Signs and Society (2025), **13** (1), 102–121
doi:10.1017/sas.2024.5

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
HANKUK UNIVERSITY OF FOREIGN STUDIES

ARTICLE

Semiotic Determinacy: Sovereign Citizens' Approach to Legal Language

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Abstract
Some people have become disenchanted with modern bureaucratic forms and modern governments, and in their attempts to imagine an alternative, have joined the sovereign citizen counterpublic, a right-leaning movement comprised of loosely affiliated groups rejecting the validity of national laws that are present in the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and other countries. These groups focus their energies on legal systems as they resist modern institutions and have developed a shared semiotic ideology about how legal language works and how legal texts should be interpreted. This semiotic ideology hinges upon a particular form of semiotic determinacy; our article unpacks its implications. Sovereign citizens' ideology is antithetical to how institutionally entrenched actors understand the interplay of semiotic determinacy and indeterminacy in legal contexts, which leads their logics and historical narratives to resonate with conspiracy theories. We conclude by exploring how this counterpublic re-configures older strands of Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation logics as resistance in this neoliberal moment.

Keywords: authoritative discourse; language ideology; law; semiotic ideology; subculture

We are living in an age of the otherwise in which the idea that the social world is constructed has captured the imagination of people on all points of the political spectrum in many Euro-American countries. In the aftermath of this realization, many take the next step, recognizing that the world could be otherwise if only enough people would coordinate to make it so. They thus enact alternative ways of being social, of creating laws, and of transforming repertoires of social norms—whether by invoking their views of how life used to be before a particular historical turning point or imagining desirable futures in which communities follow other, more palatable guidelines for governing themselves (see Cohen and Gershon 2023; Coutin and Yngvesson 2023; Gibson-Graham 2002). Understanding these longings for an alternative requires attention to people's semiotic ideologies (Keane 2018), especially given that calls for alternatives are reflexive engagements with how the current social order

came to be constructed as well as visions for creating an alternative social order through persuasion, refusal, and other communicative practices.

In this article, we turn to a growing counterpublic, sovereign citizens, a right-leaning movement comprised of loosely affiliated groups in the United States, Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere whose shared semiotic ideologies and acts of lawfare are what binds them together far more than any overarching organizational structure (see Cohen and Gershon, n.d. for an analysis of sovereign citizens as a response to the neoliberal moment). They are a counterpublic in Michael Warner's sense because they fashion themselves as having a common set of beliefs largely through the addressivity and circulation of texts, loosely defined, and they also "differ markedly … from the premises that allow the dominant culture to understand itself as a public" (Warner 2002, 81). In each country, they take certain texts to be foundational—the Magna Carta, the US Constitution, and so on—and believe that these texts are currently being fundamentally misrepresented by illegitimate national governments.

Here is a piece of advice from a guide that circulates among sovereign citizens. It offers a model conversation for how a sovereign citizen ought to interact with a police officer who tries to issue a traffic ticket:

Police Officer: "*What's your name?*"
Man: "*John*"
Police Officer: "*Full name?*"
Man: "*You can call me John-David*"
Police Officer: "*Surname?*"
Man: "*Family name?, why do you need that? I gave you my name?*"

If you do decide to give it say "John-David of the Doe family" Make sure they write it like this to distinguish you from your corporate entity MR JOHN DAVID DOE/MR JOHN DOE etc.

Police Officer: "*What's your address?*" *You can be vague*
Man: "*I live in the Anyplace North Dublin area,*" or "*Yellow Road, that's near Ballyanywhere*" (Tir na Saor n.d., 18, police officer is called Gardai in original)

In this encounter, the sovereign citizen would explain when elicited that, by requesting their name and address, the police officer is attempting to extend a contract, and the sovereign citizen is refusing. They view the police officer as a representative of an illicit corporate government (since in their view, most national governments have been replaced by corporate governments whose goal is to profit off the labor of its generally unwitting citizens). They argue that every corporate government seeks to ensnare all its citizens in a web of contracts, and they view various legal forms—birth certificates, traffic tickets, taxes, driver's licenses, and so on—as contracts extended by corporate government officials to citizens.

