregard to relationships. Indeed, a wide range of idiosyncratic behaviour tends to be accepted as part of valuing personal autonomy.⁶⁵ In earlier times, conflicts between individuals and groups were processed through physical combat, and this continues to some extent in the present.⁶⁶ In addition, while strong commitments to autonomy and limited hierarchy enable extensive participation and deliberation in decision-making, this process can be agonistic, frustrating, and time-consuming.⁶⁷

Indeed, the apparent long-term stability of Aboriginal Australian sociopolitical order does not arise from an 'either-or' understanding of peace or conflict susceptible to the god's eye view of the social science observer. Peace and conflict run together in continually contextualised and emergent relations. In the language of IR's heritage, this is a chorologically derived (from the Greek *khōros*, pertaining to relations among geographical phenomena) understanding of political relations. But, this also does not mean either an absence of order or that the resulting understanding is ineluctably local or limited. Political relations are patterned just as relations among geographical phenomena are. These patterns can be observed by hovering or flying in the manner of birds, but this is a transitory condition; it is not the (unsustainable) privileged perspective of the social science/IR observer.

Our goal, then, is not to cast Aboriginal Australian peoples or traditions as intrinsically relational (and thus peaceful) and their European counterparts as essentially survivalist (and thus conflictual). Rather, our contention is that amidst the pursuit of relational balance connected to Country, survivalism is always present as an alternative orientation to be deflected, managed, and perhaps embraced depending upon circumstances. Survivalist impulses – and behaviours – are part of human being and experience. Human frailties (the wildcard of the ego, a competitive or aggressive impulse) or an externally imposed crisis may present recurrent challenges to the pursuit of long-term security and political order through relationalism. There is no point in attempting to eliminate this orientation. To attempt to do so would be to work against who people are. Rather, Aboriginal people appear to have developed, through a remarkably long-term experiment in human order making, relational ways of mitigating and managing survivalism. In contrast, dominant IR theorising has tended to embrace survivalism. Meanwhile, recent efforts at ontological reinvention tend to attempt to turn against and/or escape dominant IR and survivalism through the critical distance afforded to them by the observer's perspective. Against these IR approaches, Aboriginal Australian political theory reveals the longstanding entwinement of relationalism and survivalism developed by Aboriginal Australia and provides a potential pathway for critically engaging with and recasting some of IR's survivalist assumptions while also rethinking relational forms of ontological reinvention.

An Aboriginal approach to multipolarity?

The idea of a 'balance of power' among contending entities occupies a central position in IR understandings of the international system,⁶⁸ as do arguments about whether variants of polarity (uni-, bi-, multi-) are more conducive to a stable system.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, we have argued that IR's core assumptions and precepts tend to preclude understanding of Aboriginal Australian conceptions of political ordering and inter-polity relations. Nonetheless, we have also argued that these very different approaches to thinking about inter-polity relations might be usefully put into

⁶⁵Fred Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics among Western Desert Aborigines* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1991), p. 161.

⁶⁶Macdonald, 'Where words harm and blows heal'.

⁶⁷Brigg and Walker, 'Indigeneity and peace', p. 265.

⁶⁸Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*; Buzan, *From International to World Society*.

⁶⁹John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, NY: Norton, 2014).

exchange. Here we take up this argument by considering the possibility of an ‘Aboriginal approach to multipolarity’. While we showed the inadequacy of the notion of anarchy for describing Aboriginal Australian inter-polity relations earlier in the article, the very general IR notion of independent entities ([nation] states) operating autonomously within a system does resonate well with Aboriginal Australian understandings of autonomous groups (nations, clans, or ‘mobs’) each exercising jurisdiction for their affairs.

Elucidating an Aboriginal approach to multipolarity first requires, perhaps paradoxically, not seeking similarities through the general IR notion of multipolarity but beginning with important differences between Aboriginal Australia and IR. In IR’s international system schema, entities arise based on sovereign and hierarchical command-obedience power relations within a given territory. This survivalist dynamic arises, moreover, in a way that is divorced from the territory upon or in which the regime is established. The (nation) state entity is imagined to be independent of landscape and place. Further, the order that arises in the international sphere emerges out of the play of competitive power relations and utility maximisation. In contrast, in Aboriginal Australian political ordering, entities arise through lateral relations and are integrally bound with landscape and place. Inter-polity ordering arises not because of the play of contestation (though that is not entirely absent) but because landscape, through Country, serves as a template for the socio-political ordering of relations among individuals (through the kinship system) and groups (through a system of ‘sections’ correlated with and crosscutting kinship systems as well as ancestor tracks embedded in landscape that connect groups with one another).

