Intervention

Reimagining self-determination: Relational, decolonial, and intersectional perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Self-determination language and practice are increasingly perplexing in the 21st century. Historically linked to decolonization processes and post-imperial transformations of the international system, self-determination has espoused both violent and non-violent resistance, and supported both existing and emergent sovereignty. With the Janus-faced relationship between self-determination and colonialism continuing to this day, the contemporary moment is an opportune time to take stock of self-determination. However, as conventional jurisprudence and international legalism framings have, in many ways, hampered its emancipatory potential, alternative ways of reimagining self-determination are needed. Bringing together scholars from the fields of political and development geography, indigenous studies, international relations, and sociology, this intervention demonstrates how articulations of self-determination in specific sites offer powerful critiques of the state system and the liberal world order and unsettle hegemonic forms of knowledge production. These articulations open up conceptual space to push self-determination beyond the realm of rights, allowing us to reimagine self-determination as a vision and practice, and to recover and reconceptualize the hopeful, emancipatory and aspirational politics that have always underpinned self-determination. This intervention seeks to re-envision self-determination from three novel and interlinked angles: decoloniality, intersectionality, and relationality. Drawing on a range of examples of contemporary and historical self-determination claims and contestations, each author focuses on one or more of these angles to examine the extent to which current practices of and visions for self-determination engender novel understandings of emancipation from 'foreign' domination and/or colonial systems of governance.

1. Introduction

1.1. Costas M. Constantinou and Fiona McConnell

Self-determination language and practice are increasingly perplexing in the 21st century. Whilst conventionally celebrated as a peremptory norm of international law, enshrined in Article 1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights – the right of all peoples 'to freely choose their political status and to freely pursue their own form of economic, cultural and social development' – self-determination is a contested right in global political arenas. Historically linked to decolonization processes and post-imperial transformations of the international system, self-determination has remained a key but elusive concept. It has encompassed both violent and non-violent resistance, and supported both existing and emergent sovereignty. The value of self-determination is obvious and welcome, as it has been instrumental for emancipatory politics and the liberation struggles of peoples around the globe over a hundred years. Yet while it has, in certain contexts, delivered independence, it has also been used to legitimize settler colonialism, as well as neo-imperial interventionism in support of seceding

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states.

This Janus-faced relationship between self-determination and colonialism continues to this day. On the one hand, there has been a resurgence of interest in the right of self-determination from movements resisting colonialism, particularly in the context of its institutionalization vis-à-vis Indigenous rights through the adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. This renewed interest effectively shifted self-determination claims from a twentieth century focus on 'saltwater' colonial contexts (Trinidad, 2018) to 'settler' colonial contexts (Loong et al., 2023). On the other hand, we have seen the continued instrumental use of self-determination to justify and reinforce colonial/imperial expansion (Massad, 2018), most recently in the case of Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk as sovereign states in February 2022 (Szpak, 2023).

The contemporary moment is therefore an opportune time to take stock of self-determination. However, as conventional jurisprudence and international legalism framings have, in many ways, hampered its emancipatory potential, we argue that alternative ways of reimagining self-determination are needed. Therefore, rather than attend to how self-determination is interpreted in international and human rights law (e.g., Buchanan, 2004; Cambou, 2019; Koivurova, 2008), or presented as a 'problem' to be 'solved' in political science (e.g. Cunningham, 2014; Griffiths, 2017; Schulte, 2020), we take inspiration from scholarship that interrogates how self-determination is variously defined, manifested, and challenged, including Kuokkanen's (2019) work on self-determination *as* non-domination, and Massad's (2018) assertion that self-determination has never been a stable signifier in its historical application. As such, this intervention offers a framework for reimagining what it means to lay claims to and to practice self-determination. In the spirit of political geography being an outward-looking field of study, receptive to cross-, inter-, and intra-disciplinary exchanges, we bring together scholars who work in the fields of political and development geography, Indigenous studies, international relations, and sociology. At the same time, we emphasize that self-determination, as an intrinsically spatial right, practice, and vision, deserves more critical attention precisely from political geographers.

The relationship between self-determination and territory is well established, and recent work has examined the geographical imaginations that underpin the right of self-determination and its productive intersection with postcolonial geography scholarship (Loong et al., 2023). The contributions to this intervention demonstrate the potential for further geographical interrogation. The following essays establish how focusing on the articulation and reworking of self-determination in specific sites, rather than as an abstract and prescriptive legal claim, offers powerful critiques of the state system and the liberal world order, and unsettles hegemonic forms of knowledge production. It thereby opens up conceptual space to push self-determination beyond the realm of rights—that is, to reimagine self-determination as a vision and practice, as well as a right, and to recover and reconceptualize the hopeful, emancipatory, and aspirational politics that have always underpinned self-determination.

This is the main goal of our intervention. As all four pieces demonstrate, self-determination is not only a struggle for political autonomy, but also a practice of resistance, prefigurative politics, and epistemic emancipation. In bringing the contributions together, this intervention seeks to re-envision self-determination from three novel and interlinked angles: decoloniality, intersectionality, and relationality. Drawing on a range of contemporary and historical examples, the authors use one or more of these angles to explore how current practices of, and visions for, self-determination engender novel understandings of emancipation from 'foreign' domination and/or colonial systems of governance.

Whilst there has been increasing attention paid to questions of Indigeneity, decolonization, and decoloniality within political geography in recent years, including in the pages of this journal (e.g. Naylor et al., 2018; Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020), critical engagement with self-determination has often not been foregrounded in these discussions.

We argue that adopting *decolonial* perspectives vis-à-vis self-determination has the potential to enrich these ongoing discussions within political geography and to generate productive insights into the (re)workings of self-determination. Decolonial perspectives in the first instance encourage us to look at self-determination beyond the decolonization processes linked to postcolonial independence and nation-building—processes that commonly occurred within boundaries imagined by distant imperial centres and reflected in colonial cartographies that limited the horizon of alternative sovereignty and political possibility (Benson et al., 2023).

A major concern of the current decolonial literature has been this undoing of the paradoxical equivalence of the right of self-determination with the right of colonial conquest, by exposing how in exercising the former, one could, in effect, end up legitimizing the latter. The realization of this troubling relationship has led scholars to pronounce the postcolonial era as catastrophic in many respects (political, economic, environmental), thus pinning the critical task 'against' the discourse and unreflective practice of self-determination (Massad, 2018). This line of critique views 'self-determined' nation-states as founded upon a systematic amnesia of conquered First Nations and occupied peoples, as well as a continuum of slow and less visible colonial violence that extends into the intimate and domestic geographies of contemporary Indigenous governance (De Leeuw, 2016). Even in the case of so-called 'old' nations and emblematic 'non-colonized' states, such as Ethiopia in the pan-Africanist imagination, the consolidation of state power has installed and continues to reproduce colonial systems of governance. As Regassa outlines in his contribution below, extractivist development and urbanization projects have been contested by indigenous pastoralist and agro-pastoralist communities and can be seen as a continuation of land dispossession and settler colonialism. Yet, these projects have now mobilized the 'people toward a collective vision of self-determination' based on land protection and resource sovereignty.

