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# The Moving Spirit of Settler Colonialism: Temsula Ao, Counter-Sovereignty, and the Politics of Intervention in the Borderlands of India

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This paper investigates the incursions, or more accurately, the interventions of the Indian state into what are often called its "Northeast borderlands." It grapples with the specific space occupied by those who belong to this minoritized region in India. Theoretically, it works through conceptions of "sovereignty" and "intervention" to underscore what is at stake for those who lie within the remit of recognized state sovereignty but are nonetheless subject to brutal and invasive "intervention." The article engages Naga author Temsula Ao's writing on questions of "tribal" identity, globalization, and borders to situate India as a postcolonial "settler" state. Finally, it puts her work in conversation with Manu Karuka's notion of "counter-sovereignty" to highlight the ways in which even critical International Relations (IR) theory risks falling into the trap of reifying "sovereignty" and unwittingly giving credence to Westphalian and Euro-centric understandings of sovereignty at the expense of alternative and prior imaginaries.

Este artículo investiga las incursiones, o dicho de manera más precisa, las intervenciones del Estado indio en lo que, con frecuencia, se denominan sus ≪tierras fronterizas del noreste≫. El artículo trata acerca del espacio específico que ocupan quienes pertenecen a esta región minoritaria de la India. De manera teórica, el artículo aborda las concepciones de ≪soberanía≫ e ≪intervención≫ con el fin de remarcar lo que está en juego para aquellas personas que se encuentran dentro del ámbito de la soberanía estatal reconocida, pero que, sin embargo, están sujetas a una ≪intervención≫ brutal e invasiva. El artículo aborda los escritos de la autora Naga, Temsula Ao, sobre cuestiones de identidad ≪tribal≫, globalización y fronteras con el fin de situar a la India como un Estado ≪colono≫ poscolonial. Por último, el artículo pone el trabajo de Temsula Ao en correlación con la noción de ≪contrasoberanía≫ de Manu Karuka con el fin de poner de relieve las formas por la cuales, incluso la teoría más crítica de las RRII, corre el riesgo de caer en la trampa de cosificar la ≪soberanía≫ y, sin ser conscientes de ello, dar crédito a las concepciones westfalianas y eurocéntricas de la soberanía a expensas de imaginarios alternativos y previos.

Cet article s'intéresse aux incursions, ou plus précisément, aux interventions de l'État indien au sein de ce qu'on appelle souvent ses ≪ régions limitrophes du Nord-Est ≫. Il s'intéresse à l'espace spécifique occupé par les membres de cette région minoritaire en Inde. Sur le plan théorique, il examine les conceptions de ≪ souveraineté ≫ et d'≪ intervention ≫ pour souligner les enjeux pour ceux qui sont soumis à la souveraineté d'un État reconnu, mais qui subissent tout de même des ≪ interventions ≫ brutales et invasives. L'article fait intervenir les écrits de l'auteure Temsüla Ao du Nagaland sur les questions d'identité ≪ tribale ≫, de mondialisation et des frontières pour resituer l'Inde en tant qu'État ≪ de colons ≫ postcolonial. Enfin, il confronte son travail à la notion de ≪ contre-souveraineté ≫ de Manu Karuka pour mettre en évidence les façons dont même la théorie des RI critiques risque de tomber dans le piège de réification de la ≪ souveraineté ≫ et d'accorder involontairement du crédit aux approches westphaliennes et eurocentriques de la souveraineté aux dépens d'autres imaginaires antérieurs.

Recapitulating rumors as facts, historians and their audiences assume membership in the rumor community, breathing new life into the rumor of countersovereignty with each variation, with each retelling. What historical actors saw clearly as nakedly political claims, as stories of justification after the fact, subsequent readers take for facts, for the whole story

—Manu Karuka, *Tracks of Empire*

Grandfather constantly warned
That forgetting the stories
Would be catastrophic:
We would lose our history
Territory, and most certainly
Our intrinsic identity
Temsula Ao, *The Story-Teller*

On December 4, 2021, soldiers from the 21 Para Special Forces army unit in Nagaland, India, opened fire on a group of coal miners in a bus murdering six of them. They claimed to have mistaken the miners for militants. The Naga community's rightful anger manifested itself in protests and riots, leading to the death of seven other people, along with a Special Forces soldier. The local (Nagamese) police filed a First Information Report saying that the military had not made a requisition to the police station to provide a police guide for their counterinsurgency operation, and thus, "it [was]

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obvious that that the intention of the security forces is to murder and injure civilians" (Human Rights Watch 2021). In the wake of this dreadful incident, this article wrestles with the specific space occupied by those who belong to this minoritized group in India.

Theoretically, it works through conceptions of "sovereignty" and "intervention" to underscore what is at stake for those who lie within the remit of recognized state sovereignty but are nonetheless subject to brutal and invasive "intervention." I tarry with Naga author Temsula Ao's writing on questions of "tribal" identity, globalization, and borders. I put her work in conversation with Manu Karuka's notion of "counter-sovereignty" to highlight the ways in which even critical IR theory risks falling into the trap of reifying "sovereignty," albeit as essentially "negative" or "problematic" in opposition to conventional IR theory's apprehension of sovereignty as largely "positive." This reification precludes an engagement with alternative modes of social and political organization, "sovereignties" that preceded European notions of spatially demarcated territories with armies to manage external violence and the police and legal systems to incarcerate within. Ao and Karuka instead enable more capacious visions of sovereignty that are not perfunctorily circumscribed by state violence. In the context of the (post)colonial Indian state, their work helps us think through the category of "intervention," one still largely understood to be premised on inter-state rather than *intra*-state violence. This article complicates the neat boundaries between inside and outside that remain pervasive in, and central to, the discipline of International Relations. Quite simply, it demonstrates that "intervention" is not solely about conflict between states, but can also be expressed internally within the territories ruled by states, most acutely felt on the edges or borders of nation-states.

Border zones, frontiers, liminal spaces, or "borderscapes" as they are often referred to in critical geography (Brambilla 2015) continue to exert a mysterious influence on both statist and global-imperial imaginaries. Much of the (European) colonial enterprise was animated by a desire to carve up the world into neatly bordered zones, demarcating territories by naming them—this, as opposed to that—and erecting boundaries. Even if the Westphalian notion of "sovereignty" that much conventional International Relations still clings on to has been exposed to be a myth: A system of organized hypocrisy (Krasner 1999), this fundamentally contingent concept nonetheless has become accepted as an organizing principle for a largely ahistorical discipline (Bartelson 1995). Perhaps most interestingly as a way of projecting control by European colonizing powers over discrete and disparate geographies but that was always disjointed and truncated; a system of "uneven legal geographies" (Benton 2009), the tenacity of the state system of sovereignty and its particular way of organizing space and managing people have persisted. Most notably, the violence at the core of the system of states and its *sine qua non* sovereignty, however qualified, remains constant, seemingly sempiternal.

