

# The sovereign citizen superconspiracy: Contemporary issues in native title anthropology

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## Abstract

The Australian *Native Title Act 1993 (Cth)* provides for the recognition of rights and interests which arise from the traditional laws and customs of Australian First Nation peoples. Processing applications for a determination of native title can take many years and involves numerous stakeholders, presentation of evidence of ongoing connection with the land and sea within a claim area, negotiations with other parties including from industry and government, as well as negotiations between Indigenous groups. The process can be long, arduous, and often outcomes fail to satisfy the expectations of native title claimants. In this paper we investigate how individuals who either disagree with the premise underlying native title, or who have suffered negative impacts through the course of native title claims, may be either targeted by, or swept up in, Australian sovereign citizen rhetoric. We aim to contextualise presentations of sovereign citizen ideas in native title claim processes by providing an overview of the history of sovereign citizen thought, and examples of its contemporary expression in some Australian online forums. In doing this we aim to provide a broad foundation for future research into the issue. The dialogue in sovereign citizen

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online communities exposes people to extremism and superconspiracies. This article will provide a theoretical framework and historical context to the Australian sovereign citizen phenomena and describe online amplification of disinformation in Australia that has the potential to cause harm. We illustrate how stakeholders who are drawn to relatively moderate online content (such as opposing native title) may be radicalised through gradual exposure to extremist anti-government sentiment and hate speech. This article highlights the need for further research into sovereign citizenry in Australia, and strategies for native title practitioners to engage claimants who subscribe to and disseminate sovereign citizen disinformation in native title processes.

#### KEYWORDS

conspiracy theory, native title, sovereign citizen, superconspiracy, worldview

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In Australia native title rights can be established by claimants making an application to the Federal Court for recognition of their rights to land and seas under their traditional laws and customs (National Native Title Tribunal, 2010). Native title anthropologists provide research and evidence in relation to native title legal proceedings. The evidence of independent 'expert' anthropologists can be relied upon by parties to a native title proceeding (Palmer, 2011). 'In-house' anthropologists work from within Native Title Representative Bodies (commonly known as Land Councils) and work with claimants and their legal representatives through the course of the claim process, including in the facilitation of claim group information and decision-making meetings (Martin, 2004; Pilbrow, 2020). To achieve a successful determination of native title, the claim group must provide evidence that they continue to hold connection to the claimed area, which arises from laws and customs that have been acknowledged and observed in a manner substantially uninterrupted since the British claimed sovereignty in 1788 (Palmer, 2018). As a result of the complexity in pursuing legal recognition of traditional rights, some claimants choose to disengage from the legal process and reject the legality of the system as a whole and the legitimacy of the practitioners who work within the system (Taplin, 2023). In 2022, a group called the Original Sovereign Tribal Federation (OSTF) posted disinformation on social media accounts about native title, and promoted a variety of conspiracy theories, including anti-government sentiment and hate speech (OSTF, 2022).<sup>1</sup> Active members of this group disseminate disinformation such as stating that individuals can lawfully disregard Australian law. The origins of these pseudo-legal arguments trace back to the sovereign citizen superconspiracy and terrorist groups in the United States (Netolitzky, 2018a). The sovereign citizen superconspiracy is now well established in Australia (Baldino & Lucas, 2019; Champion et al., 2021; Kent, 2015). Incorporating what

many people would consider to be extremist worldviews, the popularisation of sovereign citizen theories, including amongst Indigenous communities, is affecting the work of practitioners in native title processes (Taplin, 2023).

In the conspiracist milieu, there is no uniformity of specific beliefs amongst clearly defined 'groups' or communities; rather, diverse and loosely defined communities include individuals who adopt unconventional beliefs and incorporate elements of sovereign citizen theory (potentially along with elements of various other theories) into their belief system (Toseland, 2019). Individuals may adopt some sovereign citizen theories but may not self-identify as a sovereign citizen or as a member of any named or clearly demarcated group (Harambam & Aupers, 2017). For the purpose of clarity in the ensuing discussion, we will refer to those people or groups who ascribe to the shared set of beliefs described below as sovereign citizens.

The sovereign citizen conspiracy theory holds that government and legal institutions are illegitimate, and that an individual can declare themselves sovereign (Berger, 2016). A sovereign person is believed to exist outside of the law and of the jurisdiction of government and the courts. Sovereign citizens often believe that the existing government is a corporation. Some people who subscribe to the sovereign citizen 'government is a corporation' theory incorporate Pizzagate, QAnon and #SaveTheChildren theories,<sup>ii</sup> which assert that a secret sect is driving global governance (Badham, 2021). Conspiracy theories are adopted and adapted, or 'localised' for best fit. Basit (2021, p. 3) observes that the 'localization of conspiracy narratives allows them [conspiracy theories] to gain more currency and traction'. Elements of conspiracy theories are often adopted into the worldviews of individuals who feel persecuted or harmed by governments or legal systems, as they may provide 'victimhood narratives' to explain perceived persecution or harm (Armaly et al., 2022; Pantazi et al., 2022). This paper analyses equivalent responses observed amongst members of native title claimant groups by native title practitioners in Australia. In order to understand how sovereign citizen pseudo-legal arguments are impacting native title processes in Australia, it is important to first understand the origins and evolution of the sovereign citizen conspiracy theory, as well as the consistent themes and beliefs which underlie the disparate set of arguments advocated by sovereign citizens.

