

Mobile relations and temporal politics: Navigating the case for Indigenous nationhood and the ethos of the open society

Adrian Little^{1,*} and Sana Nakata²

¹School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, 3010, Australia

²Indigenous Education & Research Centre, James Cook University, Bebegu Yumba campus, Douglas, Queensland, 4811, Australia

*Corresponding author. School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville, Victoria, 3010, Australia. E-mail: little@unimelb.edu.au

Abstract

Recent years have witnessed growing interest in Indigenous philosophies focused on deep ontological and epistemological *relationships* between Indigenous peoples and their lands, seas, and environments. These relationships transcend traditional temporal orderings—linear sequencing of past, present and future—and challenge possessive notions of ownership that characterize the logic of the modern state. Such statist assumptions of fixity and possession are reflected powerfully in the ways in which states have used bordering as a mechanism for migration control. This article interrogates the compatibility between advocacy for greater international mobility and migration on one hand and strengthening Indigenous nationhood on the other from the perspective of political theory, including Indigenous theories. The concept of relational ontology provides a pathway to mitigate potential tensions between a position that is grounded in openness and mobility in one domain and one which focuses more on deep connectedness to particular territories and the claims they engender. Against prominent arguments in the migration literature suggesting that place-based perspectives are inherently part of a problematic ‘sedentarist metaphysic’, we draw on both Indigenous relational theory and Bergson’s ethos of the ‘open society’ to articulate an approach in which relations are understood as deep but radically incomplete. Rather than seeing advocacy for Indigenous nationhood and arguments for more open international borders as a contradiction in terms, an approach to mobility which builds upon openness, relational ontologies, and radical incompleteness derived from Indigenous temporalities contains the possibility of a new politics of migration.

Keywords: indigenous, relations, mobility, temporality, open society.

Over the last twenty years there has been a substantial growth in academic literature focused on the role of borders in contemporary politics and society. Scholarly work in this field ranges from debates on the plight of refugees and asylum seekers at nation-state borders (McNevin 2022; Pallister-Wilkins 2022), to the increasingly securitized nature of these debates and the physical infrastructure of border zones (Bigo 2014; Little and Vaughan-Williams 2017; Squire 2020), through to more anthropological studies of the nature of relationships in borderlands—often across as well as within nation-state boundaries. This

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latter literature focused on mobility across borders often draws on cases from regions such as Africa and central Asia to demonstrate the shortcomings of approaches governed by methodological nationalism and statism (Bakewell 2008; Goodhand 2008; Novak 2011; Klem 2018). As a result of the emergence of critical border studies, it has become increasingly clear that borders which are construed in a simplistic fashion focused on the primacy of established nation-state boundaries can no longer be presumed to be ‘natural’. Instead, they reflect a range of assumptions, fabrications or colonial practices that do not stand up well to critical scrutiny. Under the influence of theorists such as Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, the temporal dimension of bordering and mobility—in both theoretical and practical terms—has been a more recent concern of critical border studies alongside its more traditional spatial focus (Parker 2009; Ozguc and Little 2023).

Contemporaneously, the twenty-first century has witnessed increased attention directed towards much older—but long neglected—Indigenous knowledges focused on the ways in which First Nations¹ have predicated their ontologies and epistemologies on relationships with particular territories and the human, non-human, spiritual, and environmental connections that reside therein (De la Cadena 2010). In some cases, this literature has dealt with cases whereby Indigenous people are considered relatively unitary, although that is not to say lacking diversity (Hoskins 2012). In many others however, First Nations are understood to be comprised of diverse political systems, and the construction of Indigenous peoples as a singular group has been damaging to the understanding of Indigenous diversity and connection to *specific* places for *different* peoples.

Two points need to be stressed here in relationship to extant Indigenous scholarship: first, Indigenous claims need to be understood as reflections of specific social and political communities rather than as the demands of just another ‘culture’ within a (super)diverse society (Vertovec 2023), and, second, that Indigenous communities are internally diverse which overlays their politics with an additional dimension of complexity that resists essentialist understandings of their place-based political claims. We will highlight contemporary debates in the Torres Strait over border crossings between Australia and Papua New Guinea, which reveal how Indigenous communities engage with migration policy in complex ways. The border is an artifice of colonial states, specifically the annexation of Papua New Guinea and the Torres Straits to the state of Queensland and later the independence of Papua New Guinea, which resulted in a new international border. As we discuss, Torres Strait Islanders intervened directly in international treaty negotiations concerning the placement of the border and work to retain mobility to sustain customary practices in the region. However, this can also result in tensions regarding the management of the state border as an asylum seeker crossing.

In cases of settler colonialism, the scholarly focus on the violence perpetrated by the state has often drawn attention away from the intrinsic value of the Indigenous knowledges which colonialism has attempted to eradicate. In particular, there has been less focus on the ways in which, in pre-colonial times, place-based ontologies coupled with transitory seasonal migration patterns *required* relationships not only with place and the local environment, but also other Indigenous peoples and overseas traders (Konishi 2018; Russell 2018; Ormond-Parker 2020). In this vein, rather than being sedentary and immobile, Indigenous philosophy has typically coupled place-based thinking with an explicit concern for mobility. As scholars like Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Madeline Whetung demonstrate, Indigenous philosophies can conceptualize existence as mobile *and* deeply rooted in place, revealing how place-based ontologies still require movement and connection across land and sea (Simpson 2017; Whetung 2019). In Australia, this is reflected in sophisticated mobility systems that enabled Aboriginal movement for ceremonial and trading purposes, such as the use of song lines across the Australian continent and protocols for visiting between different nations both on the mainland and beyond the continent’s shoreline (Fuller, Norris, and Trudgett 2014; Norris and Harney 2014; Konishi 2018; Russell

2018; Kemp et al., 2022). Moreover, through the course of the settler colonial enterprise, Indigenous people have experienced forceable displacement from their lands which means that frequently they too live on the lands of other Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Each generation of Indigenous peoples must now find ways to navigate these complex and changing relations both in place (Watkin Lui 2012; Ponton 2018) and online (Good 2021). Therefore, when we refer to 'relations' in Indigenous theory, we are not referring to a singular set of ontological and epistemological practices or simplistic understandings that all Indigenous peoples live on the territory they are Indigenous to. Rather, Indigenous thought involves relations with a range of human and non-human entities including specific environments, ancestors and future generations, other Indigenous peoples, settlers, migrants, international visitors and traders, and so on.²