Added to the tragedy of land dispossession through the centralized exercise of territorial sovereignty is the legacy of the 'pathological homogenization' of people that accompanies state formation and postcolonial nation-building (Rae, 2002). Nation-building through homogenization has been complicit in fostering less visible forms of internal colonization, and it continues to undermine alternative visions of self-determination across the world – an insidious process that has been largely bypassed in the decolonization movements of the twentieth century. Recognizing that any given state 'is always already a sedition'—a form of betrayal to other self-to-be-determined communities or territorial arrangements—can help us to critically reflect on and to reassess claims about the redemptive power of postcolonial statehood (Constantinou, 2004, pp.4–5).

Building on and pushing beyond this decolonial critique, Dirik underscores in her contribution the Kurdish movement's increasing suspicion concerning the state and its supposed ability to serve as a vehicle for self-determination. Whilst this position of the Kurdish movement is also the result of historical failures to establish a sovereign Kurdish state, certain movements within contemporary Kurdish resistance have ideologically morphed into a struggle against the centralizing power of the state, opposing forms of domination that have colonized human society from the earliest states of ancient Mesopotamia (on this point, see also Scott, 2017). For Dirik, self-determination is first and foremost a 'stateless' form of liberation, a working 'against' or 'without' the state; it stands for the democratization of relations between individuals and communities, as well as with nature. From a different angle, Loong in her contribution highlights the diversity of self-determination practices within the Karen liberation struggle, ranging from the original aspirations of the movement – for an autonomous Karen State – to the Salween Peace Park, established in a Karen-controlled area. Recognizing the Indigenous rights of local Karen inhabitants through 'constituent diplomacies' (Cornago, 2017), this exercise of self-determination combines political accommodation and Karen control of Indigenous lands, whilst also enhancing the human-nature continuum that characterizes

Indigenous understandings of self-determination. This practice of self-determination links to wider ecological debates about approaching nature through a decolonial lens, as well as current calls for more-than-human and wildlife self-determination (Rizzolo & Bradshaw, 2019). In this regard, the decolonial perspective aims to rethink and retheorize self-determination by taking on board 'alterity and multiplicity in knowledge production'. This recognizes that colonial conquest took place over a range of terrains and perpetuated hegemonic and unequal relations that have affected different communities, and different components within these communities, to this day (Naylor et al., 2018, p. 200).

Intersectional perspectives further open up and pluralize the notion of self-determination based on the distinctive experiences of individuals and communities, and their treatment within the local, national, and international systems where they live and operate. It is pertinent to remember, as Getachew (2019) aptly suggests, that in addressing the 'problem of empire', postcolonial movements were not merely concerned with political autonomy, but also with the transformation of both national and international politics. 'The right of self-determination marked the first step of this transformation' that was systematically practiced and operationalized through nation-building and world-making (Getachew, 2019, p. 11). With regard to how world-making operates in different sections of society, Kuokkanen argues in her contribution that Indigenous women understand self-determination primarily as a vision of emancipation from all forms of domination, and as capacity-building as well as collective wellbeing. Kuokkanen further underscores the importance of individual self-determination, noting how self-determination as integrity plays out in interpersonal relationships and in individual/group relationships to land, and how the restructuring of oppressive relationships lines up with the promise of self-determination. This interplay of individual and collective self-determination, and between eudemonic living and collective wellbeing and autonomy, has also been analyzed extensively within psychology. Overall, a focus on distinct experiences allows for a widened and more comprehensive understanding of self-determination (Ryan et al., 2008).

Intersectionality thus highlights the variable impacts engendered by the pursuit of self-determination and parallel processes of nation-building and world-making. In the contributions below, besides the distinctive experiences of women re-envisioning self-determination, we see practices of self-determination from within other sections of the 'nation', be it refugees, prisoners, pastoralists, the youth, or ethnic groups. Indeed, in different ways each of the contributions suggests that, when we move beyond ontological categories of 'peoples' that underpin liberal legal understandings of self-determination, and instead consider fluid and intersectional identities (Dirik), state-driven differences among people (Loong), and solidarities across ages and genders forged through self-determination movements (Regassa), we are able to think of self-determination beyond the realm of rights. Another interesting insight is that self-determination claims are increasingly moving beyond the 'human' community and world-making to address the protection of 'complex webs of relations between humans and non-humans' (Blaser, 2013a and Loong's and Regassa's contributions below).

Finally *relational* perspectives in many ways crosscut both decolonial and intersectional perspectives. Relational perspectives underscore self-determination as a processual and embodied practice, focusing on aspects that local agents themselves identify as contributing to their autonomy. We can think, for example, of Naylor's (2017) work on the materiality of autonomous resistance – be it in the emblematic struggle of the Zapatistas in the Chiapas region or of peasant collectives opting to self-organize and refusing to join the social and economic programmes devised by central governments. These modes of resistance demonstrate the value of critically engaging with the web of relationships that affect the experience and exercise of self-determination *on the ground*. As recent scholarship in political geography has demonstrated, a grounded, multiscalar, and granular analysis of relations offers ways out of the

dominant imposition of 'colonial' or 'external' forms of knowledge about what it means to be autonomous and self-determined (e.g. Radcliffe & Radhuber, 2020).

Dirik's and Loong's pieces, in particular, demonstrate that non-state and anti-colonial expressions of self-determination are shaped by translocal circulations of ideas, peoples and resources. Drawing on Massey's (1994) assertion that space is constituted by plural, interconnected, and open-ended relations that produce unexpected outcomes, we argue that a decolonial lens is also an intrinsically relational one. Meanwhile, as noted above, intersectional perspectives highlight precisely the intertwined ways that self-determination is operationalized at individual and collective scales. Indeed, the pieces featured here illustrate not only the range of scales through which self-determination is articulated – from the transnational to the individual – but also the varied sites and spaces where self-determination is being re-imagined and practiced, including cities, prisons, refugee camps, peace parks, and bodies. Speaking to scholarship on relational geographies (e.g. Massey, 1994, 2005), this intervention presents a relational approach to self-determination that foregrounds how self-determination is negotiated through situated relations with actors – human and non-human – at a range of spatial scales and temporalities. It explores the networks that come about in articulating claims to self-determination, and it examines how the nodes and intensities of relationships modify, in practice, the meaning of self-determination, as well as the expectations of what is possible or ethical to do with it.

