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Acting sovereign: interventions in a politics of gendered protectionsim, *Borderlands E - Journal*

Goldie Osuri

Macquarie University

Tanja Dreher

University of Wollongong, tanjad@uow.edu.au

Elaine Laforteza

Macquarie University

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INTRODUCTION

'Acting sovereign' in the face of gendered protectionism

Goldie Osuri, Tanja Dreher & Elaine Laforteza

Macquarie University, University of Technology, Sydney,
and Macquarie University

The papers in this volume arise from a politics of 'acting sovereign' in the face of discourses of gendered protectionism focused on Indigenous and Muslim women in Australia. Discourses of 'protection' have been deployed to legitimize ongoing colonial relations, particularly in terms of the Intervention into Northern Territory Indigenous communities and the policing of Muslim communities during the 'war on terror'. In this editorial we outline the contemporary politics of gendered protection and the possibilities for 'acting sovereign', as well as introducing a series of workshops convened in order to explore possibilities for alliances and interventions around these themes. The 'Gender, Violence, Protection' workshops developed important understandings around the politics of speaking and listening, of alliance-building and creating safe spaces, grounded in Indigenous sovereignties and the (im)possible challenges of co-existence and conversation in contexts of colonial violence justified as 'protection'.

In recent years, a number of studies of sovereignty have linked its governmental practices to the reassertion of white Australian nationalism. In her discussion of the consolidation of white Australian sovereignty, for example, Suvendrini Perera states that the Australian state embraces 'crisis as an opportunity for asserting itself on multiple fronts, and for renewing and expanding a sense of racial mission at home and abroad' (2007: 126). In Australia, she argues, 'state projects of maintaining security, peacekeeping, nation building and aid in the region in turn reflect back on and reinforce an ongoing internal project of enacting or reasserting colonial sovereignty over Indigenous bodies and lands' (2007: 126). Aileen Moreton Robinson (2006: 389) has recently suggested that one of the challenges for Indigenous

politics in Australia is to extend an understanding of the terrain of sovereignty in Australia as relations of force in a war of races normalized through biopower, contributing to an understanding of how Indigenous sovereignty and its disavowal have shaped Australian nationalism. The arguments that these scholars make indicate the necessity of articulating sovereignty in relation to contemporary colonial and racial politics in Australia.

In the case of the current Australian government's announcement to extend its Intervention in remote Aboriginal communities for another three years, sovereignty appears to have been consolidated through the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act in the Northern Territory. But this sovereignty was justified at the end of the regime of conservative Prime Minister John Howard through protectionist discourses in relation to Indigenous women and children based on the reports about child sexual abuse and domestic violence contained in the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Anderson and Wild 2007). Nicole Watson (2009), in this special issue, suggests that while there is genuine need for programs which will address issues of child sexual abuse or domestic violence, the Intervention's methods and its blanket approach have, in fact, been detrimental to many of the Indigenous communities targeted by this response. Indeed, while the Report's recommendation was for consultation with communities affected and opportunities for Indigenous control of response strategies, the Federal governments' response began with the deployment of military personnel and has continued to sideline existing and proposed community-led programs to combat violence against Indigenous women and children. Irene Watson (2005) has written eloquently on the manner in which a protectionist agenda in relation to Indigenous women and children is an illusion which effects entrapment for Indigenous communities and a feeling 'of being hunted in a confined space' where she fears the 'loss of voice'. 'The image of a black woman in need of rescue, Watson argues, 'works to contradict the call to freedom and self-determination of women, children and men (the entire community)' (2005: 26). Protectionist discourses of saving Australian Muslim women have also been used to target and often discriminate against Muslim communities in the context of the post-September 11 declaration of the 'war on terror.' In the context of reading this gendered strategy against Muslim communities, Chris Ho (2007) has suggested that the portrayal of Muslim men as inherently misogynistic allowed the Howard regime to draw a link between Muslim 'backwardness' and global terrorism. Both Ho and Watson suggest a politics of neoliberal governmentality and control which underpin gendered protectionist discourses in relation to Indigenous and Muslim communities.

For Indigenous and Muslim women, therefore, there is an urgency to an intervention of voicing concerns against protectionism, and reclaiming the politics of self-determination and gender struggle against a possessive patriarchal language of 'our' or 'their' women. This voicing of concern is also an intervention in the politics of sovereignty as articulated through a white Australian nationalism.