## 2 | ORIGINS OF THE SOVEREIGN CITIZEN CONSPIRACY THEORY

Sovereign citizen thinking first emerged in the United States, and stemmed from the milieu of anti-tax, anti-government, nationalist and occasionally violent militia groups that became particularly active in the 1970s (Prouty, 2021). The Posse Comitatus movement, founded by William Gale and Mike Beach in the late 1960s and early 1970s, fostered a belief that the county sheriff was the highest-ranking law officer in the United States (Kealy, 2003). Gale and Beach advocated that the sheriff's law enforcement office had legitimate jurisdiction to enforce the law, and called for patriotic local armed militias to fight any attempt by a federal government jurisdiction to implement laws in the county, arguing it would be corrupt and an illegitimate use of power (Weeber, 1999). Gale was also a Christian Identity<sup>iii</sup> preacher, and since its inception the Posse Comitatus community was closely tied with antisemitism. Common (but not universal) amongst both the Patriot and Posse Comitatus movements in the United States is a belief that an evil Jewish sect has secretly taken over the US Government and now runs the world (Weeber, 1999). In the United States this conviction goes further, to justify the formation of armed militias as a means to counter government authorities which are perceived as illegitimate as a result of infiltration



by morally corrupt forces. According to Hodge (2019) militia, patriot and anti-government activism (including the Posse Comitatus) peaked in the United States in the 1990s in part as a result of increasing anxiety in a rapidly globalising world. By the end of the 1990s the sovereign citizen conspiracy theory had emerged from this milieu, also with strong influences from the 'common law courts', and the anti-tax movement (Hodge, 2019).<sup>iv</sup>

The Southern Poverty Law Centre, a US-based hate-speech watchdog, also observed growth in the late 1990s amongst sovereign citizen communities in the United States (SPLC, 2021). In this period a series of violent attacks were attributed to sovereign citizens, including the 1995 Oklahoma City Bombings which killed 168 people, the 1995 shooting of three police officers by Carl Drega, and the 1997 killing of a police officer by Doug and Craig Broderick who had been stopped for a traffic violation (Sarteschi, 2020; Sarteschi, 2021). Violent encounters continued with the 2003 killing of two law enforcement officers over a land dispute by the Bixby family, and the 2010 killing of two law enforcement officers by Donna Lee Wray Joseph and Jerry Kane in West Memphis (SPLC, 2010). Most who subscribed to sovereign citizen beliefs were not violent, and the influence of the theory continued to grow. The Southern Poverty Law Centre estimated that by 2011 in the United States the number of committed sovereign citizens was 100,000, and twice that many again were interested or had an entry-level interest in sovereign citizen dialogue (SPLC, 2021). By 2014 the US Justice Department considered sovereign citizens a domestic terrorism threat, and in the same year a report by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism noted that US law enforcement considered sovereign citizens the greatest domestic terrorism threat in the country (SPLC, 2021).

## 2.1 | Sovereign citizens expanding internationally

Much earlier than 2014, sovereign citizen arguments had moved beyond US borders. In Canada and the United Kingdom people who adhered to the same anti-government, anti-tax notions might have called themselves 'Freemen' or 'Freemen on the land' (Kent, 2015). In Canada sovereign citizen communities emerged in the late 1990s, promulgated by seminars run by US sovereign citizen David Wynn Miller, who was banned from Canada in 2001 (Pitcavage, 2012). The impact of vexatious sovereign citizen litigants on the Canadian Court system was such that in 2012 Justice Rookes directly addressed the pseudo-legal arguments put forward by sovereign citizen Jacquie French (aka Jacquie Phoenix) in a detailed judgement, *Meads v Meads*, designed in part to assist courts in dealing with the same phenomena (Netolitzky, 2018b). Amongst online communities in the United Kingdom, sovereign citizen concepts emerged in 2010, further prompted by a visit to London in 2010 by sovereign citizen influencer Winston Shrou (Pitcavage, 2012). In 2011 Freeman protesters in the United Kingdom stormed a courtroom and tried to arrest a judge (Kent, 2015).

## 2.2 | Sovereign citizens in Australia

Winston Shrou and David Wynn Miller (who was banned from Australia for a period of time) also held seminars in Australia (in Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide) between 2010 and 2012 (Pitcavage, 2012). Some press at the time suggested Miller was specifically targeting Aboriginal audiences (Glazgov, 2014; Wallace, 2011). Glazgov (2014) suggests that this is a means to draw a wider audience into 'conspiracy subcultures', and Wallace (2011) suggests that Miller systematically

targets vulnerable audiences. Kent (2015) reports sovereign citizen groups and webpages, including 'United Rights Australia', began appearing in Australia as early as 2010. Currently none of this content remains available online. The Anti-Defamation League reported in 2012 that 'Sovereigns now have at least a foothold in Australia and New Zealand' (Pitcavage, 2012, p. 14).

Following the seminars of Shrout and Miller, the sovereign citizen community in Australia appears to have grown slowly and quietly for a period. Not much was reported between 2012 and 2019, when Wayne Glew, a sovereign citizen in Western Australia and an ex-police officer, ran for the Senate under Rod Culleton's Great Australian Party (Mann, 2022; Perpetch & Meachim, 2019). Glew had previously been declared a vexatious litigant as a result of his arguments at court that local government did not exist (Meachim & O'Connor, 2018). Throughout 2020 stories about sovereign citizens became notable and prominent in Australia, perhaps because COVID-19 lockdowns allowed people to spend more time involved in online communities and promoted resentment at government-imposed isolation periods and vaccine mandates. The Victorian police commissioner reported an increasing trend of people refusing to recognise police jurisdiction that impacted on police operations (ABC, 2020), and a woman called Karen gained media attention by famously espousing sovereign citizen concepts to justify refusing to wear a mask in a Bunnings hardware store (Gillespie, 2020). By 2021, sovereign citizen Jacquie French, whose arguments had been so clearly rebuffed in *Meads vs Meads*, in Canada in 2012, ran an Australian Facebook page with 5000 members (Gillespie, 2020).

