

## Māori Sovereignty or Death

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### **Abstract**

In her 1984 book 'Māori Sovereignty', Donna Awatere sustains a blistering polemic on 'white culture' that still retains its rhetorical force 40 years later. Her construction of a sharply delineated binary between a monolithic notion of 'white culture' as against 'taha Māori' can come at the cost of simplification. But this is not at all to say that Awatere is wrong when she says it is 'Māori Sovereignty or death'. In this paper, we extend Awatere's work by analysing relationships between colonialism and capital. We begin by situating Awatere's work in its historical context, outlining major shifts in the global political economy, and drawing on Awatere's analysis of Fascism to account for contemporary Far Right movements. Building from the inextricability of Fascism from the settler colonial/imperialist economy, we explore Awatere's framing of whiteness as a system of racial exploitation and violence that enforces the state's genocidal claims to sovereignty, defined through necropower – capitalism's consumption of racialised death. We then consider the contradictions between capitalism and constitutional transformation. By scanning revolutionary movements elsewhere (in particular the Chilean movement for plurinationalism), we identify the need for extra-parliamentary, broad-based, popular power and constituent authority from below, as well as Indigenous solidarities and international alliances to circumvent anti-Māori populism and confront capital. In reflecting on the power of death, and the need for counter-hegemonic culture capable of securing the transition out of capitalism, we are drawn to the revolutionary essence of whakapapa as an Indigenous ontology that eternally resists necropower.

**Keywords:** Māori sovereignty, necropolitics, Fascism, white supremacy, transnational capital, constitutional transformation

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## **Introduction**

Last year in February, thousands of protestors gathered on parliament grounds in Wellington opposing the New Zealand Government's COVID-19 response. In the sea of morbid effigies, pro-Trump signs, and Far Right conspiracy propaganda, Māori independence flags billowed incoherently. Tribal leaders asked protestors to go home (McConnell & Metekingi, 2022) and stalwart Māori radicals including Tame Iti and Hone Harawira publicly denounced the event. The occupation descended into violence 23 days later, when hundreds of police moved in to forcibly clear the site. Protestors improvised weapons, hurled cobblestones, and set multiple fires, while police used fire hoses, long-range acoustic devices, pepper spray, and sponge bullets against the occupiers. Eighty-seven arrests were made, and 40 police were reportedly injured. The unprecedented parliament protest, along with recent escalations in hate-based violence (Foon, 2020) demonstrate that 40 years on from its drafting, Donna Awatere's *Māori Sovereignty* is now more relevant than ever.

Since the publication of Awatere's seminal text, neoliberalism has intensified capitalism's internal contradictions, fueling global crises of constitutional legitimacy along with para-state, counter-revolutionary violence. At the same time, the professionalisation of social movements, and police militarisation have all but eliminated revolutionary organising. Awatere's analyses of whiteness, ideologies of domination, violence, and the Māori sovereignty movement remain necessary to make sense of the contemporary conjuncture and are only more urgent in 2023 than when first published in 1984.

## **'Māori Sovereignty' 40 years on**

Donna Awatere wrote *Māori Sovereignty* while nursing a painful eye injury, sustained in an attack outside her home by white supremacists opposed to the anti-Springbok Tour protests Awatere had led (Awatere Huata, 2022). Through years of struggle, Awatere had gained deep insight into Māori oppression and radical organising. Awatere and her generation of Māori sovereignty activists had made history, placing Treaty and racial justice squarely on the national agenda, and forcing the state to shift its approach to colonialism.

The seeds of this activism were planted in the wake of the Second World War. Awatere described the impetus to join Ngā Tamatoa as watching



her father's generation, which had paid 'the price of citizenship' in battle, face racism and continued land theft on their return from war (Awatere Huata, 2022). These humiliations, and the discrimination experienced by urbanised Māori in housing, healthcare, education, and employment (Awatere, 1984) contradicted the supposed harmonious race relations central to the state's Treaty exceptionalism narrative, cultivated in response to the global decolonisation movement. Ngā Tamatoa successfully raised national consciousness of these and other issues, with catch cries that included 'Not one more acre', and 'The Treaty is a fraud' (later, 'Honour the Treaty').

Despite the successes of Donna Awatere and her contemporaries, many of the injustices identified in 'Māori Sovereignty' have intensified since the text's publication. The neoliberal restructuring of the global economy constituted a 'war on the poor' that saw the massive transfer of wealth from public to corporate ownership (Robinson, 2022), and reduced the social safety net in core capitalist nations to a tightrope. Just as Awatere had identified earlier, Māori continued to "absorb the worst of economic conditions".

The assimilation of every country into a globally integrated economic system and the flow of capital upwards created a transnational capitalist class so bloated that states have little power to refuse their dictates (Robinson, 2022). This has led, however, to a crisis of overaccumulation, as there is nowhere left to invest. Put simply, there isn't enough wealth left to steal to keep the wheel of capitalism turning.

The temporary fix of financialisation (skimming surplus value generated by workers as capital is circulated, often by gambling in the fictitious economy) collapsed spectacularly in 2008. Yet, in the intervening years, speculation only increased. State bailouts are reinvested into the fictitious economy, exacerbating the crisis of overaccumulation, and sending us into dangerous new territory (Robinson, 2022). The spinning top of capitalism has flown off the kitchen table, into the unknown.

