Un/common grounds:

Tracing politics across worlds

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore possibilities for reconceptualising cosmopolitics by focusing on sites and situations where the problem of un/commonness plays a central role. Stemming from ethnographic research carried out as part of an ongoing collaboration called 'Landscapes of Democracy', we outline a study of democratic politics that extends beyond the politics of a single world and attend to landscapes of political practice which embed, and sometimes deny, 'shimmering' multiplicity. We follow the chronological unfolding of our fieldwork in Germany and Australia, and trace politics across worlds by telling alternating stories about how commonness and uncommonness is achieved in specific parliamentary settings in Frankfurt, Berlin, Darwin and Milingimbi – a Yolngu community in the Northern Territory. In doing so, we interrogate the relationship between commonness and uncommonness, not as an opposition, but as a series of situated efforts to find out and articulate what needs to be made un/common, for what purposes, and on what terms. Bringing into focus such explicit and implicit framings of cosmopolitics suggests that there is potential for partial and situated practices on the ground to rework un/common futures through the continual reimagining of pasts and the configuration of people-places to which these futures are tied.

Key words: common ground; cosmopolitics; democracy; Germany; Australia; Yolngu; parliament

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Riyawarray: Common Ground

'Riyarraway: Common Ground' is a ten-minute long video on YouTube (Yolngu people 2008). Before the opening scene, a short text appears on the screen, informing the viewers about the origins and the purpose of the recording. It says:

> Riyawarray or Common Ground is an ancient and unbroken Yirritja Ngarra Law ritual. In this film it is performed by Yirritja Clan Nations from across North East Arnhem Land. This three-month (daily) ceremony honours our Yolngu code of conduct through Ngarra Customary Law (Rom) – our House of Representatives. We aim to have Yolngu Rom recognised as a credible justice system and to challenge the way in which the Australian Federal Government has imposed their emergency response, The Intervention, here in the Northern Territory.

After a few seconds, the text disappears and the viewers find themselves watching a dance, which is part of the ceremony. There is a rhythmic sound of clapsticks and the shouts of a group of men. Except for the master of ceremony, the dancers' bodies are carefully painted. Most of them are holding spears, moving synchronously to the sound of the clapsticks. The master of ceremony cries out, the men respond, and the dance comes to a halt. The next cut shows a senior Yolngu lawman, who in a firm voice states that this is not a ceremony for ceremony's sake. Alternating between English and Yolngu matha (language), he says this is a ceremony addressed to the government, and its aim is to change Western people's thinking. The dancing continues. Against the brown sandy ground and the bright blue sky, the men's red dress and white and yellow body paint has a powerful visual effect.

Next cut: Ganygulpa Dhurrkay, senior cultural advisor from Milingimbi, tells the viewers this is the first time she has seen this particular ceremony happening. Women do not usually take part in a ceremony of this kind. However, this ceremony has been initiated in the wake of the Intervention, a set of strict policies imposed by the Australian government on Aboriginal communities in 2007. Riyawarray, she said, is a powerful call to see the Aboriginal-Western relation from a new perspective. The next image shows an older man, calling out in Yolngu matha from the top of a tall tree placed in the centre of the ceremony ground. There are different groups of people around the tree, some are wearing bright red clothes, others yellow. It is difficult to understand what is going on, but understanding is not the aim of the ritual. The aim is to enact a common ground where Aboriginal and Western traditions can come together and have their differences recognised. This, at least, is what Keith Lapulung Dhamarrandji, former chair of the Milingimbi Council, says in one of the final cuts. He continues:

> You are seeing all these Yolngu people dancing, rejoicing, performing, presenting through Ngarra… we want you mob out there in Canberra to

> recognise our law. Have those two laws, Yolngu and Balanda [Western] law, meeting together, and find a good way for presenting a betterment for all Australians, Yolngu and Balanda [Western people], at this very time in this millennium, in this 21st century.

The sound of the clapsticks becomes stronger again, and in the closing scene of the video the viewers are back in the middle of the ritual. The camera shows the event from a low angle – perhaps it is placed on the ceremonial ground. The viewers are not asked to participate in the dances. They are asked to witness them.