2. Self-determination without and against the state

2.1. Dilar Dirik

In the past decades, movements and struggles for self-determination at the margins of the nation-state system have questioned the legitimacy of the state as a vehicle of political will. These include popular transborder movements that relate to terms like autonomy, self-determination, decolonization, and radical democracy in non-state terms. Such struggles have at times come to define the state, especially the nation-state, along with patriarchy, as institutionalized forms of power and violence and as enemies of society's autonomy. Their alternative visions and modes of governance operate at different scales through networks of self-organized structures—from neighbourhood communes to transnational umbrella congresses—and through different strategies and tactics, from spiritual recovery to armed struggle.

In the absence of international solidarity systems or regional sovereign coalitions in the tradition of 20th century communist, anti-colonial, or national liberationist structures, today's self-determination quests often turn to the liberal human-rights framework. Calling for a disruption of incomplete histories of the struggle for rights that do not account for coloniality, violence, and conceptual diversity, Sumi Madhok (2021) argues for engagement with subaltern epistemologies and political trajectories that are otherwise provincialized. Acknowledging, tracking, and centring 'vernacular' articulations and cultures of justice outside of the hegemonic legal, Eurocentric, statist, and institutional realm amplifies struggles and political subjectivities, as people fight not only to live and survive, but to organize self-determined, free lives.

In this short contribution, I draw on the Kurdistan context to highlight how non-state political imaginations of self-determination can generate pluralistic and egalitarian cultures that do not fundamentally draw on the liberal tradition to legitimize their validity. Alternative or revolutionary non-statist political cultures affectively structure lives and imaginations and often present themselves as radical perspectives that, while having emerged from within specific contexts, can potentially universal resonance.

The terrain described as Kurdistan is located at the intersection of four nation-states (Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria) in the Middle East, a region long marked by empire, colonialism, war, occupation, genocide, sectarianism, forced migration and assimilation. Like other 20th century

contexts of national liberation, various Kurdish political parties and groups articulated visions for Kurdish self-determination along European universalist traditions following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. While many desired statehood to express Kurdish existence, the movement around the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) with time expanded the question of self-determination to include the ethical and political principles of organizing society, proposing, practicing, and popularizing alternative concepts beyond the quest to statehood. Formed in 1978, the initially Marxist-Leninist PKK started guerrilla warfare against the Turkish state, a NATO member, in 1984, with the aim of establishing an independent and socialist greater Kurdistan. Its leadership was based in Syria and Lebanon throughout the 1980s and 1990s under the auspices of the Syrian state, a NATO enemy that hosted various national liberation struggles. In the 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the PKK, which had by now mobilized a popular mass movement around it, including in the European diaspora, began transforming aspects of its ideology and practice, notably abandoning the quest for statehood. The party increasingly asserted the need to dismantle the state and patriarchy, alongside capitalism, as the fundamental systems of power that colonize life, and women in the movement began to organize autonomously. In 1999, Abdullah Öcalan, the leader and main ideologue of the movement, was abducted in Kenya and imprisoned in Turkey in a NATO-led operation. In 2005, he proposed, from prison, a non-state transborder system based on autonomous self-organization, to be realized through communes, assemblies, cooperatives, academies, and congresses. Today, this 'Democratic Confederalism', with its main pillars of radical democracy, women's liberation, and ecology, is practiced on different scales across sites in the Middle East and the diaspora.

In the movement's ideology, the state system is a product of a 5000-year-old centralist and violent trajectory reaching back to ancient Mesopotamia. Consequently, the current systems of power are a product of a 'statist civilization' that has come to colonize human society. This anti-ecological and society-cidal 'coup' reached its peak with the rise of colonialism and capitalism, establishing itself as a world-system, today governed by nation-states. Genuine democracy is understood as being at odds with liberalism, which is critiqued as an ideology that disguises the true nature of power. Instead, direct democratic, participatory organizational modes, infused with references that draw on emancipatory aspects of the region's spiritual traditions and on global social-resistance histories, are meant to recover and to democratize relations between individuals, communities, and nature.

While the movement's view on self-determination is constructed around a population's relationship to regional and global forces (e.g. the western-dominated capitalist, patriarchal and nation-statist world-system), it also defines internal principles for self-governance. Women, youth, and minoritized communities are empowered to organize themselves autonomously, including by developing social theory and self-defence mechanisms, and to engage in struggles within society. Learning from setbacks of revolutionary liberation struggles of the past, the movement believes that society can only be free if the oppressed can determine all aspects of their lives, individually and collectively. Beyond being a territorial end goal, autonomy is a method of building democratic relations within and between communities. It signifies not the separation of communities and territories, but rather a politicized reconnection of social fabrics based on resisting power and building 'free life'—a process that is part of a larger, planetary struggle.

Liberation, then, is conceived as both freedom from domination and a protracted effort to 'remove the statist mentality' from people's minds and hearts to create means of concrete daily self-organization without reliance on state power. The movement's political discourse, formulated in education, assemblies, direct actions, social contracts, and media, curates a collective culture around a shared political project, ideologically and materially creating revolutionary subjectivities aspiring to be ungovernable by states across sites like local communities, mountains, refugee camps, prisons, and the diaspora. Democratic autonomy is creatively adapted to different situations; similar vocabularies and organizational mechanisms span from relatively mainstream legal and political structures within Turkey to guerrilla spaces in the mountains. The aspiration is to transform the region's social fabric in an emancipatory fashion without external or state intervention. The democratic confederalists establish regional and internationalist alliances with social movements that seek alternatives to capitalist modernity. Self-determination is therefore not a Kurdish-only national effort, but involves unifying regional and transnational communities and societies, empowering them to organize against the divisive monopoly of the state system. It is thus purposeful for this deep, globally imagined decolonization to the extent that it enables not only freedom from foreign rule, but also room for the articulation of values, principles, and aesthetics for organizing the daily and just functioning of life.

Scholarship on rebel governance, sovereignty, and non-state organization in contexts of conflict, civil war, and insurgency is often concerned with measuring the ability of non-state actors to behave in state-like ways when governing territory and populations. From a feminist and decolonial perspective, positivist approaches to making sense of political life are insufficiently attentive to power and social relations. Such approaches can obscure how forms of non-state governance experiment with ways of being 'not like the state'. This is in part because concepts and cultures that are characterized as local, Indigenous, community-based, customary, or traditional are 'trumped' by the normative framework of human rights law, which is often aligned with hegemonic state interests (McConnachie, 2014). This says little about the validity, efficiency, or legitimacy of either system in the eyes of those subjected to it, as the following example of a movement-affiliated refugee camp aims to illustrate.