Contributions to this special issue arise out of a series of workshops which attempted to enable a space where Indigenous and Muslim women academics and community members could articulate the effects of protectionist discourses of white nationalism. What is innovative about this articulation is that it travelled across the conventional borders of 'Indigenous' and 'Muslim' communities. The dialogues that emerged from the workshops, we would argue, illustrated a politics of 'acting sovereign'. If the Australian government has engaged in 'acting sovereign' within Australia and across the Asia-Pacific region, as Suvendrini Perera (2007) points out in the introduction to *Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty Post-2001*, 'acting sovereign' can also be a descriptor of engaging with the deployments of the violence of sovereign power. Or as Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat state, 'The "secret" of sovereignty seems, in other words, still to be defined in the tension between the will to arbitrary violence and the existence of bodies that can be killed but also can resist sovereign power, if nothing else by the mere fact of the simple life force they contain' (2005: 13). Although this formulation of sovereignty echoes Foucault's notion of resistance operating along the seams of power, Hansen and Stepputat draw on a Bataillan notion of the 'embeddedness of sovereignty in the body' (2005: 13). For Bataille, Hansen and Stepputat argue, sovereignty may be 'articulated in attitudes or acts, beyond the realm of utility or calculation' (2005: 13). While a comprehensive discussion of Bataille's notion of sovereignty is beyond the scope of these introductory remarks, it is relevant to the politics of 'acting sovereign' in the face of deployments of sovereign power through protectionist discourses. Acts of speaking, interviewing, listening, and engaging in the politics of alliances, all these, we would argue, constitute that alternate articulation of sovereignty beyond calculations which reference the frame of white sovereignty (Watson 2007; Moreton-Robinson 2007; Perera 2007). Not calculable, but useful and necessary, acting sovereign intervenes in the detrimental discourses of white Australian sovereignty especially as it has targeted Indigenous and Muslim communities.

Workshopping 'gender, violence and protection'

In the context of the Intervention in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities and the ongoing public debates around 'oppressed' Muslim women, the imperative of challenging the discourse of paternalistic 'protection' sparked animated discussion and emerged as a pressing and potentially productive point of conversation between Indigenous and Muslim Australian women in the initial consultations for the project which culminates in this volume. We therefore chose 'Gender, Violence and Protection.' as the central theme for a series of interlinked workshops which were held in 2008. The need for shared conversations and expanding networks of solidarity against gendered protectionism had earlier been identified as a priority goal at two conferences held in late 2006 and organized by the editors (see Dreher 2009 and Osuri 2009 in this volume). The background, organisation and outcomes of the 'Gender, Violence and

Protection' workshops are introduced briefly here, and discussed further in the papers which follow (see in particular the final paper 'Reflections and Insights' (Stanton et al 2009) and papers by Hussein and Imtoul, Osuri and Dreher).

While we — Goldie Osuri, Tanja Dreher and Elaine Laforteza — took on the practical work of convening workshops (organising, managing communications and seeking funding), we sought direction from an Advisory Group — Sue Stanton, Nicole Watson, Shakira Hussein and Alia Imtoul — with experience in issues and activism among Indigenous and Muslim Australian women. We were aware and reminded of the many pitfalls for such a project, and each person involved in the organisation asked themselves, 'what is my place here?' For many, the question became, 'How can I listen, learn and form solidarities?' With the advisory group we discussed whether the workshops should be 'public' or 'closed', how to ensure that the project was not dominated by non-Indigenous and non-Muslim academics, who should facilitate the discussions, etc. Ultimately, participants were invited through the organisers' and advisory group's existing networks and chosen for their relevance to the issues discussed.

This strategy involved an uneasy balancing act between the pitfalls of an essentialising identity politics on the one hand, which might suggest that *only* women who identify as Indigenous or as Muslim or as both should be involved, and on the other hand the risk of tokenism in a conversation conducted primarily among people who identify as neither. To address this challenge, invitations were extended to organisations and individuals who work to contest the workings of gendered protectionism in academia, advocacy and activism with a strong emphasis on ensuring maximum levels of participation by women who identify as Indigenous and/or Muslim. Nevertheless, as discussed in detail in the final paper (Stanton et al 2009) in this special edition, the project did not fully avoid either dilemma. There were moments in which participants felt the expectation to speak 'on behalf of' an identity or community, and also other moments where participants felt that others in the room were inappropriately representing 'their community'. The point of connection that worked most productively was not a monolithic or homogenized category of 'gender' or 'women', Indigenous or Muslim, but rather resonances across shared political commitments in the face of gendered protectionism.