In this article, we tackle the potentially contradictory logic of two theoretical positions that are commonly held together in contemporary scholarship (Sharma 2013; Bauder 2020, Chatterjee and Gupta 2020). The *first* argument suggests that we should challenge the over-determination of nation-state borders and view the state as a set of institutions and practices that at best denigrates and at worst exercises extreme physical violence against vulnerable migrants seeking entry (Squire 2020; Pallister-Wilkins 2022). In normative terms, this perspective might imply that state borders should be more permeable or that states have an obligation to protect or provide humanitarian assistance to those persecuted in other parts of the world. The *second* position implies that we should venerate and institutionalize the connection of Indigenous communities to specific lands or territories and thereby accord exceptional status to peoples with cultural connections to specific places (see Alfred 1995; Arat-Koc 2020). Even if these two propositions are not an outright contradiction (though we suspect some in the popular media would see it as such), there is a potential tension between these narratives insofar as one is implicitly focused on openness and the need for greater potential for movement across borders, while the other accords status to particular peoples specifically focused on the longevity of their historical connections. The challenge for theorists juggling with these two instincts is how to respect place and to seek forms of self-determination for peoples due to their connections to the land and sea, while simultaneously transcending over-determined spatiality when it comes to the exclusionary and violent activity of the state.

While one legitimate method of connecting these two perspectives may be through a direct and more traditional critique of the colonial state, in this article an alternative theoretical account is developed focused on the *intrinsic* theoretical perspectives of Indigenous philosophies vis-à-vis advocates of the 'open society' such as Bergson and Deleuze (Baugh 2016). We argue that both approaches invoke theories of *temporality* that help us to rethink our approach to spatiality especially when it comes to questions of mobility. For both Bergson and Deleuze the open society is one oriented towards the possibility of a different future in society 'to come' rather than the banal constraints of a static and sedentarist nationalism (Deleuze 1991), while longstanding Indigenous philosophies (noting that Indigenous peoples and their knowledge practices are diverse rather than monolithic) emphasize relational ontologies grounded in place. Rather than being sedentary, these Indigenous connections to place evolve over the course of time as relationships unfold both within and outside those places as people move between them. To be clear, there is still considerable merit in approaches which focus on the misdemeanours of the colonial state (in societies that have experienced various forms of colonial violence) as a way of navigating this terrain, but we contend that there is an alternative and valuable way of approaching the topic which posits a positive account of the concepts of mobility, openness and relations as its foundation grounded in longstanding Indigenous philosophies and scholarship.

In this article, we begin by focusing initially on these themes as they appeared in the early twentieth century and which have been more recently integrated into critical border and mobility studies (Biasiori 2023), before upsetting these more linear, chronological accounts

to demonstrate how some of these ideas had a much earlier provenance in Indigenous philosophy. Against more linear, progressive forms of theory-building whereby scholars simply construct new theories based upon theoretical scholarship that has gone before, we demonstrate a more reflexive method whereby contemporary scholarship is considered as a way of opening the theoretical toolbox to explore ideas which preceded contemporary debate, but were neglected. In so doing, we demonstrate the very non-linearity that is a feature of temporal thinking as a method and clarify the ways in which ideas from times and places long ignored can be brought to bear on contemporary debates in innovative ways.

The article suggests that a theory of political temporality informed by relational ontology may be a productive mechanism for managing the tension between exclusive and inclusive forms of bordering (Little 2022). Based on engagement with temporal theories (Bergson 1910; Deleuze 1991), the argument proposes a theory of temporal politics that connects with relational ontology in such a way that the movement of time is understood in subjective terms dependent on the engagement and lived experience of competing perspectives on the speed, tempo, and duration of socio-political change and the overlapping, relational nature of past, present, and future. In line with this approach, all political subjects and objects of political debate are part of a relational process of becoming (Connolly 2011) including the constructed boundaries that contain them. Borders are constituted through relational processes between those on the inside, those on the outside and those on the cusp and the relationship between particular peoples, migration, and their (im)mobility over time is both uneven and dynamic.³ Place-based boundaries and borders are therefore radically incomplete, even where they contribute to millennia of cosmological meanings and experiences for certain groups. What might be the outcomes if these theories of relations were applied directly to mobility debates?⁴

At this point it is important to distinguish between a theory of mobile relations (founded on Indigenous philosophy) and some of the more orthodox theoretical frameworks used to analyse migration. There are two important characteristics that frame this distinction. First, migration has typically been viewed through an anthropocentric lens whereby the object of study is the human (and their cultural affiliations) moving between points located in different countries or states (Malkki 1992; Ehrenfeld 2025). As we shall see, a theory of mobile relations challenges this anthropocentric approach (and even more recent variations in migration theory such as transnationalism) by locating humans within a broader network of relations that go beyond people and nation-states to focus on relations with the natural environment, past, and present generations, and subnational communities (Ozguç and Little 2023). Second, theories of migration are often implicitly or explicitly methodologically nationalist and are underpinned by a 'sedentarist' logic that pathologizes mobility, especially when it is undertaken by certain social groups with lower capacity for 'acceptable' forms of cross-border movement defined by factors including race and class (Bakewell 2008; Moret 2020; Zehfuss 2024; Ehrenfeld 2025). Indeed, Zehfuss points to the importance of temporality in debates about migration to combat overly spatio-territorial and/or methodologically nationalist approaches. She points to a different 'chronopolitics' affecting marginalized groups such as migrants when we rely on the relatively static assumptions (both temporal and spatial) that underpin much migration theory (Zehfuss 2024). As we shall see in the second half of the article, Indigenous philosophy invokes a particular chronopolitics which has only been considered at the margins of contemporary debates on (im)mobility and in migration studies more broadly.

Our temporal approach is challenging for the politics of migration in the modern nation-state precisely because the argument is well-attuned to some of the theory and practices of Indigenous politics. For all the diversity of Indigenous peoples, many Indigenous communities have negotiated nationhood with other First Nations groups, sometimes moving across First Nation boundaries. Today, Indigenous peoples around the world have the common experience of negotiating their nationhood with the colonial state (in settler colonial

contexts) or with modern borders that reflect the organization of former colonies (e.g. across the African continent). In these various movements, we can understand Indigenous relationalities in a way that is neither static nor atemporal. Moreover, First Nations are often better equipped to navigate legal and political plurality than modern nation-states which have often emerged from particular constitutive moments rather than a range of overlapping processes over a much longer period of time (Patton 2010). Lastly, many Indigenous peoples have a much more relational sense of themselves in general through deep ontological connections to land, water, and environment, through histories of engaging with other human subjects (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous), and, latterly, through navigating sustainable pathways for themselves in the face of the destructive power of the modern nation-state (Coulthard and Simpson 2016).