The necrotizing global economy and compounding environmental devastation wrought by the insatiable appetites of capitalism threaten not only livelihoods but the ability of our planet to support human life itself, resulting in widespread social unrest. States have turned to more violent and invasive forms of repression: ramping up digital surveillance technologies, police militarisation, and mass incarceration (Robinson, 2020). Far Right movements have muddied public perceptions of the crises,

implicating those already most exploited under capitalism both within states and externally, e.g., scapegoating racialised minorities and advocating war, and spreading conspiracy theories including those centred on climate change denial. Many here are grappling to understand the increasing visibility of Far-Right movements despite Awatere laying New Zealand's Fascistic tendencies bare four decades ago.

**“Ordinary white New Zealanders” (Awatere, 1984, p. 19)**

In the aftermath of the Christchurch Mosque shootings, popular denials of societal culpability in white supremacist terrorism appealed to external causality – most explicitly in the refrain ‘This isn't us’. In the intervening years – despite mounting evidence of increasing incidents of hate speech, online harassment, and hate-motivated violence – media accounts continue to attribute the popularity of Far-Right movements to causes outside New Zealand: Donald Trump's US presidency, political polarisation caused by social media, and the influence of global Far Right and conspiracy movements. Yet, for Awatere (1984), “New Zealand has always had two of the cornerstones of Fascist ideology” (p. 13), which she identifies as white hatred and separate development.

Aimé Césaire (2000) similarly diagnosed the Fascism of all colonial projects, writing in 1950 that before Europeans were the victims of Nazism, “they were its accomplices”, that Europeans tolerated and turned a blind eye to Nazism, “because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples” (p. 36). Thus, Fascism did not arise in Europe in the interwar period when the term was coined; Nazi Germany was a continuation of settler colonialism, directly inspired by the US: a nation built on genocidal expansion and “widely understood to be at the cutting edge of racist and eugenicist statecraft when it came to immigration, second-class citizenship and miscegenation” (Rockhill, 2020, para. 5).

Awatere's focus on ‘separate development’ exposes statecraft that reproduces structural racism through systems (plural) of governance differentially applied across geographies and population sectors. As Hage (2017) explains, racism operates through a separate “governmentality directed at subjects whose lives are constructed as less valuable in themselves, and against whom more repressive and violent forms of subjugation can be deployed with less difficulty” (p. 52). Multiple state agencies as well as civil society are mobilised to govern minoritised



populations (Rockhill, 2020). As Awatere (1984) describes, “White rule is imposed daily by force, by the police and the courts, as well as through ideas, by the church, the media and education” (p. 29). While some sectors of the population experience liberal democracy, minoritised groups may simultaneously experience the same state as Fascistic.

After years of direct experience with the violent white supremacist US police state, George Jackson (1972) identified that liberalism and Fascism are by no means antagonistic, but simply two sides of the same capitalist coin. The pro-capitalist ‘line of adjacency’ between liberalism and Fascism (see Shaw, 2020) is referenced by Awatere when she states, “The philosophies of democracy and liberalism are used to justify white supremacy and separate development in this country”. These appeals to liberal democratic principles such as egalitarianism are performed as oppositional to Fascism (often in the form of innocence or outrage) but fail to challenge exploitative capitalist social relations, allowing “many whites [to] indignantly dissociate themselves from [Fascists], at the same time, still enjoying the benefits which those philosophies created for them.” This complicity means one only has to ‘scratch the surface’ to reveal ready Fascists in “ordinary white New Zealanders” (Awatere, 1984, p. 19).

### **‘The glorious white way of life’**

Awatere (1984) avoids biological determinism, stating “White blood is not the problem. White culture is the problem.” (p. 86). Anyone can be co-opted into the project of whiteness, including Māori, who live in close proximity to colonisers and experience “white ‘superiority’ in daily doses” (p. 87). Romanticised notions of white (or Pākehā) culture trace its emergence to relations with Māori. Yet, Awatere (1984) is clear that white culture in New Zealand was formed in opposition to Māori. She describes how different white groups united to “fight the good fight against the wicked Māori who refused to give up any more land” (p. 11). Ethnic differences between these white groups were “sublimated to the greater racial demand for white ownership and white power” (Awatere, 1984, p. 11). Elsewhere in the text, white culture is described as ‘millennial’, revealing how Awatere’s conception of ‘white culture’ explains the specific white identity that emerged in New Zealand. She links this identity to the sweeping tradition of ‘glorious’ conquest and domination – tracing back to the Middle Ages – that operated

through ‘logics’ of social hierarchy pre-existing and including racial capitalism (defined further in relation to sovereignty in the next section).

The genesis of white culture is glorified in ideologies of the Far Right and Fascists in settler states who “desire the collective rebirth of a white homeland within a project of settler-colonialism that they perceive, incorrectly, to have failed” (Shaw, 2020, p. 11). While Fascism can be distinguished by its desire for a strong state, a defining feature of all Far Right movements is para-state violence. If the governing party is viewed to be advancing white-settlerism, Far Right violence takes the form of state-loyal militias and vigilantism (Shaw, 2020). One such example is Kyle Rittenhouse who fatally shot two men and injured a third at a protest against racist police violence in Kenosha, Wisconsin. If, however, the ruling party is seen as unsympathetic to their cause, Far Right violence tends to take the form of state-oppositional accelerationism or insurrection, for example, the January 6th storming of the US capitol, the ‘Freedom’ convoy in Canada, and the parliament protest in New Zealand.