War, peace and cosmopolitics

How might we relate to the call for a common ground proposed by the Riyawarray ceremony, but also raised by many other forums across the globe, including Sámi parliaments and First Nations initiatives? One possibility is to turn to political theory, especially works on cosmopolitan democracy that examine how communities other than nation states could be recognised as political entities. The term 'cosmopolitan democracy' has a long history: it goes back at least to the late 18th century, when in an essay on the conditions of perpetual peace Immanuel Kant used it as a synonym for the extension of a Western understanding of democratic politics to the rest of the world (Kant 1983 [1795]; see also Cheah and Robbins 1998; Ingram 2013; Morgan and Banham 2007). The conditions for peace, he reasoned, involved the extension of a single, universal, political system able to arbitrate concerns in a transparent and consistent manner. In the 19th and 20th centuries, variants of the term were taken up in the conceptualisation of international class struggle, the establishment of the League of Nations after the First World War and the United Nations after the Second World War, and debates about the new world order after the end of the Cold War (Archibugi 2003; Held 1995). Understandably, there was much hope placed in global political institutions transcending the politics of nation states tainted by colonialism and totalitarianism. In the early 21st century, a new kind of conflict, the War on Terror, has given academic and political discussions about cosmopolitan democracy yet another impetus. When reflecting on this and other developments concerning global security, Ulrich Beck notably suggested a reformulation of cosmopolitanism as a strategy to 'establish common ground across frontiers' in an era where past and present conflicts render existing political institutions increasingly inadequate (2004a: 439; see also Beck 2006).

Political theory is certainly helpful when it comes to the conceptualisation of politics beyond and below nation states. However, several works in Science and Technology Studies (STS) have problematised the lack of materiality and specificity associated with global visions of democracy. In his response to Beck's cosmopolitan proposal, Bruno Latour (2004) queried commonness as something that supposedly exists beyond conflict and politics. As he argued, what makes a common ground *common* is precisely the politicisation of the conditions of politics, including the expansion of politics to include other entities than humans (see also Cronon 1996) – a move that is missing even from the most radical variants of cosmopolitan democracy. To mark the difference between the two understandings of commonness, Latour borrowed Isabelle Stengers' term 'cosmopolitics', which denotes the ongoing exploration of who or what may participate

in the composition of a shared world, and how (Stengers 2005; 2010). The term stuck, and since the Latour-Beck exchange a number of STS scholars have engaged in cosmopolitical explorations in diverse settings. Some of them focused, for example, on the ways in which different worlds are being held together through urban infrastructures (Blok and Farías 2016) or architecture and design (Yaneva and Zaera-Polo 2017), while others have examined how shared worlds are being threatened or fall apart due to illness (Schillmeier 2016) and disasters (Tironi et al. 2014). In one way or another, these scholars have shown that a common ground is a precarious achievement, which involves heterogeneous sets of entities and requires constant maintenance.

Shared by Latour's work and many studies of cosmopolitics conducted in the West is a general assumption that the production of a common ground is both possible and desirable. Cosmopolitics in this sense is present in the careful work of knitting together of heterogeneous elements and crafting a new common world (see Latour 2018). However, if we add to this consideration another set of contemporary STS-inspired studies involving research carried out with Indigenous communities, the production of a common world is no longer the only outcome which might be imagined or considered necessary (Law 2015; Watson 2011). For Mario Blaser (2014; 2016), who has been working with Indigenous communities in Paraguay and Canada, cosmopolitics arises at the intersection of differing 'worldings,' such as when governmental protection of caribou as endangered wildlife rubs up against the care given to *atîku* by Innu seeking to maintain their relationship with places, kin and the *atîku's* spirit master. The production of a single common world would struggle to accommodate multiple worldings, for instance *atîku* that were also caribou, and *vice-versa*. Furthermore, as Marisol de la Cadena's long-term research in the Andes has shown, this move would by and large ignore the intricate ways in which cosmopolitical processes are being caught up in 'politics as usual', that is, more-or-less established procedures and institutions associated with democratic politics (de la Cadena 2010; 2015 – see also Asdal and Hobæk 2019). Equally importantly, it would also leave aside questions related to how STS scholars themselves relate to cosmopolitics, as translators of concepts on the ground (Verran 2002) or in other administrative, educational and governmental contexts (Østmo and Law 2018). Taking these considerations into account, it seems appropriate to ask, with Blaser (2016), if *another cosmopolitics is possible* (see also Blaser and de la Cadena 2017; de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

Beginning with the 'Riyawarray: Common Ground' video both as a provocation and as an empirical find, in this paper we address this question by focusing on situations where the problem of un/commonness plays a central role. To do so, we draw on ethnographic research we carried out as part of an ongoing collaboration called 'Landscapes of Democracy'. Using walking as a research method (Benterrak et al. 1996; Dányi 2017; Ingold and Vergunst 2008; Puwar 2014; Winthereik et al. 2019), we have initiated a study of the practice of democratic politics that extends beyond the politics of a single world, exploring landscapes of political practice which embed, and sometimes deny, 'shimmering' multiplicity (Deger 2006; Muecke 2003; Rose 2017; Ween and Lien 2016). Walking prioritises embodied experience as a detector of difference and a basis for analysis, rather than a pre-figured set of methods and assumptions. Our empirical work began in Germany, with visits to parliamentary sites in Frankfurt and Berlin. We then transitioned to Australia where we spent time in Darwin exploring the Northern Territory

Parliament and travelled 450 km east to the small island of Milingimbi in North East Arnhem Land to learn about Yolngu politics and legal practices. In this paper, we more-or-less follow the chronological unfolding of our fieldwork and trace politics across worlds by telling alternating stories about how commonness and uncommonness is achieved in specific parliamentary settings. In the concluding section, we then return to the 'Riyawarray: Common Ground' video and suggest a reconceptualisation of cosmopolitics through a shift of attention from commonness as a general good to better or worse versions of uncommonness.

