

Acting as Country (Entry for Braidotti, R., E. Jones and G. Klombyte (eds). *More Posthuman Glossary*. Bloomsbury Academic)

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Aboriginal sovereignty is not accommodated by Western political frameworks that prioritise independence, autonomy and territorial possession to define the operation and limits of power as a form of mastery and exclusive right. Instead, it is common for Indigenous peoples to articulate our sovereignty in relational terms of ecological and ontological interdependence; Aboriginal sovereignty is performative and chiefly involves ‘acting as Country’. Although the world’s Indigenous peoples are diverse, having distinctive cultural practices developed over aeons of time in specific locations, Indigenous peoples globally can be considered united in their efforts to represent and protect their interests and rights in the traditional lands and waters that define Indigenous being as such. In this sense, ‘acting as Country’ defines a universal goal and character of Indigenous sovereignty. This conceptualisation of sovereign being advances a cultural understanding of the relational nature of power, which contrasts with dominant Western notions of sovereign dominance, possession and exclusivity and resonates strongly with posthuman principles of relationality (see Bignall, Hemming and Rigney 2016).

In settler-colonial situations such as Australia, where First Nations peoples are overwhelmingly subjected to the legal, political, socio-economic and cultural forms imposed by colonising authorities, practices of acting as Country define a distinctive quality of Aboriginal sovereignty. The notion that Aboriginal self-governance involves acting as Country offers a novel conceptual resource for Indigenous politicians struggling to reclaim political authority after colonisation. Reclaiming Aboriginal sovereignty involves rebuilding an effective capacity to act as Country through the cultivation of positive relations in support of life-affirming ecologies. Acting as Country is, then, the continuing exercise of Indigenous sovereignty through an ongoing duty of, and responsibility for, protection of Country. This duty binds Aboriginal peoples with their traditional territories in accordance with a system characteristic of Indigenous Law, which links the human and natural worlds and thereby specifies complex interrelated conditions of human right and environmental obligation. The interconnected right and responsibility to ‘act as Country’ is vital for Indigenous authorities as the Traditional Owners and original custodians of ecologies under threat from unsustainable and potentially destructive industry, development and population growth. Furthermore, the capacity to act as Country is crucial for the health and wellbeing of Indigenous nations, whose identity and existence as such is inseparable from the environmental health of the lands and waters that constitute and support Indigenous Being (see Hemming et al 2019).

‘Nation re-building’ describes key aspects of the process Aboriginal Nations can undertake to recover their sovereign capacity after colonisation. Proceeding through phases of Identification, Organisation and Action, Indigenous nation re-building is key for Indigenous community development and self-determination after colonisation and supports the sustained efforts of First Nations to reclaim and exercise governmental agency (Cornell 2015). As a process of recovery, Indigenous nation rebuilding strengthens the political subjectivity and effective institutions required for the self-governance of Indigenous nations. Self-determined political identity, organisation and action, are essential existential tools for Indigenous communities as they strive to reclaim political authority and the right to self-governance after colonisation. Indigenous Nation rebuilding for self-governance is a strategic and structured process of political

revitalisation that Indigenous leaders can mobilise to effectively practice aboriginal sovereignty in ‘acting as Country’.

References

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