In mid-December 2021, the 'Original Sovereigns' established a presence close to the Aboriginal Tent embassy<sup>y</sup> at Parliament House in Canberra, which caused friction with the established Tent Embassy activists who rejected the Original Sovereigns' camp (Hassan, 2022). On 30 December that same year, people with ties to the group set fire to the doors of Old Parliament house (AAP, 2022). In February 2022, sovereign citizen arguments (including, amongst others, anti-vaxx sentiments) provided impetus for the 'Convoy to Canberra' protests, during which it is reported up to 10,000 people converged in a protest at Old Parliament House (Copland, 2022). The reason they converged on Old Parliament House is tied to the details of the beliefs and stories that underpin the sovereign citizen superconspiracy in Australia (specifically, that the last legally legitimate government of Australia was based in Old Parliament House, before being ousted by an illegitimate corporation) (Roose, 2022). Tragically, in December 2022, two police officers and a civilian were shot and killed in Wieambilla South-West Queensland by perpetrators who were influenced by anti-government and sovereign citizen beliefs (myPolice, 2022).

### 3 | SOVEREIGN CITIZEN BELIEFS AS A PROBLEMATIC SUPERCONSPIRACY

At this juncture it is helpful to explain why we use the term 'superconspiracy' to describe the set of beliefs held by sovereign citizens, and why we view the sovereign citizen superconspiracy as problematic. It is difficult to provide definitional clarity to the groups of individuals who promote sovereign citizen arguments, because aside from sharing a set of falsifiable beliefs about history and law, they may hold little in common. Sovereign citizen communities and ideas are sometimes described in media and academic literature as a 'movement' or an 'ideology'. The term 'movement' is suggestive of an organised group working towards specific political objectives. Sovereign citizens have some capacity to organise as groups, but with the exception of the objective of wholesale dissolution of the existing system of government, no-one has yet demonstrated that sovereign citizens organise around a specific and predetermined objective (Badham, 2021;



Harambam & Aupers, 2017). For this reason, we do not consider the term 'movement' to be a clear descriptor of sovereign citizen rhetoric.

The definition of ideology and the 'intersection of action and ideology' has drawn much scholarly attention, largely beyond the scope of this paper (Pilbrow, 2020, p. 47). We argue that the term 'ideology' is of limited utility in describing sovereign citizen beliefs, because it suggests to the reader a singular commitment to a set of shared values and a rigidity of values that are not evident in many people attracted to sovereign citizen discourse. That is to say, there is a proportion of people who are not committed to sovereign citizen ideas, or who otherwise hold values at odds with some of the rhetoric, but who are nonetheless influenced by sovereign citizen beliefs. Cassam (2021), p. 14) defines ideologies as '... guides to action as well as frameworks of understanding. One's ideology tells one what to do as well as what to think'. Ideology relates to the values a person holds, the things they believe to be true, and informs the actions they choose to take. By this definition sovereign citizen beliefs may fall within the definition of ideology, however in our view the term holds connotations in relation to the value system of the associated community that is not helpful as a descriptor for sovereign citizen beliefs.

A simple definition of a conspiracy theory is a theory whereby 'a small group of powerful individuals [is] acting in secret for their own benefit and against the common good' (Uscinski et al., 2022, p. 3). While it seems fitting to describe sovereign citizen beliefs (that an illegitimate corporation is posing as government and secretly working against the common good) as a conspiracy theory, we find this inadequate. Given such an innocuous definition of conspiracy theories, it is hard to understand why belief in conspiracy theories is of sufficient interest or concern to warrant academic research. In this context, the concept of superconspiracy becomes helpful. Toseland (2019, p. 22) defines a superconspiracy as

... conspiratorial constructs in which multiple conspiracies are linked together hierarchically ... [headed by] a distant but all-powerful evil force manipulating lesser conspiratorial actors. Relative to the preceding types, superconspiracies are meta-narratives that can accommodate event and systemic conspiracies in such a way that a single conspiratorial universe becomes populated by increasing numbers of actors and a more complex, multi-faceted, centralised plot.

Toseland (2019) helpfully explains how rather than simply being a belief in a single event, a person who subscribes to a superconspiracy believes that many or several conspiracies are interrelated in a metanarrative. In this way flexible or non-ideological beliefs begin to influence a person's worldview, and ultimately the way they interact with society. Docherty (2001, p. 52) argues that people '... collaborate with others to view or make [understand] the worlds in which they live'. Understood through this lens, a superconspiracy can be described as a 'worldmaking narrative', as it provides a platform upon which people collaborate with others in a conspiracist community to narrate and thus 'make' the world in which they exist. Superconspiracy communities commonly narrate a world that is controlled by hostile powers and where these hostile powers are secretly collaborating for their own benefit and against the good of everyday citizens. The worldview is dynamic and should not be thought of as a static set of beliefs. Individuals can change and adapt their worldview narratives based on their personal experiences and the influences around them. The sovereign citizen communities discussed here narrate a world in which these 'hostile powers' are illegitimate corporations that have illegally usurped legitimate governments, and are deceiving people into observing false laws for their own profit. Some superconspiracy subscribers even see 'the corporations' as practicing

genocide or working to deplete the global population for their own benefit. Therefore, we argue that sovereign citizen beliefs can be viewed as superconspiracies.