At this point, a striking difference that speaks to both differing conceptions of order and ways of knowing that ordering becomes apparent. IR theorising has inter-polity ordering arising ‘behind the backs’ of actors in the international system, revealed through the privileged perspective of the observer by forgetting that knowing requires knowers to be participants first. In contrast, the Aboriginal Australian system has all actors ‘in-play’, bringing about the ordering of the system, with all actors deemed (in principle) of being able to understand the mechanisms and systems for bringing about order. Each individual may not understand *all* the mechanisms at play, and access to knowledge may be regulated according to capacity, age, or gender, but in general, individuals know that they are part of the system and are co-responsible for its ordering. Survivalist tendencies and phenomena are managed through individual participation and self-regulation in a politically and normatively emergent order framed by Country, Dreaming, and Law.

Such striking differences may suggest that we do in fact face incommensurable differences in the pursuit of engagement between IR and Aboriginal Australian conceptions of inter-polity systems through the notion of multipolarity. This is probably so if we engage with the notion of multipolarity in foundational ontological and epistemological terms. Mary Graham has previously suggested one possible formulation of Aboriginal logic that highlights apparently incommensurable difference:

Multiple Places in Landscape = Multiple Connected Dreamings = Multiple Mutually-Respecting Laws = Multiple Truths = Multiple Perspectives = All perspectives (truths) are Valid and Reasonable.⁷⁰

There is not much possibility here for a rapprochement of this thoroughgoing conception of multiplicity with the universal perspective of the disembodied observer embraced by dominant IR. However, rather than embrace apparently irreconcilable difference, we want to show how our discussion thus far enables traffic at the level of conceptualising inter-polity relations.

⁷⁰Mary Graham, Morgan Brigg, and Polly Walker, ‘Conflict Murri way: Managing through place and relatedness’, in Morgan Brigg and Roland Bleiker (eds), *Mediating across Difference: Oceanic and Asian Approaches to Conflict Resolution* (Honolulu, Hawai’i: University of Hawai’i Press, 2011), pp. 75–99.

In contrast to thoroughgoing Aboriginal Australian understandings of multiplicity, IR conceptualisations of inter-polity relations apparently seek to forget that human knowledge making is necessarily a *participant-first* activity, making a series of untenable assumptions. Inter alia, the international system is constituted of a tightly constrained class of entities that are engaged in self-organising process of equilibrating behaviours driven by conflictual and self-interested behaviour. IR conceptions of multipolarity refer to the actions or behaviours of (nation) state entities as if states were individuals⁷¹ and to the exclusion of the individuals that conceptualise and operationalise states. In contrast, Aboriginal Australian political ordering makes (lawful) participation integral to both the production of order and knowledge of that ordering. Aboriginal Australian approaches thus address key ontological, epistemological, and methodological short-falls of dominant IR conceptualisations of (international) systems. It follows, beyond these theory of knowledge concerns, that Aboriginal approaches should be able to offer practical insights to recalibrate and augment IR understandings of system and of multipolarity.

One way to summarise the possibilities that Aboriginal Australian approaches offer to IR understandings of multipolarity and of system is to highlight the theme of connectedness. Where IR posits autonomous utility maximising entities engaged in survivalist contestation, Aboriginal Australian approaches posit autonomous entities that are relationally connected, including through the challenge of mitigating survivalist behaviours or phenomena. Where IR posits regimes operating disconnected from place, Aboriginal Australian approaches posit regimes enabled and articulated through place. Meanwhile, this approach seeks to engage with rather than to (untenably and unrealistically) turn its back on dominant IR scholarship and contemporary international relations.

An Aboriginal approach to multipolarity, then, posits a relationally thoroughgoing understanding of connections among entities that does away with a strong observer's perspective. Our first claim for the value of this approach is that it does useful work to help more fully describe the empirical reality of our hyper-connected inter-polity relations in the twenty-first century (the work of positive social science). Balance of power among states, in most contemporary cases requires highly variegated diplomatic practice to not only balance 'power' with another entity/entities, but also to balance this traditional IR act of balancing with the fact of mutual integration within global systems of trade and other practices of cooperation from postage to shipping and from quarantine to air travel. As states have become more relationally entwined, Aboriginal conceptions of resonating connections across and among polities provides a more useful way to describe inter-polity relations than does an understanding of disarticulated contesting entities.

Our second claim is that an Aboriginal approach to multipolarity is useful to help us grapple with what types of order we should be pursuing (the work of normative social science) to address current key political challenges. The most striking example here is the challenge of climate change, where extant IR concepts appear largely unable to facilitate a useful response to the maddening populist denial of climate change.⁷² An Aboriginal approach to multipolarity suggests the grounding of politics in place and landscape as a foundational way for people to be engaged with and care for the well-being of systems they inhabit and embody, with the relational connection among places providing the impetus for this to operate among polities. It provides us, in Bruno Latour's terms, with a demonstration of how to come 'down to earth'. In this way, multipolarity with Aboriginal characteristics reveals the poverty and unsustainability of the disconnected perspective of the social science/IR observer.