Sovereign citizens in general reject the current validity of national laws on the grounds that they are contracts that have been unconscionably imposed. Yet in their rejection, not all contracts are anathema, only contracts that are not freely

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

consented to. They thus turn to a relentlessly voluntaristic reliance on contracts as an alternative vision of how one must manage relationships with others and with the nation-state. Consensual contracts with the corporate nation-state, in their perspective, create stable, fully knowable, and perduring relationships and roles, functioning as texts that can adequately encapsulate guidelines for conflicts that might arise.[1]

In this article, we turn to sovereign citizen groups and loosely affiliated individuals in the United States, the country that is widely regarded as where these ideas and practices first originated. In focusing specifically on sovereign citizens, we are interested in how, unlike many counterpublics that traffic in the political potentials offered by semiotic indeterminacy, sovereign citizens will use and project onto legal actors and genres specific forms of semiotic determinacy to bolster their resistance to a political and legal system they consider illegitimate. We explore a shared language ideology that holds that legal language is and should be transparent. As such, it involves only revelation and requires little, if any, interpretation—when performed correctly.[2] This language ideology has parallels with other right-leaning legal actors in the United States, such as originalists, but as we will discuss later, there are clear differences between how the two groups read texts. For example, sovereign citizens do not face the same challenges of applying law to specific cases that originalists do, and thus, the sovereign citizens' version of semiotic determinacy reflects the fact that they have historically faced fewer practical hermeneutic challenges than originalists.

Despite their range of historical origin stories and disparate locations, the sovereign citizen counterpublic has come to the attention of the media and different countries' legal systems in part because of how they engage with legal institutions and state representatives like police officers and bureaucratic officials. In every country, they treat the currently dominant legal language as being consistently semiotically determinate. This is a sharp contrast to the hermeneutic mixture of semiotic determinacy and indeterminacy deployed by institutionally sanctioned legal actors, such as judges, lawyers, and police, who rely on the open-endedness of processes for applying law to the details of a case. That is, for sovereign citizens, some of the labor of fashioning an otherwise occurs through fairly radical alternative linguistic legal practices (see Bauman 1983 for a similar example among early Quakers), most of which tend to dismay institutionally sanctioned legal practitioners and so far has led to failure in the courts. In this article, we explore the semiotic ideologies and discursive practices developed by participants in the sovereign citizen counterpublic to support their core belief that legal language is determinate in its semiosis despite repeated interactions and often open confrontations with legal systems built around substantively different language ideologies about how law should be interpreted.

To that end, we engage closely with the ideological work through which participants in sovereign citizen speech communities and communities of practice work to reject the context-dependency of reference specifically and semiosis generally. We track how

[1]This is a take that anthropologists and critical legal studies scholars persuaded by relational contract theory (see Macaulay 2020) would believe is not possible to enact in practice.

[2]Interpretation is not a term from the sovereign citizen's lexicon in this article. We are using *revelation* and *interpretation* as our own analytical terms.

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

sovereign citizens consolidate, disseminate, and defend an alternative vision to institutionally authorized legal expertise. Their alternative comprises not only a register but also a shared commitment to imagined genre effects and a set of legal strategies that are shaped by their distinctive interpretation of national (counter-)history and authoritative legal practices. Against a view of semiosis as open-ended, indeterminate, and context-dependent, sovereign citizens instead assert the invariant, determinate functioning of both language-use and an underlying, conspiratorial reality that is given through revelation, not interpretation.

Background

We use the term "sovereign citizens," recognizing that, among the people who share this legal language ideology, there are different subgroups. Some of them use the name "sovereign citizens" while others use different names, such as UK Freemen; scholars and critics, meanwhile, often call all of them "pseudolaw groups."[3] Our archive is based on publicly available texts—books, blogs, online videos, podcasts, and websites—that various groups in this movement circulate. Aided by our research assistant, Jonas Johnson, we focused primarily on groups in the United States who differed from each other along what seemed like productive axes. For example, we tracked how Judge Anna engaged with her audience in contrast with the National Liberty Alliance, and how Moorish sovereign groups such as the Al Moroccan Empire Consular Court at Lenapahoking State diverged in ways distinct from other primarily Black groups such as the United States of America Republic Government.