We draw on Indigenous theories from around the globe to inform this analysis, while grounding it in the particular context of Sana Nakata's community, the Torres Strait Islands at the northernmost tip of the Australian continent. An archipelago of over 200 islands, the Torres Strait provides a sea passage between the Coral and Arafura Seas, and beyond them the Indian and Pacific Oceans. Long before European voyagers and British missionaries used the passage to move between the Indian and Pacific oceans, it enabled economic, social, and cultural connections between the peoples of the Papua New Guinean highlands to the north, and the many Aboriginal nations to the mainland on the south (Douglas 1886; Osborne 2009). Following colonization, the region was of strategic geopolitical value in the imperial relations between Britain and Japan, and the Torres Strait would become shaped by Japanese, south-east Asian and South Sea Islander migration (Ganter 1994). Despite this history of being a strategic site for trade and diplomatic relations, the scholarly corpus on the Torres Strait Islands and its peoples remains small. This informs the selection of sources utilized, with the inclusion of Sana Nakata's family-held traditional knowledge and contemporary news reports, supplementing the global Indigenous scholarship drawn upon for the broader analysis.

Having provided the background and context in this introduction, the remainder of the article proceeds through two stages. The first section begins with a necessarily short introduction to the key theorists of temporality, Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze in particular, to highlight the major concepts of the theory of temporal politics and how they have influenced critical border studies. The second section discusses Indigenous conceptions of relations to demonstrate the key ontological and epistemological claims they advance. The concluding section brings the two together to highlight commonalities which can inform a different politics of human mobility—what we call *mobile relations*. The article concludes that rather than seeing the advocacy for Indigenous nationhood as necessarily place-based and therefore sedentarist (Malkki 1992)⁵ and arguments for greater mobility across international borders as a contradiction in terms, the former might actually help us to establish political opportunities for the latter. In other words, an approach to bordering and mobility which builds upon openness, relational ontologies, and radical incompleteness derived from Indigenous temporalities, contains the possibility of a new politics of migration explicitly established against sedentarist approaches. This structure is deliberately chosen to unsettle linear theory-building. Blockages in contemporary thought might be tackled more innovatively if we are prepared to return to ideas and practices of other times and places for guidance on tackling the challenges of the present. Perhaps rather than relying on caricatures of 'rhetorics of indigeneness' (Malkki 1995: 512), we would do better to engage with historical Indigenous scholarship, its articulations of substantive forms of Indigenous knowledge and its conceptualizations of mobility.

1. Temporal politics and mobility

The initial theoretical framing of the article revolves around the work of early twentieth century philosopher Henri Bergson and the reinvigoration of his work by Gilles Deleuze

(1991) in the latter part of the century. These theories were to prove influential in the emergence of critical border studies in the last two decades insofar as they provided a challenge to fixity, stability, and methodological nationalism. Two particular Bergsonian concepts are most relevant to debates on (im)mobility because they focus on relationality between human subjects and their material environments: first, ‘open and closed societies’, and second, ‘time and becoming’. We connect these ideas to Deleuzian theory to demonstrate the importance of relational thinking in the contemporary politics of borders and migration. This will foreshadow the discussion of Indigenous relations in the second half of the article and the centring of Indigenous philosophy in debates on mobility that we propose.

While other parts of his philosophy may be more well-known, a distinctive feature of Bergson’s philosophy lies in his discussion of open and closed societies (Bergson 1935). For Bergson, the model of a closed society is one in which we imagine a static community that is one dimensional in nature and does not change. A closed society engenders monoculturalism, limited engagement with external actors or states, and a lack of awareness of the benefits of change. For Bergson, these societies are self-obsessed and become imprisoned within their own enclosures. The modern state is a clear expression of these kinds of communities, which are primarily concerned with self-preservation. Borders become important markers of closed societies as they are frontiers which become idealized for their protective function in securing closed societies from the threats of external actors that challenge their *modus vivendi*. This enables closed societies to reject responsibility for or obligation towards others that do not exist within the boundaries of the state. Most importantly, closed societies engender a mindset that precludes transformation in their constitutive body, the people. According to Bergson (1935: 229), the members of the closed society ‘hold together, caring nothing for the rest of humanity, on the alert for attack or defence, bound, in fact, to a perpetual alert readiness for a battle’.

Bergson juxtaposes this description of the closed society with the idea of the open society: ‘the society which is deemed in principle to embrace all humanity’ (Bergson 1935: 230). Here he imagines a society which is more amenable to engagement with others and regards those on the outside of borders as people to be embraced as interlocutors or those from whom we can learn, rather than as outsiders that we need to be protected from or people to be ostracized. In this sense, the open society is one that is open to change; it understands the evolving nature of its own constituent power, and is willing to learn from the perspectives of others. It is both humble in its epistemic foundations and optimistic in its disposition towards the world. Bergson’s approach is not reflective of a utopia of openness—the creation of a world which it would be as hard to imagine in our time as it was in his—but rather a way of imagining and cultivating a disposition or ethos which can facilitate greater openness to alternative perspectives than our own over the course of time.

It is important to highlight that the pursuit of the definitive open society is not Bergson’s objective; indeed, by his own definition, it would not be possible. Instead, he recognizes that all societies are a mixture of ‘open and closed tendencies’ (Power 2012: 190). At best, we might profess the desirability of openness and press for measures that counteract closure, but no society will ever be simply one or the other. The fact that no societies are impervious to influence from those on the outside and that internal social relations are complex and variable ensures that, at best, the ‘open society’ may be something we are moving towards, but always with counteracting forces of closure in coexistence. Vibrant societies are always in the process of becoming and these developments can lead in more open or closed directions. Indeed, it is quite possible that different beliefs, actions, and policies in various spheres of society may be pulling in opposite directions. Therefore, the open/closed distinction is not a simple juxtaposition of contrary forces, but rather terrain to be navigated in the facilitation of greater mobility between different societies.

Bergson’s ‘open society’ invites readers to imagine worlds that are not confined by static borders and boundaries and in which individuals and communities are not conceived as

defined by fixed cultures. Not only is the open society concerned with mobility in terms of human movement, but also mobility of the *relationships* social actors have with a multiplicity of others across a range of social differences and beliefs. The 'open society' then is focused on a dynamic understanding of diversity and generosity; it is as defined by the quality of its internal relationships as it is by its engagement with and openness towards those beyond its boundaries. For Bergson (1935: 27), the open society is not simply the transition from 'love of country' to 'love of mankind' as if the two are mutually exclusive. He never seeks simply to replace one order with another. Rather, his interest is in the 'constitutional logic of multiplicities', the movement, the indeterminacy, and plurality (Deleuze 1991: 117). For Bergson, the open society is not an end in itself, but more a representation of a reality whereby society is in a mode of constant transformation. This notion of 'becoming' challenges scholars to embrace uncertainty as a condition that provides opportunities for creative political action including increased mobility beyond borders.