Some may object that insights about connection and hyper-connected inter-polity relations are available through other means, and that the above contributions are too modest an offering to draw from the world's oldest living culture and the accompanying depth of remarkable human difference. Others might object that foregrounding multipolarity leaves our efforts

⁷¹Alexander Wendt, 'The state as person in international theory', *Review of International Studies*, 30:2 (2004), pp. 289–316.

⁷²Bruno Latour, *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2017).

straightjacketed by precisely the constellation of problematic concepts that we critiqued in the second and third sections of the article. However, as we have argued, to attempt a fulsome escape from the dominance of IR is to misread the current political play and not properly relational in the terms of Aboriginal political theory that we reconstruct here. Our goals are simultaneously ambitious and grounded. We are pointing out that Aboriginal Australian peoples have designed, over vast timescales, ways to mitigate survivalist tendencies for long-term political stability while also holding that others – including dominant IR – might learn from a relational Aboriginal approach. We do not doubt the extent of the challenge of mitigating the survivalist tendencies of colonisers who have expropriated Aboriginal land. But we also contend that colonisers can learn, even given the apparent uniqueness of Aboriginal Australian approaches to inter-polity relations and the gravity of ongoing power asymmetries. In relational-Aboriginal terms, it may be that it is necessary to read the landscape carefully, to recognise the ‘paradoxical power of political weakness’ – and to wait ‘for the right conditions, unlike the individualist and forced will-to-power of the European politician’.⁷³

Conclusion

Longstanding Aboriginal Australian forms of political ordering and inter-polity relations deserve to be understood through Aboriginal Australian political theory that is set apart from IR scholarship that mobilises the powerful yet problematic social science mechanism of asserting observer’s distance *vis-à-vis* the relations in which scholars or analysts are themselves embedded. In Aboriginal political ordering, both individuals and ways of knowing are embedded within a system that enables the management of survivalist political dispositions through a series of integrated and resonating ontological commitments. Where Aboriginal political ordering and knowing has individuals embedded in political relations, IR of both conventional and heterodox forms tends to create for knowers forms of ‘escape’ from political relations. Conventional IR defers to the scientific phenomenon of ‘system’, while many recent ontological reinventors seek to stand apart from the dominant version of IR, at times by aligning with relationalism. Both conventional IR and recent ontological reinvention in IR are inadequate for knowing Australian Aboriginal forms of political ordering and inter-polity relations, though there are relational ontological resonances with critical pluriversal approaches to relationalism.

Our claim in this article has not been that the temporal primacy or philosophical sophistication of Aboriginal Australian political ordering and knowing confers any particular authority. Rather, we have cast this ordering and knowing as the outcome of a long-term experiment in human order making that foregrounds land and place as the basis for a relational-ecological system. This, in turn, enables us to achieve some theoretical distance from IR understandings and to show that Aboriginal Australian peoples have developed ways of understanding systems that take account of the fact of human participation in the systems they describe. These ways of understanding systems do not suffer the untenably restrictive assumptions of dominant IR theorising, nor do they need to construct an alternative ontology to escape from dominant IR. Moreover, they provide theoretical resources for grappling with contemporary political circumstances and challenges, including human interdependence and climate change, as we illustrated by positing the possibilities of an Aboriginal Australian approach to multipolarity.

One of the challenges that we have engaged throughout this article is the fact that Aboriginal Australian approaches to political ordering and inter-polity relations are in many respects radically different from those of dominant IR. Indeed, we have argued that where Aboriginal approaches are characterised by a relationalist ethos, IR approaches are predominantly survivalist. Given these differences, it is tempting to make an argument for radical difference and to take a

⁷³Stephen Muecke, *Ancient and Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* (Sydney, Aus.: University of New South Wales Press, 2004).

stance apart from dominant IR – to attempt an escape from dominant IR as many recent IR ontological reinventors seek to do. However, we have suggested that to do so would involve an ultimately unsatisfactory attempt at scholarly self-redemption enabled by the very observer's perspective that fuels IR's elevation and reification of survivalist tendencies – tendencies that also enable the scholarly mining of Indigenous philosophy for dominant knowledge's own projects and preoccupations.

Moreover, to seek redemption would not be properly relational in the terms of the Aboriginal political theory we have introduced here because it would overlook the ways in which Aboriginal Australian peoples have grappled with and managed survivalist phenomena in the midst of the very long-term process of developing a highly sophisticated approach to political ordering. In this approach, apparently opposed and contradictory forms of political practice are inflected through 'survivalist' and 'relationalist' political dispositions that are related to and entangled with each other. This form of relational thinking takes account of the world in a practical and grounded way; it does not seek to partition it, or to turn its back on one part of it, including on dominant IR. For this reason, we have argued for a far more qualified 'relational escape' from dominant IR by introducing IR to Aboriginal Australian ways of conceptualising political order and inter-polity relations.

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