The workshops were successful in enabling participation across a range of identifications and academic contexts. Over the course of three workshops the discussions included, at various times, participants who work in diverse roles in many universities (Australian National University, Charles Darwin University, Flinders University, Macquarie University, University of Sydney, University of Technology Sydney, University of Western Sydney, University of Wollongong) and community and activist organisations (Muslim Women's National

Network of Australia, National Indigenous Youth Movement of Australia, Women for Wik) as well as artists and media practitioners working with blogs, theatre, film, radio, and community newspapers. While the workshops attracted a broad diversity of participants — Indigenous and non-Indigenous, Muslim and non-Muslim, lawyers, doctors, former police, activists and teachers — the project was less successful in engaging participants working beyond the academic environment in community and activist organisations. Quite likely, people invited through community groups asked themselves: ‘what does that have to do with me?’ or ‘what can they do for our aims?’

The workshops were kept small (10-20 people) to create an intimate setting that was distinct from a formal conference space. Members of the Advisory Group acted as facilitators. Each workshop began with an explanation from us as convenors explaining the aim of creating safe spaces and our intention to listen for suggestions rather than to direct the discussions or the project. A number of key questions were posed in the invitation and the agenda at each meeting:

- How can we challenge the hijacking of the language of women’s rights and self-determination which structure racially discriminatory policies?
- How can we support community-developed initiatives rather than imposed, paternalistic ‘protection’?
- How might we develop solidarities across different experiences of oppression?

All participants were asked to locate themselves within the concerns of the project during introductions. On some occasions, suggested readings or notes from previous meetings were circulated. The topics nominated for each of the meetings were decided in discussions between and with the advisory group. We took notes at each session which were later typed up, then circulated among the advisory group and participants.

The first workshop focused on issues around the Northern Territory Intervention. These included the commercial opportunities of the Intervention for the government and businesses and the continued stereotyping of Indigenous people as needing externally-imposed ‘protection’ and ‘development’. Overlapping concerns between Indigenous and Muslim communities were also discussed and here demands for ‘authenticity’ and gendered discourses of protection were a major point of connection. Strategies were raised, which included creating broader dialogue and networks within and beyond Indigenous communities through media platforms. Further, it was suggested that it is very important to document and publicise strategies and programs that *do* work as a way to create such dialogue and shift the agenda focused obsessively on Indigenous ‘problems’. The challenge, a participant suggested, is to ask what genuine protection could be, who it is for and what motivates the drive for protecting. Coinciding with the

week of the federal government's National Apology to the Stolen generations, this workshop also asked: What can be done to ensure that Rudd's apology does not silence the call to stop ongoing colonising practices?

The second workshop focused on the law. A salient point was how law functioned in terms of development. Development implies that there is a standard to be reached, thus a hierarchy of development (in)forms law. In terms of Australian law, whiteness, as white race privilege, was marked as the basis of law's right to make (il)legitimate certain issues, people, etc. In this context, law, development and whiteness intersect to create a praxis of knowledge-power that constituted the ways in which the sovereign rights of people were legally acknowledged or not. Further, the role of the police/policing was examined, posing the question, is the police role to protect the state and its interests? For instance, this workshop discussed the way that protection sometimes occurs in the name of (cultural) sensitivity. There is a need to intervene because there is inequality or discrimination, but that also becomes the reason why communities are disciplined and surveilled. What then is being protected?

The third workshop analysed the role of media in facilitating and/or resisting protectionist/development discourses. The pressures faced by community media were identified, including the lack of autonomy within communities vis-à-vis a lack of external presence/publicity. The pressure to acquiesce to dominant media platforms was also discussed, prompting questions such as: How do we engage with the complexity of communities without feeding into racism? How can solidarities be formed across different ethnic groups, not just between minority and majority groups? These questions went beyond the media themed workshop and permeated the final public forum.