While Bergson's discussion of open and closed societies is pivotal for our argument here, he is undoubtedly better known for his work on time and becoming. Against linear depictions of the passage of time (past-present-future), Bergson invokes the idea that multiple temporal phenomena coexist, overlap and connect with one another. He deploys this concept of multiplicity to suggest that such is the temporal overlap between a range of changing social phenomena that they can never be simply enumerated or quantified by merely distinguishing them from one another (Bergson 1910: 105). Importantly, this implies that all temporal phenomena are imbued with an *ineliminable relationality*, a perspective which, as we will see, resonates with aspects of Indigenous philosophy. Both theories infer that the passage of time is much more complex than linear or sequential movement from past to present to future. Instead, the 'now' of the present is always deeply connected to its past and future and the movement between these temporal domains is interpreted inter-subjectively or relationally. There is no objective, homogeneous passage between these phases of time and their duration is contested. This infers that political subjects are related to one another, mobile rather than sedentary, and that they are all in a process of becoming.

For Bergson, historical accounts are not simple retellings of 'completed' events, actions and their outcomes, but rather dynamic reflections which have ramifications for the present and future. In Bergsonian terms, the challenge is to recognize and incorporate the unpredictability and incompleteness of political subjects and events, while also recognizing the unknowability of their future state and relinquishing certainty about their provenance. Bergson's conception of political change invites scholars to dispense with static categories and certainty to provide a much more open and undefined sense of the future: a sense of the future characterized as much by regression or reinterpretation of the past as it is by sequential progressive development. This is where Bergson and Deleuze are particularly relevant to discussions of bordering and mobility. Openness, mobility, and becoming are difficult concepts to operationalize in a political lexicon informed by sedentary outlooks prioritizing fixity and certainty. However, the concept of becoming has come to the fore again more recently with theorists emphasizing the relational, fluid, and interactive elements of politics rather than relying on more static accounts of sequences and causality (Connolly 2011: 168). Indeed, Bergsonian thinking has been deployed by Deleuze and others to reflect on the ways in which societies 'come together' in not entirely predictable ways (including dynamics of mobility and immobility), rather than viewing social progress as emanating from an engagement across difference over time towards pre-determined ends. This nomadological approach has a strong relational dimension because it envisages temporal change evolving through flows with, across and against different currents and counter-currents including static conceptions of borders (Ehrenfeld 2025).

In summary then, Bergson's conceptions of time, becoming, and the distinction between open and closed societies invite scholars to reconsider the fundamentals of key issues such as borders, mobility, and migration afresh as has been the case in critical border studies

(Ozguç and Little 2023). In particular, they encourage us to consider processes in *relational* terms rather than merely accepting the fixity of borders or the authority of nation-state governments to simply exclude those seeking to enter ‘their’ territory. Importantly, it is here that we can delineate complementarities between Bergsonian thought and Indigenous philosophy insofar as the latter has been explicitly engaged with cosmologies which rest upon relational ontologies and epistemologies. Rather than seeing Indigenous philosophies as an outlier or ‘Other’ to contemporary political theory, we contend that there are significant areas of overlap and interrelation especially if we relinquish sequential, progressive understandings of the acquisition of knowledge and put Indigenous and non-Indigenous philosophy into meaningful and productive conversation. When it comes to major political issues like mobility and migration, there might be much to learn from Indigenous philosophies in both methodological and substantive terms rather than just simply treating them as a different way of seeing the world or reflective of a different temporal era. In the second part of the article, we turn to precisely this task of engaging Indigenous philosophies to identify a new politics of mobility based on Indigenous relationism.

2. Border work: Indigenous relationality in theory and practice

If contemporary theories of temporality challenge the fixity and overdetermination of nation-state boundaries and attendant restrictions on mobility, how can they simultaneously underpin a politics that supports theories of Indigenous nationhood? And when Indigenous philosophies emphasize place-based cosmologies, how can they contribute to theories of mobility and migration? Whilst these questions may appear paradoxical at first glance, we argue that it may be productive to bring these two perspectives together.

We have highlighted how Bergson’s understanding of societal openness and closure rests upon relational dynamics between actors within and beyond borders. Rather than romanticizing the ethos of open society as an ideal end point, Bergson provides the temporal terrain for theorizing mobile relations in non-sedentary terms. From this position, we can counter dominant historical, cultural, and anthropological inscriptions of Indigenous peoples as uniquely sedentary by examining their relationships to place, people, and time. While Malkki (1992: 28), problematizes the ‘ecological immobility’ these inscriptions produce, her primary interest is not in rendering these inscriptions as inaccurate or problematic for Indigenous peoples, but in how the sedentary logics they sustain present problems for mobility (particularly for refugees). Where Malkki (1992) uses Indigenous ‘rootedness’ to highlight the constraints of a sedentary metaphysics for mobility, we demonstrate Indigenous philosophy as an alternate framework that helps to alleviate these constraints.

Indigenous relations to place cannot be reduced to a sedentary logic. To be ontologically grounded in place, as we demonstrate in the examples below, is neither analogous nor reducible to fixed and static connections to place. We resist Malkki’s botanical metaphors that describe Indigenous place-connections as static ‘rootedness’. Instead, we emphasize relational dynamics to reveal that Indigenous place-based ontologies can also encompass mobility and change. By examining border work practices, we show how Indigenous philosophy and practice both precede and exceed sedentary logics of mobility. We aim to show that this non-linear and non-chronological engagement offers a renewed representation of Indigenous relationality, and develops our notion of mobile relations.

Rather than accepting the ways that borders feature in contemporary migration debates (Little 2015), it is more productive to focus less on the existence of borders, to concentrate more heavily on the *work that those borders do in practice*. Here, examining bordering in Indigenous communities proves instructive (Lightfoot and Stamatopoulou 2024). Contrary to the strong border narratives that dominate global political debates, many nation-state borders around the world are highly permeable especially in parts of Africa and central Asia, so it often makes as much sense to think of borderlands as spaces of engagement

rather than the 'hard' borders which dominate many border debates (Korf and Raeymaekers 2013; Agier 2016; Ahmed 2024; Ruiz 2024). Water borders exemplify this multiplicity, operating simultaneously in ways that are neither paradoxical nor contradictory. Water embodies new possibilities in terms of flow and connectivity (see Nishnaabeg 'shoreline law' in Whetung 2019). Ultimately, borders become what governments make of them and some are more amenable to fortress mentalities and militarization than others. For example, there are challenges in countries with only maritime borders such as Australia compared to the extreme measures advocated by the Trump administration in the USA to prevent mobility. Even these dynamics are fluid: borders can be more or less open according to the political climate of the day and are more permeable for some migrants than others. Within these dynamics, Indigenous practices capture tendencies both towards closure and openness (Karp 2023; Lightfoot 2024). Our contention is that this issue is thrown into sharp relief by examining bordering in the context of societies such as Australia (and other settler colonial states) which contain diverse Indigenous communities.