Common ground: parliamentary democracy across the globe

We developed our idea of exploring landscapes of democracy in 2015. Sparked by our conversations and experiences of diverse situations of political practice, it became clear we needed to work with an analytic concept that did not already assume the dominance of Western versions of territory (Elden 2013). We therefore turned to landscapes as lived and empirical spatial formations that continually emerge and re-emerge, producing different configurations of people and places, embedding different commitments and norms of practice. Our fieldwork began in earnest in the summer of 2016, when we first met in Frankfurt am Main and Berlin to visit some of the iconic sites associated with German democratic politics. At the time, Endre's research was based at Goethe University in Frankfurt, pursuing his long-term interest in parliaments as places configuring and participating in the material practice of liberal democracy (Dányi 2012; 2019). After several carefully designed walks in Germany, out plan was to continue our fieldwork in Darwin, where Michaela was based, working with Yolngu in North East Arnhem Land and the Ground Up research team (http://groundup.cdu.edu.au/) at Charles Darwin University.

In Frankfurt, our fieldwork started at the current townhall called the Römer, which was the place where throughout the Middle Ages many Holy Roman Emperors were elected. The impressive great hall on the first floor has the emperors' portraits on display in a chronological order, from Charlemagne to Francis II, making visible more than a thousand years of political history. The history of modern parliamentary democracy is, by contrast, much shorter and more fragmented. After the Römer, we did a tour in the Paulskirche, a nearby church that housed the first German parliamentary meeting during the 'spring of the nations' in 1848. Currently, it serves as an exhibition hall dedicated to the political development of Germany from the late 18th century until the middle of the 20th century. We learned that soon after the Second World War (during which Frankfurt was heavily bombed and the inner city was completely destroyed), the government of the United States of America commissioned a building modelled after the Paulskirche to serve as the new home of the Western German legislature. The construction had already begun when the government of the United Kingdom intervened, insisting on Bonn becoming the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany – that is where the Bundestag was set up, leaving Frankfurt devoid of any political significance in the rest of the 20th century.

In Berlin, we continued our journey across the German democratic landscape by visiting yet another parliamentary museum in a former church in the Gendarmenmarkt. The

exhibition led us through European history, from the French Revolution and its aftermath through a series of national revolutions and the rise and fall of fascist and state socialist dictatorships. Reiterating the historical narrative, after the exhibition we walked around in the inner city, visiting the Holocaust Memorial and the remnants of the Berlin Wall near the Brandenburg Gate. From there, it was only a few minutes to the Bundestag, the home of the current German Parliament, where we met the employee of a party faction, who had agreed to give us a guided tour (for more information about the everyday operation of this faction see Laube et al. 2019). Our guide told us that the original building was designed in the late 19th century but, shortly after the Nazis came to power, it lost its political function and remained vacant until the 1990s. It was only in 1999, ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when the former Reichstag – redesigned by Norman Foster (2000) – could once again serve as the home of the legislature.

[Fig. 1 about here]

The famous glass-and-steel cupola in the middle of the renovated Reichstag surrounds a large funnel, which seemingly allows all possible issues and concerns to be drawn from the outside and into the German Parliament (see Brichzin 2019). Walking the length of the spiral pathway around the inside of the cupola, we reached the roof terrace where we were able at once to look down towards the floor of the parliament (see Fig. 1), as well as out over the monuments and museums we had passed on the way to get here. The ghostly hauntings reminded us of the literature on cosmopolitan democracy, according to which modern political history began in the late 18th century, parliamentary politics was gradually institutionalised during the 19th century, it withstood waves of devastation in the 20th century, and in the early 21st century it needed to find ways of coping with challenges beyond the national level. How much of this narrative would hold, we wondered, when a few weeks later we travelled half the globe to Australia?

While preparing for our journey to the southern hemisphere, we began to think about obvious differences and similarities between the two nation states. Like in Germany, modern political history in Australia began in the late 18th century, although there the main context was the British Empire and the colonisation of the 'new continent'. Following federation in 1901, a new national capital was required and there was significant dispute between Melbourne and Sydney as to where its appropriate location should be. Not unlike Bonn in the Federal Republic of Germany, Canberra, a new city located partway between the other two state capitals, was chosen as a compromise. Here an interim parliament house was built and occupied for 61 years, before a new parliament house was opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1988 – the year marking 200 years since British settlement. On a different occasion, one of us travelled to the parliament house in Canberra and viewed the design in person. Being offered a tour by a ministerial staffer, and looking through a brochure published by the Parliamentary Education Office (n.d.), we learned that this iconic building is purposely embedded within the landscape of Capital Hill. Its design is based around two curved (boomerang-shaped) walls, topped by a large flagpole. The walls separate the two chambers, giving physical form to the bicameral parliamentary system. The colours of the chambers replicate those of the British Parliament, with red for the Senate and green for the House of Representatives,

but have been adapted and muted to match the grey-green and red-ochre colours of Australian native plants, such as eucalypts and wattle trees.