Within the humanitarian regime, political neutrality is a precondition for protection and aid. Long-term displacement camps function as surrogate sites for political groups, including armed movements seeking self-determination, to find cover, mobilize communities, and reproduce themselves. The blurring of categories like 'civilian' and 'militant' challenges humanitarian actors in relation to aid provision and the implementation of what the UNHCR defines as 'durable solutions'. In PKK-affiliated discourse, camps and prisons are sites of resistance and special zones for prefigurative politics. Camps and prisons as sites of socio-political struggle, self-organization, imagination, and practice, are, despite hardships, occasions to create self-determined lives outside the dominant system. While prison requires individual, intimate struggle against the state and a demonstration of political willpower, stance, and discipline, the guerrilla or refugee camp becomes an opportunity to collectively implement political visions.

The 'Martyr Rustem Cudî Camp' or Mexmûr (Makhmour) Refugee Camp, located in northern Iraq, is inhabited by approximately 12,000 Kurds, who left their villages during the 1990s war within Turkish borders. Due to its proximity to the PKK, Mexmûr Camp has been a point of tension for the UNHCR, Turkey, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq. The politicized population has social contracts and self-organization mechanisms like assemblies, councils, and academies, as well as autonomous women's and youth structures to organize daily social, political, and economic life.

In the absence of justice before international accountability mechanisms, political communities can become more attentive to the world of state power, intelligence, and militarism than to the language of human rights and humanitarianism. Meanwhile, humanitarians' sceptical framing of community institutions as obstacles to endorsed solutions erases visceral knowledge stemming from lived experience. At Mexmûr, inhabitants cultivate in their social, media, diplomatic and education work the ability to read the state and geopolitics as self-defence against the nation-state system, which wants to render the displaced and dispossessed defence-less and 'politics-less'. In interviews I conducted in 2015, camp residents referenced the movement's ideology to emphasize that the UNHCR was acting on behalf of the nation-state system, itself the root cause of war and forced displacement. While open to

engagement with the outside world, residents are vigilant regarding external influences. This vigilance was reinforced in 2014, when PKK guerrillas, and not the UNHCR, helped to evacuate the camp during ISIS attacks. In the view of camp residents, whoever meaningfully organizes, defends, and sacrifices themselves for the camp has the 'right' to make claims over it. The guerrillas, otherwise labelled as terrorists, are their guarantee for survival – a reason why young women and men from the camp continue to join them.

Fluidity between militants and civilians is a problem from a liberal legal perspective, wherein ontological categories must be clearly defined for state-led forms of rights, justice, and aid provision to function. Residents, however, believe that their structures are subjected to violence because they are more genuinely democratic than either liberal-democratic states or international institutions. What the humanitarian sector, which increasingly co-opts self-determination terminology, characterizes as 'politicized' constitutes concrete forms of participation and representation to Mexmûr camp residents. By presenting themselves as political actors ungovernable by the liberal order, camp residents offer a counter-model to managerial humanitarianism. So, for instance, the predecessors of what eventually became the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, a system largely based on the PKK's legacy, took up humanitarian responsibilities without mandate in August 2014, building the first camp for Êzîdî genocide survivors fleeing from the so-called Islamic State in Şengal (Sinjar), Iraq, after these were rescued by the PKK. At the time (before the international anti-ISIS coalition formed), this was seen as a victory of revolutionary self-determination over solutions offered by the 'state system'.

Based on a radical understanding of the state system, the PKK-affiliated movement does not build upon self-determination rooted within international law, which has been critiqued as having been repurposed to undermine liberation struggles of the colonized and oppressed (Massad, 2018). Rather, liberation is formulated in revolutionary leftist fashion as essentially entangled with the fate of all communities and peoples in the region and the world, achievable only through protracted political and internationalist struggle against both foreign/colonial rule and, more generally, against society's domination by capitalist modernity. Self-determination, from this perspective, refers more concretely to the ability of communities to meaningfully organize and to defend themselves along radical democratic principles from the bottom up.

While such practices persist locally in parts of Kurdistan and the diaspora, given the Middle East's conditions and its role in the world, the limitations of 'stateless' liberation and self-determination must not be understated. These include continued war and violence, resource scarcity, socio-economic problems, gaps between theory and practice, internal hierarchies, and authoritarian tendencies. Although international legal frameworks do not fundamentally form the basis of this cosmology, activists in times of crisis make calls to the international community of states for interventions that implicate self-declared revolutionary structures with state power and imperialism; thus, the survival of the Autonomous Administration has relied, to a large extent, on US military presence, which has long pursued regime change and the undermining of state sovereignty in Syria.

Understanding moral-political registers that drive different self-determination quests requires privileging subjugated histories, practices, epistemologies, and cultures that do not present themselves as simply existing alongside the nation-state-based liberal world-system, but instead claim to develop valid alternatives deriving from philosophically different sources of legitimacy. This may involve both interrogating liberalism as a Euro-American political ideology and governance system backed by institutional, military, and financial power, and recognizing resistance against it not as exceptional, but as a legitimate and popular stance in many parts of the world. Critiques stemming from such contexts can, in fact, deepen contemporary analyses of the nature of the nation-state and the liberal world order today.

3. Settler-colonialism and the struggle for self-determination in Ethiopia

3.1. Asebe Regassa

Self-determination is a politically contested and complex concept. Nevertheless, the historical antecedents that invoked questions of self-determination in different parts of the world share much in common – colonialism, domination, and marginalization. Although the conceptual and legal complexity of self-determination necessitates contextual interpretations and relational approaches, self-determination as defined in international law does not recognize historical contexts of colonialism and contemporary political economies of extractivism that compel Indigenous peoples, in particular, to raise different kinds of self-determination (Anaya, 2000). Firstly, international law readings overemphasize the political dimension of self-determination, though domination is often sedimented through epistemologies of knowledge production. Secondly, self-determination in contexts of settler colonialism requires more contextual understanding of domination than what the international legal framework provides. Thirdly, with the rise of violent capitalist extractive economy, self-determination should encompass people's struggle for resource sovereignty, which is not well captured within the dominant discourses.