Indigenous nationhood provides a highly differentiated yet broadly similar relational ontology when examined in contexts such as Australia (Brigg, Graham, and Weber 2022). These ontologies are predicated on historical connections to place traceable for over 60,000 years (Clarkson et al., 2017), with new relational forms that address modern challenges such as climate change (McGaughey, Maguire, and Purcell 2023; Schuijers 2023) and the politics of First Nations within the new colonial nation-state. While grounded in time immemorial, Indigenous ontologies are not static or monolithic. The relationships they are predicated upon and the mobilities that emerge between them are living and dynamic (Watkin Lui 2012). Consequently, Indigenous politics is often conducted in a different temporal register to that of the settler state. In Australia, where settler politics takes the arrival of the First Fleet and the assertion of *terra nullius* as the starting point of modern Australia (Watson 2014), the continent's Indigenous peoples trace back a much longer historical trajectory in which the past informs understandings of both the present and future. Indigenous time scapes therefore typically demonstrate a less linear conceptualization of time than settler perspectives, with the obvious claims to not only deep histories but also less obvious claims to much greater longevity.

Indigenous time scapes are but one expression of non-linear temporality where past, present, and future interact to inform and shape everyday practices: ceremonies that connect ancestral knowledge to new generations of knowledge holders (making the young old again); environmental rhythms that offer accounts of time that are not just seasonal (attached to the annual turning of the globe) but generational (reflecting full life cycles of flora or fauna that overlap in irregular patterns), and political actions that assert an ongoing sovereignty that is ever-denied but never extinguished. By contrast, Anne McNevin and Antje Missbach (2018: 17, 28) have considered methods of temporal regulation deployed by states in border control that result in 'chronic waiting' (Jeffrey 2008), 'existential immobility', or 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009). This describes the exploitation of linear time by the state, in which those seeking refuge are suspended between a past and place that presents imminent danger to their lives and a future and alternate place that may offer safety. The suspension becomes a 'luxury limbo', in which the state uses time to perform the benevolent possibility of safety while simultaneously suspending the agency and futures of those who have no choice but to wait. These contrasting temporal approaches, demonstrate how different understandings of, and relations to, time *do different things* to the relationship between people and place.

While there are many Indigenous time scapes and modes of relationalism which make generalizations about temporality, nationhood, and mobility a perilous task,⁶ for the purpose of this article, we want to examine three *kinds* of relations derived from Indigenous practices that can help to make sense of mobile relations. First, relational ontologies that have been articulated by many First Nations scholars describe the importance of the core relationships Indigenous people have with the land, sea and non-human life of their

environment (De la Cadena 2010; Moreton-Robinson 2015). This provides a more nuanced ontological account of the political subject as one that is constituted through relationships and which is more-than-human. Moreover, the Indigenous subject is conceived here as the recipient of the gift of relations from ancestors as well as the responsibility to preserve these ancestral connections for future generations. Second, historical practices demonstrate the ways in which boundaries between First Nations have been always been negotiated and navigated to enable seasonal activities and trade (Donaldson 1996; Ormond-Parker 2020). These negotiations have sometimes taken amenable form, and at other times been more contentious (Brigg, Graham, and Weber 2022). Third, contemporary engagements with the settler colonial state have presented unique temporal challenges for mobility. As Moreton-Robinson (2015) has argued, the colonial regime in Australia has forced the displacement of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from the lands and seas to which they belong and are responsible to. While this displacement has been pursued to secure the political legitimacy of the settler colonial state, it has also failed to extinguish Indigenous peoples' connection to place and their assertions of ongoing sovereignty.

Let us briefly discuss each of these forms of Indigenous relationism in turn, highlighting among other examples, how these appear in the particular context of the community of Sana Nakata—the Torres Straits—a region with deep pre-colonial connections to the wider region and a complex contemporary maritime boundary between the nation-states of Australia and Papua New Guinea and which has been described as a 'region uniquely positioned at the confluence of the Australian continent, South-East Asia and the Pacific' (Shnukal, Ramsay, and Nagata 2017: 1). Indeed, historically the Torres Straits were treated by outsiders as both commercially and geopolitically significant with the Japanese securing key maritime interests in the region while the British imagined a 'new Singapore' which would 'form a link between the possessions in Australia, India, and China ... and, as it were close the ring fence with which we have girt the first quarter of the globe' (Battersby 2017: 17, 18 citing an 1861 letter from George Ferguson Bowen to Secretary of State for the Colonies).

Firstly, articulation of the relationships between Indigenous people and their environments is commonplace in the literature. For example, Kahnawà: ke scholar, Audra Simpson (2014: 12), writes of the need to examine 'the history of this community [the Mohawk Kahnawà: ke] within a larger matrix of relatedness (to territory, to other Iroquois peoples, to the politics that frame them) ... and change the ways we study and write about Indigenous politics'. In her discussion of Nishnaabeg internationalism, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2017: 56) writes that with 'our complex ways of relating to the plant nations, to animal nations, and the spiritual realm, our existence has always been inherently international regardless of how rooted in place we are. We have always been networked. We have always thought of the bush as a networked series of international relationships'. And Dene scholar, Glen Coulthard (2014: 4) outlines the ways in which the settler colonial state in Canada systematically set about 'undercutting Indigenous political economies and relations to and with land ...'.

In the Torres Straits, *Ailan Kastom* (Island Custom), has become a contemporary expression of the importance of the laws and practices that have been sustained *and adapted* despite colonial disruption. *Ailan Kastom* does not simply describe traditional law, but rather a political practice of adaptation in response to experiences of change and continuity. Maintaining *Ailan Kastom* is a key function of the Torres Strait Regional Authority, and shapes policy and politics in the region on all matters from fisheries to climate change to family practices. *Ailan Kastom* is related to traditional laws (but not limited to them), such as Malo's law of the Meriam people, in which relations of responsibility between human and non-human beings order everyday life and society and are brought to bear on contemporary challenges. Relevantly, these laws and customs can and do demarcate enforceable boundaries within the region, access to and management of land and sea country, and

expectations of respectful engagement between different Islander groups and the respective lands and seas they belong to.