These widely varied groups don't necessarily get along with each other, yet they are recognizable through the similarities in their political visions; obstreperous and distinctively enregistered legal tactics; and shared semiotic ideologies about genre, legal language, and foundational historical texts. They all argue that their current national government is illegitimate, having gone astray at a particular historical moment and ended up replaced by a corporation functioning as a government, taking advantage of its (duped) citizens. The question of when, precisely, the "true" government was replaced depends on that informal group's historical imagination. In the United States, some emphasize the direct aftermath of the American Revolution, and many focus on the adoption of the 14th Amendment and then the abandonment of the US gold standard. In Australia, some focus on the Whitlam government in the early 1970s as taking the wrong turn, while others view the colonization of Australia as illegitimate. In general, in Commonwealth countries, the Magna Carta is frequently turned to as a foundational document; in the United States, it is the original document of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Many participants in this counterpublic insist on the possibility of a true government that can be made viable—if only the corporate

[3]Donald Netolitsky (2023, 796, 800–801) documents fifteen distinct "pseudolaw groups" in the US, Canada, Austria, Republic of Ireland, UK, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Germany, France, and Russia (some of which, he ventures, no longer have followers). He suggests that extending the term sovereign citizen, which originated in the US, across other groups stands to misdescribe how some relate to their national state. And yet all of these groups, he illustrates, share a "a surprisingly consistent international monoculture of alternative law."

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

government's illegitimacy were widely known. Thus, they insist that a foundational truth can be revealed from a text, but, as we shall see, they reject the idea that it is made visible through interpretation. In other words, legal language is *not* comprised of meanings that emerge in the encounter between a reader, the world, and the text.

Sovereign citizens also uniformly reason that their illicit corporate government has financial reasons for using contracts to steal the fruits of every corporate citizen's future labor as collateral for the national debt. Contracts force people to become their legal personas, legal personas that have exchanged unalienable rights for "statutory privileges," controlled by the government. This exchange robs sovereign citizens of their ability to be vibrant and free human beings, which they term "living souls."

Yet contracts can be refused. And sovereign citizens are committed to an ideology of the transparent efficacy of performative language, so much so that they believe it is possible to reverse the corporate government's attempts at control by using the correct form of legal language at precisely the correct moments. Often saying the right thing at the right time revolves around using the correct phrases that will refuse the contract they view the government as offering in that moment. Other times, it can involve insisting on claiming one's true identity as opposed to the legal/corporate persona that the government has insisted that every citizen inhabit and already inserted into an unconscionable contract. For example, a popular manual advises that when in court:

> When they ask: "Who are you?" Answer—I am me? The judge will ask "Are you JACK R PATRIOT?" Your response should be: Judge, for the record, I am here without counsel and I cannot make a legal determination about what you asked me. After a response from the judge, your response should be: Judge, for the record, I am not here to enter a plea, I am here for one purpose and that is to challenge subject matter jurisdiction. I am not a corporation, I am ME. (Redemption Manual 1, n.d. 5–11)

As in our initial example, the author of a *Redemption Manual* here counsels readers to use terms that enable them to proclaim effectively that they have a true self and are refusing to be the duped persona corporate governments foist on all citizens through nefarious contracts in the guise of birth certificates, drivers' licenses, and so on. In moves such as these, sovereign citizens project a determinate effect or result that supposedly follows inevitably from the use of contractual language (manifested, for instance, in the use of a verbal formula like "Are you JACK R PATRIOT?") and propose an alternative formulation that in their view leads to a different, yet equally determinate effect.

This legal semiotic ideology structures a decentralized movement anchored by individual gurus as well as by thousands of websites offering forms, manuals, and seminars to address legal problems (often for a fee) (ADL 2012). From the early days of the US movement, adherents endorsed an entrepreneurial approach to circulating legal strategies (Levitas 2002), and there can be strong financial incentives for disseminating sovereign citizen ideas through paid workshops and webinars. Many academic commentators trace the emergence of the sovereign citizens movement to

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the racist and antisemitic Posse Comitatus (Power to the County), led by William Potter "Bill" Gale starting in the late 1950s. Bill Gale and his followers argued that, "a group of citizens was justified in arming themselves to resist federal laws they disliked" (Levitas 2002, 4). While fairly fringe, they began to gain more widespread support during the early 1980s farming crisis and recession, when they promised to offer legal avenues to combat widespread bankruptcies and foreclosures. Through for-profit workshops and pamphlets, they taught various strategies for repudiating state jurisdiction, claiming that only the county sheriff was in fact authorized to enforce law—or rather, what they defined as law. This initial movement faded, only to re-constitute itself in the Great Recession of 2008, with many of its members motivated by their experiences with debt to imagine an alternative relationship to state-sanctioned financial obligations (Hodge 2019). Collectively, all these groups traffic in law. In these groups' hands, law (or rather contract) creates new kinds of roles: people who feel empowered to challenge state authority in cases involving things like speeding tickets, licenses, fines, taxes, liens, farm debt, and property foreclosures. In all these cases, there is a generally held view that the right speech acts can stymie corporate government officials, preventing them from stripping sovereign citizens of their freedom and property.