This violence is uneven, differentially distributed, and protean. Racialized populations, poor people, and minoritized groups are almost always on the razor's edge of state control, surveillance, and internment. Against this carceral backdrop, it is interesting to think about the etymology of the word we often use to describe the dispossessed, which is the "marginalized." Marginalization, in common parlance, usually refers to a process of social exclusion, and to marginalize (as a verb) signifies the deliberate and willful treatment of a person, group of people, concept, etc. as "insignificant or peripheral" (Oxford English Dictionary 2016). The clue, however, is in the word—to be marginalized is to be quite literally on the "margins." The margin itself is the "edge or border of something" (OED 2022). The marginalization of the margin then appears to be a tautology but is nevertheless productive: of subjectivities, policies, and spatialities and therefore worth exploring and unpacking. In order to do this, the next section traces the marginalization of the Naga community, by a host of actors, by briefly tracking the history of Nagaland as the Northeastern border of India. The rest of the article locates the marginalization of Naga peoples as an act of ongoing settler colonialism and its correlates: intervention, dispossession, and colonial sovereignty.[1] In line with the concerns of this special issue, it advances a dialectical understanding of intervention that underlines the tension in Indian internal interventionist practices—at once "settler" colonial and fundamentally incomplete and recursive. This dialectical approach allows us to see interventions in the present as act of interferences and imperial formations in motion, in which the more elastic conception of settler colonialism expands and complicates traditional and bounded notions of sovereignty and intervention. The article shows that what we refer to as intervention in international politics is not merely a "colonial" act of imposition undertaken by an outside force against a notionally sovereign state, but is also an ongoing process in places that are ostensibly *post*colonial and were perhaps once even anti-colonial.

## Nagaland: A Potted History

Nagaland is a small state in the Northeast of India.[2] It shares a border with Myanmar and as is often the case with smaller postcolonial border regions, much of its documented history starts with the arrival of the British in India. Shockingly, little seems to be known about this region by the outside world prior to the advent of British imperialism, and especially before the interest in the Naga Hills and the neighboring regions—all of which at the time were called "Assam"—expressed by the British East India Company owing to the region's wealth of natural resources, including coal, tea, and oil. When the British arrived in the region, they decided it "lacked history" (Saikia 2004, 20), a common colonial convention.

The Encyclopedia Britannica is characteristically dismissive of Naga history, with its entry on the region starting with "Nagaland has no early written history" and proceeding on to congratulate the British, who "ended the practices of headhunting and intervillage raids and brought relative peace to the region" (Lodrick and Minodhar 2020) by the late nineteenth century. The "relative peace" refers to the strength and brutality with which the British defeated and

[1]Various groups of people, including Ao, Angami, Chang, Lotha, Sema, Konyaaj, etc., were classified under the generic umbrella of "Naga" by the British. For more on the bringing together of these communities into one single discursive lens and the congealment of disparate identities in and through the colonial encounter, but then re-appropriated and used as a rallying cry for self-determination by the "Nagas" themselves, see "Writing the Nagas" by Andrew West (1994).

[2]The Northeastern region of India comprises of Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. Apart from the 21k that connects the region to India, most of the region is, in essence, an international border. Naga peoples and other Indigenous communities have moved between villages in these places, either of their own volition or because of enforced displacement for the last couple of 100 years. This article neither treats the Indian Northeast as a homogenous whole nor does it isolate what is known as Nagaland from its larger socio-political context. Instead, it stresses the overlap and imbrication in the ways in which groups of people have lived and continue to live here, which also reflects the ways in which they have been acted upon by the Indian state.

ousted the Burmese from the Northeast of India in the First Anglo-Burmese War of 1824–1826, which led to the near complete annihilation of a generation of Burmese men as well as placed a massive financial burden on the Burmese state. This was the most expensive imperial war fought by the British and also led to a lasting toll on the East India Company (Myint-U 2001). The war was motivated by French-Anglo colonial rivalry and resource-mongering and led to the second and third Anglo-Burmese wars later in the century, albeit against an already atrophied Kingdom of Burma.

Borderlands, or "frontiers" as they are sometimes known, have paid a disproportionate price in the quest for imperial supremacy and control of a highly prized region. For the British, India was the jewel in its crown, and while control of the entire country was an unequivocally violent endeavor, the "margins" of the British Indian empire were subject to some of the most invasive and brutal restructuring and dispossession. The border regions to the Northeast of India were only partially integrated into the British Empire, despite the intensive documentation undertaken by the British on the different types of "tribes" and their distance from "civilization" and "religion" (Butler 1847). These "most dangerous of passes" (Butler 1847) were strategically important to Britain, and much like other strategic gateways to India, they became violent experiments in the colonial politics of intervention. To take one example, Afghanistan too was considered strategic because of its location as the northwestern border of India and was repeatedly intervened in by the British to ensure this portal to India remained pliant, while at the same time considered too unruly to be brought into the ambit of Empire proper (Manchanda 2020). Although there are many differences between the ways in which the British interacted with the Afghans and the Nagas, there are also striking resonances in the manner in which "war-like tribes," "dangerous and difficult passes," and people with "backwards customs" (Shakespear 1929; Lusmden 1875) in both Afghanistan on the one hand and the regions of Northeastern India on the other were dealt with; indeed, these regions were referred to as the North-West Frontier and the North-East Frontier (called NEFA, Northeast Frontier Agency) of the British colonial state, respectively. Given the revolving door and high turnover of colonial personnel from one site to another during the Raj (Manchanda and Plonski 2022), the similarly heavy-handed but distanced manner in which the frontier spaces of (what were to become) Nagaland and Afghanistan were interacted with and intervened upon is par for the course. As Lord Curzon argued in his famous Romanes Lecture at Oxford in 1907, "frontiers" were located at the razor's edge of civilization and demanded an especial sort of "masculine" (read aggressive) energy to "deal" with the unique problems posed by the frontier.

Northeastern scholar Yasmin Saikia (2004, 20) avers: "[i]t appears that the more the British merchants and administrators penetrated the interiors of Assam to expand the reach of colonialism, the more British scholars wrote about the lack of history of the natives in these margins." Not knowing how to classify different communities and groups of people in the region, the British rendered some communities as "unknowable" and soon after declared them "dead." In light of this history, it is perhaps unsurprising that the independent, putatively decolonized Indian state was presented, and sometimes experienced, as the antidote to the epistemic and material violence meted out to the peoples, lands, and lifeways of Naga people. The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, in a speech in 1962 against Chinese aggression on India's Northeast border, was keen to stress the hard-fought victory against colonialism and called out China for practicing the "most aggressive form of imperialism functioning across our borders in India" (Sharma 2020; to the wire). He emphasized the territorial integrity of India to reassure the citizens of the "Northeast" that they were an integral part of the sovereign independent Indian nation. State sovereignty may be a colonial construct, but it was also one frequently invoked by intellectuals, politicians, and activists at the height of anti-colonial protests against European imperial powers in Africa, Asia, and much of the so-called "third world" in the mid-twentieth century (Lawrence 2013; Getachew 2019). Sovereignty's corollary nationalism was therefore quite a heady drug in the face of racist claims about India not being ready to govern.

