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Relations. Indigenous Self-  
Determination, Governance,  
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**BOOK REVIEW**

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**ABSTRACT**

Rauna Kuokkanen is an Indigenous – Sámi – feminist scholar and activist whose book *Restructuring Relations* offers a radically liberating vision of indigenous self-determination that “seeks to restructure all relations of domination.” Such restructuring needs to respond to external oppression, in particular in the form of settler colonialism and extractivist global capitalism, but also to oppression internal to indigenous communities, especially patriarchal gender hierarchies and gender-based violence against women and people who do not conform with heteropatriarchal norms.

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In the last decades, there have been many attempts within International Relations (IR) to rethink the discipline's core concerns and to do so from previously sidelined perspectives. One major contribution comes from feminist scholarship that has de-naturalized the masculinist underpinnings of an allegedly un-gendered world order, including its most important building blocks (states, warfare, international governance and law). Feminist IR scholarship often takes a transnational perspective, brings non-state actors as global influencers to the fore, and is apt to detect structures of gendered exclusion and violence; it is multi-vocal scholarship from many different parts of the world, but dominated by white scholars affiliated with relatively privileged institutions in the Global North. Another influential, de-centering contribution to IR are Indigenous perspectives. Arguably, indigenous scholarship contains the most radical counter position to statehood as an organizing principle of world order, because the existence of settler states has meant attempted (and often successful) eradication of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and modes of governance. For me, as a non-Indigenous immigrant living in the United States, it is astonishing to realize how comprehensively indigeneity has been constructed, in US national historiography, as a feature (or even a "mistake," e.g. in reference of genocidal acts such as the trail of tears) *of the past*. The presence of diverse Indigenous peoples today seems a negligible part of the national collective; and "their" history is not the lens through which one looks at this country. Globally speaking, this is not everywhere the case. In particular in the Canadian national context, indigenous presence has become more publicly recognized, due to persistent and expanding indigenous activism. Also, indigenous organizations from around the world have created networks that have allowed them to articulate demands of self-determination that differ fundamentally from the notion of statehood. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) of 2007 is one remarkable global result of this activism, despite sustained state opposition to it as well as indigenous criticism of the declaration's shortcomings. In any case, Indigenous peoples have not only survived (cultural and material), they are also constantly developing and revitalizing their distinct ways of life, despite of and in relation to a state-centrist world that has a hard time making sense of other-than-statist forms of political organization.

Rauna Kuokkanen is part of this expanding discourse. She is an Indigenous – Sámi – feminist scholar and activist whose book *Restructuring Relations* offers a radically liberating vision of indigenous self-determination that "seeks to restructure all relations of domination."<sup>1</sup> Such restructuring needs to respond to *external* oppression, in particular in the form of settler colonialism and extractivist global capitalism, but also to oppression *internal* to indigenous communities, especially patriarchal gender hierarchies and gender-based violence against women and people who do not conform with heteropatriarchal norms (in reference to the more fluid gender concepts of indigenous communities that were "made straight" by colonialism, Kuokkanen calls them two spirited and queer, or 2SQ people). The first half of this vision can be described as the core of indigenous activism and scholarship – in focus are the patterns of colonial expropriation, structural violence and humiliation that Indigenous peoples have been exposed to as well as their fights for rebuilding land-related traditions, livelihoods and governance structures under extremely adversarial conditions. But, as Kuokkanen argues, the second dimension is typically sidelined in indigenous self-determination attempts many of which she identifies as male-led and centered. In that logic, gender hierarchies and sexual exploitation are seen as a by-product of settler colonialism that will go away once self-determination is achieved (or, alternatively, will be addressed *after* the more important external struggles). However, Kuokkanen argues that gender hierarchies have become deeply entrenched in indigenous communities themselves, and if these structures are not directly addressed, the quest for *collective* self-determination will lack its necessary basis of *individual* self-determination and self-esteem for large parts of the community (women, 2SQ people, and children, who are both directly and indirectly, through the suffering of their mothers, affected by abuse). Kuokkanen connects this twofold framework of self-determination to three contexts of indigenous self-governance: Some First Nations in Canada, the Inuit in Greenland, and the Sámi in Scandinavia. She does this to demonstrate the diversity and context-specific histories of indigenous communities and to underline the need of context-sensitive strategies toward self-determination.