Scholarly approaches to legal semiotic indeterminacy

In the United States today, most institutionally embedded legal actors have inherited the 20th-century idea that there are "gaps, conflicts, and ambiguities" within legal rules and that the core of what lawyers and judges do to vie to resolve these gaps as they confront specific conflicts and react to specific contexts (Kennedy 2002). Legal philosopher Brian Leiter maps a spectrum of views on legal interpretation. The views range from the simple observation that language is "open-textured" (Leiter 2007, 74, quoting H.L.A. Hart), and hence law necessarily encodes a modicum of indeterminacy, to the realist claim that the rules and principles that govern "how to read" law (Leiter 2007, 75, quoting Karl Llewellyn) are flexible and manipulable "and so made to do very different rhetorical work" (Leiter 2007, 76)—thus enabling lawyers and judges to produce considerable indeterminacy in legal reasoning requiring ethical and political judgment in legal practice and application. Regardless of where they fall on this spectrum, however, few, if any, institutionally embedded legal actors would today challenge "a thesis about the *under*determinancy of law" (Leiter 2007, 79).

Likewise, for linguistically and semiotically oriented scholars of law, there has been a longstanding understanding that practicing law entails adapting elements of a large body of previously established legal doctrines to a case—a context-bound set of represented events—a practice that has semiotic indeterminacy in various forms at its core. Marianne Constable, inspired by Austin, explores how infelicitous conditions can reveal legal language's incompleteness, that is, how legal language's performative capacity depends on the nuances of contexts (Constable 2014). Linguistic anthropologist Elizabeth Mertz, in her approach to the semiotic indeterminacy at the heart of legal practices, focuses far more on how lawyers' language ideology builds upon certain forms of entextualization—the emergence of a set of linguistic and nonlinguistic signs

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as an apparently coherent entity, or text—to produce legal facts rather than establish facts on the ground.

> In other words, in legal language, we know this fact because it was found and written down (entextualized) by an authoritative court, operating under correct metalinguistic rules and with the proper authority. One of the miracles of this system is its ability to combine certainty with such a flexible—indeed, at times deliberately agnostic—approach to social reality. (Mertz 2007, 216)

Building on such insights, Justin Richland has argued that the legal system produces sovereignty and its effects through how its participants assert authority as they manage a multiplicity of meanings when determining jurisdiction, alongside other necessary legal tasks (Richland 2013). Authority is established precisely because semiotic indeterminacy is at play and is being continuously renegotiated or maintained by legal actions. Most recently, Jessica Greenberg (2024) has discussed how different legal actors actively labor to produce specific forms of semiotic indeterminacy as they seek to differentiate between a judgement's legal and political effects:

> Building and deploying incoherence—or an excess of potentially contradictory meanings—is precisely what the institution enables. It is *the point* …. Those attuned to the subtleties of institutional authority can use formal channels to work that law-politics distinction. They do so by naturalizing and fixing boundaries of law and politics *and* using that distinction to activate an excess of potential meanings and intertextual connections in legal judgments. (Greenberg 2024, 10–11)

This is an all too brief summary of some of the ways scholars attentive to legal language have highlighted semiotic indeterminacy's central role in law: in other words, they hold a view of law as comprised of signs that give rise to other signs in structured but open-ended and often unpredictable ways. This role holds, albeit is practiced differently, for both civil and common law systems. But not for sovereign citizens. They explicitly reject all the modes for establishing authority mentioned here in their interactions with contemporary courts and government bureaucracies, regardless of which legal system they are in. Instead, they insist on a view of law as comprised of signs that give rise to one and only one effect or result, and thus produce genres whose very use should ideally ensure acontextual stability—in a word, determinacy.