However, not only has India simulated or "mimicked" (Bhabha 1984) techniques and strategies of colonial governance; it has also troubled any neat boundary between what is colonial and what might be considered settler colonial.[3] In the first instance, it is worth noting that Nehru's vision of the Northeast frontier and its people, although more romantic and gentler than Curzon's, was for all intents and purposes remarkably similar. After a visit in 1937 to what was then still the NEFA, he asks: "Now who are these tribal folk? A way of describing them is that they are the people of the frontiers or those who live away from the interiors of this country. Just as the hills breed a somewhat different type of people from those who inhabit the plains so also the frontiers breed a different type of people from those who live away from the frontier" (cited in Nag 2009, 49). Second, and more importantly, a recently declassified letter from Nehru to JFK in 1962, at the time of the aforementioned Indo-Chinese war, clearly delineates the Indian state's position on its "interior colonies." Nehru writes to Kennedy, pleading for military aid and financial assistance in the face of an impending Chinese occupation of Assam along India's northeast border. In doing so, he explicitly invokes as well as delegitimizes independence movements (from India) within the Northeast thus: "The domestic quarrels regarding small areas or territorial borders between the countries in this sub-Continent or in Asia have no relevance whatever in the context of the developing Chinese invasion. I would emphasize particularly that all the assistance or equipment given to us to meet our dire need will be used entirely for resistance against the Chinese." (Nehru, letter to Kennedy 1962). By relegating this fight for self-determination as a "domestic" issue even while conceding the struggle is for territory and over borders, Nehru blithely diminishes the significance ("quarrels over small areas") of a strong movement for self-government and places it firmly within India's sovereign jurisdiction. The message is clear: India's own suppression of the rights of the people of the Northeast cannot be conflated with the external aggression of the Chinese. This disavowal is crucial to the politics of

[3]This is similar to points made by scholars of Brazil. See, for instance, Poets, Desiree. "Settler colonialism and/in (urban) Brazil: black and Indigenous resistances to the logic of elimination." *Settler Colonial Studies* 11.3 (2021): 271–291. For more on definitions of settler colonialism, see James Eastwood and Sharri Plonski "Settler Colonialism" in *Thinking World Politics Otherwise* OUP: forthcoming. Although in this instance, one could use "settler" and "internal" colonization interchangeably to signal how the outside/inside binary prevents us from fully reckoning with the multi-faceted nature of intervention, I refrain from using the language of "internal colonization" because of its very precise focus on US ghettos or South African bantustans. It tends not to imply movement of settlers into an area but a relation of exploitation and forced incorporation into unequal polity, which nonetheless is also applicable in the Indian context. To signal this "dual" quality of Indian (post) colonialism, I use "interior colonization" instead of "internal" colonization, as the first Prime Minister of India himself did.

"intervention" and is at the heart of India's settler or interior colonization.

In the section below, I draw on Temsula Ao's work to tease out this understanding of India as a settler colonial state, or at the very least as displaying aspects of settler colonialism, when it comes to its northeastern territories. Dominant accounts of settler colonialism propound an implicit typology through which settler colonialism is contrasted with other ideal types of colonialism, including "franchise colonialism" and "plantation colonialism." Settler colonialism on this account is distinguished by the logics of extermination—where native land is occupied, and original inhabitants and habitats are extinguished by (usually) a white colonial population (Verancini 2010). However, it is equally the case that settler colonialism overlaps with other forms of colonialism, and is far from a finished project as scholars such as Audra Simpson (2014) have postulated. Indeed, the failure of extermination—Indigenous peoples and lifeways persist despite the violence of settler colonialism—is key to its ongoing, systemic nature. Ann Laura Stoler argues that this core failure of settler projects challenges us to reconsider the idea of settler-colonialism as a specific "type" or fixed set of relations of colonial domination. "Settler colonialism might better be understood not as a unique "type"" Stoler notes "but as the effect of a failed or protracted contest over appropriation and dispossession" (2016, 61). As she continues, "Settler colonialism is only ever an imperial process in formation whose security apparatus confirms that it is always at risk of being undone" (Stoler 2016, 61). In other words, the fact of settler polities' security apparatuses reflects the endurance of native life. On this account, what makes settler colonialism distinctive is its ongoingness and incompleteness, and not necessarily solely a focus on land appropriation (although those dynamics also endure). This hinge toward an inter-imperial analysis—where taxonomies of colonialism give way to more fluid and materially grounded analyses—broaden the scope of colonialism by bringing "Eastern," "Southern," and "Third World" into its fold. Indeed, a dialectical understanding of intervention allows us not only to approach settler colonialism as a form of intervention, but also to appreciate its multiplicity and historical endurance. I also subscribe to the notion that settler colonialism is a systemic process that is both global and local and always in motion. Iyko Day (2016, 17) calls this the "moving spirit" of settler colonialism; in her words, it is a "formation that is transnational but distinctively national, similar but definitely not the same, repetitive but without a predictable rhythm, structural but highly susceptible to change, everywhere but hard to isolate. This is what we might call the music of settler colonialism. It is from the past, but never stops playing." This dovetails with Ann Laura Stoler's (2016, 26; Fagioli and Malito, forthcoming) notion of history as "recursion," which complicates readings of history as either defined by rupture or continuity. "Settler" colonialism, as a form of imperial intervention likewise is recursive; a form of power that is context-dependent, mobile, and mutable and yet very much tethered to violent processes of domination and extraction. By putting Ao into a transnational conversation with other Indigenous writing, thinking, and political projects around sovereignty, I do not wish to collapse these multiple genealogies and conceptions of Indigeneity into a common framework of settler colonialism, but instead to pivot to more expansive ways of understanding settler/internal colonialism that can also help make sense of "Third World" (post)colonial spaces. As I show below, distinct but connected histories and repertoires of (counter)sovereignty also help us reframe and challenge the ontology and narratives of postcolonial nationalism, themselves a product of particular ways of dividing up space and carving out territory.

