



BOOK SYMPOSIUM ON *HOME RULE: NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY
AND THE SEPARATION OF NATIVES AND MIGRANTS* BY
NANDITA SHARMA

Neither Native or National
Against Sovereignty and Towards a New Commons

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The planet's multiple crises demands new modes of thought, new political agendas and re-assessments of where we have arrived. Nandita Sharma's *Home Rule: National Sovereignty and the Separation of Natives and Migrants* (2020) is a book that roams the planet connecting how separation works to fashion identity claims concerning nations, citizens, migrants and natives. Sharma's profound critique of sovereignty as a mode of separation rather than one of freedom, autonomy, and an authentic postcolonial condition is an important intervention and re-assessment of where we have arrived. Working across national movements, migration practices, claims to sovereignty, anti-colonial movements, global immigration policies, and the ordering of the nation-state Sharma argues that a "*Postcolonial New World Order* in which people are defined as part of separate 'nations' and ruled through the apparatus of nation-state sovereignty, international bodies,



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and global capital” (Sharma 2020: 3, emphasis in original) p.3 is what characterizes our current time. I am in agreement with Sharma’s argument and in what follows I suggest that Sharma’s insights requires of us a different kind of politics if we are to save the planet and vault beyond the colonial categories of management that we have inherited and that organize much of our political action, dreams, and desires in the current moment.

The kind of critique that Sharma offers in *Home Rule* is one that unsettles how our political present has unfolded and in doing so Sharma writes against and significantly clarifies the limits of some political claims in our present moment. Sharma’s critique of territory, nation-state, and sovereignty as routes towards freedom is one we must surely reckon with, and the evidence *Home Rule* provides of how movements to achieve sovereignty and nationhood have been mostly not liberatory movements but rather the imposition of rule by elites, coercive rule, and other forms of non-collective self-determining rule are difficult to argue with. Indeed, Sharma’s work recalls that of Frantz Fanon’s (1961) *Wretched of the Earth* and Samir Amin’s (1990) *Delinking* works that undo the sentimentality of our political projects of liberation and instead offer us accounts of the entanglements of our coloniality, while pushing against any too easy narrative of liberatory resistance. This is the kind of work that refuses the sentimentality of nation-state sovereignty as the harbinger of autonomy and freedom and is the kind of intellectual intervention that makes many uncomfortable and encourages others to rethink their political positions.

Where Sharma breaks with Fanon and Amin is in the profound critique of sovereignty that *Home Rule* offers. In this critique, Sharma takes many intellectual risks, but in my view the risks are necessary if we are to seriously think the disappointments and failures of national liberation movements in the post-World War Two era and into the present. At the heart of Sharma’s urgent intervention is this claim: “In the Postcolonial New World Order, being a member of a nation in possession of territorial sovereignty is *the* thing to be(come). It is an aspiration, moreover, that cannot be named as such, for, to be convincing, it must not be seen as an invention but an *inheritance*” (Sharma 2020: 3, emphasis in original). It is this particular insight of Sharma’s that significantly dials up the stakes of all kinds of movements for redress, for land back, for nation, citizenship, and sovereignty as righting wrongs that *Home Rule* asks us to not just reconsider but to break with politically. Read in the context of the imminent climate catastrophe, Sharma’s insight is a world re-orienting intellectual insight.

If we take seriously that post-World War Two struggles have largely been waged through national liberation models that have either failed or been hijacked by ruling elites who have stolen the revolution, to riff off of Fanon (1963), how might we think differently about a “new” politics of liberation and freedom. As climate change and predatory capitalism continues to produce what Stuart Hall called “planned and unplanned migrations” (Hall 2003: 195) a rethinking of our mutual co-constituting livability becomes at stake. Sharma does not just leave us with the critique of sovereignty and its significant limits but rather points us to a past that might well be our collective future too. I am interested in Sharma’s ideas on the commons because, like her, this is where I think a politics of the possible needs to head as well.

The kind of idea of the commons that Sharma advances is one that takes planetary life as the totality of our collective inheritance. To do so it means that we must take some significant risks. The risks at stake are to development new modes of political identification. If our current modes of identity—native, national, citizen, migrant, and other niches have failed us, and I agree with Sharma that they have failed us—then new ways of marking our collective mutuality are necessary. Sharma concludes: “I have argued additionally that to further the project of decolonization, we need to disidentify with the postcolonial political categories of National-Native and Migrant. Fundamentally, this requires us to disidentify with being National Citizens” (Sharma 2020: 282). The importance of this insight is one that troubles and disrupts all the modes of identification that have been the bulwark of our contemporary movements. Sharma’s turn to the Diggers and their desire for land and “the ability to enjoy a livelihood on it *without exclusion*” (Sharma 2020: 282) is where I land my further engagement with the beautiful political challenge that *Home Rule* provides to all of us. Sharma’s incited us to think differently about how we might live together. I now turn to that political project.