Readers more familiar with right-leaning conspiracy theorists' approaches will notice some parallels between other conspiracy theorists and sovereign citizens, but also significant differences. As with most conspiracy theorists, for sovereign citizens, there is a hidden power structure that those in the know can access, and there are visible and easily accessed signs that point to this power structure. Indeed, it is not surprising that "do your own research" is a common call across all of these communities given their shared sense that a hidden truth is easily knowable when one is attuned to the right sources of information using the correct interpretive lens. Many sovereign citizens will advocate for others to follow their example and undertake a tremendous amount of research labor to grasp the historical shifts they believe have happened. Yet there are substantive differences between

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sovereign citizens and other conspiracy theorists. Most notably, sovereign citizens tend not to dabble in apophenia, that is, "the perception of patterns among random or seemingly unconnected signs" (McIntosh 2022, 10). Unlike Q-Anon followers and similar conspiracy theorists, they will not devote vast amounts of hermeneutic energy to deciphering cryptic signals supposedly sent by political leaders, celebrities, aliens, or others in the know[4] (see Lepselter 2016; McIntosh 2022). They also don't pepper their conversations with allusions to other narratives shared predominantly by those in their counterpublic, as James Slotta describes (Slotta 2019). Their focus, instead, is on offering a fairly coherent alternative to institutionally established legal expertise, an alternative that comprises a register, a commitment to imagining particular genre effects, and a set of legal strategies that are shaped by their distinctive interpretation of national history and institutionally entrenched legal practices.

Semiotic determinacy and the sovereign-citizen counterpublic

As these ideas travel to different countries, the specific content morphs to accommodate the historical intricacies of each nation-state.[5] Yet the practices that draw the media's attention remain strikingly similar, a clear indication that this is a counterpublic (see Hobbs, Young, and McIntyre 2024; Netolitsky 2023; Warner 2002). Sovereign citizens are attentive to legal arguments and judicial rituals, yet, from the perspective of lawyers and judges, they are attentive in all the wrong ways. They have built their own relatively intricate theory of how stable textual reference must be, focusing often on aspects of legal documents, such as whether a name is in all-caps or not, that signals little to those who are more institutionally entrenched. In the most general senses, sovereign citizens have a commitment to semiotic determinacy that builds on shared assumptions with court officials about the importance of contracts, of legal authority, of the power of certain properly phrased language to felicitously transform people's status and obligations to others. Yet what counts as a felicitous legal utterance and how reference functions in legal circles for these sovereign citizens is so at odds with legal norms that court officials frequently respond to them as though they are insane (Netolitsky 2018).

A general frustration with the social contract underlies sovereign citizens' turn to insisting upon a contemporary society built from the ground up based on a wide range of openly accepted contracts between individuals. For anyone immersed in classic liberal infrastructures and institutions, there is a puzzle that Durkheim (1893) noted about the social contract. To live within a liberal social order is to be surrounded by the premise that everyone has agreed to a social contract that few in fact have had the opportunity to openly and consciously acquiesce to (Burnyeat and Sheild

[4]There are exceptions. Donald Netolitzky has noted that "the US's leading pseudolaw Accept for Value (A4V) guru, Winston Shrout, says he sits on a "galactic roundtable" and controls financial institutions with his colleagues: elves, the Queen of the Fairies, and fictional New Age figure "Saint Germain" (Netolitsky 2023, 805).

[5]Shifts in media ecologies have clearly shaped how easily this perspective travels internationally since the movement's origins in the 1950s United States. How precisely these ideas travel, and are translated, is beyond the scope of this article.

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Johansson 2022, 227). To be part of Society built along liberal lines is to be immersed in a contractual sociality that presupposes a negotiated exchange of certain freedoms for security. The negotiation has never in fact taken place, yet all must act as if it has. It is the very taken-for-granted acceptance of the social contract underpinning so much of the contemporary liberal infrastructure that is anathema to sovereign citizens, at least today when they believe the state has exceeded its sovereignty and no longer governs according to any principle of popular consent that could authorize its role.

Instead of arguing that contemporary governments govern based on popular agreement, sovereign citizens insist that today we all live in a very different reality. We now live in and under a corporation that—like any other corporation—can only assert its reach, jurisdiction, and control by contracting with other legal entities. Sovereign citizens insist that all legal and political relationships today are individual contractual relationships. They hold that these contracts are constantly being asserted, and, just as constantly, can be rejected. When a traffic ticket is issued, this is a contract that one can refuse to accept. When property tax is levied, this too is viewed as a contract that can be turned down. Driver's licenses, car registrations, and birth certificates are contracts as well. A Redemption Manual's author explains:

> Everything offered to you either verbally or in writing is a **new** offer of contract …: a traffic ticket, a parking ticket, a code enforcement violation for your yard not being mowed, a building permit, a jury duty notice, a notice or bill for property taxes, a bill to re-register your car, a notice or bill for state or federal taxes, a notice from your bank or credit card company that there will be higher charges for late payments, etc, the list is eternal because everything between you and a corporation **is** an offer of contract. The good news is that all contracts can be accepted or REJECTED. (Redemption Manual n.d., 1–5 underlining and bold in original)

In this view, every documentary and financial interaction with the corporate state is a contract that, as a sovereign citizen, one can choose to say no to. Being a member of society is not established in one irrevocable moment. Instead, there are only contracts among individual legal entities that can be extended and potentially repeatedly refused.