In this intervention, I focus on the settler-colonial system in Ethiopia in order to unpack the entanglement of political autonomy, epistemic emancipation, and resource sovereignty within the struggle for self-determination. The Ethiopian context offers a unique case because of the history of state formation in the form of internal colonialism (Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990). First, I will briefly elaborate on the practice of settler colonialism and how it enhances consolidation of political, epistemic and economic domination by settler states/societies. Second, I establish a link between settler colonialism, frontier-making, and the erosion of Indigenous sovereignty. This second point leads me to the contextualization of the struggle for self-determination within settler-colonial systems with a focus on Ethiopia.

Settler-colonialism is imbricated with discourses and practices of stripping off Indigenous sovereignty and consequently erasing Indigenous rights, knowledges, and institutions (Barker, 2012). It consolidates its power based on cultural/racial and epistemic dichotomies between its mainstream society and native/Indigenous populations. Writing on settler-colonialism in Australia, John Bodley (2014) argues that Aboriginal populations in Australia and their cultural and sacred spaces were decimated not only by extractivist capitalist economies but also through assimilationist policies of the settler-colonial state. As such, this practice entails reconfiguration of socio-spatial patterns and property regimes of Indigenous peoples and legitimates land appropriation (Rasmussen & Lund, 2018; Regassa & Korf, 2018).

In such contexts, contestations over land and other resources are claims not just over ownership of *material resource* but also over issues of *resource sovereignty*. It entails contestations between settlers and Indigenous populations over meanings of space, time, histories, land and land rights. Resource sovereignty constitutes the assemblage of territorial claims and socio-economic relationships to natural resources, and people's authority to secure the material basis of their livelihoods (Radhuber & Radcliffe, 2023). Securing resource sovereignty requires people's participation in decision-making processes on matters that affect their lives and ensuring the principles of free, informed and prior consent regarding development interventions on their land. From the vantage point of these intertwined demands for freedom, self-determination is invoked as a decolonial project not only of reversing and unsettling hegemonic discourses and knowledges, political institutions, and extractive economies, but also of ensuring the exercise of sovereignty and control of the future.

Questions and struggles for self-determination in Ethiopia are invoked in response to the establishment of an internal colonial system since the late 19th century and the subsequent political oppression,

economic exploitation and socio-cultural marginalization that this system produced (Holcomb and Ibssa, 1990). Successive regimes in Ethiopia have used narratives of nature conservation, development, 'improvement', and 'civilization' as technologies of consolidating state power in areas hitherto considered to be threats to national security – mostly located at the margins of the state (Hagmann & Korf, 2012). The conquest and subsequent conversion of these frontier regions into settler-colonial territories were legitimated through the narrative of *dar hager makinat* (civilizing the peripheries of the state) (Regassa & Korf, 2018). This narrative still resonates within the government's policy towards pastoralist and agro-pastoralist areas, and thus, it is a project of future-making. Future-making constitutes enrolment of time and space into an anticipated future (Bryant & Knight, 2019), drawing on experiences, narratives, and memories of the past and assembling these with practices, policies, and discourses of the present. It also entails erasure of Indigenous memories, knowledges, and practices. The annexation and conversion of these territories into the control of the settler-colonial state was exercised through what Hagmann and Korf (2012) described as violence perpetrated in the form of a *state of exception*. Therefore, the struggle for self-determination, as I will present below, is exercised against the discursively constructed and politically institutionalized forms of settler-colonialism.

Here, I present three case studies to analyze self-determination from decolonial, intersectional, and relational approaches in the Ethiopian context. The first case illustrates the Oromo youth protest that erupted following the launch of the Addis Ababa Master Plan in 2014. In the second case, a protest against a gold mine in southern Ethiopia illustrates self-determination from a resource sovereignty perspective. In the third case, I present a snapshot of the contestation and friction between local environmental knowledge and Western models of nature conservation that hints at self-determination from an epistemic perspective. These three cases illustrate distinctive dimensions of self-determination, i.e., self-determination as struggle for political autonomy, resource sovereignty and epistemic emancipation.

In 2014, the federal government and Addis Ababa city administration launched a new master plan called Addis Ababa Integrated Development Plan that would increase the size of the city by 20 times (Regassa, & Emana, 2023). The project reactivated Oromo farmers' memories of land dispossession in and around the city and, as a result, provoked a nation-wide protest in Oromia – the largest regional state in Ethiopia. The protest was led by the youth but eventually mobilized all sectors of the Oromo people and engulfed all corners of the region. For the youth, who lost their hope for the future due to the rise in unemployment and poverty on the one hand, and unbearable political oppression on the other hand, the protest was part of the struggle to gain control over their future (Abebe, 2020). Following the protest, other demands including Oromia's right over Addis Ababa, making Oromo language one of the official federal languages, control over resources (minerals) and Oromia regional state's autonomy were raised and served as instruments of mobilizing people toward a collective vision of self-determination. These demands galvanized activists, political parties (including some within the ruling party), Oromo scholars and peasants to rally behind the common cause – the right to self-determination (Regassa, & Emana, 2023). In 2018, the movement reached a climax and prompted the former Prime Minister, Hailemariam Desalegn, to resign; the current Prime Minister, Abiy Ahmed, took power at this time. Although Abiy Ahmed has not responded to any of the questions that set off the protest, the movement brought to the surface the Oromo people's struggle for self-determination, including the right over development, exercise of language, and political autonomy.

In May 2018, soon after Abiy Ahmed became Prime Minister, a popular protest broke out against MIDROC Laga-dambi gold mine in Guji zone of Oromia in opposition to the renewal of the company's license, amidst reports of the mine's horrendous human and environmental impacts. Different sources exposed the impacts of the toxic chemicals from the mine on local communities, including paralysis in

children, stillbirth, miscarriage, critical skin diseases and chronic asthma (Regassa, 2022; Gardner, 2019; HRW, 2023). Apart from the impacts of toxic chemicals from the mine, the Guji Oromo community in the vicinity of the mine deeply resented MIDROC because of land dispossession and restrictions on access to farmland and artisanal mining sites (Regassa, 2022). Questions of entitlement to the resources, job opportunities at the mine, local communities' right to a clean environment and issues related to human and environmental health impacts of the mine were among the major demands of the people. Throughout the 20 years of MIDROC's operation, and even during the re-opening of the mine in 2021, local communities were not consulted; nor were they compensated for the damages the mine has caused to people, livestock, and the environment.