In considering the use of superconspiracy terminology, we have reflected further on the effects of superconspiracies on whether it is reasonable to define some superconspiracies as problematic and, if so, on what grounds. Academic research into conspiracy theories and believers in conspiracy theories (conspiracy *theorists*) often separate the two areas of inquiry: *What* is the basis for the conspiracy theory (i.e., what is it that people believe)? And *who* believes it? (That is, what are the psychological traits and cognitive errors in reasoning that lead to people believing in clearly falsifiable conspiracy theories?) (Schaab, 2022). Cibik and Hardoš (2020), p. 3) provide examples of populations who are ‘moon hoaxers, 9/11 truthers, vaccine denialists, Jew-baiters, [and] chemtrail believers’. Other examples include the belief that the earth is flat, COVID-19 and 5G are conspiracies, or those that question Barack Obama's citizenship, Jeffrey Epstein's death, or believe that top Democrats are behind a child sex ring (Pizzagate). In societies that value pluralism and intellectual freedom, conspiracy theories (such as the belief that the earth is flat) may be factually incorrect but not problematic. Cibik and Hardoš (2020), p. 8) conclude that ‘in general, irrationality, epistemic blindness, immunity to evidence and large-scale support for clearly far-fetched views are simply features of our society’, citing examples including astrology (such as the belief in horoscopes) and most religious doctrines. Therefore, the actions of people who believe in astrology, the power of crystals, the Holy Trinity, a flat earth and chemtrails are unlikely to undermine the stability of a liberal-democratic society. However, there are real consequences for societies that see an increase in populations who believe in politically disruptive conspiracy theories. One of the terms used in the critical literature to describe believers of problematic conspiracy theories is ‘ethically unreasonable citizens’ whose beliefs undermine the liberal-democratic ideals of mutual respect, freedom and equality (Cibik & Hardoš, 2020). In this paper, we conceive of the sovereign citizen superconspiracy as problematic because, in our view, it is so commonly tied to advocacy for, or the perpetration of, violent reprisals upon those people who are (in the mind of the sovereign citizen) complicit in the government's agenda.

The sovereign citizen superconspiracy is problematic because of its demonstrable capacity to cause societal harm. Adherents to this superconspiracy in the United States have perpetrated violence on the basis of their convictions, and the 6 January 2021 Capitol insurrection illustrates that when superconspiracists gather in numbers, they can present a material threat to the processes of democratic governance. The problematic effects include erosion of trust in experts and scientific knowledge, lower willingness to engage in politics, and decreased trust in official and legitimate political institutions (Cibik & Hardoš, 2020). The concern for Australia, with growing numbers of sovereign citizen superconspiracy believers, is the challenge to maintain conditions for a contemporary democratic society built on mutual relations with citizens. A certain class of conspiracy theory believers may erode the stability of democracy where their beliefs are ‘at odds with the liberal ideal of free and equal citizenship’ (Cibik & Hardoš, 2020, p. 4).

Cibik and Hardoš (Cibik & Hardoš, 2020) argue for better civic education that highlights a reasonable and tolerant view of citizenship based on mutual respect: ‘citizens who understand themselves as free and equal should then be more immune to such conspiracy theories’ (p. 17). What then of the experience of native title claimants who, in part as a result of a complex legal proceeding, may be feeling angry, disempowered, unequal or cheated by the process (Taplin, 2023)? According to Schaab (2022, p. 2), individuals ‘are more likely to believe in conspiracy theories when they are experiencing a loss of control, suggesting that conspiracy theories are appealing partly because they present the world as simpler, and thus more manageable, than the official account’. With a similar view, Rutjens and Veckalov (2022, p. 2)



citing the work of Marchlewska et al. (2018) state, ‘... when an unequivocally clear scientific explanation is lacking for an uncertain event, people with a strong need for answers (i.e., need for cognitive closure) are more likely to endorse conspiratorial explanations for these events’. Therefore, there is the potential for the sovereign citizen superconspiracy to make sense to native title claimants, particularly those who feel disenfranchised as a result of the process. Taplin (2023) also describes the earned distrust of government and legal systems arising from the fraught history of Indigenous land rights in Australia, which may further contribute to native title claimants’ receptiveness to sovereign citizen anti-State discourse. Any individual who espouses distrust of institutions and is looking for ‘someone to blame’ may be more vulnerable to conspiracy theories (Baker, 2023; Taplin & Holland, 2022). Additional influencing factors such as economic disadvantage, class, social exclusion and lack of access to education and employment (Rowse, 2012), financial stress, and anger over government regulation may further stimulate conspiracy thinking (Baldino & Balnaves, 2023). The concern is when anti-democratic sentiment leads to extremism and radicalisation of individuals, as evidenced by the fatal event in Wieambilla South-West Queensland in December 2022 (myPolice, 2022; Utting, 2023). As a result of this event, in Australia, police are now increasing reporting on community members who hold extreme conspiracy or religious beliefs, and socially or politically extreme beliefs, including matters involving sovereign citizens (Utting, 2023). The underlying sentiments of sovereign citizen rhetoric is distinct from Indigenous Australian sovereignty discourse, as discussed below.

### 3.1 | Underlying beliefs and sentiments common to sovereign citizens

To gain insight into an emic view of the shared worldmaking narratives of sovereign citizen superconspiracy communities, it is useful to summarise the themes and ‘stories’ that are common to this superconspiracy. According to MacNab (2012), sovereign citizens perceive themselves to be in conflict with a powerful, corrupt, illegitimate government, and consider it necessary to undertake ‘research’ to find a truth hidden from the population. To the sovereign citizen the existing system is in fact illegitimate or criminal, and thus in the mind of the sovereign citizen it is warranted to punish those who are complicit in or who support the system (Pitcavage, 2012). The conviction that they are battling for ‘the legitimate and just alternative’ ties sovereign citizen convictions with nationalist sentiments, particularly in the United States (Berger, 2016).

Sovereign citizens believe that individuals can actively renounce the existing systems of laws and governance and exist outside of them, because governments, and the legal systems they have created, are inherently illegitimate. This explains why sovereign citizens sometimes end up in court for unpaid fines and taxes, or fraud, and why violent clashes with police arise from basic traffic violations. A sovereign citizen may believe that fines, taxes, laws and police jurisdiction are all fabricated by an illegitimate corporation posing as government and therefore do not apply to them (MacNab, 2012).