## Temsula Ao and the Poetics of Intervention

The "moving spirit" of settler colonialism has always been defied by the movement, the poetry, and the polyrhythmic melodies of anti-colonialism, which produce their own music, more mellifluous and less cacophonous but no less forceful than that of their antagonists. Temsula Ao is a poet, writer, and ethnographer whose work provides a textured appreciation of intervention by a national army and government within a formally recognized sovereign state. Specifically, her life and texts have been devoted to resisting the encroachment of the Indian state on Naga, and more precisely, Ao Naga (the "tribal"[4] group to which she belongs) identity. As we have already seen, the Northeast has a troubled history in the context of modern India and is most often caricatured as the site of insurgency and terrorism, and Nagaland—Ao's homeland[5]—in particular is branded as the locus of this violent activity.

The Northeast—officially referred to as the "Northeast Region" (NER)—the region shares an international border of 5,182 kilometer (3,220 mi) (about 99 percent of its total geographical boundary) with several neighboring countries. The "Northeast" is the easternmost region of India representing both a geographic and political administrative division of the country. It comprises eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura (commonly known as the "Seven Sisters")—and the "brother" state Sikkim, which only became part of India in 1975. The "Northeast," an administrative category coined by the British (Baruah 2007), persisted into the postcolonial period, and a sizeable chunk of the population of this region is considered "Indigenous" and protected by the 1950 Constitution of India through a rather derogatorily termed Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes Protection Act. Indeed, an astounding 85–95 percent of all inhabitants of Nagaland and Mizoram fall under the category of Scheduled Tribes. Their status as these so-called scheduled tribes (along with the scheduled castes) was bestowed upon them by the Indian state after independence as a form of recognition that thus far the colonial state had failed them. In a paternalistic gesture that aligned with the newly independent state's image of itself, India offered the Scheduled Casts (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) "reservation status" guaranteeing political representation and "positive discrimination" to the people who were designated the "Depressed Classes" during British rule (Sharan 2003; Bose, Arts and van Djik 2012;; Vishvanath 2014). Today, not much of the "positive" remains in the series of discriminatory and oppressive actions enacted by the state and much of the people of India.

Temsula Ao's work interrogates the frictions between identity, boundaries, and globalization. The bulk of her

[4]Rather than an endorsement of the word "tribe," which is shot through with racialized assumptions about retrogressive and backwards peoples (see Manchanda 2018), I use the word because it is the term used by the Indian state ("scheduled tribes") to refer to the native hill population of the region. "Tribal" is also used as synecdoche for the Naga Hills to demarcate the hill populations from the largely Hindu population in inhabiting the plains of Assam.

[5]Ao belongs to the Ao "tribe" but was born in neighboring Assam. There is much overlap and travel of Indigenous peoples between the internal state boundaries of India, which is yet again testament to the pitfalls of thinking in terms of India's (internal and external) state borders.

writing is personal, inflected with stories of her childhood and anecdotes from her life: biography, annals, and memoir. But it is also deeply political and in contrast to much of the contemporary critical work on borders and bordering, it may even be read as reactionary for its place-based privileging of the fight against oppression of one group and its refusal to blame the idea of a sovereign nation-state as the root of all evil. This agnostic engagement with the state is contrary to the move toward more radical critiques of the nation-state form as always already conservative, racialized, and oppressive, and as pitting migrants against Indigenous peoples (Sharma 2020).[6] Ao's work in the same vein is "identitarian" in that it is based on the experiences of injustice of one community, and it argues for a politics that explicitly atones for and redresses some of that injustice. And yet because of this "rootedness," Ao's observations are brimming with an acuity that is often absent from the field of International Relations and cognate disciplines. In her work, diverse and multiple as her canon is, the border emerges as a site of difference and unhappiness, but for Ao, it is the borders of the federal state that pose the biggest threat and are the cause of the greatest damage, and grief, to her community. She writes against the twinned evils of the internal borders of the Indian state and globalization both technologies of what Shilliam (2013, 113) has called "colonial-modern rule," traversing space, time, and scale but remaining firmly grounded in the local struggles and day-to-day politics of her people (Fagioli and Malito, forthcoming). The world she conjures up as an antidote to the current world order is expressly not a borderless one. For her, "hybridization"—the result of a globalized world—entails the "subsumption" of originary (Naga) identities that has resulted in and will continue to culminate in a "de-identification" and "de-humanization" of her people (Ao 2006). Yet, it is the *Indian* state and its comportment (rather than borders in general) that remain the main focus of her rebukes and castigation.

Although not immediately obvious, International Relations can learn much from her poetry and literary works because it revolves around theorizing "sovereignty" and "intervention"—core IR concepts—and foregrounding the *problematiques* of struggle and resistance. In the first instance, Ao's work grapples with and highlights the "exceptional" status the regions and peoples of the Northeast labeled "separatists," "insurgents," and "terrorists" have been conferred with, evoking a distinct spatial and temporal modality usually afforded to places and peoples deemed "beyond the pale" in the context of postcolonial India.[7] In the second, by focusing on a region connected to the mainland of India by a strip of land less than 15 miles wide, she complicates the inside/outside dichotomy that is regnant in much IR scholarship, even as it tries to problematize some of its underlying assumptions (Walker 1993). As van Schendel (2002, 652) has demonstrated, "maps of South Asia not infrequently present Northeast India (and sometimes Bangladesh) as an inconvenient outlier that is relegated to an inset." He posits that this "slicing into pieces" bits of territory by makers of regional maps is not merely an exercise in the reorganization of space through visual representation but also fundamentally complicates notions of scale making it difficult to ascertain the position of the Northeast in global, national, and regional registers. His conceptualization of a "scale of distance" through which some regions are depicted—visually, rhetorically, and through other practices of representation—provides a methodological undergirding to this paper and helps interrogate the ways in which distancing the Northeast of India from the mainland helps construe the former as imminently intervenable.

In line with this special issue's examination of state power's spatial dimensions: Its operations "outside, across, and beyond the nation-state" (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003), Ao's own reflections mount a wholesale challenge to a discipline that continues to structure its inquiries along racialized lines through its taken-for-granted assumptions about "failed" or "fragile" states (Manchanda 2020), "good governance" (Gruffyd-Jones 2014), and "quasi-sovereignty" (Woodward 1997, but also Jackson 1993). Third and finally, Ao's work contributes to a growing literature on Indigenous conceptions of time, space, scale, and crucially nationhood (Byrd 2011; Simpson 2017), work that repudiates the denial of "coevalness" (Fabian 1983) that informs much of the literature in social science, and instead promises a politics of relationality and solidarity—from a relatively overlooked place—the confines of the Indian state. Ao's work addresses the gradations and hierarchies implicit in state-building in postcolonial spaces and in homes on the unique implications of this state-building on occupied land within a notionally secular decolonized state. Without propounding the "paternal" racism of Ron Perlman's character in *Don't Look up*[8] when he flippantly comments about how great it would be if "the Indians with the elephants and the Indians with the bows and arrows get together," a conversation between Indigenous politics around the world is indeed imminently worth having. Modern India is unique in that it is already a laboratory for that conversation even as it evades the label of "settler," and Ao contributes to this conversation even as she refrains from deploying the lexicon of "Indigenous" or "native" politics.