The language of relationship pervades this literature making clear that ontological connections to land and the environment are fundamental to Indigenous subjectivities. Moreover, the particular nature of the relationship to land is not proprietorial in the colonial sense where land can be packaged and transferred to others as private property. As Nichols (2020: 32) explains in his theory of dispossession, ‘many Indigenous thinkers have considered it a positive feature of their societies that they did not partition Earth in this manner’. Rather land is construed as part of a more-than-human ontological entanglement of which human subjectivity is a part, but no more than that. The claim to land as ‘owned’ is not a proprietorial term in the settler sense, but a description of long, historical connection in which Indigenous people are embedded.

In the Torres Straits, where traditional laws and customs are practiced (and adapted) alongside the laws of the Australian state, the relationship to land and seas is better understood as a relationship to *mother* and the regulation of behaviour, resource management, and boundaries that follows can then be meaningfully understood as a *familial responsibility* to the more than human. To take Sana Nakata as an example, her father would explain that to be named as *kulkalaig* is to be assigned to and have responsibility for the place *kulkal*, encompassing all beings of that place—animals, trees, waterways, and more. Within this group, you would also be assigned to a clan, named for a particular part of the place you belong to and are born of, for which members would have specific responsibilities that others would not. Understanding the social structure in this way, helps to reveal relations of responsibility that assign people to place in ways that help to balance and sustain human-non-human relations in the ecosystem over long time trajectories. It is this sense of place which grounds Indigenous ontologies in relations that are non-exclusionary and not to be confused with colonial concepts of ownership.

The second kind of relationalism discussed here concerns the relationship between different Indigenous nations. Leanne Simpson’s quotation above makes clear that many First Nations have long engaged in international practices, though often within the boundaries of what is now construed as the colonial nation-state. In fact, the process of movement—indeed the need for movement to ensure survival—meant that First Nations have historically proven themselves adept at negotiating mobility across land with other First Nations. Mike Donaldson (1996) describes these patterns of movement within pre-colonial Australia and the international relations they required. This involved First Nations people moving across sometimes large areas of land to trade with each other or for ceremonies, often using the stars to chart repeated routes (where peoples like the Wardaman travelled by night) and developing techniques such as songlines (‘an oral map of the landscape’, Norris and Harney 2014: 147) and rock art as well as stars as a means of navigation (Fuller, Norris, and Trudgett 2014; Kemp et al., 2022).

Therefore, as Simpson (2017: 58) makes clear, Indigenous forms of internationalism do not even require physical international travel across nation-state borders as we know them today:

We have many nations that are co-existing within a given land mass already, whether those nations are made up of relationships of human or non-human beings ... my nation is not just composed of Nishnaabeg. It is a series of radiating relationships with plant nations, animal nations, insects, bodies of water, air, soil, and spiritual beings in addition to the Indigenous nations with whom we share parts of our territory. Indigenous internationalism isn’t just between peoples.

As such, Simpson (2017: 61) makes clear that the Nishnaabeg conception of international relations are predicated on ‘consent, reciprocity, respect and empathy’. However, as

Brigg, Graham, and Weber (2022) explain, this is not to say that international relations between Indigenous groups have always been harmonious—indeed, in some cases, they have been and continue to be more agonistic in nature.

It is also apparent that there are pertinent examples of cases where traditionally understood international mobility was a feature of Indigenous internationalism. Ormond-Parker (2020) and Blair and Hall (2013), for example, document the pre-colonial trading relationships between First Nations in Northern Australia and Macassan traders from Sulawesi in what is now Indonesia to harvest and trade sea cucumbers to the Chinese. Ormond-Parker (2020: 5) explains how some of these relationships were more convivial in areas such as North-East Arnhem land (with evidence of Macassan cultural influences there) and hostile in others such as the Kimberley. This is evidence of a history of international relationships that precedes the arrival of settlers in Australia and there is also plentiful evidence of a variety of international relationships, for example, the influence of Japanese culture in the Torres Strait (Nagata 2004) and experiential connections between different Indigenous communities such as between the peoples of the region now named the Torres Straits and Papua New Guinea.

It is also the case that, despite the ‘fortress Australia’ rhetoric that has accompanied the crackdown on boat arrivals to Australia over the last twenty-five years, many maritime spaces are governed through a range of treaties. A good example here is the Torres Strait Treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea which has a direct impact on the livelihood of the Indigenous peoples of the region and regulates this transnational ecosystem, especially with regard to fisheries governance (Butler, Busilacchi, and Skewes 2019). This example both addresses First Nations relations between Torres Strait Islanders and Papua New Guineans whose connections long precede colonial encounter, and the relation to nation-states. Coming into effect in 1985, after several years of negotiations, the Treaty created a protected area which permitted relatively free movement across the ‘border’ for ‘traditional inhabitants’ within a ‘Protected Zone’ enabling the continuation of some traditional ways of life (Corrin 2020). It demonstrates an example of more permeable border relations than are commonly seen between nation-states. Treaty negotiations were prompted by the independence of Papua New Guinea from the British, which had previously been under the annexure of the state of Queensland. With independence, came concerns between the newly formed independent state and Australia to clarify their shared borders. For Torres Strait Islanders, these negotiations would affect not only mobility for trade and fishing, but risked separating the islands into two separate nation-states. At this time, Islanders strongly asserted their ongoing sovereignty to the lands and seas of the region with one arguing, ‘We are happy to share what we have in the Torres Strait but we will not give—not a teaspoon of water, not a grain of sand’ (Getano Lui Sr quoted in Smith 2021).

While Torres Strait Islanders had great success in securing their interests in these Treaty negotiations with no borderline drawn between islands and securing customary rights for some to maintain traditional fishing and trade, Islanders were never recognized as sovereigns nor made a formal party to the Treaty. Instead, the Treaty accords customary rights to those defined as ‘traditional inhabitants’⁷ to enable movement through the borderlands and seas. Traditional inhabitants is not an easily defined group and broadly includes some residents of northern Islands and some residents of coastal communities in Papua New Guinea (Corrin 2020). Traditional inhabitants do have some representative mechanisms in the administration of the Treaty (see Article 18), and Islanders more generally through the Torres Strait Regional Authority and other mechanisms which can assert themselves on matters that concern the Treaty, but this falls well short of formal recognition of their sovereignty in the region. Instead, it is perhaps best understood as a type of stakeholder consultation, rather than Islanders being a permanent negotiating party. This temporally locates Islanders’ interests as historical ‘traditional inhabitants’ with ‘customary’ rights justified by past practices. In contrast, state parties retain the contemporary status of

‘sovereigns’ for ongoing border management. While the Treaty does not recognize Islander sovereignty, the intervention of Islanders into the Treaty negotiations should be understood as a political act (and not just a claim) of sovereignty that asserted *ailan kastom* into an international process. While the formal recognition of Islander sovereignty in such negotiations would likely be debilitating for the Australian state which has struggled to accommodate legal pluralism, in practice, it would transform the position of Islanders from being an administrative subject of the state to a negotiating sovereign with distinct legal and political interests that belong not only to a long and deep history, but to present day political life and future aspirations.