In October 2008 a public forum was held which aimed to take the issues raised in the semi-closed workshops to a wider audience. In answer to the question posed previously, the inclusion of artists demonstrated how the arts were able to speak across a variety of areas. Forum attendees included previous workshop participants, as well as presentations from Immigrant Women's Speakout, Bankstown Youth Development Services, Reclaim the Night, and Urban Theatre Projects. The forum began with short presentations by the Advisory Board, which raised issues covered in the workshops. Paula Abood (activist and community worker) also launched her blog, *Race and the City* (see Abood 2009 in this volume and <http://raceandthecity.com/>). Discussion followed wherein a participant suggested that academia was 'obsessed' with a 'whiteness' that had 'nothing to do' with the issues the forum raised. In response, some said that examining whiteness did not intend to homogenise white people, but rather sought to challenge how whiteness (in)forms life. Others suggested that such a comment deployed a reductive distinction between academia and the 'real world' and used an anti-intellectual prejudice

to erase the recognition of how whiteness (in)forms gendered and protectionist discourses.

The panel discussion was followed by small group conversations to further engage the issues raised, and specifically the need to understand our own racisms. This prompted the question: How can we speak about this without being chastised? Chastisement was seen to stem from the divides between people and from the hijacking of language in the name of protection wherein the right to speak on one's terms and own spaces is destroyed. The forum ended with a hope that the project might continue to recover such spaces so that uncovering racial and gendered privileges/power won't be dismissed as outside 'real' life, but can be acknowledged as an indelible, and accountable part of it. Overall the workshops allowed for links to be made amongst people who constantly fought or were forced into fighting for their place/position within Australia. The rights of being/belonging, speaking and being heard were at stake.

Interventions in the politics of gendered protectionism

In the ethos of 'acting sovereign', Nicole Watson makes an innovative contribution to this special issue by shifting the parameters of the debate in relation to the Intervention in the Northern Territory. She examines the manner in which the devaluation, even criminalisation of Indigenous property rights which occurred through the policies enacted by the Intervention, relies on a privileging of individual property rights and the intensified discourses of home ownership and renovation in Australia in recent years. Such an examination illustrates the biopolitical paradigm of fostering and validating an assimilationist ideal of middle-class success in relation to individual property rights and home ownership while associating criminality (child sexual abuse and domestic violence) with the collective property rights associated with Indigenous peoples. As Watson argues, while there is a genuine need for programs addressing the concerns of child sexual abuse or domestic violence as outlined in the recommendations of *The Little Children are Sacred Report* (Anderson and Wild 2007), the draconian measures of the Intervention have effectively targeted Indigenous property rights in a racially discriminatory manner.

In an invited paper, Irene Watson traces this targeting of Indigenous property rights through colonial demonization of Indigenous peoples to its contemporary manifestations where 'the idea that collective land ownership contributes to the vulnerability of Aboriginal women . . . is actually pretty absurd' (2009). Yet, the Intervention has meant loss of control over land, income and consequently the very bodies of Indigenous peoples in the Northern Territory. And, as Watson points out, 'All evidence instead reveals poorly resourced Aboriginal communities and this deprivation increased during the decade of the Howard government' (2009). The discussion of the validation of individual property rights over collective property rights which

criminalises or attempts to erase Indigenous sovereignty in the essays by Nicole Watson (2009) and Irene Watson (2009) therefore intervenes in the politics of protectionism, and highlights the historical and contextual ways in which there has been an attempted erasure and devaluation of Indigenous sovereignty.

In this context of the continual disavowal of Indigenous sovereignty, a politics of asserting Indigenous sovereignty becomes (im)possible and absolutely necessary. Yet of the issue of co-existence with Indigenous sovereignty also needs to be theorized in a multi-ethnic nation. Goldie Osuri's paper, '(Im)possible Co-existence', begins with the observation that contemporary work on Indigenous sovereignty rarely engages with the concept of co-existence. Drawing on Derrida's analysis of sovereignty and the impossible, the paper examines the seeming impossibility of Indigenous sovereignty and co-existence in present-day Australia as the point at which we might develop new possibilities. Osuri offers a critical engagement with the work of the 'Gender, Violence, Protection' project as an example of negotiating protocols for conversation, alliance and action that contribute to the possibilities for co-existence in the context of Indigenous sovereignty.