There is a clear line of sight between the parliament building and the Australian war memorial in the distance. This is marked by a tree-lined parade that leads from the doors of the war memorial to the old parliament house and continues in a direct line up to Capital Hill and the forecourt of the current parliament house. The guide directed our gaze to this entrance way, to a large mosaic embedded in the forecourt. The mosaic was created by a Warlpiri man from Central Australia, depicting one of his ancestral stories, the *Possum and Wallaby Dreaming*. The guide also told us that on the other side of old parliament house, just out of view, is the Aboriginal Tent Embassy: a makeshift structure set up in 1972 as an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty and a call for political rights for Aboriginal Australians. Inside the building, he directed us towards the Yirrkala Bark Petitions, the Barunga Statement and the Native Title Act – all legal documents, which with varying levels of success have called for recognition of Indigenous rights over lands of which they have had ownership and been a part for 'time immemorial' (Aboriginal People of Yirrkala, 1963).

Some of these Indigenous artefacts came to Canberra all the way from the northern part of Australia. This is not that surprising if we consider that throughout the 19th century the Northern Territory was governed as part of South Australia, and then for the most part of the 20th century as part of the Commonwealth. According to an information booklet we found online (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 2016), the first building on the current site of the Northern Territory Parliament in Darwin was a post office, constructed in the 1870s. Although it was heavily damaged in the bombing of Darwin in the Second World War, the main threats to the infrastructure throughout the 20th century were apparently cyclones, rather than political upheavals. As the booklet informed us, a few months after the Australian government granted the Northern Territory its own legislature in 1974, Cyclone Tracy almost entirely destroyed the renovated post office, forcing newly elected Members of Parliament to work 'amid dangling electric wires and gaps in the ceiling' (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 2016: 3). The current building that houses the legislature was opened in 1994 – it was designed for a tropical climate, with a façade that diffuses 80% of direct sunlight.

As these brief impressions show, it is rather easy to draw a contrast between German and Australian landscapes of democracy. However, these parliamentary arrangements also suggest that ultimately we are dealing with a single model of governance: a Western democratic system that stretches around the globe. Despite the obvious geographical and cultural differences, there is a strong claim of commonness: both Germany and Australia are liberal democracies with solid parliamentary architecture and infrastructure. These constitute a common ground, where commonness is understood not simply as something public or shared, but also as a moral-political stance configured in relation to the shadows of powerful political orderings of the past – fascism, state socialism and colonial imperialism.

Uncommon ground: the honey bee and the eagle

Our fieldwork in the Northern Territory started on the 1st July 2016 with a grand firework in one of the city beaches in Darwin: this was the annual celebration of Territory Day – the day the Northern Territory was granted self-governance almost four decades earlier. Not surprisingly, our first destination was the Northern Territory Parliament, although for a somewhat different reason than what we had initially envisioned. In the information booklet mentioned earlier, after a paragraph about a fountain that commemorates the victims of a crane crash during the construction of the parliament building, we found the following short text:

> *Ngarra Law Painting*. Ngarra is the Aboriginal customary law of Arnhem Land. This paining is based on the honey bee ceremony which teaches Yolngu people how to live within the law. It was painted by James Gaykamangu. (Legislative Assembly of the Northern Territory 2016: 6)

One of us recognised James Gaykamangu as a Yolngu Elder from Milingimbi, who – among other roles – had worked as a senior interpreter and an indigenous court liaison officer in various Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory. He has also collaborated with the Charles Darwin University on several community development projects and published an informative article about Aboriginal customary law in Arnhem Land (Gaykamangu 2012). Upon our arrival/return to Darwin, we contacted him to see if he had time to accompany us to the Northern Territory Parliament and tell us about the painting. He agreed to meet us in front of his house and we drove downtown together. The parliament building was easy to recognise: a white, rectangular structure surrounded by tall palm trees. We had thought we might spend some time engaging with the architecture, but James rushed straight inside, past the security check, and led us upstairs to a concourse. His painting hung in one of the corners, between a copper plate that had 'Ngarra Law' written on it, and a longer quote by James, which explained his position within his clan and the status of the painting in Yolngu life.