In six chapters, Kuokkanen rolls out a conceptually complex framework and a detailed empirical analysis. For both, she draws on a wide range of literature as well as on rich interview data

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1 Kuokkanen, *Restructuring Relations*, 1.

from the three contexts, in the spirit of collective and relational knowledge creation. Especially for readers not familiar with indigenous scholarship, being exposed to this abundance of literature alone makes the book a worthwhile read. The first chapter presents her concept of self-determination as a foundational value. In its core, self-determination is about creating responsible relationships, especially to land, kinship and spirituality. Different from the focus on exclusive territorial claim in Westphalian statehood, self-determination entails collective integrity, which means protection of the land to ensure survival, as well as individual integrity, bodily and mentally. Hence, the overarching goal is to enable everybody's, including future generations', wellbeing within the collective. This also means that relationships that oppress rather than nurture need to be addressed and transformed. Accordingly, calling out gender hierarchies and gender-based violence within indigenous communities is fundamental for collective self-determination and should not be dismissed as illegitimate "Western" interference that places the individual over the community.

The second chapter introduces the concrete features of self-government that have been developed in the three selected contexts. The two general takeaways are, first, that three very distinct paths have evolved, and second, that all three of them have to be described as limited forms of self-governance that heavily depend on the external control and acceptance of the respective state. Greenland is an outlier – with its Inuit majority population and increasing steps toward self-rule, it is envisioning a statehood model of self-determination which is typically not an option for indigenous populations. It has the most independent institutions among the three cases, but they are "least indigenous" and most directly modelled after those of the Danish state. Canada is home to many First Nations, and in the context of repressive assimilationist state policies past and present, a strong discourse on self-determination has emerged and a variety of self-government models have been developed, including land claims. The Canadian state remains unwilling to consider full indigenous sovereignty, and indigenous representatives negotiating with the state have a history of misogyny and subordination of "women's interests" under "general ones" (the Indian Act which still treats Indigenous women different from men in regards to their status rights is an expression of this). Sámi representation is the least powerful and basically amounts to an advisory function in Sámi affairs to the respective state. In Norway, Sweden, and Finland, Sámi parliaments have been established; while they have developed different priorities – e.g. a focus on cultural and linguistic self-determination in Finland, protection of distinct cultural traditions such as reindeer herding in Sweden – all three institutions have not been able to push toward holistic self-determination, and Sámi people are more often treated as minorities in Scandinavian countries than as a (potentially) sovereign nation.

Chapter 3 takes a view on visions and challenges of self-government from within. On the side of visions, the two most far reaching are full independence in Greenland, which is mostly concerned with economic independence and the development of extractivist industries, and rematriation in Canada, which proposes the restoration of women's decision-making power, complementary to men's, as an entrenched indigenous practice. These visions are riddled with challenges – political elites in Greenland have become alienated from ordinary people, and institutions have become too bureaucratic; the project of statehood seems to replicate colonial hierarchies, this time between urban and rural Greenlanders. Rematriation, on the other hand, is opposed to male-led indigenous government models as too compromised by the settler state logic, but it has not yet been able to develop "tangible models ... that can pose as real alternatives to existing frameworks."<sup>2</sup> However, grassroots movements such as *Idle no more* have offered some guidance in that direction, for example by proposing traditional power sharing arrangements and internal checks and balances on the path toward self-determination. As this chapter sheds light on internal controversies over best ways of indigenous governance, what becomes clear to the non-Indigenous reader is that "normal" statehood does not formulate a goal that demanding – a state holds a monopoly of violence and promotes order, not non-domination. While the focus on justice and inclusion in Kuokkanen's concept is appealing, I wondered if non-domination is perhaps not realizable in a (any) community with competing interests, and if it would be more useful to think of *sufficient* representation for each interest to avoid its exclusion.