Self-determination also entails unsettling hegemonic forms of knowledge production. In the 1960s, the imperial regime in Ethiopia introduced a top-down, colonially imposed fortress conservation model and subsequently marginalized and expelled local communities' alternative ways of knowing and co-existence with more-than-humans. After it joined the international environmental conservation discourses through UNESCO, the imperial regime established Nech Sar National Park in 1974 on ancestral land of the Guji Oromo and enforced strict separation between humans and more-than-humans (Regassa, 2016). This conservation model contradicts the Guji's Indigenous conception of human relations with more-than-humans, which is built on values and principles of respect, reciprocity, and coexistence (Regassa, 2017). The state criminalized Guji's pastoralist livelihoods, displaced people from their homes, and restricted them from accessing resources within the protected areas. In response, the Guji resorted to overt and covert forms of resistance. In 2004 for example, following the displacement of the Guji from the park area, the zebra and other herbivorous animals left the park and moved to areas where the Guji people were resettled. In response to my question why the zebras moved out of the park, a Guji elder replied, 'The animals can't live alone because they would be prey to predators', hinting that the wildlife have the right to determine where they want to live. In addition, this case illustrates Guji's entitlement to self-determination from ontological and epistemological perspectives of human-nature relations.

These three cases illustrate that self-determination, particularly in settler-colonial contexts, constitute questions of political autonomy, epistemic emancipation, and resource sovereignty. Settler-colonialism discursively nullifies Indigenous peoples' property rights, removes their political autonomy, and imposes hegemonic forms of knowledge. In such contexts, the struggle for self-determination necessitates restoration of Indigenous resource sovereignty, which often requires the exercise of political autonomy. The protest against the Addis Ababa Master Plan, MIDROC gold mine and the Nech Sar National Park, and the coalescence of the Oromo people across gender, age, and professions, also hints at the intersectionality of self-determination. I conclude that a nuanced understanding of the temporality and spatiality of domination that invokes the struggle for self-determination, particularly in settler-colonial contexts, necessitates a decolonial methodological and conceptual lens.

4. Self-determination as decolonial worldmaking: possibilities and limits in the Karen struggle

4.1. Shona Loong

Amidst protracted conflicts, some groups have enacted self-determination claims in ways that challenge the concept's restrictive definition and use in international law (Loong et al., 2023). In such contexts, self-determination can be conceptualized as decolonial worldmaking: an effort to build relations between humans, and between humans and non-humans, that challenges relations of colonial domination. This intervention examines how seeing self-determination as decolonial worldmaking illuminates both the possibilities and limits of

self-determination in the Karen context in Myanmar, focusing on the Salween Peace Park. In the Salween Peace Park, the Karen National Union (KNU), community-based organizations, and Karen civilians are rethinking self-determination amidst the world's longest civil war, leveraging the international Indigenous movement to challenge multi-scalar relations of colonial domination.

An eclectic and growing body of literature approaches worldmaking in two main ways. First, scholars have used worldmaking to describe subaltern actors' efforts to remake the international order. Looking back on the twentieth century, scholars have pointed to how actors marginalized in global history have made unacknowledged contributions to human rights (Berger, 2022), urban planning (Stanek, 2022), and solidarity movements (Kelley, 2019). Most relevant to self-determination is Adom Getachew's *Worldmaking After Empire*, which argues that although leaders of anticolonial movements are often memorialized as statesmen – and they were predominantly men – they actually strove for loftier goals: to rethink state sovereignty and to craft a domination-free world order. Their claims to self-determination thus marked a 'radical break from the Eurocentric model of international society' (Getachew, 2019, p. 11). This mode of worldmaking, which I call *Worldmaking I*, conceives of worldmaking as the creation of new, more egalitarian set of power relations beyond the nation-state. Getachew, however, also discusses the limits of this worldmaking, as claimants' visions were ultimately force-fitted into an emerging neoliberal economic order and the template of the Westphalian state.

A second strand in the worldmaking literature, *Worldmaking II*, focuses on the relations between humans and non-humans. This literature decolonizes the universal truth of a 'one-world world' (Law, 2015); instead, it sees the world as composed of heterogeneous systems of relations between humans and non-humans. From this perspective, world politics is 'ontologically multiple' and pluriversal, shaped by multiple relations between people and living things, and multiple systems of knowledge (Trownsell et al., 2022, p. 787; see also Blaser, 2013b; Escobar, 2017). Correspondingly, self-determination can be viewed as a means of 'defending' not only peoples – the presumed subjects of international law – but 'complex webs of relations between humans and nonhumans' (Blaser, 2013a, p. 14). By reading the literature on Worldmaking I and Worldmaking II together, a new lens on self-determination emerges: self-determination claims not only reach 'up' into the spaces of international politics, but also 'down' into the relations between people and the ecosystems they inhabit, healing them in the wake of colonial violence (see Krystalli and Schulz, 2022).

I saw both Worldmaking I and Worldmaking II at work in my research on the Salween Peace Park. A territorial initiative spanning 6746 square kilometres, the Peace Park is located in Mutraw, one of the KNU's strongholds. In 2018, when the Peace Park was launched, the KNU had been at war with successive Myanmar governments for nearly seven decades. (The KNU signed two ceasefires, in 2012 and 2015, but clashes continued in the Peace Park area despite ongoing peace negotiations.) The initiative has never been acknowledged by a Myanmar government.

The Salween Peace Park is, in effect, a KNU-controlled area governed by a distinct constitution which – for the first time in formal terms – recognizes that local Karen inhabitants are rightful claimants to Indigenous rights. This constitution is called the Salween Peace Park Charter; it was drafted by Karen civil society groups and Indigenous leaders in consultation with the local population, and seventy-five percent of the Peace Park's inhabitants approved it via a referendum (those who did not vote to approve the Charter include those who had been displaced at the time of the referendum.) The Charter sets out 118 articles on the governance of the area, to be implemented by KNU representatives, elected community members, and civil society groups (see Loong under review). Much of this centres on the conservation of waters and lands through customary institutions, which the KNU and civil society groups see as evidence that Indigenous Karen people are enacting self-determination in practice, even if they are denied self-determination by the Myanmar government.

The Salween Peace Park expresses self-determination as worldmaking in both senses of the word. On one hand, the Peace Park positions the restoration of Karen customary lands – or *Kaw* (literally: country or territory) – as part of self-determination. *Kaw* refer to systems of relations between humans and non-humans that preceded the establishment of the Burmese nation-state, although some of these systems have been disrupted by the decades-long conflict. The Peace Park seeks to consolidate *Kaw* systems – documenting them, formalizing them, and ensuring that they are recognised by the KNU – and in so doing asserts that Indigenous Karen have long practiced reciprocal relations between humans and non-humans (see Paul et al., 2021, 2023). This illustrates self-determination as Worldmaking II.