In her anthology of short stories *These Hills Called Home: Stories From a War Zone*, Ao relays a range of experiences and anecdotes by setting them in their everyday but never banal contexts. These ten stories are written against the backdrop of the long period of fighting between the Indian state and those deemed "separatists" from the 1950s to the 1990s. This time is largely considered to be one during which India went from a newly independent fledgling state to a consolidated democracy, but can be equally remembered (and indeed is) as a time of upheaval, of a shift from proto-socialism to neoliberalism, and one spawning a distinct temporal break from decolonial idealism to aggressive modernization. At the behest of this (unfulfilled) quest for growth and development, the Indian state became bolder in its suppression of people it considered to be on the peripheries. In 1997, a ceasefire was established, which did little to quell the "insurgency" in the Northeast or indeed to dampen the Indian government's desire to fully control the region and eliminate the socialist secessionist "rebels." Nonetheless, before this period of official ceasefire, which remains in place at

[6]Through my engagement with Ao's work, I do not in any way support anti-Muslim claims by Indigenous or other inhabitants of NEFA. This is a tension that has been exploited and, in some ways, manufactured by the Indian state. A focus on "interior" colonization also lends itself to more in-depth analyses of the casting out of Muslims from the nation proper through forms of counter-insurgency, pacification, and citizenship curtailments—all policies of "internal/interior" intervention implemented by India today.

[7]Tellingly, the expression "beyond the pale" is itself probably a racialized turn of phrase used to connote the unruly and uncivilized behavior of Irish people living outside the boundary and therefore the authority of English Law in Dublin in the late Middle Ages.

[8]The blockbuster *Don't Look Up* although slated by critics is a rather profound rumination on the American (US) present. The actor Ron Perlman plays the character of veteran military officer Benedict Brask, a brusque, taciturn figure who embodies all the traits of toxic white military masculinity albeit in a distinctly twenty-first-century manner.

the time of writing, the Indian center was in a state of all-out war with the inhabitants of this region. Ao's stories (2006a) are mostly tearjerkers, based on fact but told with a novelist's sensibility and attention to narrative detail.

All ten stories share a common leitmotif: the constant perils of life under occupation. One story "The Last Song" stands out in it particular in the ways in which it sutures together the multiple valences, and indeed violences of life for Nagamese people, especially women: military brutality, insurgency, rape, and torture. 'The Last Song' recounts and fictionalises events from the "Onaeme incident" of 1987, after the eponymous Naga village in which it unfolded. This was part of a coordinated military offensive known as Operation BlueBird, which was launched by the Indian state in retaliation for an attack on the Assam Rifles outpost allegedly by members of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland. The NSCN, which has since split into smaller factions, has had one main stated aim—to create a sovereign state for the Naga people, which includes all the regions inhabited by the Nagas in Northeastern India and northwestern Myanmar.

One of the posts of the abovementioned Assam Rifles—which happens to be the oldest paramilitary force in India established by the British in 1835 as a sort of "police militia" to fight in the "most unhealthy jungle localities" and pacify the wild warrior tribes in the Northeast of India (Shakespear 1914, 8)—was attacked on July 9, 1987. This attack left nine paramilitary officers dead, and a large cache of arms and ammunition was reportedly stolen from the outpost. In response, and allegedly as a way to retrieve the stolen goods, the Indian Army launched a counter-insurgency operation codenamed Operation Bluebird. Operation Bluebird lasted for over 3 months and affected over thirty villages in the Northeast of India. Ao's (2006) "The Last Song" has as its protagonist a young woman, Apenyo, who was "born to sing." Her beautiful voice and dulcet tones win her the opportunity to be the lead singer in a choir commemorating the inauguration of a new church whose opening all the villagers had contributed to. This celebratory occasion turns funereal when the Indian army bursts in, deciding to punish the villagers who paid taxes to the nationalist movement. These "betrayers of the government" meet their fate thus: Apenyo and her mother are gang-raped by Indian soldiers, who then proceed to murder any villager who witnessed the rapes by incinerating the church. Many people are immolated in the church, a moment of hope burnt to ashes.

The lawyers (Haskar and Hongray 2011) who launched a case against the Indian government for human rights violations and other atrocities committed under the aegis of Operation Bluebird have documented the following crimes:

1. Death due to torture or starvation of twenty-seven persons, including several babies.
2. Rape and sexual abuse of several women, including minors.
3. Torture of men, at least 300 cases.
4. Illegal arrests of villagers, officials, and government servants.
5. Burning and dismantling of more than 100 homes.
6. Dismantling of schools and churches.
7. Widescale looting of property with details of each household.
8. Forced labor on an industrial scale, amounting to human slavery.

Ao pulls no punches in her story. Apenyo and her mother are not granted the honor of being buried in the village graveyard; their rape and subsequent death are deemed dishonorable, their bodies and souls are tarnished by the acts of Indian "jawans."[9] Colonized/racialized women are always subject to a double whammy: that of patriarchal oppression as well as racialized oppression, a point redolent of bell hooks' argument in *Ain't I a Woman*. Ao is also explicit about the relationship between the Indigenous inhabitants of these villages and the Indian central government that controls them. She conceives of the malefactions of the Indian army not merely as violations of human rights but as *occupation*. In another story in *These Hills*, she laments the crimes committed with impunity by Indian soldiers as "denying them [the villagers] access to their fields, restricting them from their routine activities, and most importantly demonstrating to them that the 'freedom' they enjoyed could so easily be robbed at gunpoint by the 'invading army'" (Ao 2006, 11). This deliberate choice of words—"robbery," "invasion"—impels us to rethink our categories of, "intervention," "sovereignty," "borders," and the associations that they evoke. The next section zooms in on the politics of the Indian state to explore the salience of Ao's literary works in the Northeast.

## India as Settler (Post)Colonial Power

There is a litany of crimes, "legal" and "extra-legal," and a dizzying array of rules, regulations, laws, and statutes that this small region of north-eastern India has been subject to since the British Raj but amplified by the Indian state post-independence. In much political and International Relations theory, these anomalous areas have been made sense of through the metaphor of the "state of exception." On Giorgio Agamben's account, the state of exception creates "a space in which the normal order is de facto suspended" (2008). Using the (Holocaust/refugee) camp as his example, he examines the way in which this space also "inaugurates a new juridico-political paradigm in which the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception". The camp is thus the structure in which the state of exception is both "willed" into existence and "realized *normally*" (Agamben 1998, 170, emphasis in original). He later expands this notion to other "zone of indistinctions" created by the dictates of sovereign power. While his argument, and especially its emphasis on the legality and spatiality of Euro-modern sovereignty, is compelling, in the sections that follow, I examine India's relationship to Nagaland and its neighboring regions as one of settler colonialism rather than through the lens of the camp and bare life. This is because the vocabulary of "camp" and "bare life" easily feeds into a geographical imaginary in which "heartlands" (the norm) are pitted against "borderlands" (the exception), ossifying the very distinctions it sets out to problematize.