These global insurrections are related, yet none can be attributed externally. The conditions that give rise to Far-Right violence are foundational to each of these settler colonies, both ideologically (discussed in the next section) and economically as capitalism’s declining rate of profit requires continued ecological exploitation and colonial domination (Hage, 2017). George Jackson (1972) describes how Fascism arises ‘by default’ during times of severe economic hardship as international capitalism’s response to socialism. That is, when the privileges and social safety offered under a liberal democracy begin to erode, the labouring masses can no longer be ruled by consent and seek socialist alternatives, prompting the capitalist class to push for authoritarian rule and more violent forms of class repression (Rockhill, 2020). Thus, Fascism can be understood as “nothing more than the final solution to the class struggle” (Parenti, 2017, p. 17), or as Césaire (2000) put it, “[a]t the end of capitalism, which is eager to outlive its day, there is Hitler” (p. 37).

### **Genocidal claims to sovereignty**

*“The white line up fingers its weapons. Yet again. Ready to do violence.”* (Awatere, 1984, p. 32)



The conversation around white violence is inherently tied to white culture as a critical basis for Western imperialism. In engaging with Awatere's notion of white culture from an anti-capitalist position, we were reminded of critiques of cultural nationalism from revolutionary Black, Indigenous and Third World Marxists (e.g., Newton & Newton, 2014; Ofari, 1970; Sivanandan, 1990). Such critiques draw our revolutionary focus back to capitalism as driving the materialist conditions of colonial extraction and exploitation, as opposed to superficial understandings of culture, which posit it as the ultimate source of oppression and liberation. This provided a tension for us in engaging with 'Māori Sovereignty' as built upon the theoretical framework of white culture (and Māori culture as its revolutionary antithesis), questioning the role of capitalism and dialectical struggle within Awatere's arguments.

However, culture in the context of Māori sovereignty is indivisible from these materialist conditions, describing the boundary of the Western capitalist culture as the heritage/continued violence of settler colonialism. As Sivanandan (2000) wrote at a similar time on the economic reductionism of many white Marxists in the First World, ignoring the cultural manifestations of racism as essential functions of capitalist exploitation is futile within the context of revolution. "It must envisage, that is, a fundamental change in the concepts of man and society contained in white culture – it must envisage a revolutionary culture" (Sivanandan, 2000, p. 78). *Māori Sovereignty* grapples with the possibility of such a revolutionary culture in the context of Māori anti-colonial struggle against the settler capitalist state.

Echoing the calls of Haunani-Kay Trask for cultural people to become political (Center for Hegemony Studies, 2010), Awatere wrote of the ways in which 'taha Māori' is deliberately reduced into forms that are culturally palatable for and able to be commodified by the settler state – haka, carving, etcetera. This is not to undermine the revolutionary potential of our arts within te ao Māori but highlights how Māori culture is insidiously distorted, gatekept, and co-opted (see Ngata, 2023) by the settler colonial project to reduce our revolutionary potential as a whole. Similarly, Awatere's work builds across the contexts of Third World anti-imperialist struggles and how these lessons may apply to the struggle of Māori against white violence in the form of settler colonial capitalism and its assimilatory effects.

The theory of white culture, as developed throughout the text, speaks to Sivanandan's dialogue around racism as being determined economically

but defined culturally. White culture, through Awatere's writing, is a systematised form of white violence embedded within the political and material power of the settler state, which assumes white supremacy and therefore imperialism that enact militarised-carceral violence. White cultural imperialism and white violence are interlocking with the legal construction of the state's illegitimate and genocidal claims to sovereignty. Sovereignty as white imperial authority stands in total contradiction to Māori sovereignty. And it is this contradiction in sovereignty discourse that we aim to explore here, shifting us towards a liberatory framework of restoration in conversation with Awatere's text.

The notion of sovereignty plays a fundamental role in Foucault's (2003) theory of biopolitics; the state's exceptional power in 'making life and letting die'. Sovereignty is, therefore, intertwined with the fundamental dynamics of settler colonialism as a genocidal process – in which Indigenous communities are perpetually dispossessed by the accumulative power of whiteness. As both a critique and extension of Foucault, Achille Mbembe (2003) positions sovereignty as a necropolitical construct, defining life and therefore sovereignty's limits through the politics of death. The settler state's power is, therefore, enacted through and grounded upon the right to kill and, more importantly, who must be killed for necropolitical power to survive resistance.

The deployment of white imperial sovereignty leads to the creation of death worlds; new forms of social existence in which precarious communities are subject to social death through the violent process of racialization, subjugation, and systematic oppression. Through histories of genocide and assimilation, Mbembe (2003) writes that the settler colony provides the primordial "syntheses between massacre and bureaucracy, that incarnation of Western rationality" (p. 23).