The painting itself is a tall, impressive image dominated by four colours: black, white, golden yellow and clay-red (Fig. 2). The structure is not easy to decipher, but the painting seems to be divided into several sections. The top part, James told us as we were taking notes and photos, is where the honey bee enters the hive and makes the honey comb. This refers to a story about a honey bee that flew across the salt water in North East Arnhem Land, encountered a whale and made diamond-shaped marks on its back, then continued its flight to a swampy area. There it landed on a rock, which gave fresh water. The honey bee then flew on to other sites in the region, and wherever it flew, it put clan groups in contact with each other. This, however, is only one of the stories present in the painting – there are many others. The yellow, red and white colours, as well as the particular direction and configuration of the brush strokes are the specific intellectual property of the Gupapuyngu tribe, of which James is an Elder. The painting therefore is not 'merely' a piece of art, but a legal document – partly a Coat of Arms, partly a constitution, partly a parliament and partly a set of rules that regulate diverse aspects of Yolngu life, from avoidance relationships and clan relations to such 'modern' issues as alcohol abuse and pornography. The stories, colours, designs, clan arrangements and proprietary law have been in force, so to speak, for thousands of years, well before the British colonisers arrived. As a Yolngu Elder and a legal expert, James had the authority to paint it, and to

give it as a present to the Speaker of the Northern Territory Parliament, who had it put on display in the concourse in 2011.

[Fig. 2 about here] [Fig 3. about here]

After our visit to the Northern Territory Parliament with James, we knew we had to find out more about the Ngarra. In a few days we were going to go to Milingimbi, to the Aboriginal community where James is from. We were hoping we could learn more there about Yolngu law and the Yolngu Parliament, and the ways in which they relate to mainstream Australian politics. But before that trip, we wanted to return to the parliament building in Darwin and see the parts we missed the first time we were there. Similar to our research in Frankfurt and Berlin, we decided to go on a guided tour. We had signed up and went to the main entrance to join a group of about 20 people. Our guide greeted us in the main hallway, in front of a tableau with the photos of current Members of Parliament. She told us about how Captain Arthur Philipp proclaimed in 1788 that British law applied to Eastern Australia, how Captain JJG Bremer announced in 1824 the enlargement of New South Wales, so that it included the Northern Territory, and how the Northern Territory continued to be governed by parliaments located in the south well after Australia became an independent country. After the short lecture, we walked over to the terrace, where our guide pointed out the tropical features of the building. Then we spent some time in the Parliament's library, where we saw several photos about the bombing of Darwin in the Second World War and the devastation left by Cyclone Tracy.

After the library, we went upstairs to the concourse we had seen during our visit with James. This time, however, we walked past his painting – to our surprise, our guide had nothing to say about the honey bee. Instead, she led us to a painting of a flower, the Stuart's Desert Rose, which is the state emblem of the Northern Territory. She told us that the flag of the Northern Territory, introduced in 1978 to mark self-government, was designed after the patterns of this flower, which reappears in the Northern Territory's Coat of Arms, along with two kangaroos and a wedge-tailed eagle (Fig. 3). She reminded us that the Coat of Arms is symbolic of the people, history and landscape of the Northern Territory, and alongside the emblems of the flora and the fauna there are other noteworthy motifs, too. In the centre of the shield held by the kangaroos is a drawing of a woman, which is a reproduction of a rock art image in North East Arnhem Land. There are also designs on both sides of the shield that symbolise camp sites joined by path markings – images that commonly appear in the paintings of Aboriginal people from Central Australia. Finally, the eagle holds an Aboriginal Tjurunga stone, also important to some Aboriginal groups in Central Australia. The stone is resting on a helmet, which is a reminder of the Northern Territory's war history (although it does not seem to have anything to do with the Second World War).

We were puzzled. James's image of the honey bee story and the Northern Territory Coat of Arms are hung right next to each other on the wall of the gallery, which encircles the main foyer of the building. The first time we visited the Northern Territory Parliament, we were led straight to the documentation of Yolngu law, as expressed by a senior authority from the Gupapuyngu tribe. The strong claim made by that painting was that an alternate system of law existed that was now present within the walls of the Northern

Territory parliament building. Having had our attention drawn to that painting, it was surprising to notice how invisible it seemed to become on our second visit. The image of the Coat of Arms *also* suggested that Indigeneity was present within the political practices of the legislature, but its manner for demonstrating this took a rather different form than the story of the honey bee. The eagle does not appear in James' painting, which expresses ancestral relations and motifs as part of a strictly defined practice for doing and remaking Yolngu law. Such strict proprietary arrangements are also absent from the Northern Territory Coat of Arms, which does seek to include recognition of an Indigenous presence, but which does so in a manner that draws symbols from all over the territory and combines them with Western iconography. While present side-by-side on the wall, these images are radically uncommon, with one becoming visible in an assertion of Yolngu ancestral law and the other within a configuration of parliamentary democracy, in which all citizens are included as equal and able to be represented (symbolically) on the same terms.