Additionally, as a borderland, the region functions as an active site of asylum seeker border crossing that raises concerns for many Torres Strait Islanders (Karp 2023) who must negotiate complex bordering practices in a manner that most Australian communities do not have to confront. Therefore, while Indigenous relationality can help reveal different ways of thinking about mobility and the borders between nation-states, the Torres Strait Islands also offers an example of how Indigenous peoples can find themselves struggling to assert their own laws and customs, including in maintaining borders and relations in ways that accord with traditional law. This highlights that there is not necessarily anything inherent in Indigenous ontologies and relations to place that necessarily result in a no-borders or open-borders position. Instead, it is more useful to consider how Indigenous philosophy enables deeper understanding of how ideas of openness and closure belong to a shared dynamic, rather than functioning on mutually exclusive terms. In the Torres Straits, the seas are both passage and boundary. Some are imposed, and some are grounded in the responsibilities that *ailan kastom* and traditional law accords. They are not mutually exclusive, and nor can the tensions that arise between them be easily resolved. Our attention has been to better understand how these complex forms of relation are part of the work that borders do.

The third form of relationalism relevant to this argument is by far the most problematic for Indigenous peoples. The relationships between traditional legal and political practices and practices of colonization that forced the displacement of many. Here we seek not to delve into the intricacies of the case for legal pluralism, but merely to point to the fact that the matter of a plurality of legal and political forms (and how they relate to one another) is an issue that has become increasingly prominent in Indigenous politics and one that has not been successfully managed thus far through concepts such as reconciliation (Turner 2006). Importantly, this politics remains animated by the deep ontological connections to place expressed by Indigenous peoples, even as those peoples were forced off their traditional lands. As made clear in the discussion above, Torres Strait Islanders who live in the region must daily navigate the interaction between international, local, state and federal law jurisdictions, including native title rights, as well as the Torres Strait Treaty. Engaging with neighbouring Indigenous peoples, today means engaging in this complex architecture of international law and often competing state interests. There is no region in Australia that has such complex legal architecture. Yet it is also the case, that the majority of Torres Strait Islanders no longer reside in the region or are responsible for navigating this daily complexity. This mobility has not, however, extinguished Torres Strait Islander identities but rather resulted in ‘improvisation, creativity and innovation’ (Watkin Lui 2012: 151) and, for many, the continuity of responsibility for place even while residing elsewhere.

In Australia, *Mabo No. 2* was a judgment of the High Court of Australia, in which Meriam people of the Torres Straits asserted Malo’s law in the fight for land rights, but were instead delivered a narrow form of customary property rights today known as ‘native title’. Subsequently, the Native Title Act 1993 (Cth) further diminished the promises of land rights (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Instead, it added a new dimension to an already complex set of relations in which Islanders continue to navigate traditional and colonial laws and customs in a borderlands region composed of fluid water borders and passages

between different Indigenous groups, and modern nation-states. As a result, Indigenous relations with the colonial state are as complex as ever.

After decades of seeking to realize Indigenous self-determination through the native title framework (McCaul 2023), the most recent effort to achieve structural reform was through a constitutional referendum to establish a Voice to Parliament, which failed in October 2023. The proposal sought to establish a new forum of political representation for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (Appleby and Davis 2018; Bray and Nakata 2023). Despite the proposal from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to reset the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Australia in the Uluru Statement from the Heart in 2017, it was subsequently rejected by the Coalition government that had commissioned the process. When the matter of constitutional reform was put to a referendum by the ensuing Australian Labor Party government in 2023, over 60 per cent of Australians voted against it (Biddle et al., 2023). The Uluru Statement has a distinct temporal underpinning, which ‘differs dramatically from an approach to political action in the present which is concerned with drawing a line under the past so that [it does] ... not tarnish the future politics of Australia’ (Little 2022: 94). In this manner, it was a temporally distinct from other reconciliation efforts seeking to locate Indigenous injustice in the past, atonement in the present, in pursuit of a future where Indigenous dispossession is no longer relevant to political life. Importantly, the reforms were supported by the majority of Indigenous peoples across the continent, notwithstanding that most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people no longer live on their traditional lands. Over the course of thirty years, it has become increasingly clear that relational practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the ways in which these ground their political claims to deep and non-linear trajectories of time, are anathema to many of the non-Indigenous peoples and political institutions in Australia.

The Torres Strait case, both in the operation of the Treaty and the limitations of native title arising from the *Mabo No. 2* court decision are important reminders of how legal plurality guarantees little, and that while promising possibilities may open, others become less possible as a result. We acknowledge that there is considerable scepticism from Indigenous scholars about the likelihood of traditional sources of sovereignty and those of the settler colonial state coexisting harmoniously. Most notably, Coulthard’s (2014) perspective indicates an unwillingness to countenance engaging in reconciliatory processes with the oppressor as a way of pursuing sovereignty. Similarly, Audra Simpson (2014: 12) states that in ‘situations in which sovereignties are nested and embedded, one proliferates at the other’s expense; the USA and Canada can only come into political being because of Indigenous dispossession. Under these conditions there cannot be two perfectly equal, robust sovereignties’. The inevitability of this viewpoint is hard to deny, but, more importantly for the purposes of the argument here, it highlights the relational nature of political institutions. Merely according some kind of formal sovereign status to traditional First Nation legal practices, is not akin to giving them equal footing. What matters is how these practices and traditions *relate* to the nation-state and their material standing for the Indigenous people that they pertain to and belong to. In temporal terms, we are reminded also that the mobility and relations between different peoples, communities, and nations on and across the waters that surround the continent predate the Australian state by millennia. In this deep history, there are a multitude of referent points for new relational possibilities and understandings of mobility. Indigenous philosophy and relationality in the ways that we have described it here can be understood as both place-based *and* mobile.

3. Conclusion

This article has addressed the potential tension between advocacy for greater mobility across borders and support for Indigenous nationhood. Whilst not an outright

contradiction, the tension creates ammunition for opponents of both positions who may accuse advocates of double standards if they are unable to explain their reasoning and the compatibility of the two arguments. After all, how can one oppose strong national borders whilst simultaneously advocating for greater recognition for subnational bordering? This article has set out to explain the complementarity between the two perspectives through the concept of mobile relations which is common to both of the theoretical literatures we address.