The settler-occupation renders and compartmentalizes space into an ongoing project of militarisation, terror, and death –colonised peoples, therefore, are perpetually incarcerated by and within. Through violent claims to sovereignty, the colony creates both the law and its exception, enabling the settler state to kill Indigenous lives with impunity. Indigenous death is therefore an ongoing and necessary means of maintaining the settler colonial state.

While the contemporary means of state killing are less explicit, 'invisible' death remains a critical part of this project, enabling claims of impunity and the justification of settler colonialism as a whole. As Ruth





Wilson Gilmore (2007) powerfully claims: racism is “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death” (p. 247). Ultimately, sovereignty as a white imperial authority places Indigenous communities in a constant state of necropolitical precarity – or closer proximity/prematurity to death – through the morbid and systematized violence of dispossession, poverty, sickness, and incarceration (see Human Rights Commission, 2022). With reference to the current composition of the settler state and its violent denial of Māori Sovereignty, Indigenous advocate Tina Ngata (2023) asserts that “[w]hen we delay constitutional transformation, we are condemning those in te ao Māori to higher death rates and a raft of other social and economic outcomes that would never be acceptable for white populations” (para. 17).

Donna Awatere’s ‘Māori Sovereignty’ speaks to this through the framework of white violence as a system of white supremacy built upon the militarised consumption of Indigenous death. Looking specifically at the current carceral landscape of New Zealand, a system of policing and incarceration built from the militarized violence of land dispossession under the New Zealand Armed Constabulary, where in recent times half of all deaths in Police custody are Māori (IPCA, 2012), it is clear that death continues to build this colonised reality – a reality that Māori prison abolitionist Emmy Rākete spoke to (Snedden, 2022) as follows:

*Last week corrections pumped pepper spray into someone’s cell until they suffocated and died. I went to the tangi of a woman who corrections didn’t let see a doctor until she was vomiting up chunks of her own cancerous stomach. I went to visit someone who was held in solitary confinement for six months, whose forehead had split open because she was banging it on the cell door for weeks... the worst imaginable shit happens in New Zealand’s prisons. (6:39)*

### **Worlds beyond death**

But to ultimately structure the violence of death within the sovereignty of the coloniser fails to recognise mana beyond death within Indigenous resistance – a poetics of abolitionist refusal against the fear of death – a haunting and inevitable overcoming of the coloniser’s necropower. We are reminded of Rewi Maniapoto’s eternal revolt of spirit, a poetics of refusal against surrender at the Battle of Ōrākau, that the fight against colonisation

expands and endures beyond the limits of our physical experience of whakapapa. Ka whawhai tonu mātou, Ake! Ake! Ake!

Taking us back to memory of our cosmological origins – the pūrākau of Māui’s ‘death’ after he vainly attempts to gain immortality for tangata-kind by transgressing Hine-nui-te-pō – we question whether Māui really ‘died’ because, in Ngāhuia Murphy’s ‘Te Awa Atua’ (2013), the tension of the pūrākau is resolved through an agreement in which Hine-nui-te-pō grants Māui immortality, transforming him into regenerative life embodied by ikura, or in other words, whakapapa.

Whakapapa teaches us that our ancestors are reborn through us and we are reborn through our mokopuna, and through the taiao which inevitably survives the apocalypse. In ‘Black Afterlives Matter’, Ruha Benjamin (2018) offers vital reflections on the inextricability of white life and black death to the prison industrial complex, crafting a poetics on Black afterlife as the pathway for abolition and the regeneration of communities based on kinship. “No body ever comes back, perhaps, but spirits and ancestors might” (para. 21).

Through whakapapa, Indigenous ontology haunts and ruptures the very fallacy of white imperial sovereignty, carrying forth not merely the possibility but the inevitability of worlds beyond necropolitics. In Donna Awatere’s (1984) words, “The tension of the land is that the past comes back to disrupt the present. The tipuna never go away” (p. 88).

**“[T]he land which will bring them bread and, above all, dignity” – Frantz Fanon (1963)**

Donna, with shattering prose, sets forth the vision of Māori sovereignty in the first few lines,

*Māori sovereignty is the Māori ability to determine our own destiny and to do so from the basis of our land and fisheries. In essence, Māori sovereignty seeks nothing less than the acknowledgement that New Zealand land is Māori land, and further seeks the return of that land (p. 10).*

When we speak to *Land Back* as decolonisation, we are not speaking to a metaphor but the tangible repatriation of whenua Māori – back into the radical care of Indigenous communities whose ahi kā nurtures and regenerates the whakapapa of the land and its people as one. This shatters



the capitalist framework of land as property, broadening our view to include what Nishanaabe activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2014) refers to as land as pedagogy; knowledge is regenerated through the connections we share through the land and through each other as its descendants.