Common ground: the Intervention

Preoccupied with these thoughts about uncommonness, we followed the group along the concourse, past a series of portraits of previous Chief Ministers hanging on the wall in a chronological order, reminiscent of the great hall in the Frankfurt town hall. Our guide ushered us through a door into a small passageway, and we emerged out into one of several public galleries overlooking the plenary hall (Fig. 4). The Parliament was not sitting at the time, however had there been a session we would have had a full view of the gallery area and the standing orders of the day.

[Fig. 4 about here]

The sight was similar to the plenary hall in Berlin, except that here we saw a huge crocodile skin decorating the table where normally the stenographers work on the transcripts of the sessions. At the far end of the chamber, we saw a higher desk, right under a metal version of the Coat of Arms we saw just a few moments earlier: that is where the Speaker sits. Around the desk and the stenographers' table there are two rows of desks, arranged in a semi-circular fashion. Our guide told us this is where elected Members of Parliament sit, and similar to other countries debate and decide on all possible issues that concern the polity. Well, almost all issues, she corrected herself. She told us that although the Northern Territory looks like a state within Australia, with its own Coat of Arms and flag and annual celebration of self-governance, it is actually not a state. In a referendum in 1998, the proposal to become the seventh state of the federation was rejected by a narrow margin. Most of the time this is not a problem at all: the Northern Territory Parliament can pass legislations as any other state parliament in Australia. However, in 2007, there was one instance when the will of the Parliament in Darwin was completely ignored: this was when the Federal Government in Canberra initiated a set of security measures that became known as the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER).

For those on the guided tour who were from the Northern Territory or other parts of Australia, NTER was well-known; others were curious about what it entailed and what its continuing effects were. The guide offered us some explanation, recalling that this highly controversial episode of Australian politics was triggered by the publication of an official report by a board of inquiry titled ‘Little Children are Sacred’ (2007). The report, commissioned a year earlier by the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, was a detailed analysis of the possible reasons why the neglect of children had reached a crisis level in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and what local governmental and nongovernmental organisations could do about it. Soon after publication, the findings of the report were hotly debated all over Australia. Taken out of context and misinterpreted in Canberra as proof of the failure of Aboriginal communities and the Northern Territory government, some of the measures in the report were transformed into a comprehensive federal policy that also addressed pornography, alcohol abuse, gambling and a series of other issues without any prior consultation with the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. NTER is commonly referred to as ‘the Intervention’ because it involved the Australian Army and police-led task forces entering into communities across the territory, setting up temporary camps, relieving local councils of their authority and enacting a number of strict policies (see also Morphy and Morphy 2013).

While listening to our guide, one of us recalled talking to several senior Yolngu people in Milingimbi, who explained how difficult it was to be called on to work as interpreters when parents were asked to bring their children to the army tents for questioning. It was painful for them to see scared children being examined by medical doctors they did not know. In many cases they were also required to break cultural protocol when interpreting for the doctors, asking children intimate questions about medical and sexual health, when through kinship law it was inappropriate to be talking to those particular children at all, let alone hearing them speak on such topics. It was a confusing and fearful time. The sudden arrival of the army and the police raised bad memories of times when government authorities came and took children away, relocating them in group homes or settling them with white families and employees, never to return home. These senior Yolngu also described the catastrophic loss of existing patterns of community and traditional governance. Even ceremonial practices were not exempt from the Intervention. Under the pretext of looking for pornography, the police entered into men’s ceremonies, disregarding protests that these events were secret and sacred, and unable to be viewed by uninitiated outsiders.

All this happened less than ten years ago. Sitting in the public gallery, above the plenary hall, it was difficult to tell how much other members of our group knew how the Intervention affected Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, but when our guide announced the end of the official tour, some of us stayed a bit longer, trying to make sense of what we had just heard. On the one hand, we were still in the Northern Territory parliament building, surrounded by very strong material and symbolic claims of self-governance. On the other hand, all of a sudden we understood how even stronger claims of emergency can introduce long-lasting damage to the infrastructure and architecture of local democracy – very much like cyclones. In this context, the Intervention seemed to us a violent claim of commonness: both Yolngu and Northern Territory versions of sovereignty were disregarded as a temporary ‘governance space’

was created largely through technical means, evoking bad memories of the colonial past and resurrecting its practice in the management of Aboriginal places and populations.

Uncommon ground: looking for the Ngarra

During our first visit to the Northern Territory Parliament, we learned from James that there is a Yolngu Parliament, the Ngarra. We knew that we would not be able to see or learn much more about it in Darwin, but we had connections in Milingimbi, where James was from, and so we travelled there to find out more. We took a small plane to this island community of a thousand people in North East Arnhem Land, about 450 km east of Darwin. Most permanent buildings we saw were one-storey houses on the eastern side of the island, some of which were connected by asphalt roads, others by clay-red dirt roads. In preparation for our field trip, we read that in 2015 many of the buildings were destroyed or seriously damaged by Cyclone Lam (Terzon 2015). By the time we travelled there, most of the devastation was cleared up, but some places like the church were still under reconstruction.