In *On Property* (2021), I write of the need for a new idea of the commons. Since what historians have called the enclosure of the commons, where monarchies in Europe appropriated specific lands for their use and benefit, the commons as both an idea and a practical means of organizing life has consistently been something we have had to struggle over because the commons is the terrain that makes life, a life. It is my belief that a renewed idea of the commons for our time brings along with it a different idea of how we might collectively live better together, and that includes living better together for the entire planet as well. I would argue that 1989 and the collapse of the Berlin Wall enabled a further segmentation of the commons into more nation-states and trading blocks and thus into intensified arenas of policing, both global and local, and at and across all borders. This segmenting means that collective responsibility for our shared resources as a basis for how we care for each other became further sites of antagonism, to put it mildly. My argument then is one premised on the idea that the resources of a renewed commons are not only of what is called the natural resources of the earth; the resources of a new commons also include the world’s technological and accumulated wealth, accrued through more than five hundred years of exploitation of all of planetary life. The realization of this vision of the commons I am proposing necessitates a profound shift in how we understand life. A renewed vision of the commons is a call to invention and reinvention, to unmaking and remaking, to ending the world as it is and to making the world that we need. It recognizes that how we presently live together was conceived, installed and learned over hundreds of years and therefore it can be unlearned. We can learn new things, new ways of co-existing. A renewed vision and practice, based on stewardship of the global commons and an ethic of care that begins with attending to the most vulnerable among us first, would open us up to an altogether different, and better way of living together. Indeed, Sharma’s refusal of borders points us in this direction. The direction is one in which a different account of care beyond the self is necessary. And the migrants that generate and sit at the heart of Sharma’s arguments are those whom we might center in an ethic of care that becomes the basis for a new global commons.

In this regard we need to invent a new ethics of care or a new way of being in common and difference with each other. This new way of being must and will eschew forms of authoritarian arrangements in which people are grouped and classified as less than others and resources distributed unevenly on that basis. In Sharma's account this is what citizenship as a technology of the nation-state does. Such a perspective requires a new account of life as "history has intervened," as Stuart Hall (1990: 225) points out. Our current task is to narrate a different account of how we can live better together collectively. Following Sylvia Wynter(1995), we can offer a different account of life and work to make that account the dominant mode of how we inhabit the planet as species. Such a different account demands we imagine anew our mutuality of relations across populations, species and other modes of life on the planet. In Sharma's move against sovereignty, she is requiring of us a new ethics of not just borders, but of how we organize all of planetary life.

To arrive at the incitement Sharma's work offers us we are going to have to risk something to make something better than we have and something that will save the planet. Gayatri Spivak has asked us to risk our specialism (Spivak 2012:303) That risk is going to have to begin with risking identity, and instead provide another and different account of our shared and collective histories. Risking identity's seductions, its claims on us; risking its steadfastness, and risking that we can collectively re-invent ourselves beyond the identities that have evolved from the aftermath of Columbus's onslaught in the Americas is one that scares many. However, those very identities are in part the production of our ongoing colonial matrix. If we are to save this planet we must begin to grapple with the trap that identity is. How it cages us, and how under some conditions it always already pre-empts the possibility of another world coming into being. In this regard we need to imagine a new and different kinds of solidarity as Tamara Nopper (2021) points us to in discussions of Asian and Black solidarity and in so doing a different and new account of the commons in a post-Columbus migratory world.

One of the things that I am more and more keenly willing to risk begins with the knowledge that the people and institutions that made us and named us savage, nigger, uncivilized, barbaric, native are the same ones that have now accepted and partially made us also identify as Black, Indigenous, POC, LGBT, and so on. And that these latter identities are now offered up as the means to access resources within the nation-state and to even achieve new nation-states. But what is evidently clear is that the nation-state is not a site of freedom. The enlightenment, post-enlightenment, modernist European expansion project that categorized us remains steady in its ongoing categorizations and in its ability to induct into its practice of the human all who will retain its foundational principles of brutal unequal distribution of the earth's resources. What remains elusive for many of us then is the difficulty of forging "cross-cultural resonances" as Wilson Harris (1990: 11) would put it from a partially shared and ongoing brutal history into this contemporary moment where racial hierarchy positions those dysslected as furthest from Black as more worthy of a life—this is the legacy of Las Casas all the way to Trump and Joe Biden, all inclusive. My argument here is not one for a colorblind political consciousness, but rather for a political consciousness that recognizes the nigger, the native, the coolie, the savage, the uncivilized, the oriental, the barbaric all share something in common and it is from that commonality that a

different politics is possible without guarantees, as Hall (1990, 2003) has taught us. Hall already had embedded in his account of how we might remake the world a critique of coalition and solidarity, and yet an insistence that we must try. Just try. A new global commons, a desire for its actuality is to try at it. What I am certain of is that most of our current responses to the conditions of degradation the majority of us are forced to live daily will not in any way, shape, or form be adequately addressed nor produce the conditions and new foundations for transformation if we continue to respond and to activate desires within the entrapments of late modern capitalist culture, one being played out on the terms of the master conception of European humanism. Sharma's insistence that sovereignty does not and cannot deliver the kind of transformation we actually need is borne out in example after example. Therefore, we have one small task, to collectively execute risking something of ourselves—to risk the identities that we think makes it legitimate to rule others out.

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