This parcelization of peoples and spaces into the "mainland" and the "periphery" has also resulted in academic ghettoization of the sort favored by some area studies experts. Taking area studies as a field to task for paying insufficient attention to the messiness and overlap that inheres in regions and places that might emplaced and studied as one area rather than another, Willem van Schendel advocates for what he calls a strategy of "jumping scale" (2002, 647–9). Foregoing the neat distinctions of scale—global/national/local, urban/rural, etc.—he instead propagates the circumventing or "dismantling" of historically entrenched "forms of territorial organization and their

[9]Jawan, which literally translates to "young and healthy," is the word used to refer to soldiers (always male) in the Indian army.

associated scalar morphologies" (2002, 661). This involves developing new concepts and conceptions of regional space, cross-cutting areas, and "honeycomb geographies" that both draw on and unlearn some of the core precepts of "contextualized" area studies knowledge.

Questions of space and scale give way to perhaps an even more crucial terrain: that of time. Situating the Naga fight for self-determination in a longer temporal arc as a struggle for Indigenous rights rather than as a demand for statist recognition and colonial acknowledgment (Coulthard 2014) allows us to disrupt and re-think the dominant model of Indian statehood as homogenously "postcolonial": rising from the ashes of British colonialism like a phoenix in 1947. This temporal caesura obscures almost as much as it reveals. While links are sometimes made between Palestine and Kashmir (Osuri and Zia 2020), the nature of colonial power in Northeastern India is left largely unproblematized. India's own policies toward Kashmir and the Northeast have been similar, and Naga villages have been used as laboratories for experimentation in policies then extended to Kashmir. The Assam Rifles, originally called the Cachar Levy, for instance, were a precursor to, and model for, the Rashtriya Rifles a similar paramilitary/police militia unit designed to conduct "counter-insurgency operations" in Kashmir.

Another law is the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, colloquially better known as the "anti-terror law," which was modified in 2019 to make it possible for the Union Government in Nagaland as well as the federal government in the guise of the "National Integration Council" to designate individuals as terrorists *without any formal judicial process.* This ironically illegal law (given that it contravenes several articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) means that people arrested and charged under this Act find it harder to get bail (Poddar 2019). The expansion of the law by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the interest of "the sovereignty" and "integrity" of India, which disproportionately impacts Muslims and Indigenous peoples aligns, with the notion that Westphalian sovereignty practiced by modern nation-states is invariably racialized (Nisancioglu 2020).

Another piece of legislation and a key component in the backdrop to Temsula Ao's writing has been the draconian Arms Forces Special Powers Act (AFSPA). This is an Act of the Parliament of India that grants special powers to the Indian Armed Forces to maintain public order in "disturbed areas" and was first passed in 1958. It was first applied to the Naga Hills in September 1958 and then extended to Assam. It has come under fire by human rights activists and organizations, including notably Amnesty International, for the gross maltreatment of people under its purview. Amnesty International's 2015 report on violations of human rights, including rape, torture, and conditions resembling enslavement, was centered on the Act's enforcement in Jammu and Kashmir. However, 25 years earlier, Amnesty had released an almost identical report on AFSPA and Operation Bluebird in Manipur and surrounding Naga villages. The report makes for extremely difficult reading as it details the grisly killing, gang-rapes, maiming, torture, and extra-judicial arrests and executions by the Assam Rifles in the Northeast, including of elders, children, and journalists (Amnesty International 1990). "Several dozen" children were given electric shocks, whereas others were tortured to death. The Amnesty report calls on the Indian government to interrogate these crimes and bring the offenders to justice, but after 28 years of an intense court battle in 2019, the High Court closed the case without a single arrest. Likewise, Human Rights Watch (2021) has detailed the lack of judicial oversight that allows the Indian military to treat Nagaland as a theater of war, rather than as a political constituency. As Rhys Machold (forthcoming) notes in his work on counterinsurgency operations in India in the 1960s, government officials were concerned with how they could mimic and become like guerrilla fighters in the Northeast in order to more effectively defeat and destroy them, underscoring the belief that this region and its peoples were fundamentally different from "mainstream" India.

Although AFSPA was instituted in Nagaland and neighboring regions in 1958 as a temporary measure, as of December 2021, it has been extended at least until September 2024, but a series of extensions remains likely. The Nagas and the Mizos are relegated outside the nation-state, as a "border" problem to be dealt with through security expertise and cut-throat counter-insurgency. The Nagas, Mizos, and other Northeastern communities are therefore the perfect insider/outsider: interpellated into nationhood when convenient and cast out when deemed a problem. Colonial-era exclusion policies have metastasized into postcolonial normalized exceptionalism that manifest themselves through India's long war on racialized borderlands to borrow from Nikhil Pal Singh (2017). Indeed, as Seraphin 2023 argues, halfway across the globe, in relation to the US' ongoing practices of extraction and dispossession specifically in the context of the Dakota Access Pipeline, the very idea of the United States is an unsettling paradox. "The USA is external to itself, in a perpetual legitimacy crisis, anxiously pressing its authority on contested lands. When movements such as the one against the pipeline (#NoDAPL) force the USA to 'invade itself,' they compel us to conclude that the peripheries of US empire are in fact everywhere. #NoDAPL asserts: America has no stable self to invade—America is an invasion" (Seraphin 2023: online). The settler coloniality of the United States is "cleaner," its boundaries less fuzzy than those of India's. And yet, India's interior colonization has a not dissimilar trajectory, shaped by violent counterinsurgency and riddled with anxiety (Machold and Manchanda, forthcoming).

It is only through the twinned workings of settler/interior colonialism and perceptions of distance coming together in this instance—the Northeast of India has always been considered a remote and distant/distanced region and visually represented as such in maps of the region—has this level of violence, intervention, and social restructuring been achievable. The overarching logic of settler colonialism may be "elimination"—that is, the absolute erasure of native peoples, lives, and lifeworlds as Patrick Wolfe (2006) has argued—but there are other logics at play too, including "biocultural assimilation." Assimilation for Wolfe can still be considered part and parcel of the logics of elimination, a trope Ao also explores in her work. Indeed, as Wolfe himself (2006) goes on to claim settler colonial invasion needs to be understood as a structure and not an event.[10] For Wolfe settler colonialism is a perpetual and ongoing system of erasure and elimination intimately connected to land and space, and not something that has already occurred. It is this structural nature of settler colonialism, its continual grammar of dispossession that is most salient in the case of the Indian occupation of "its" Northeastern borderlands even in the face

[10] I am aware that many scholars are critical of Wolfe's ascendancy in the field as a white settler, but as Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016) notes, although Wolfe is wrongly credited with creating the field (as he himself acknowledges), his work on the structural nature of dispossession as central to settler colonialism remains germane to understanding the nature of present-day settler colonialisms.

of what Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016) has called "enduring indigeneity." Settler colonialism as an overarching structure also speaks to the processes of "accretion" (Doyle cited in Fagioli and Malito, 2024), through which practices of domination and erasure overlap and become sedimented over time.

As Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah submit when writing about Palestine, settler colonial logics often mirror, overlay, and subtend logics of conventional or "franchise" colonialism as it is sometimes known. The British Empire in particular was a vast and unwieldy enterprise driven by varied and tentacular expropriative techniques that were often temporally and spatially dispersed. These logics have evolved in postcolonial states themselves and, in turn, are now experiencing their own distinct(ive) afterlives, puncturing our association of temporalities as neat and successive, as examined in this special issue. In India, this is further complicated by the delicate choreography of competing forces in the Northeast. One prominent recent example was the passing of a bill in 2019 that amended the Citizenship Act, which has been a mainstay in Indian politics since 1955. The Bill, which on the face of it might seem innocuous enough, is a cleverly worded attack on certain minoritized communities as well as the lifeways of people in places like the Northeast and Kashmir, very much in line with the logics of elimination delineated above.

In a direct violation of the constitution of India, the Bill states that persecuted minorities from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan can get residency rights in India and fast-track their naturalization. Yet crucially, the Bill only gives certain minorities from these countries protection, so for instance, Muslim Hazaras persecuted in Afghanistan do not get a right to enter India, and minorities persecuted in other neighboring countries like Myanmar (most prominently Rohingya Muslims) and China (Uyghur Muslims as well as Buddhists) do not have recourse to the protections granted in this Bill. Another very troubling, and in no way incidental, corollary of the Bill is that it explicitly targets Muslim citizens of India..

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) has led to massive protests and uprisings in the Northeast of India and across the country. One of the main contentions by diverse groupings of Indigenous populations (Christians, Buddhists, Pagans, and Muslims) is that the resettlement of Hindus from Muslim-majority countries into this region reflects a targeted policy of "Hinduizing" all of India in line with the ruling BJP's ideology of Hindu nationalism and supremacy. They claim that this would alter the region's demographic balance, resulting in a loss of their political rights, culture, and land beyond recognition and goes against the Assam Accord, a treaty signed explicitly to stave off this balance (Saha 2019).[11] This is reminiscent of the arguments around Indigenous elimination cited above.[12] The second catalyst for protests is the associated proposal of the National Register for Citizens (NRC), which is a thinly veiled act designed to make minoritized communities in India stateless by forcibly striking off the names of people who could not prove their citizenship through official documentation. Indeed, 1.9 million people living in the Northeastern state of Assam woke up one day and found out that their names were left off this register of citizens, in what *Foreign Policy* has pointedly called "the great Indian disenfranchisement" (Agrawal and Salam 2019). It is no coincidence that over a third of the population of Assam is Muslim. Nonetheless, for the so-called tribal communities of the Northeast, "the opposition is not merely about the 'communal' nature of the CAA and NRC; rather, it's a question about their survival and existence" (Roluahpuia 2020).[13] This cuts across religious and ethnic lines and yet again boils down to questions of Indigeneity—a word not heard much in the Indian context, but remains a clear marker of the Indian state's settler colonial comportment. Foregrounding the politics of Indigeneity, Indigenous sovereignty and settler colonialism allows us to recalibrate critical accounts of intervention that nonetheless implicitly assume that intervention and invasion are flagrant violations of Westphalian and Eurocentric forms of sovereignties.

Rather, these acts of deliberate and violent dispossession, "raced modes of dispossession" and governance as Lisa Tilley (2017)calls them, are attacks on Indigenous modes of being and alternate imaginaries of sovereignties around the world. In Northeastern India, infringements of "originary" sovereignties closely track those perpetrated in other settler colonial spaces. We can turn once again to Palestine, where the Israeli state has implemented a slew of policies designed to ensure that citizenship for Palestinians is contested, attenuated, and always precarious. In India, as in Palestine '48', the writing off of entire communities as "terrorists" and the bearing down of the power of the legal edifice of the state in the name of (read: settler) order and security are brazen, and increasingly, celebrated.

In the Northeast, as in Palestine, and especially in Gaza, the appearance of distance helps cement the idea that the state's interventions are necessary, and perhaps benevolent. Lori Allen's (2012)work on Gaza highlights different kinds of "scales" that cohere together to make Gaza "intervenable." Specifically, she underscores the imbrication of scales of distance and levels of destruction "as they are shaped militarily and discursively." Her words to describe Gaza hold eerily true for Nagaland and its environs:

> Gaza has been cemented in the imagination of some as a distinct kind of place. Scales of distance have been

[11]The question of Indigeneity and the "balance" of communities is a tricky one in the Northeast. On the one hand, in Assam, which is a Hindu majority state, there has been a long-term hostility to "illegal (predominantly Muslim) migration" from Bangladesh, which shaped many of the policies of the BJP. On the other hand, as Rahul Rao (2021)argues, those most disenfranchised by the combined ramifications of the CAA and the NRC are the Indigenous/Adivasi populations rather than the richer and more politically vocal Hindus. The effect of this legislation, in his words, would be "to incentivise adivasis to become Hindus, a process that the Hindu Right already encourages through campaigns of coercive inducement that it calls "ghar wapsi" (return home)."

[12]India has refused to ratify The Interational Labour Organisation's convention on tribal and Indigenous people repudiating any attempt to recognize tribal populations as Indigenous peoples. It also threatened to block a United Nations Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Populations unless it was expressly limited to "the Americas, Australia and the Arctic regions" (Barsh 1986, 374)

[13]The complicated question of indigeneity referenced in footnote 10 becomes even more thorny when one includes the differentiated integration into the body politic of "hillspeople" and "plainspeople" in the Northeast. The distinction was first articulated by the British, "who were inclined to keep the tribal people of the Excluded and Partially Excluded areas separate from the plainspeople" when discussing the political structure of independent India but ultimately decided against it (Kumar 2005, 197). The substance if not the lexicon of this divide has since been widely employed by the Indian state to distinguish between the majority Hindu population of Assam and the Adivasi population of the surrounding Naga Hills, leading to violent riots by the "hill tribes" forced into what they as coerced assimilation by the Assamese, ultimately leading to the formation of different states between the 1960s and 1980s (including Nagaland). Returning to the NRC, which was designed to disenfranchise Muslims and not Hindus, nonetheless, led to the casting of people of all religions in the Northeast outside of the ambit of national belonging given the Kafkaesque requirements of proving citizenship. Ultimately, however, as Alpa Shah notes, distinctions between religion, politics, and economics have never been very meaningful in what she calls "the sacral polities" of Adivasi lifeworlds, and yet these distinctions are manufactured and exploited in the name of national unity and now more than ever (Shah 2014; Rao 2020).