As Awatere (1984) repeats and repeats, all Māori land must be returned to its people in order for Māori sovereignty and Māori futures to thrive once more. “The goal is to have all time and all space Māori” (p. 101). The interweaving of space and time speaks to Mbembe’s (2003) writing on necropolitics and space as the raw material of sovereignty—ordering our relationship to time as a force of life through the exploitation of capitalism. This notion of Māori space or time is fully embodied in the relational framework of collective being which underpins the text’s dialogue around the fundamental elements of Māoridom, “interweaving and interlocking patterns of human connections, of all skills, knowledge, talent and things belonging to the group and not to the individual” (Awatere, 1984, p. 102)

At its core, Māori sovereignty is a radical challenge to the material conditions which structure the consumption of Indigenous death under capitalism and white imperial sovereignty. It speaks to not only the possibility but the inevitability of worlds beyond the seemingly endless exploitation of Indigenous lands and people. The whakataukī ‘whatungarongaro te tangata, toitū te whenua’ (the people disappear from sight/site but the land remains) is often contextualised within environmental justice kōrero with regards to the eternal being of land against the relatively short continuum of human history. But this does not mean that people die while the land remains, rather, from the ontology of whakapapa – our ancestral existence as tangata is eternally woven within and regenerated through the whenua. And as the existence of our whakapapa, land, histories, and rangatiratanga long predates the settler colonial project, so has it survived – and will long survive the necropolitical project.

### **Contradictions of capital and constitutional transformation**

Returning to the argument for Māori sovereignty, which is now better known as tino rangatiratanga or constitutional transformation, Awatere is undoubtedly correct that constitutional transformation is a logical priority and is the primary instrument perpetuating injustices. Arguments of the type that suggest problems for Māori will be addressed after the revolution

against capitalism should make us immediately wary. Mana motuhake is the fire that has sustained Māori struggle since the beginning of colonisation and the full restoration of that autonomy is paramount.

However, acknowledging this fact does not relieve us from a confrontation with capital because of the structuring primacy of economic relations in shaping social relations. The stakes of this political/economic double bind can be better understood by way of an (albeit inadequate) analogy. The bourgeois revolution in France led to a change in the political form that left the operations of capitalism untouched. In fact, it secured the ongoing accumulation of capital by way of a more adequate political form (Lafrance, 2019). For the working class, it was a shift primarily in the group of elites by whom they were dominated.

More proximal to our case, Walter Rodney (2018) refers to “the shabby reality of neo-colonialism” (p. 319) in relation to political independence without economic independence, or without a complete break from capitalism of post-colonial states. Rodney (2018, 2022) refers to this supposed independence variously as nominal constitutional independence, tokens of constitutional independence, flag independence, indirect rule, the shadow of 'sovereignty, and false decolonization. We might also point to the transformation of iwi into corporate form by way of the treaty settlement process as further evidence of how capitalist forms reproduce themselves as the insidious underside of explicit political processes. If there is no break with capitalism, how much will the Rangatiratanga Sphere end up resembling the dreary bourgeois state?

Recent work by Anselm Jappe et al. (2020) helps us to specify the relationship between the economic and the state-political more tightly, as Toscano (2020) translates from the original French:

*In reality, there exists a polar relation between the economic sphere and a state-political sphere which is its functional subsystem. Capitalism is not only the market, it is the state and market-production (as well as other derived spheres) [...]. States are far more immersed in the world of capital than is suggested by the fetishist vision of the state as a mere instrument. [...] On the one hand, the state is in no way an action of society on itself which is auto-determined and self-grounded, because its conditions of existence and its social capacities totally depend on the drainage it operates in the*



*form of taxes on the economic sphere [...]. On the other hand, states in their historical genesis and the logic of their functioning constitute themselves in the role of 'ideal collective capitalist' [...]. In other words, states take charge of the overall conditions of reproduction of capitalist societies that the competitive logic of the corporate economy cannot, by its very logic, assume. (pp. 16-17).*

Why does this matter for constitutional transformation in Aotearoa? If the state is dependent on capital's future profitability for its own revenue – the so-called 'drainage' it operates on the economic sphere – then its power and legitimacy are also tied to capitalist accumulation. Any perceived threat to future accumulation is thus a threat to the state's power and legitimacy (Toscano, 2020). Take for example Mitterrand's government of 1981 in France. Having won broad support for an ambitious programme of democratisation of the economy and nationalisation of key industries, Mitterrand's government rapidly set about establishing its programme of reform. Although headwinds were manifold, crucial amongst them was the way in which capital was 'spooked' by the reforms causing massive capital flight, effectively tanking the economy (Therborn, 2022). Faced with the concurrent collapse of his party's legitimacy, Mitterrand was forced to undertake a complete U-turn.

It is entirely likely that the possibility of constitutional transformation in Aotearoa will be perceived by capital as a profound threat to the smooth functioning of future accumulation. Capital flight will provide a stick with which to discipline any government which seeks to advance constitutional transformation. This necessitates that any movement for constitutional transformation must be clear about the confrontation with capital this will bring about. The cultural wing of the economic attack will predictably be the increasing virulence of racial solidarity amongst white people: anti-Māori populism. As a result, the movement for constitutional transformation will require wielding a coercive power of some sort to discipline both capital and white supremacists. In Gramscian terms, a new consciousness of national self-determination, a counter-hegemonic culture, will need to be produced, one that is able to secure the transition. This will involve alliances and will necessarily be internationalist. Capital's global scale, its penchant for flight to wherever conditions of exploitation are most favourable, as well as its

ability to discipline states via coercive supranational institutions and withdrawal, necessitate planetary alliances to be built from the ground up.