In the United States, following the series of police fatalities between 1995–2010 that were attributed to sovereign citizen interactions, law enforcement personnel and agencies began to release educational materials to assist their officers in identifying sovereign citizens in order to enable them to better assess risk (Greenberg, 2017). In a video (SPLC, 2010) aimed at educating police officers of ‘warning signs’ to assist in identifying sovereign citizens, some typical phrases or questions posed by sovereign citizens are provided, such as;



Is [a driver's licence] required of a sovereign?

Officer, I do not believe I, nor this private vehicle, falls under your jurisdiction, and

I am reserving all of my common law rights.

In Australia, particularly within native title anthropology, practitioners report hearing the same or very similar phrases to reflect underlying arguments about being outside of the jurisdiction of the legal system, or the belief that the government is an illegitimate corporation which has usurped the legal system of government. It is not uncommon for people to intuit arguments, such as repeating the 'fact' that they have 'common law rights'. However, in legal terminology the phrase 'common law rights' is a specific reference to law developed by judges on the basis of precedent of earlier decisions, as distinct from written laws (legislation). The phrase 'my common law rights' as uttered by an individual during a traffic stop, is not a correct application of the concept, given its legal definition within Australia.

Amongst Indigenous Australian sovereign citizens, influencers also leverage sentiment around identity in order to capture an audience and to explicitly construct a shared legitimate identity in opposition to a demonised other or 'outgroup'. There is an equivalence in the way sovereign citizen arguments in the United States and Australia speak to a sense of identity-based entitlement and 'stolen rights'. This acts as a 'hook' for people who may feel disenfranchised by the system and leverages the victimhood narrative to create buy-in to progressively more radical and extreme content. For example, a well-known and influential person associated with sovereign citizen rhetoric in Australia, and founder of the Original Sovereign Tribal Federation, who we will refer to as 'Person 1', complexifies the violent colonisation of Indigenous lands in Australia by the British with an argument that the British and their sovereigns acted illegitimately against existing international law at the time and that the British sovereign was illegitimately ousted from the Australian Parliament by a corporation in 1973 (BitChute, 2020). In this way a worldview is constructed where there are both historical and also contemporary 'evil' actors who are seen to continue to act outside the true or 'common law' to their own benefit, and against the interests of the broader population. On further exploration of Person 1's views, it becomes apparent that (at least a significant part of) the illegitimate group of nefarious actors in power who are subverting the common people's rights are, in his view, a Jewish group with hidden power and evil intent. Sovereign citizen rhetoric lacks the intellectual formation and logic of arguments based on philosophy, history, anthropology and cultural studies. For example, scholarship on national formation and national consciousness can argue the injustice of colonisation and call for revolution (even violent revolution; Fanon & Gibson, 2016; Simpson, 2014), without relying on a perception that a revolution is required to oust illegitimate corporations that have taken over the government (Roose, 2022), to save children from a global sex trafficking ring amongst the global elite (OSTF, 2022), and to save unsuspecting citizens from Zionist Jews who are perpetrating global genocide (Icke, 2021).

Native title anthropologists are seeing an increase in native title claimants who are actively engaging with politically disruptive sovereign citizen superconspiracies. Taplin (2023) describes the way in which superconspiracy beliefs affect the views of claimants she works with in North Queensland. Presenting at a workshop for a Western Australian native title representative body in October 2022, Taplin received feedback that sovereign citizen rhetoric was a regularly disruptive force in native title research and group decision-making meetings in Western Australia as well. While only a small number of overall claimants espouse these anti-government, anti-democratic



and individualised sovereign views, the work of native title anthropologists requires greater awareness of sovereign citizen beliefs to inform interactions with claimants and other stakeholders in the native title claims process to support effective communication where a person's worldview may have been affected. The authors believe that practitioners within the native title process should receive education and skill-building to work with groups whose members are exposed to sovereign citizen arguments, in order to steer claimants away from radical and harmful content. The authors also seek to flag the need for incisive ethnography to better understand why people are drawn to sovereign citizen rhetoric and how people acquire the alternate frames of reference (Pilbrow, 2023). This article will now focus the discussion on sovereign citizen superconspiracy discourse in Australia in the native title context.

## 4 | SOVEREIGN CITIZENS IN AUSTRALIA

### 4.1 | The two (different) sovereignties

Sovereign citizen superconspiracy beliefs are distinct from the current sovereignty dialogue in Australia. To be clear, we do not seek to contribute to the important ongoing Indigenous sovereignty discourse in Australia, nor do we wish to confuse or conflate this discourse within the sovereign citizen rhetoric discussion here by emphasising the former herein. That said it is important to acknowledge the work of scholars and historians surrounding the question of sovereignty in Australia, and there are legitimate concerns about the capacity of the Australian legal system to adequately address the questions of whether and how Indigenous sovereignty can coexist with imposed British sovereignty (Attwood, 2004; Falk & Martin, 2020; Moreton-Robinson, 2020; Reynolds, 2021). Therefore, it is necessary to explain the distinctions between the Indigenous sovereignty movement and the manifestations of the sovereign citizen superconspiracy in Australian communities, including Indigenous communities.

The broader discourse on Indigenous sovereignty challenges the validity of British colonisation given the pre-existence of an Indigenous society, members of which observed laws and customs that gave rise to rights and interests in land (Buchan, 2015; Moreton-Robinson, 2015). In contrast, sovereign citizen discourse challenges the validity of state and legal institutions on the basis of a global conspiracy (Matheson, 2018). Sovereign citizens relate sovereignty not to an Indigenous society, but to their personal identity. The FBI has described individuals classified as sovereign citizens as 'anti-government extremists who believe that even though they physically reside in this country, they are separate or "sovereign" from the United States' (Kalinowski IV, 2019, p. 154). This is the same sentiment of Australian sovereign citizens: they do not believe they are subject to Australian law (Baldino & Lucas, 2019). Sovereign citizens consider individual freedom as a basic right, that is, '[t]he freedom of the individual is valorized' (Switzer, 2022, p. 62). For this reason, amongst people influenced by sovereign citizen rhetoric 'the concept of sovereignty is distinctly personalized in the sense that it would be better described as "personal sovereignty"' (Switzer, 2022, p. 58). From the perspective of a sovereign citizen, the regulation of their behaviour by laws of the State (e.g., a requirement to have a licence to drive a car), harms them personally.