On the other hand, in the spirit of Worldmaking I, the Peace Park conjoins the Karen struggle with the Fourth World movement. In contrast to the Third World movement, which resulted in internal colonization in many postcolonial states like Myanmar, the Fourth World movement centres instead the self-determination of self-identifying nations, like the Karen (see Whetstone & Yilmaz, 2020). I saw Worldmaking I in action in the way the Peace Park's progenitors sought recognition not from the Myanmar government, but from the international Indigenous movement. For example, civil society representatives and Indigenous leaders associated with the Peace Park have participated in solidarity exchanges with Indigenous leaders elsewhere.

However, Salween Peace Park's efforts at decolonial worldmaking remain shaped and constrained by enduring colonial relations between the Myanmar state and the Karen nation. This illustrates the importance of detaching the expansive decolonial vision advanced by the Salween Peace Park from the hostile context in which it is implemented. By fragmenting both the 'homeland' and the 'peoples' who consider themselves Karen, state violence has constrained the extent to which decolonial worldmaking can be enacted in practice.

For one, while self-determination claims are often made with reference to a homeland, the Burmese state has violently expanded into Kawthoolei, the Karen homeland claimed by the KNU. Because the Salween Peace Park can be feasibly enacted only in areas where the KNU has kept the Burmese state out, the Salween Peace Park encompasses only part of Kawthoolei. Elsewhere, outside of KNU-controlled areas, the state has suppressed Karen ethnic identity and constrained civil society organizing. For instance, in 2019, three Karen activists were arrested for organizing a Karen Martyrs' Day event in Yangon—a day that marks the death of the KNU's founder at the hands of the military. The repression of Karen activists working towards self-determination explains, in part, why the principles of the Salween Peace Park cannot be extended to the rest of Kawthoolei at present.

In addition, while self-determination claims are often associated with a 'people', the protracted conflict has created and reinforced differences among those who consider themselves Karen. Scholars have often remarked on the religious, linguistic, and cultural heterogeneity of the Karen population (e.g. Gravers, 2007). Less remarked upon is how state violence itself has shaped subjectivities and differences – and hence the extent to which a 'people' who claim self-determination can be considered a coherent group. In the Karen context, the course of the conflict drove a wedge between those in KNU-controlled areas and those in areas of contested control, who had varied experiences of state violence. In the past twenty years, those living in KNU-controlled areas have been subject to the bulk of armed clashes, but they were less exposed to the Myanmar government's 'Bamarization' policies, which resulted–, for instance, in the replacement of people's Karen names and honorifics with Bamar names in official documents (Karen Human Rights Group, 2020, pp.14–18). Hence, the Salween Peace Park area – where the KNU has kept the state out – remains one of the few areas in which Indigenous Karen institutions have remained somewhat intact. This poses the question of how the Peace Park can avoid upholding some Karen people as stewards of Indigenous culture while alienating other Karen people who, in the long course of the conflict, have had to learn

Burmese, go to Myanmar government schools, and suppress their Karen identity. So far, the Peace Park's progenitors have been careful to position it as a solidarity-building project that demonstrates the diversity of the Karen population and of Indigenous groups in Myanmar more broadly.

The Salween Peace Park demonstrates the purchase of understanding self-determination as decolonial worldmaking. This initiative is decolonial insofar as it challenges the historical effects of state violence against the Karen, while operating in the context of ongoing colonial relations. In spite of the hostile context in which it is implemented, the Peace Park continues to advance an expansive vision for making worlds in two senses of the term, guided by a relational ontology of being: it restores relations between humans and non-humans that have been disrupted by violence (Worldmaking II), while linking the Karen struggle to efforts to build a Fourth World of non-state nations (Worldmaking I). As a lens, decolonial worldmaking shows how self-determination claims are thoroughly relational, yet efforts to make worlds are continually constrained by the colonial violence that has prompted claims to self-determination in the first place.

5. Indigenous self-determination as a foundational value

5.1. Rauna Kuokkanen

Self-determination is about relations. For Indigenous peoples, self-determination is about a vision and struggle for restructuring relations of domination for a more just present and future for their societies and people. In formal political discourse, Indigenous self-determination is discussed mostly in terms of a (deeply unequal) relationship with the state. As a legal and political relation with the state, Indigenous self-determination is typically conceptualized as a collective human right that enables a group to determine their own political, social, cultural, and economic affairs. In the struggle for Indigenous self-determination, rights and the relationship with the state are no doubt central questions. Considering how the discourse of Indigeneity and the very concept of Indigenous peoples are products of colonialism and continued state domination, the centrality of the state in Indigenous struggles and visions for freedom is expected. Outside the legal and political framework, however, the meaning and content of Indigenous self-determination exceed rights and relations with the state and encompass myriad other relationships, including those pertaining to the land, kinship, and spirituality.

Drawing on extensive interviews with over 70 Indigenous women in Greenland and Sápmi, and with Indigenous peoples in three regions of Canada, I have developed a theory of Indigenous self-determination that posits it as a foundational value that seeks to restructure all relations of domination (Kuokkanen, 2019). It also considers and interrogates several aspects of relationality, including relations of domination and Indigenous ontologies and norms premised on relations with the land and kinship relations. I posit that as a future vision, Indigenous self-determination requires non-domination in all relations, ranging from state-led dispossession and removal, to oppressive relations of colonial policies and law, to the most intimate relationships. I argue that the rights-based approach alone is too limited and is not able to fully grasp or adequately represent the meaning of Indigenous self-determination. I infer from interviews in the three regions that Indigenous self-determination is a foundational value that fosters the norm of integrity manifested in two central forms: integrity of the land and individual integrity, including freedom from bodily harm and violence.

Indigenous women whom I talked to were adamant that in addition to the colonial relations with the state, there are many other relations of domination that must be examined if we are ever going to make Indigenous self-determination a reality. Indigenous self-determination was defined in much broader terms than rights or political autonomy—that is, having control of own affairs and decision-making powers as a

distinct polity. Instead of focusing on politics, rights, or international law, the participants typically discussed the underlying values shaping their conceptions of Indigenous self-determination, such as relationality, the paramount significance of the land, and freedom from domination.

Defining Indigenous self-determination as a value, I build on the work of legal scholar Jennifer Nedelsky (2011, p. 242), for whom 'value' denotes a widely shared conception with which members of a group express what is considered essential for their wellbeing both as individuals and as a distinct collectivity. As examples of core values, she mentions equality, dignity, security, autonomy, bodily integrity, adequate material resources, individual and/or collective spiritual expression, and respect for the earth and the rest of creation. Following her definition, I suggest that self-determination is a broad concept with which Indigenous people convey what they regard as necessary for their individual and collective wellbeing.