### **Chilean plurinationalism**

With this in mind, Chile provides both an illustrative example and a potential for solidarity. The Chilean constitution is a relic of the CIA-backed coup that installed the military dictator Augustus Pinochet. The constitution is fundamentally anti-democratic and designed to concentrate power in a few hands and to enshrine the legitimacy of the coup. The coup itself was in the service of the implantation of neoliberal reform, which Pinochet undertook at breakneck speed (Vergara, 2022b). The total exclusion of Chile's Indigenous peoples is also a notable feature of Pinochet's constitution, a feature that has survived subsequent reforms despite the Chilean government paying lip service to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). It is worth noting that Aotearoa (where UNDRIP was reluctantly signed if only as an 'aspirational document') has been referred to as 'Chile without the gun' due to the neoliberal 'coup' within Lange's Labour Party and the comparable rapidity of neoliberal reform here (New Internationalist, 5 November 2000).

In 2019, in Chile, there was a massive explosion of social unrest, one that had been fermenting for over a decade, directed at the state and its anti-democratic constitution, severe inequality, patriarchy and the ongoing theft and destruction of Indigenous lands coupled with the latter's complete political exclusion (Rojas, Brooks & Vila, 2021). A notable feature of the 2019 protests was the ubiquitous presence of Indigenous peoples' flags, in particular the Mapuche wenufloye, expressing the inclusion of Indigenous struggle for political independence – phrased as plurinationalism – with the broader demands of the protests (Aylwin, 2020; Bauer, 2022). Following the state's failed attempts at violent repression of the protests, the then President Pinera was forced to call a plebiscite in which citizens could vote to throw out the Pinochet-era constitution and begin again from scratch. The Chilean people voted overwhelmingly (~80%) in favour of constitutional transformation.

And here is perhaps the first lesson for us. In order to quell the uprising and restore peace following the referendum, the constitutional transformation demanded by the people was begrudgingly accepted but handed over to the existing parliamentary structure to carry out. As the



Chilean lawyer Camila Vergara (2022a) summarised the Constitutional Convention, the entity that was to be tasked with writing the new constitution:

*[It] was intended to constrain rather than channel popular energies. It instituted an antidemocratic two-thirds supermajority rule for passing new constitutional articles and gave establishment parties outsized influence over the drafting process. From the beginning, the constituent process was captured by elites, who intensified their attempts to preserve the status quo. (para. 11).*

Despite this, the constitution that was ultimately produced through this process was undeniably radically transformative and progressive. However, the process itself, by excluding popular input, alienated a large part of its supposed constituency. In addition, the Right had used the process to spread a campaign of disinformation wildly distorting the actual terms of the new constitution. And it is no surprise that it was chiefly fearmongering regarding Indigenous autonomy that the Right leveraged to turn people against it. As the Chilean-American writer, Ariel Dorfman (2022), summarised:

*I also suspect that, though few would openly admit it, a large number of my fellow countrymen and women are uneasy about the emphasis on the autonomy of Indigenous peoples, and the insistence on “plurinationalism” in a land that prides itself on its unity. I remember coming to live in Chile at the age of 12 and being told over and over again that there were no “Indians” in the country, that they had all been assimilated. It may well be that this current attempt to bring those nations, their languages, customs, and culture, out of invisibility was a challenge to what innumerable Chileans felt to be their deepest identity: their European heritage. This is basically an unwillingness to deal with the atrocities of history, and the dispossession of those native Chileans. (para. 4).*

Accompanying the anti-Indigenous sentiment that was leveraged by elites, was that other assault on legitimacy led by capital. Fifty billion dollars had been removed from Chile since the beginning of the constitutional

process (Thomson, 2023). Capitalists have suggested that the erosion of key checks and balances on power is one of the primary reasons for capital flight. This is no small irony given that the constitution they would seek to preserve is the legacy of a coup and a military dictator. The result of the undemocratic process, combined with right-wing control of the media, was that Chileans voted overwhelmingly (≈60%) against the new constitution.

The popular energies that erupted onto the streets in 2019 have not been defeated, however. The Cabildos – public assemblies – that have a long history in Chile and flourished once again in the protests and subsequent constitutional process remain a powerful expression of popular and direct democratic power and imagination. Camila Vergara (2021) succinctly summarises the crucial lesson to be learned for our struggle for Māori sovereignty:

*Given the ways in which the political class are attempting to control the process, and the degree of systemic corruption in the current order, a parallel extra-parliamentary process ‘from below’ appears wholly necessary for achieving a more inclusive and legitimate process, and for holding those elected to account. With no mechanism to force convention members to follow through on their campaign promises, both popular power and authority will be required. Although popular constituent power emerged from the October rebellion and is periodically reasserted by direct action in the streets, constituent authority requires institutions where it can inhabit and sustain itself over time. The authority of people, organized against oligarchic power and the neoliberal order, needs to be constituted within their own inclusive and egalitarian political organs, to channel local popular wisdom towards decision-making. How far this can be achieved remains to be seen.* (para 12).