Conspiracy theorists posit that a secret and powerful elite controls governing bodies. Superconspiracies tie together interrelated conspiracy theories to inform a worldview in which the world is controlled by a group with nefarious intentions. A typical Australian sovereign citizen posits that a global elite is 'tricking' the Australian population by secretly ousting governments

and instituting corporations that create bogus laws to profiteer off the common people. ‘Truth-seeking’ in this context involves identifying the ‘façade’ that is the existing government and those responsible for creating and maintaining the ‘lie’. This is different from the ‘conspiracy of silence’—the widespread amnesia in relation to the violence of colonial dispossession that occurred and is well documented in Australia (e.g., Bottoms, 2013). It is also different from ‘calling out’ persistent hegemony and raising issues of the ongoing injustice of discrepancies in social and economic measures between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations in Australian society. Importantly, mainstream dialogue about Indigenous sovereignty does not threaten violence upon those people who are complicit in the current flawed system and who work to uphold or improve current (imperfect) legal systems and government institutions. For these reasons, worldviews that include awareness of historical violence, Indigenous trauma and social justice issues experienced by Indigenous populations, including sovereignty dialogues and native title challenges, are not politically disruptive or extreme worldviews.

The challenge for practitioners, and also audiences who read or hear sovereign citizen discourse, is identifying which statements are based on legitimate and reflective critical analysis of native title issues as opposed to problematic conspiracy theories. For example, the Sovereign Union of First Nations People, established in New South Wales in 1999, is a group that ‘... asserts genuine pre-existing and continuing sovereignty over First Nations Territories’. This collective runs a Facebook page with content primarily focused on social justice issues such as racism and Indigenous rates of incarceration, as well as a webpage focused on Indigenous sovereignty (Sovereign Union, n.d.). This established group explicitly distances itself from sovereign citizens (Sovereign Union, 2022) stating:

This is a completely different stand to that of some other First People's sovereignty approaches, who are challenging jurisdiction at every turn including, but not limited to, the right to drive with their own number plates, without registration and without insurances. This is a tactic of the Freeman Movement, also known as “sovereign citizens” and there are the police confrontations that continue to be manifested in the USA, which in some cases lead to death and imprisonment.

Members of the Indigenous sovereignty movement are aware of the risk of perceived invalidation of their movement due to perceived association with sovereign citizens. Jack Latimore, in an article in *The Age* (2022) titled ‘Blackfishing: alt-right pushes to co-opt Aboriginal Tent Embassy to cause’ provides a description of the relationship between sovereign citizens and the activists at the Tent Embassy at Old Parliament House. Latimore (2022) quotes *Warriors of Aboriginal Resistance* spokeswoman Ruby Wharton, a Gamilaraay and Kooma woman, in saying that the original sovereign movement is attempting to ‘co-opt the First Nations Sovereignty rights movement’. Amongst some Indigenous activists the Australian sovereign citizen superconspiracy influence may be perceived as hostile, and ultimately politically detrimental, as it undermines the work of groups calling for dialogue on sovereignty issues.

## 4.2 | Manifestations of the problematic sovereign citizen superconspiracy in native title

In 2010 (the same year as the first visits of US sovereign citizens Shroul and Miller in Australia) Person 1 set up the Original Sovereign Tribal Federation (OSTF, 2022).



In a 10-min video posted on the OSTF webpage on 7 July 2022,<sup>vi</sup> another key influencer associated with the Indigenous Sovereign Tribal Federation (herein 'Person 2') talks about the difference between (his understanding of) 'sovereignty', and native title. Below are a few excerpts from Person 2's post:

Native title is slave's title.

... when you sign up for native title, you're actually signing the land away ...

... we've been duped into it by the land councils ...

... the land councils, they are corporations owned by the federal government which is a corporation ...

The land councils have been committing genocide ethnic cleansing ...

[To Indigenous people working for land councils] You're working for a corporation that is genociding and committing ethnic cleansing against your own people ...

... treason in tribal law is the same as treason in their law.

[To land council staff more generally] ... you won't be forgiven, and you won't be forgotten.

We know who you all are, and we will never forget who you are. And you will be reminded for eternity that we know what you have done.

Content in this post includes references to the problematic sovereign citizen superconspiracy themes identified above. Person 2's story describes the struggle against a powerful and corrupt government, the revelation of a hidden truth, the secret criminality of the existing system, and the threat of punishment for complicity for those who support the system. The theme of being duped or conned by agents of government and the legal system is prevalent. Aside from the oblique reference to the Australian Government being a corporation, there is little explicit detail in the post which reveals its conceptual foundations in the sovereign citizen superconspiracy. Person 2 posted far more inflammatory and detailed superconspiracy content on David Icke's website in October 2021 (Icke, 2021). This post is not only relevant for its content but also because of where it sits. David Icke is a known conspiracy theorist and wrote several books setting out 'evidence' in support of problematic superconspiracies. Toseland (2019) in his thesis on conspiracist communities (or 'Truthseekers' in emic terms) in the United Kingdom, recounts one conspiracist's description of Icke as the 'Kindergarten of the occult', referring to Icke being a regular entry-level influencer of many adherents in the community. Toseland (2019, p. 45) goes on to say:

A fundamental characteristic of superconspiracies such as Icke's is the attribution of nefarious, evil motivations to the controlling forces. This is an essential qualification of the design/control dimension [of conspiracy thinking]; the controllers do not exercise power beneficently but for their own benefit at the expense of humankind.