As a core value, the concept of Indigenous self-determination fosters the norm of integrity which has several interrelated and reciprocal dimensions. These include territorial integrity, cultural integrity, collective and individual integrity, and the integrity of the land. My focus is specifically on individual integrity and the integrity of the land for two reasons. While scholarship and international law have focused on the significance of cultural and collective integrity of Indigenous peoples, the two other dimensions have received less attention. The primary importance of land and of relations with the land are widely considered but are rarely discussed through the norm of integrity. The second reason is that the themes of individual integrity and the integrity of the land were frequently raised by the research participants in all three regions, even if they did not necessarily use those terms. Therefore, I concur that the norm of integrity, especially individual integrity and the integrity of the land, form the foundation of the theory of self-determination as a fundamental value.

While some research participants entered into the discussion of the meaning of Indigenous self-determination through the rights framework, engagement with this framework was not extensive. Some participants shunned the rights framework as an imposition of a foreign discourse. For Anishinabek artist, activist and educator Wanda Nanibush, the language of rights implies the granting of rights by the state rather than recognition of how Indigenous peoples have always been self-determining. For Nanibush, self-determination is not first and foremost a right; nor is it 'something that needs to be bestowed on us, [since] we already have it' (Interview, May 30, 2014).

Instead of rights or the relationship with the state, most participants considered self-determination as a vision that inspires and compels them to contribute to the collective wellbeing and to efforts of nation-building or capacity-building in their communities. Very rarely, if at all, were these efforts discussed in the context of international Indigenous rights or political engagement in arenas such as the United Nations. Therefore, I contend that an exclusive focus on rights discourse provides us with a limited legalistic and state-centred conception of Indigenous self-determination that neither reflects the breadth of Indigenous self-determination nor pays adequate attention to relations of domination beyond the state.

By conceptualizing Indigenous self-determination as a foundational value, I reject the idea that self-determination can be understood only in terms of rights. I do not, however, reject the rights discourse entirely. My argument, rather, is a matter of emphasis. I take a cue from Nedelsky, who points out that the question 'is not whether but *how* the language of rights will be used' (Nedelsky, 2011, p. 236, emphasis added). As she argues, and as Indigenous rights advocates would no doubt substantiate, 'rights are a powerful rhetorical tool in struggles for justice all around the world' (Nedelsky, 2011, p. 232). The rights framework, particularly the global discourse of Indigenous rights, is vitally important for establishing a normative legal and political framework for Indigenous self-determination. Importantly, the global Indigenous rights discourse is broader than, and thus distinct from, the narrow rights-based politics of many mainstream Indigenous organizations seeking to reform

relations with the state through policy, electoral politics, and legislative changes.

Having said that, I argue that paying closer attention to the relational character of self-determination enables a more effective examination of its transformative potential in terms of restructuring relations. The research participants were asked about their understanding of the concept of self-determination, as well as its personal significance and meaning. For many, self-determination gained meaning at the individual level through acts regarded as contributing to the common goal, as well as through the idea of individual self-determination. Nearly all viewed individual self-determination as a prerequisite for the exercise of collective self-determination. None of the participants, however, discussed individual self-determination in terms of gender equality or women's rights. Instead, individual self-determination was construed in terms of justice, dignity and freedom from discrimination, coercion, and violence. While some participants focused on structural violence of the settler state, all agreed that elimination of interpersonal physical and sexual violence must be on any agenda of Indigenous self-determination. The three categories of integrity– individual, collective, and land – were frequently deliberated in ways suggesting their interdependence, forming an inseparable standard of integrity at the heart of Indigenous self-determination. Destroying or undermining one radically compromises the others.

At the heart of Indigenous self-determination is the ongoing struggle for the land and against the colonial dispossession that disrupts the foundational relations Indigenous peoples have with their territories. The collective integrity of Indigenous peoples hinges on territorial integrity. Several participants discussed their strong connection to the land and how it provides them with a deep sense of responsibility to protect it. Some talked about their involvement in resistance to resource extraction, which they see as threatening to destroy the land and thus, as dispossessing them (and their people) of the land and their relationship with it.

As an example of a strong connection to and sense of responsibility for the land, Sylvia Plain, Anishinaabe student and activist from Aamjiwnaang First Nation (Ontario), mentioned the Mother Earth Water Walk. Started in 2002 by Anishinaabe elder Josephine Mandamin, the Water Walk began as an aspiration to re-establish the responsibility to, and sacred connection with, water that Anishinaabe women have traditionally possessed, as well as a way to instil teachings and to connect youth with the land (Mzinegiizhigo-kwe Bedard, 2008). Plain explains, '[People] started walking around the Great Lakes as part of reintroducing themselves to the land and getting to know those waters more intimately and everything that's part of that' (Interview with Plain, July 28, 2014). After participating in the Walk in 2011, Plain notes that the walk gave her 'the opportunity to walk through different First Nations territories and learn about their teachings and relationships to water, which helped me to understand how the land governs us as First Nations peoples and provides us with our identities' (McGregor & Plain, 2013, p. 96).

Like territorial integrity, individual integrity is a precondition for Indigenous self-determination. Unlike territorial integrity, however, individual integrity is regularly overlooked in considerations of Indigenous self-determination. Yet when the participants were asked about the meaning of the concept of self-determination, nearly all noted the significance of individual self-determination and body sovereignty. While consisting of several different aspects, the most important dimensions of individual self-determination for the participants included bodily integrity and freedom from violence. Individuals' responsibilities and commitments emerging from the relations and ties of belonging that connect individuals to their communities were also considered central. Further, I argue that the way Indigenous women frequently discuss individual self-determination is akin to this conception of individual integrity, rather than liberal-feminist ideas of individual autonomy centred on individual choice and decision-making. This is not to suggest that individual autonomy is not valued in Indigenous societies. On the contrary, individual autonomy, characterized by interdependence rather than independence, has been traditionally held in high regard in numerous Indigenous societies.

In international law, self-determination is a right vested in all peoples, including Indigenous peoples, to decide their collective affairs and, in that way, to control their present and future. My theory of self-determination as a value does not negate this core principle but expands it and clarifies its relationship to Indigenous rights. As a transformative vision and tool for transforming all relations of domination, I argue that we need to conceptualize Indigenous self-determination as a foundational value—that is, a widely shared understanding of what a group considers indispensable for their well-being as individuals and as a people, and a principle that guides Indigenous peoples' lives, actions, choices, and decisions both collectively and individually.

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Costas M. Constantinou: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Fiona McConnell:** Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Dilar Dirik:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Asebe Regassa:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Shona Loong:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft. **Rauna Kuokkanen:** Formal analysis, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

We have no conflict of interests.

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