Chapter 4 and 5 provide a gendered analysis of each self-governance model and ask how seriously they take gender-based violence as a problem in itself and as a dimension of self-

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2 Ibid, 137.

determination. When it comes to the political representation of their interests, indigenous women are in a particularly difficult situation: Indigenous communities hold the assumption that gender hierarchies are alien to their traditions and were imposed on them through European interference. Indigenous self-governing institutions, however, do not follow any type of pre-colonial gender egalitarianism, but represent the Western androcentric logic of political institutions to which women have some, but not full access. If women then make demands for gender equality, they are being criticized because such demands are deemed alien to indigenous culture. The 'true' traditions are invoked in opposition, such as importance of female informal political participation (which is indeed important, but cannot be equated with access to formal political power), a gendered division of labor, and the centrality of motherhood (which, by and large, is constructed as incompatible with political leadership).

As politically active Indigenous women have generally not found support in the self-governing structures created, many of their interests are politically underrepresented. Kuokkanen zooms in on the matter that is most harmful to women's bodily and mental integrity: direct and structural gender-based violence (she focuses on violence against women, but mentions the effect of heteropatriarchal violence on 2SQ people as well as children). She resists attempts to identify the roots of violence against indigenous women *either* in the brutality of patriarchal-colonial devaluation *or* patriarchal hierarchies within indigenous communities. Rather, she makes clear that indigenous women's self-determination depends on confronting both structural and direct violence, and that they need proactive indigenous institutions in that fight. Again, we see diversity in the three contexts – the degree of violence women experience is much higher in Canada than in Greenland or Scandinavia, but levels are always significantly higher than for non-Indigenous women. This reality, however, is publicly silenced, often with the intention to preserve communal cohesion and unity. Indigenous feminists who talk about patriarchal violence in their communities are then criticized as traitors, but as Kuokkanen's convincingly points out, "rationalizing violence only as a consequence of colonial history denies agency and condones perpetrators' behavior."<sup>3</sup>

The responses to violence against women within self-government structures are, as a consequence, lacking on all levels: lack of data leads to lack of comprehensive analyses of causes, violence is normalized, individualized (alcoholism is often blamed as a cause rather than as an exacerbating factor), and generally dealt with in superficial ways and without the provision of resources and services. Kuokkanen recognizes the difficulty of involving the state in dealing with violence against women given its role as producer of intergenerational trauma (especially in the Canadian boarding school system), but she still argues that the project of restructuring these violent relations "cannot entirely bypass the state."<sup>4</sup> In sum, not only have indigenous institutions failed to address violence against Indigenous women as a problem in itself; they also make no connection between the individual integrity of women and collective indigenous self-determination.

In the concluding chapter 6, Kuokkanen uses Nancy Fraser's concept of gender justice to formulate three core areas of restructuring relations: the first is the welfare of children, which is about breaking the cycle of intergenerational trauma and contributing to collective strength as a basis of self-government. This care work is perceived as a collective task. The second area is about confronting endemic violence against women by strengthening the cultural traditions that prevent rather than enable it. Third is the rematriation of indigenous governance that both recognizes informal ways of participating in the community, as is often done by women, and fully opens the path for women to formal decision-making institutions.

Reading this book has been enormously insightful. It is written by an expert who listens and talks to different audiences (indigenous, non-indigenous, from different parts of the world, men, women, 2SQ people, scholars, politicians, bureaucrats, activists, feminists, "traditionalists") and is able to tie several bodies of literature as well as oral processes of knowledge creation together. Perhaps because Kuokkanen has many different audiences in mind, she avoids simplistic or essentialist explanations; the multidimensionality of problems is always carefully represented. This becomes clear in her critical discussion of references within indigenous communities to a

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3 Ibid, 183.

4 Ibid, 206.

perfect pre-colonial past; her focus is rather future oriented, and she expects difficult processes of figuring out a better, more humane way of building community based on transparency, inclusion, honesty and accountability.

One closes this book with a lot of inspiration and some concrete ideas about how to move toward indigenous self-determination that is free from domination. Clearly, such restructuring would be desirable for non-indigenous communities as well. I do not read Kuokkanen's book as a plan to "get there" – I personally don't think this is possible, unless we dismantle large-scale social structures altogether. But in a world where dominations of all forms have become normalized, it is imperative that we think more collectively in a better, more caring direction. As the year 2020 has taught us, we will only survive if we look out for each other. For that purpose, we can use some indigenous feminist guidance.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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