Toseland's observations on Icke and his role in promulgating superconspiracies also permeates the discourse of influencers like Person 2 who provide much of the influential content in the Australian OSTF online community. Person 2's social media posts are rife with claims that 'powerful people' are conspiring against humanity with false vaccines and fake rights in native title 'contracts' (Icke, 2023). Antisemitic and threatening hate speech is common (but not universal) in sovereign citizen discourse. In a post on BitChute (an alt-tech video hosting site that promotes its platform as offering freedom of expression and hosts many channels containing conspiracies and hate speech; Trujillo et al., 2020), Person 2 begins by claiming there have been forced vaccinations and subsequent fatalities in the remote Northern Territory Aboriginal community of Robinson River.<sup>vii</sup> Person 2's views eventually evolve into anti-Semitic claims that Jewish people control the world and abuse children. In the post Person 2 states (Icke, 2021),

They're happy to wipe out 15 million Australian people in the process ... The Freemasons are nothing but the foot-soldiers for the Zionist Jews that are running this shit.

To all you Zionist Jews that look at us as Goyim, trying to wipe out us the people, and trying to take out my sovereign tribal people in the process—your days are numbered too. People will be coming for you. Justice will be served. You think you can wipe out the entire planet? And genocide 95% of the planet and get away with it? ... We are standing against the tyranny that you Zionist Jews, and Freemasons, you child-raping dogs.

Person 1, the founder of the OSTF, also espoused hate speech to a responsive crowd on the lawns of Parliament House at a rally conducted with the United Australia Party in March 2022 (Nathan, 2022). His comments were met with antisemitic cries from the crowd. Person 1 (BitChute, 2020) said,

I notice there's a lot of people here today wandering around with the red and the blue flags. That piece of shit that's in the corner of that flag is the Union Jack, the union of Jacob, represents three or it is three Hebrew tribal flags. And if you're worried about their standing under the Jews and what they represent, that's what you're standing under when you carry that flag.

Such hate speech is not found on the OSTF Facebook page. Much of the content on that page is curated to invite people to become involved in positive relationship-building or empowering Indigenous experiences by, for example, promoting cultural experiences in remote areas of Arnhem Land. With this first interaction, people have no reason to suspect that they are in fact taking initial steps to engage with a community heavily influenced by extremists who espouse hate speech and threaten race-based violence. The OSTF does include content designed to capture sentiment and engender further research into some of the more pervasive superconspiracies, such as the 2:36 min 'missing children awareness video' with no speech, but images of grieving adults and children (some behind bars), and statistics on missing children worldwide (OSTF, 2022).<sup>viii</sup> This is a clear reference to the Pizzagate and #SaveTheChildren conspiracy theories, which imagines that a globally powerful elite systemically kidnap, enslave, abuse and (in some versions) undertake satanic rituals upon thousands or hundreds of thousands of children.<sup>ix</sup>

In an analysis of the relationship between belief in conspiracy theories and violent extremism, Basit (2021, p. 3) observes that both conspiracy communities and violent extremist groups exhibit '...



an “us versus them” world view where a sharp in-group and out-group distinction, punctuated by distrust and polarization, exists’, and further that ‘conspiracy theories are linked to threat perception, prejudices and negative attitudes about powerful outgroups’. Basit (2021) concludes that conspiracy theories are exploited (perhaps even weaponised) by violent extremist groups and can function as a means to enable radicalisation. Particularly effective are conspiracy theories with strong emotional appeal, such as those relating to the abuse of children or what Basit terms ‘victimhood narratives’ (2021, p. 4). The OSTF conviction that native title is a means to practice genocide on Aboriginal people is an example of a victimhood narrative promoted by Australian OSTF influencers.

According to Basit (2021, p. 5), three factors lead to violent extremism: ‘(i) grievances; (ii) culprit for the grievances; (iii) suitability of violence to address the grievances’. In the case of the problematic superconspiratorial content promoted by OSTF, the grievance is clearly identified as a scheme by an illegitimate corporation posing as the Australian Government (the culprit) to practice genocide on Aboriginal people including through the native title process. In the minds of some OSTF influencers, violence may be considered suitable to address the grievance (as suggested by the threatening speeches from OSTF leaders such as Person 2). There is no clear example or demonstration of the third element in Basit’s equation linked to native title processes as yet. Viewed through the lens provided by Basit and drawing on the experience of law enforcement in the United States and recent police shootings in Australia, it would be a mistake to discount the possibility that the sovereign citizen-inspired disinformation amplified by OSTF influencers could lead to violent action in Australia.

## 5 | CALL FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Learning how to manage, negotiate and/or navigate through multiple worldviews, including worldviews influenced by problematic superconspiracies, is an essential skill in working across legal, cultural and historical contexts. The role of a native title anthropologist requires an appreciation of and openness to understanding diverse, including at times challenging, worldviews. The emergence of a small minority of individuals in Australia who hold problematic sovereign citizen superconspiracy beliefs has the potential to impact the current and future work of practitioners involved in native title claims. Taplin, a native title anthropologist, observed several claimants withdraw their participation from native title anthropological research in 2022, and attended meetings in which sovereign citizen rhetoric was advanced aggressively and disrupted the decision-making process of native title claim groups. Setting aside arguments as to the efficacy or legitimacy of the native title process, the authors contend that native title claimants are entitled to make decisions in relation to native title processes on the basis of accurate information, and that native title practitioners have a professional obligation to counter disinformation where it disrupts informed decision-making (including disinformation inspired by sovereign citizen rhetoric). It may be that specific training would be useful for practitioners to handle situations where points of difference are clearly being verbalised from a ‘self’ and ‘other’ perspective, where the ‘other’ is described as taking on villainous qualities stemming from illegitimate power being used to corrupt everyday citizens. It is important for practitioners to have the skill to discuss the underlying concerns of stakeholders, which may stem from complex social challenges, distrust and anger at current legal, political and social structures, and participants’ subscription to groups who are calling for significant systemic change. A complex cultural narrative informs current behaviour (that may include high conflict, high emotion, and escalating use of power and protest) and includes elements that are not