We have drawn on Bergson to argue that the interpretation of time and becoming is deeply relational in character with path, present, and future overlapping in radically incomplete ways. If human subjects are connected to one another in meaningful ways, then so too are the material issues they address through political action. Because of this relationality, social entities are never fixed, but exist instead in a dynamic state. Even matters that seem definitively settled at any particular juncture may be injected with new uncertainty through the evolution of related social phenomena at a future point. According to this approach, social phenomena are typically in a dynamic process of change whereupon they develop in relation to other incomplete processes. The absence of fixity is particularly resonant with Bergson's explanation of open and closed societies which exist on a continuum rather than in juxtaposition with one another. In other words, all societies can be deemed to be becoming more or less open rather than being definitively open or closed. Open and closed should be interpreted as related categories rather than contrasting concepts.

We have traced three particular forms of relations in Indigenous philosophy to inform our concept of *mobile relations*. First, relational ontologies, demonstrate the ways in which Indigenous peoples derive cosmological outlooks from their deep connection to place. We have emphasized that these connections are best understood as dynamic rather than static, but that they still encompass tendencies towards both openness *and* closure. Second, we have also highlighted other forms of Indigenous international relations that have historically been carried out between First Nations peoples' negotiating movement across boundaries through practices like song lines and trade, demonstrating that place-based ontologies can account for, rather than exclude, mobility. Third, contemporary Indigenous political life navigates complex non-Indigenous socio-political formations whether through legal pluralism or resistance, highlighting how relationality operates even within the constraints of colonization.

What then are the key insights that can be derived from bringing these literatures together? The first point to note from this engagement concerns the importance of understanding relationality as a key feature of any socio-political issue. By their nature, social issues or political problems are not static or fixed—the added degree of complexity engendered by fluidity and movement is what makes many of these issues so difficult to resolve. In their different ways, temporal politics and Indigenous philosophies lead us to a better understanding of the nature and political challenge that relationalism invokes. When it comes to the pursuit of what Bergson calls more open societies, there is much to be learned from Indigenous thinking because it demonstrates both deep connectedness to place, but also the ways in which borders can be crossed in ways that are both respectful and welcoming. The acknowledgement of deep connection of others to place as well as the tradition of inviting others to share and enjoy space is a key insight that has been lacking in non-Indigenous understandings of bordering and migration. Instead of seeing bordering practices as demarcations of connectedness, the colonial state typically uses borders as instruments of exclusion. This exclusivity is anathema to Indigenous thought and action which is grounded in recognizing and nurturing land, environment, and peoples as well as acknowledging others and expecting them to similarly care for these relational connections.

Ultimately, what this implies is that relationality can *travel* even if, as [Brigg, Graham, and Weber \(2022\)](#) remind us, Aboriginal personhood is not mobile. Subjects neither lose

their connection to place when they leave it, nor do they relinquish relational responsibilities when they move to the territory of others. This is not the exclusive or proprietorial notion of ownership associated with private property, but rather an understanding of belonging that sustains human subjects and entails responsibilities to maintain Country. In Australia, this ontological connection to place is sufficiently strong that it can not only endure forced dispossession, but it also empowers diasporas to sustain decades long political movements for greater recognition and reform. Where the concepts of the open society, temporality, and becoming inform us about how to conceive of relationality in theoretical terms, Indigenous thought provides examples of not only what might be possible but what is already in practice. And, if that mode of thinking is applied to debates about migration and more open societies, it provides us with a way of conceptualizing *mobile relations*: the connection of human subjects to each other and the material environment as well as the responsibilities that this connectivity engenders for people regardless of where they find themselves in the world. In emphasizing the radical incompleteness of *mobile relations*, we move towards a new position from which migration issues are not reducible to borders between states, but to the dynamic, uncertain and fluid ways in which people and, in the case of the sea passage of the Torres Straits, the environment around them, moves. These responsibilities welcome, acknowledge, nurture, and extend to both other humans and the natural environment.

One final point pertains to a more methodological register concerning Indigenous philosophy. While there must continue to be a place for studying Indigenous thought on its own terms as reflective of particular cultures, communities, and knowledges (a point only latterly becoming apparent in contemporary scholarship), this should not mean that it must be on the margins of scholarly debate. Just as we need to ensure that Indigenous thought is no longer marginalized, it also needs to not be treated as something ‘exotic’ or disconnected on the fringes of socio-political debate. Indigenous philosophy makes vital contributions on its own terms and does not need to be mediated through the lens of more established political theories. Indeed, it is vital that these established theories become much more open to learning from the substantive and methodological insights that Indigenous philosophies can provide. This is precisely the case with *mobile relations*—a conception in which the problems that dominant theories have had with migration and bordering are reinvigorated by an open and respectful engagement with perspectives from Indigenous philosophies.

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None declared.

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Notes

1. The term First Nations is most common to the context of Turtle Island (the northern America continent) and is increasingly used elsewhere, including in the Australian context in which we write. However, we recognize that nationhood does not accurately describe the diversity of Indigenous peoples social and political systems and that not all communities use this term. This article refers to First Nations, particularly when emphasizing the dynamics between political communities. This article also refers to Indigenous, particularly when emphasizing people, their knowledges, and philosophies.

2. A range of forms of Indigenous relations are discussed in [Little \(2024\)](#).
3. See, for example, Moret's discussion of Somalian migrants in Europe ([Moret 2020](#)).
4. See [Sheller and Urry \(2016\)](#) for discussion of 'new mobilities'.
5. In her 1995 article Malkki juxtaposes anthropological theories of sedentarism and closed systems with James Clifford's advocacy for a focus on travel and mobility. In pointing out how a 'sedentarist bias unintentionally mirrors the increasingly elaborated nativism of anti-immigrant or xenophobic violence', she then chastises 'reactionary rhetorics of indigenesness' ([Malkki 1995](#): 508, 509, 512). Our argument articulated below demonstrates that Indigenous philosophy is often just as much about mobility as it is about 'sedentarist norms'.
6. There is limited scope in this article to discuss in detail the myriad material practices and engagements that take place in the Indigenous-colonial encounter. Hence examples will be predominantly derived from one specific place, the Torres Straits, demonstrating the ways in which Indigenous bordering practices become entangled with those of the colonial state over the course of time creating a mélange of material practices which are of course imbued with significant power inequalities. We thank one of our reviewers for asking us to clarify this point.
7. Not all Torres Strait Islanders are considered 'traditional inhabitants' for the purpose of the Treaty.

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