### **[F]rom the improbable to the highly likely**

As we write these concluding paragraphs, flood waters, silt, and debris still cover low-lying areas of Te Matau-a-Māui, Te Tairāwhiti, Te Tai Tokerau and coastal areas west of Auckland, where souls are known to pass on their way to Te Rerenga Wairua. With road, water, electricity, and communications networks yet to be restored in many areas, the total number of lives lost from





this, the country's most catastrophic weather event in a generation, is as yet unknown. The hardest hit regions – cut off from the rest of the country – are now reporting looting and increases in violence against women and children (RNZ, 2023). The frenetic exploitation of people and the planet is registered in our lived experience of capital's limits: climate catastrophe and pandemic.

A year on from the parliament protest, Far Right and conspiracy groups continue to spread disinformation and hate. In the months following the occupation, additional rallies and national tours were held. A zine identifying the Far-Right actors involved in the parliament protest was published online (Understanding NZ Far Right, 2022), and the Twittersverse was kept abreast of Far Right movements and discourse by the same individual monitors who covered the parliament protest (including Te Rangikaiwhiria Hemara, Sanjana Hattotuwa, Byron Clark, and Kate Hannah). When the (Islamophobic, homophobic, Christian-supremacist) Freedom and Rights Coalition organised an anti-government march to Dunedin's Octagon in July, they were intercepted by a large counter-protest, led by Sina Brown-Davis of AntiFascist Ōtepoti (Oscar & Ryder, 2022). When the same group attempted a "People's Court on parliament steps" the following month, they were met with chants of 'go home' from Pōneke Anti-Fascist Coalition counter-protesters (Stuff, 2022).

While no subsequent Far Right events have attracted support approaching that seen at the parliament protest, the (dis)informational "tectonic shift" caused lasting damage to the social landscape (The Disinformation Project, 2022). COVID-19 protections were largely abandoned by Government (prompting conspiracy networks to shift focus to 'climate cult' denialism), and the ongoing violent and misogynistic threats likely contributed to former Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern's recent decision to resign (see, for example, Taylor, Hannah & Hattotuwa, 2022).

As we slip deeper into economic recession and the effects of climate change become impossible to ignore, white-settler hegemony is rapidly eroding. As Awatere predicted, "[w]hite opposition [to Māori sovereignty] will be largely neutralised by the internal dynamics of the economy" as an inevitable global economic crisis "moves the realisation of Māori sovereignty from the improbable to the highly likely" (p. 35). Only two roads now lie ahead: to the Left, the creation of broad counter-hegemonic culture against capital and white violence, the restoration of whakapapa-based connection to the whenua against the sterility and exclusion of private property, and freedom from the yoke of capitalist social relations; or to the Right, the re-

entrenchment of settler-colonial death worlds through violent, Fascistic class repression.

**“As long as you think you’re white, there’s no hope for you.” – James Baldwin**

Following Gramsci (1971), Awatere showed the reproduction of society as a whole, not just in terms of its material base but also by way of the ideas, such as racialism, to secure its coherence. It is, as Awatere has it, the dynamic reproduction of a ‘way of life’ on a daily basis that gives the terrain for domination and struggle against it.

For Fanon (1963/2004), decolonisation is not simply negative but also involves the creation of new people by way of the national imaginary. Likewise, for Gramsci, it is the notion of the new nation that must be deployed against the Fascist nation. This is one of the ways that it is possible to intervene in common sense to produce counter-hegemonic alliances. Awatere (1984) has this in mind when she states:

*The Māori people offer the Pakeha an opportunity to become part of that hegemonic consciousness, to establish an identity as New Zealanders which must be forged not in opposition to us, but with and for us. A new identity built on Māoriness must be forged. (pp. 29-32).*

**“The new net goes fishing in international water.” (Awatere, 1984, p. 80)**

Awatere recognised the need for allies, yet her analysis of potential alliances was as caustic as it was compelling. In the still (hilariously) true sections on Trade Unions and The Left, Awatere (1984) identifies working-class solidarity as foreclosed by the tendency of whites to “stick together, whatever their class, for the benefits they give each other” (p. 45; see also Du Bois, 1920; Sakai, 2014). Her assessment that multiculturalism is offered to racialised migrants as an inducement to ally with whiteness also remains true. However, 40 years on (and following the neoliberal overhaul of the ‘White New Zealand’ immigration system), the “first generation conservatism” (Awatere, 1984, p. 37) that Awatere observed among racialised migrants has given way to resentment among their progeny, still shut out from the benefits of white settlerism. Indigenous and diaspora communities’ attempts to



assert positive distinctiveness under the assimilative pressure of the white settler state can take Fascist forms, for example, in right-wing fundamentalist religious institutions such as Destiny Church – similar to US mega-churches that espouse prosperity – and Hindutva (see Dutta, 2021). Yet, there is revolutionary potential in Indigenous Pacific and migrant-Māori solidarities (see Asafo, 2022; Fu & Azarmandi, 2023; Tuiono & Dutta, 2019).