The possibilities and dilemmas of alliance are further taken up in 'A fraught search for political common ground' by Shakira Hussein and Alia Imtoul. Here the authors analyse their own experiences and observations of various attempts at alliance-building involving Muslim women in the context of the 'war on terror'. Hussein and Imtoul unpack the very different dynamics in play when Muslim Australians negotiate alliances with 'the Left' or with mainstream white feminists, as opposed to the less prevalent attempts to build alliances with Indigenous Australians and/or with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender activists and communities. While interactions with the Left may be fraught with dangers of appropriation and a tendency to focus on the 'external' threat of racism to the potential exclusion of addressing tensions and hierarchies 'internal' to the community, the growing interest in Indigenous Muslim connections has not adequately grappled with Indigenous sovereignty and differential locations within Australian colonial relations.

While taking account of Indigenous sovereignty means building alliances with Indigenous peoples in responding to the terms and assertions of white nationalism, these alliances do not operate in an egalitarian space as Tanja Dreher (2009) points out in her essay, 'Eavesdropping with Permission'. Taking account of the uneven ways in which 'alliances' have often recentered white subjects, Dreher explores the possibilities of making alliances with Muslim and Indigenous women through 'listening' as political praxis. Listening as political praxis, as Dreher discusses it, illustrates the challenges of decentering a white subject position without disengaging with the responsibility of a progressive feminist, anti-racist politics.

Elaine Laforteza asks the crucial question, 'what constitutes a safe speaking space?' in her invited essay, 'Speaking into safety'. Laforteza reflects on her own teaching experiences and the ways in which she is read and positioned as 'Asian' in the classroom, as Anglo students respond defensively to conversations experienced as a threat to their naturalized possessive investment in a centralized speaking position. Speech alone cannot guarantee safety, in Laforteza's account, rather a safe space requires complex, power-sensitive and self-reflexive interplay of speaking and listening.

Paula Abood's paper introduces *Race and the City*, a blog which seeks to intervene in wider public debates, taking the concerns which underpinned the workshops on gendered protectionism into cyberspace. Abood critically examines how cultures of silence are cultivated by focusing on specific political agendas and events facilitated through media networks. She engages with the politics of inclusion and exclusion that frames these cultures and points to the fact that what is talked about sits alongside what is left unsaid. Abood argues that race occupies this space of what is unsaid, or unsayable, therefore, she calls for critical engagements with race in order to speak back and beyond the cultures of silence that seek to erase it.

The final paper is based on an interview conducted with Sue Stanton, Nicole Watson, Alia Imtoul and Shakira Hussein (the project advisory group) by Goldie Osuri, directly following the final public forum of the workshop series. Here the speakers reflect on the workshop process and what was and wasn't achieved. The discussion highlights both commonalities and differences that emerged – including 'rescue missions' aimed at Indigenous and Muslim women, the constant struggles around who will 'represent' communities and the ways in which media and politicians 'appoint' community leaders, the difficulties of confronting whiteness without being read as 'reverse racism', the very different experiences of both historical and contemporary colonialism. These complex issues could be explored, the speakers suggest, because of the commitment to 'safe speaking spaces' which underpinned the workshops. This edition of *borderlands* brings those discussions into the wider public domain, acting sovereign in the face of gendered protectionism.

Goldie Osuri teaches in the Department of Media, Music and Critical and Cultural Studies, Macquarie University, Australia. Her current research projects include studies of sovereignties and nationalisms in Australia and India.

Tanja Dreher is an ARC Postdoctoral Fellow in the Transforming Cultures Research Centre at the University of Technology, Sydney. Tanja's research focuses on the politics of listening in the context of media and multiculturalism, and of racism and antiracism after September 11, 2001.

Elaine Laforteza is a PhD candidate, researcher and teacher in Media, Music and Cultural Studies at the Faculty of Arts, Macquarie University. Her research interests include: critical race and whiteness studies, migration and diaspora studies, and critical and cultural theory. An active member of the Philippine-Australian community, Elaine has written for the newspaper The Philippine Community Herald for eight years. She has also received a Global Filipino Youth Award in Academia/Education in 2008.

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