influenced by problematic conspiracy theories. Effectively working across worldviews requires recognising that individuals have hopes and aspirations for an imagined future that looks different from their current realities and may look different from the future imagined by other people (including oneself). It also requires a practitioner to recognise when a client is influenced or radicalised by the sovereign citizen superconspiracy. This paper has highlighted the concern that individuals influenced by problematic superconspiracy beliefs, if left unchecked, may become radicalised, and persuade others to the superconspiracy. Once involved in the superconspiracy community, seemingly moderate online content may lead to consumption of more problematic content including that espousing anti-government sentiment and hate speech. Such superconspiracies content undermines not only the native title process, but the underlying tenets of liberal-democratic societies. We note that the increase in the influence of the sovereign citizen superconspiracy described herein presents a significantly broader set of challenges to Australian society than just those discussed here in relation to native title, and suggest that these observations warrant a call for a broader government response.

Within native title anthropology networks, discussion of the impact of sovereign citizen rhetoric is increasing. To date, there is only anecdotal evidence that sovereign citizen rhetoric is a harmful or disruptive force in the native title sector; a next step is to gather data in relation to the phenomenon. There are many legitimate personal, social and political reasons a person may choose to either disrupt, refuse or disengage from a native title claim in which they hold an interest in their traditional law and custom. The concern of the authors in this paper is to highlight that in some cases, disruptive or disengaged persons might be influenced by exposure to disinformation, which is systematised as a superconspiracy and consequently has the potential to influence a person's worldview. This raises at least two imperatives for further research; the first is to advance understanding of why the sovereign citizen superconspiracy resonates with native title claimants and how sovereign citizen rhetoric subsequently shapes people's beliefs and behaviour, and the second imperative is to provide support to native title practitioners who are working with sovereign citizen superconspiracists. It is our hope that this paper will prompt the framing of questions and issues for further and more substantive targeted field research projects with established methodologies and research ethics in place. Further specific research into whether or how practitioners should engage with or even refute disinformation, and how practitioners are best placed to support individual or group decision-making where disinformation is a disruptive influence, would assist practitioners and stakeholders working in the native title arena.

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## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>i</sup> OSTF may continue to promote such content, but the ongoing activity of OSTF is not the subject of this paper.
- <sup>ii</sup> QAnon is a political conspiracy movement originating in the United States, that 'At its heart ... is a wide-ranging, completely unfounded theory that says that President Trump is waging a secret war against elite Satan-worshipping paedophiles in government, business and the media', <<https://www.bbc.com/news/53498434>>. QAnon has developed into a superconspiracy that includes misinformation and false claims about, for example, vaccines, mask-wearing, Black Lives Matter issues and sex-trafficking. Pizzagate describes a conspiracy theory that high-ranking members of the Democratic Party in the United States were involved in human trafficking and a child sex ring operating out of a Washington pizza restaurant, Wendling 2021; BBC trending 2016. <<https://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-38156985>>
- <sup>iii</sup> 'Christian Identity, is built around three beliefs ... that white Aryans are descendants of the biblical tribes of Israel and thus are on earth to do God's work; that Jews are completely unconnected to the Israelites and are actually children of the Devil, the literal biological offspring of a sexual relationship between Satan and Eve in the Garden of Eden; and that the world is on the verge of a final apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, in which Aryans must do battle with the Jewish conspiracy—an international conspiracy designed to destroy the United States—so that the world can be redeemed' (Weeber, 1999, p. 58). Weeber discusses the relationship and history of the links between Christian identity preachers and terrorist patriotic militias in the United States. The Christian Identity movement is also discussed by Schamber and Stroud (2000).
- <sup>iv</sup> An imagined alternative court system based on the interpretation of certain ideas, laws and documents (such as the Bible, and the Magna Carta) which are believed to supersede existing judicial system. Belief in 'common law' is shared amongst a broader school of 'pseudolaw' than is represented by the sovereign citizen conspiracists. In America, 'common law' as used by a SovCit refers to an interpretive mix of what is believed to be legitimate or superior legal concepts and phrases from various sources such as the Bible, the Magna Carta and the Constitution. We (the authors) have heard the phrase used in the same way in North Queensland Barrows, (2021).
- <sup>v</sup> The Tent Embassy was established on 26 January 1972 (Australia Day) on the lawns opposite Parliament House in Canberra, in protest for Indigenous land rights. By 1992 the Tent Embassy was a permanent presence in the same location. Protesters continue to advocate Indigenous Land Rights, and other issue including Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. More information about the Tent Embassy can be accessed at the National Museum of Australia, <<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/aboriginal-tent-embassy>>.
- <sup>vi</sup> This video may no longer be available online but the corresponding author retains a recording.
- <sup>vii</sup> This video may no longer be available online but the corresponding author retains a recording.
- <sup>viii</sup> This video may no longer be available online but the corresponding author retains a recording.
- <sup>ix</sup> #SaveTheChildren campaign was popularised by the online QAnon conspiracy movement using misinformation, misleading statistics, fear and anger to raise awareness of child sex trafficking by appropriating anti-trafficking narratives with false claims that high-ranking Democratic Party members and Hollywood elites were involved in global child-trafficking Roose (2020). <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/12/technology/qanon-save-the-children-trafficking.html>>.

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