Donna Awatere wrote *Māori Sovereignty* at the height of the nuclear-free movement in the Pacific. After four decades, declassified documents are beginning to reveal the strength the movement held to oppose imperialism. As the impacts of climate change and geopolitical tensions escalate, the Pacific Ocean has yet again been designated a 'sacrifice zone'. As Samoan historian Marco de Jong (*Indigenous Pacific Uprising*, 2022) explains:

*I am very concerned, and I think we all should be, that New Zealand and Australia, as America's lieutenants in the Pacific, will use climate change rhetoric to further securitise the region on behalf of the United States, which is going to preclude our own self-determined, regional, collective future and push our nation [New Zealand] closer to war... and we all know there's no winning this war. It will be the complete annihilation of any Pacific future worth saving... We should fight. We have to. The way to our future is to rebuild the regionalism which created this strong vision that really unsettled the United States and points the way towards our collective liberation. (1:01:44).*

De Jong's research reveals how the New Zealand and Australian governments colluded to oppose, co-opt, and undermine the nuclear-free movement in order to preserve their ANZUS security interests (*Indigenous Pacific Uprising*, 2022). Since then, the stranglehold of imperialism on the Pacific Nations has tightened, converting 'paradise' islands to deathscapes (Vltchek, 2016). Awatere (1984) was cognisant that "[d]ecolonisation involves forging international alliances with the radical countries and revolutionary movements of the Third World, breaking the traditional allegiances of white people" (p. 79). Despite the overwhelming odds against such an achievement, we see anti-imperialist, environmentalist, Pacific regionalism as a necessary step towards political and economic independence, due not only to geographic proximity but to our shared wellspring of radical, revolutionary

potential. As Amilcar Cabral (1973) reminds us, “culture is for the people an inexhaustible source of courage, of material and moral support, of physical and psychic energy which enables them to accept sacrifices – even to accomplish ‘miracles’” (p. 53).

Yet, Awatere (1984) also identified the political tendencies of ‘colonial Māori’, for whom “[a]ll cynicism and pain have gone” (p. 83) as they have accepted white culture as normal and seek only “the glow of white approval” (p. 26). As a people, if we are unwilling to mobilise for independence, in defence of our oceans and islands, we are already dead.

### **Mana i te whenua, mana i te moana**

While Donna Awatere’s conception of sovereignty on Māori terms shatters the structure of sovereignty as a white-imperial authority, the system that defines the word itself raises important questions as to our understandings – or grammar – of power beyond colonialism. Understanding the genocidal foundations and operations of white-imperial sovereignty, therefore, challenges us to reject conceptions of power born from the terroristic violence of colonialism. Sovereignty is wholly opposed to current sovereignty. This is the question of form versus content. The aim is not to replace current political elites with Indigenous ones within the same structure of colonial capitalism. It is the question of the complete transformation of the relationship between the leaders and the led, of the sources and expressions of sovereignty from the whenua up. Instead, we ought to define our futures through Indigenous knowledges as the revolutionary antithesis of colonial power, on relational terms. What does it fundamentally mean to be sovereign or to hold the ultimate expression of power beyond mechanisms of accountability? How are our relationships to power currently defined by colonialism and how do we transform ourselves beyond this? How do we remain accountable to/in solidarity with the various communities which make up Te Moana Nui a Kiwa and the wider Ao in our collective struggles for liberation?

### **Every home is a marae. Every piece of ground is our earth mother.**

In conversation with Awatere’s definition of Māori sovereignty as the self-determination born from the whenua, demanding its return, Moana Jackson (2020) spoke to the ethic of restoration as an answer to those challenges laid before us. While decolonisation speaks to the necessity of tearing violent



systems apart, an ethic of restoration speaks to the abolitionist project of reimagining through reconnection. Building the future not only from the present but, through the whakapapa which binds us across space and time, in constant conversation with the past. The questions above draw us back to the core framing of colonial capitalism within ‘Māori Sovereignty’, the structure of whiteness. On the project of abolition, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2018) writes that

*Abolition is not absence; it is presence.... So those who feel in their gut deep anxiety that abolition means knock it all down, scorch the earth and start something new, let that go. Abolition is building the future from the present in all the ways that we can. (para. 2).*

Situating whiteness (or white culture) as a structural project of white-imperial sovereignty as built upon a genocide waged against Indigenous people, calls for the abolition of whiteness as the necessary means for rebuilding radical co-presence. And as Gilmore and Awatere both affirm in their powerful calls to action, the dynamic enterprise of rebuilding and restoring relationships does not speak to futures dislocated from the present. It exists within a whakapapa of resistance that has long fought to regenerate connections to the land, waters, and each other, against all attempts by the state and capital to reduce our communal landscapes to ruins. Whakapapa haunts the colonising project, shaping our Indigenous presence with the reminder that our ancestors have been building futures from the past. Ka whawhai tonu mātou, without beginning, without end.

The final pages of *Māori Sovereignty* speak with dynamic poetry to this ethic of restoration – where restoration is a process of transformation and transformation is a process of return.

*Put both hands through our bodies to rip away the lizard’s claws clinging to our hearts and guts and suffocating our Māori intelligence. To rip away each last vestige of their stench within. And through the pain of this cleansing, to be joined to our tipuna’s beam of light. At last, at one with the pain of the land.*

Grappling with the global scale of transformation can feel overwhelming. But standing at the precipice of ecological and societal

collapse, our oceans rising against us, we have no choice but to fight on, with or without hope, with or (like our tīpuna) without fear of death.

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