Where could we find the Ngarra? We knew there were no grand structures associated with the Yolngu Parliament; it was more like a ceremony convened only when necessary, and even then it was not something to which people without considerable knowledge of Yolngu language and law were likely to be invited. Still, a few days after our arrival, we heard that a couple of Yolngu Elders were coming to Milingimbi to discuss alcohol abuse and other issues familiar from the lecture about the Intervention. We were hoping that on this occasion there might be some references to the Ngarra. After seeking permission from a senior leader who had travelled from the nearby community of Ramingining, we went along to the meeting, which was held at the local council. The bright room on the first floor was full of Yolngu Elders, men and women alike: some sat on chairs, others were leaning against the wall. The discussion was partly in English and partly in Yolngu matha, and revolved around a number of recent events in the community that needed attention but were not so serious that they required the involvement of the police. One member of the local council emphasised the importance of addressing these events in accordance with Yolngu law, to which someone bitterly remarked that young people no longer cared about Yolngu law or listened to their Elders.

The discussion in the local council was apparently the first of a number of meetings which would be held, and we left knowing that we would no longer be on the island when these meetings took place. On the way out, one participant, Ganygulpa Dhurrkay, who knew we were in Milingimbi to do research on Yolngu politics, told us that the next day she had some free time and would be happy to talk to us. She asked if we could go together to a billabong nearby to collect some pandanus leaves for weaving mats and dilly bags, and some roots to use for dyes. The next day, in a local hire car that had seen many such trips, we picked up Ganyngulpa and her friend Paula (a senior teacher at Milingimbi school), and drove out to Nilatjirriwa – a waterhole just out of town. Taking a large axe and a hoe out of the back of the car, we followed Ganygulpa into the mangroves surrounding the edge of the billabong. It was clear that we were complete novices at this kind of work, and she instructed us very carefully about where to dig and how. Moving close to the water's edge, there was a particular tree that we were after. Ganygulpa knew

what to look for, which roots and leaves to collect, as well as how to mix them into dyes. She had learned it from her grandmothers, just as they had learned it from their grandmothers. The roots of the tree near the waterhole were for the yellow dyes. After what seemed like a long time, we had enough ingredients, so we headed out to dig for red bulbs, also good for dying. Our final task was to collect long pandanus leaves, bristling with small spikes along their outer edge, as well as leaves that provide the black dye, and paperbark strips that are rolled into thin threads and bundled together to make handles for dilly bags and small baskets.

Ganygulpa told us about these collecting processes as we worked. Each of the trees, from which we gathered the materials for dying, had a place in the Yolngu kinship system. Ganygulpa could trace her relations to the trees, whose roots we were collecting, just as easily as she could trace her kinship relations to Paula through the two Yolngu moieties of Yirritja and Dhuwa, and through the connections of *yothu-yindi* and *märi-gutharra* (mother and child, grandmother and grandchild). In preparing dyes and weaving baskets, these kinship relations were also being maintained and interwoven. Learning to weave mats and baskets involved learning to see and do these kinship connections: how they may be brought together or kept separate, and how some threads keep the structure straight, while others circle around producing quite precise patters through the arrangements of colours, kinship and ancestral relations (see Fig. 5).

[Fig. 5 about here]

In a break, we sat down by the water and made fire for some tea. The conversation morphed into a discussion about different political traditions. In hindsight, we had been actively learning about Yolngu political practices all morning as we sweated gathering roots and pandanus leaves. As we rested and drank tea, Ganygulpa was also very interested to learn about Western parliaments. We talked about the research that had taken us to Frankfurt, Berlin, Darwin and now Milingimbi. Then we asked her about the Ngarra. She mentioned that herself and other Yolngu women have particular ceremonial places and practices in which they participate but the Ngarra was a men's only space. Ganygulpa therefore had never taken part, apart from one exceptional occasion. At this point she asked whether we knew what 'Riyawarray' was – we did not. She told us it was a Ngarra ceremony that took place in 2008, organised in response to the Intervention. Its aim was not just to protest against the Australian government's way of dealing with Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory, but also to lift up the spirit of the community. 'You can look it up, it's on YouTube!'

As soon as we returned to our accommodation in Milingimbi, we watched the 'Riyawarray: Common Ground' video over and over again. As a produced clip in a digital landscape, it was designed to be viewed from anywhere in the world, and it was through the intentional provoking of such (perplexed) engagement that it seemed to make uncommonness recognisable. However, the navigation of even this landscape required some guidance. We spent the next few days talking about the video and the ceremony with several members of the community. Keith Lapulung Dhamarrandji, former chair of Milingimbi Council, told us the video was the latest addition to a series of initiatives that had been aimed at refiguring dominant governance practices in Australia. Perhaps the

most famous ones were the Yirrkala Bark Petitions, which were formal protests against the appropriation of 300 square kilometres of Yolngu land for bauxite mining, followed by the establishment of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy and the Aboriginal Sovereign Treaty campaign, which called for the recognition of Indigenous sovereign rights in Australia (see Brigg and Maddison 2011). However, in contrast with those initiatives, which are often treated as parts of Australia's political history, the YouTube video is alive and continues to generate attention.