> formed to deform Gaza. A place that is, in strict geographical terms, not physically distant from Israel—it is, after all, just across the Armistice Line that was drawn around Gaza following the creation of Israel in 1948–has been stretched far away, projected into something housing a despised, remote and thus targetable, Other. (Allen 2012, 264)

In settler imaginaries, political topography trumps geographical veracity. Intervention in these imaginaries is both a juridical tool and a strategy of enacting violence, both of which in Gaza and Northeast India are aided by these places' notional distance from the "core." These scales of distance make the Naga hills at once intervenable and beyond "civilization," a political ruse that detracts attention away from India's brutality in these parts.

## The Lure of Counter-Sovereignty

In his magisterial *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers and the Transcontinental Railroad*, Manu Karuka sets about challenging the hegemonic narrative about US railroads that has percolated over time. Claiming that the joining of the Union and Central Pacific Railroads in 1869 is based on a "collective lie" (xii), Karuka reorients the story to focus instead on the nexus of racism, capitalist exploitation, violent conquest, and Indigenous dispossession that made both the railroads in the United States and the United States itself more generally as a project possible.

It is Karuka's notion of counter-sovereignty—the idea that modern "Western" or Westphalian statist claims to sovereignty erase the rightful sovereignty of Indigenous people, which predated these claims—that I find especially generative in thinking through and against conventional notions of sovereignty and its attendant concepts of the state, intervention, and legality that continue to structure dominant IR and political discourse. Exploring ways of being, relating, and organizing "modes of relationship" that existed prior to the arrival and imposition of colonial extraction, Karuka sketches out an alternative political imaginary that chimes with Ao's literary work. For Karuka in North America, "Colonial sovereignty is always necessarily a reactive claim: it is accurately considered a claim of countersovereignty" (2019, 2). It is based on rumor and driven by colonial anxiety. In Northeastern India, as in North America, there are Indigenous modes of relationship that both predate and reject the dominant logics of racial and settler colonial capitalism. While Karuka gestures to the writings of Ella Deloria, Sarah Winnemucca, and Winona LaDuke, three female Indigenous activists and scholars, Temsula Ao's writing also explores modes of relationship that precede and disrupt the particular (post)colonial model of counter-sovereignty subscribed to by the Indian state. The hegemonic narrative in which India manages to free itself from the yoke of British colonialism in 1947 after 200 long years is not so much false as it is partial, incomplete, and *parti pris*. Ao weaves in the other part of the Indian story, of its own colonial imposition in the Northeast, its illegitimate and always already fragmented counter-sovereignty. In the *Ao-Naga Oral Tradition*, Ao writes of "the vulnerability of all Indigenous cultures in the face of rapid modernization and other related forces" (Ao 1999, i). This book, the first oral history of the Ao-Naga community and indeed of peoples inhabiting the NERs of India, was borne out of Ao's own interaction with native American scholars in Minnesota. Much of Ao's writing, like that of Indigenous American elders, activists, and academics, is a critique of the reconfiguration of relationships between people, their lands, and their gods through the devastating force of racial capitalism. Counter-sovereignty has no space for relationality, for solidarity, for belonging otherwise, or for lifeways that are not committed to ecocide.

Utilizing the syntax of counter-sovereignty (rather than just "sovereignty") denaturalizes colonial sovereignty and instead centers a different sovereignty that crucially has existed prior to imperial conceptions of space, boundaried, barricaded, and destructive as the latter are. Counter-sovereignty is a discursive regime that has been reified and normalized as the Truth because of its constant rearticulation, backed both by physical power and the perceived legitimacy of certain kinds of knowledge. The disciplines of politics, history, and philosophy are deeply implicated in keeping what Karuka calls the "rumor" of counter-sovereignty alive. This rumor mill has a long and illustrious lineage that forecloses the possibility of resistance and struggle. Struggle against counter-sovereignty, for independence, and for self-determination is castigated as uncivilized and outside the remit of modernity, development, and capitalism. These are struggles that contest the primacy and respect accorded to the state as organizational form. They also fly against the enduring logic that underpins ideas of civil order that have been sketched out in the works of luminaries of political theory and have been reinscribed time and again and now taken as gospel. As Janice Feng argues, indexing Indigenous struggle against settler domination as "civil disobedience" domesticates Indigenous peoples within the boundaries of settler states. In her words (2022, 6): "The premise for such a transposition of struggle onto civil terrain stretches back to the theorization of the civil peace by early modern contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Their accounts of the civil insist that it emerges from the coming together of free and equal subjects into a single body politic. However, what Indigenous movements for sovereignty in Canada, US, and many other settler states hint at is that this coming-together was not equal, but instead was structured as a form of colonial domination and involuntary domestication." Against the notion of peaceful coexistence, settler sovereignty instead favors pacification, and a denial of the conquest on which it is built. Examining India's intervention within its own border(land)s helps us understand both how IR often deals with borders and sovereignty in attenuated ways, as well as how the Raj and subsequent Indian (post)colonial nationalist project engage (violently, through unending intervention) with Indigenous peoples and the Northeast/Naga Hills in particular.

However, as this paper has also shown, these architectures of settler intervention have also been fiercely resisted and disputed since the advent of colonialism. Rather than accepting the decree of settler/counter sovereignty as the only sovereignty, as Ao and Karuka excavate in their work, these contestations that have been rendered invalid, debarbed, and toothless hold a political and intellectual promise. However, instead of engaging in a search for untouched others and "native" philosophies, it is incumbent upon disciplines like International Relations to analyze these modes of relationality and demands for Indigenous sovereignties as enterprises in world-building and as a disavowal through struggle of the ongoing intervention that shapes political reality in settler or settler-adjacent spaces. As Kēhaulani Kauanui (2016) so powerfully reminds us: "[i]n terms of both cultural and political struggles, one of the tenets of any claim to indigeneity is that Indigenous sovereignty—framed as a responsibility more often than a right—is derived from original

occupancy, or at least prior occupancy." An acknowledgment of our complicity in the vocabulary of rights and the thinly veiled imperial discourse of "responsibilities"[14] is not only a political imperative; it also allows us to fully grasp the myriad dimensions, scales, temporalities, and modalities of intervention.

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[14]This is in stark contrast to the "responsibilities" endorsed by and acted upon by Indigenous peoples: toward nature, land, the ecosystem, and other human and non-human beings.

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