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Contesting Global Landscapes Theme Project

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### **Anti-Sovereignty and Indigenous Land Claims: Territoriality, Citizenship, and Time in the Yukon**

The expropriation of indigenous lands has a long history in North America. One of the principle historical mechanisms for this expropriation was the land cession treaty. Although both Canada and the US eventually suspended treaty-making with First Nations, Canada resumed the process in 1973 and over the past few decades has concluded comprehensive land claim and self-government agreements with First Nations across the arctic and subarctic. These modern treaties spell out the nature of government-to-government relations among the signatory governments and grant northern First Nations real (if limited) powers of self-government and a role in the management of northern lands and resources. In this project, I focus on tripartite negotiations among the governments of Canada, the Yukon, and the Kluane First Nation (KFN), who signed land and self-government agreements in October 2003. On the surface, the negotiations leading to these agreements seemed to be straightforward discussions aimed at determining rights to land and resources, but in practice they entailed struggles that were at least as much about cultural meanings, symbols, and processes. Government and aboriginal negotiators often had very different ideas about everything from how negotiations should be structured (i.e., the context of negotiations, who got to speak and when, and what types of narrative and “evidence” were to be permitted) to the meanings of seemingly agreed-upon terms such as “land,” “wildlife,” and “heritage.” These disagreements reflect profound cultural differences between aboriginal and government negotiators. I examine the various understandings that each brought to the negotiating table, the resulting cross-cultural interactions, and their relationship to the meanings that ultimately become accepted and acted upon in wider political and legal contexts.

During the Contesting Global Landscapes Theme Project, I plan to complete the first volume of a multi-volume study on this topic, tentatively entitled *Anti-Sovereignty and Indigenous Land Claims*. In it, I examine the changing nature of indigenous-state relations through the lens of sovereignty. Kluane people, like indigenous peoples elsewhere, have had to restructure their society in dramatic ways just to gain a seat at the negotiating table. For their claims to be heard at all, they have had to frame their arguments in a language intelligible to lawyers, politicians, and other agents of the Canadian state. By and large, this has been the language of *sovereignty*. Although First Nation political activists have found the language of sovereignty useful in their quest for an end to colonial oppression, the concept’s origins in a European cultural and historical context have caused some scholars (from all sides of the debate) to question the appropriateness of its use in an indigenous context. Despite the best efforts of scholars and activists to indigenize *sovereignty*, the term has very specific meanings in Euro-American legal and political discourse, and it is these meanings that tend to inform the actions of negotiators, politicians, and other agents of settler states. In *Anti-Sovereignty* I will conduct a close ethnographic analysis of KFN’s land claim and self-government agreements to show how the sovereignty concept – which lies at their heart – imposes culturally inappropriate notions of territory, political belonging, and time upon Yukon First Nation people; and I will consider the political consequences of that imposition.