Conclusion

We started this paper with a summary of the 'Riyawarray: Common Ground' ceremony and video. We found the latter a compelling object to think with; an empirical find that pointed us towards an exploration of parliamentary politics taking place elsewhere than in buildings, and an analytic concept which helped us cluster, compare and question differing ways of doing 'un/common ground'. In this concluding section, we briefly revisit what these differing ways are and outline how they might be used for a reconceptualization of cosmopolitics in STS.

In telling our stories of various landscapes of democracy in Germany and Australia, isomorphic narratives emerged and became visible within the infrastructure and architecture of mainstream democratic politics. In Frankfurt and Darwin, a shared grounding in traces of devastation came to the fore as stories about air raids and bombings during the Second World War were reiterated to parliamentary visitors; in Berlin these were complemented by reminders of the Cold War and Germany's imperial past. How current regimes related to empires and colonialism was a theme even more strongly present in Canberra and Darwin, with several visible attempts to break with the systematic exclusion of Indigenous groups from the political community. As we noted in the opening of the paper, such narratives and infrastructural arrangements can be counted for quite well through variants of Kantian and neo-Kantian political theory, producing commonness as a means for transitioning towards hopeful futures out of difficult pasts. However, the story from inside (and beyond) the parliament building in Darwin about the Intervention forcefully demonstrated that claims of commonness are also necessarily violent, making it difficult to maintain any clean break between the past and the present. This insight is particularly disturbing, since it questions the viability and the desirability of both Ulrich Beck's understanding of cosmopolitanism *and* Bruno Latour's version of cosmopolitics that is oriented towards the gradual composition of a common world.

If claims of commonness are necessarily double-edged, then it seems useful to shift attention and engage empirically with ways in which uncommonness is done, both when accounting for strong claims about difference in political practice and when re-considering the implicit arrangements maintained as 'default' in the West. To foreground such ways, in the second half of our paper we have focused more explicitly on stories of working with members of the Yolngu community in northern Australia. During our first visit to the Northern Territory Parliament, James Gaykamangu showed us his painting of Ngarra law, which was also a statement about Yolngu sovereignty in North East Arnhem Land. We did not realise this at the time, but based on what we subsequently learned about the Intervention, it is reasonable to assume that his donation of the painting to the

Speaker of the Northern Territory Parliament was a subtle act of protest: it was an attempt to make the uncommonness of differing worlds visible within a Western parliamentary setting. The presence of the honey-bee painting within the legislature was supposed to demonstrate the co-existence of more-than-one legal-political system in Australia. However, the fact that on our second visit to the Northern Territory Parliament members of our group walked right past his painting and focused only on the Coat of Arms suggests that James' act was *too subtle*. It was not clearly evident to others, and did not connect or gain traction within the practice of politics-as-usual. Present in the parliament building, off Yolngu land, it was easily read (and passed over) as a symbol, but not as an alternate legal-political claim.

By contrast, participants of the Riyawarray ceremony had decided to make visible the uncommonness of differing worlds in a place that constituted a blind-spot of Western parliamentary practice. By holding an exceptional Ngarra in Milingimbi, they drew attention to the very sites that the Australian government had sent the army and the police to, looking for pornography and practices of abuse. The video of the ceremony, uploaded to YouTube, opened up those sites and for a brief moment showed what was inside them: not alcohol and pornography, but ceremonial practices of ancestral law just as codified and elaborate as those of the German and Australian parliaments. Several years after its production, the video of the ceremony directed us along the same path that the Yolngu in North East Arnhem Land had tried to direct the Australian government back in 2007. However, while through the video the Riyawarray ceremony became accessible to non-Yolngu audiences in Canberra and beyond, our excursion with Ganygulpa and our conversation with Lapulung made us understand that its intended effect was dependent on processes during which viewers like us could be woven into the fabric of the world-making practices associated with it.

This last point leads us back to Mario Blaser's question about the possibility of another cosmopolitics invoked in the beginning of our paper. Based on our journeys across various landscapes of democracy, it seems to us that any answer to this question needs to closely engage with the ways in which un/common grounds are being established and maintained in a variety of settings – including, but not confined to, parliament buildings across the globe. It needs to interrogate the relationship between commonness and uncommonness, not as an opposition, but as a series of situated efforts to find out and articulate what needs to be made un/common, for what purposes, and on what terms. Bringing into focus such explicit and implicit framings of cosmopolitics – Kantian, neo-Kantian or otherwise – suggests that there is potential for our partial and situated practices on the ground to rework un/common futures through the continual reimagining of pasts and the configuration of people-places to which these futures are tied.

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