In this sense, the sovereign citizen acts as if they can choose to be outside of state power, hinging on the understanding that the state is an illegitimate corporate government, although this refusal can require quite a bit of work to maintain. For sovereign citizens, saying no to a government official is comparable in kind to saying no to Wal-Mart or an insurance agent. This equivalency is one of the ways by which sovereign citizens reject the specificity of contexts and some participant roles. They do, however, recognize that stepping outside of state power is stepping outside of a complex set of coordinating systems that take considerable effort to refuse. "I tell people, it's an inconvenient lifestyle," one sovereign citizen cautions, "Like, I don't get mail to my house, you got to understand that … I have to literally travel to go get my mail" (DisclosureHub 2022, 56:33).

Like all contracts between formally equal subjects, the contracts offered by the corporate state are not uni-directional. Sovereign citizens reason that they can turn the

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state's tools against itself, using the contracts that they are subjected to on a regular basis by various state officials as a tool to keep these state officials in check. From their perspective, there is a twist in cementing the contract that makes these actions seem effective. While utterances are integral to creating and refusing a contract, for them, silence is widely interpreted as acquiescence to a contract. They interpret a maxim from Black's Law Dictionary: "*Qui non negat fatetur*," or "He who does not deny, admits." As legal scholar Donald Netolitzky explains, this maxim describes a principle that courts can use to interpret and adjudicate pleadings (for example, if a plaintiff brings a claim and the defendant does not provide a counter-claim, the court may find for the plaintiff). Netolitzky therefore argues that sovereign citizens have "misapplied" a principle by inappropriately reasoning from pleading rules to contract rules (Netolitsky 2018). But for sovereign citizens, there is nothing inappropriate about this reasoning: all judicial proceedings are acts of offer and acceptance, and courts, judges, and prosecutors have no general authority, only authority that arises from contract—that is, from individual consent.

Hence when one suggests a contract to someone else, it is imperative that they reject within a bounded period of time, or else the contract is understood to have been accepted. Mary Croft, in a well-circulated book in this movement, writes:

> I sent the Minister of Transport (I use the Ministers of the Canadian Government to work *for* me) a Proposal of Contract, the terms and conditions of which are that we agree that what I have put on my license plate will identify my automobile as *not* one of theirs. It is mine. (p. 18)

As in many similar instances, a ministry probably simply never responded to Croft's claim, which she, along with many others, take to mean agreement. Sovereign citizens will also extend contracts of various forms to judges, prosecutors, or police they have tangled with. For example, should they be stopped by a police officer for speeding, they might put a lien on the officer's personal property to the tune of $225,000, as a Canadian sovereign citizen did in 2015.[6] For them, a lien is an offer to contract that is accepted by virtue of an officer's silence. By the same logic, when a police officer stops a sovereign citizen for speeding, they must immediately refuse to accept the police officer's authority, as politely as possible, or else they have granted the officer contractual authority over them.

Despite all the talk about contracts, we haven't come across instances in which sovereign citizens discuss *negotiating* contracts or even strategies for transforming the terms of contracts by rejecting or re-writing some aspects of contracts while retaining others. Instead, for sovereign citizens, contracts with the corporate state appear to hinge around the moments in which one either accepts or rejects it. This is part and parcel of a more general hermeneutic approach they have toward legal texts, one that is committed to revelation rather than interpretation.

[6] https://toronto.citynews.ca/2016/09/21/edmonton-police-lay-paper-terrorism-charge-against-self-proclaimed-freeman

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Semiotically determinate strategies

As textualists committed to revelation but not interpretation, sovereign citizens tend to stress how important it is to use the right phrases and document styles in ways that they believe force the courts and other government institutions to engage with them according to the true relationships that one can legitimately have with governments, as opposed to the spurious ones that many have been bamboozled into having. Their documents are therefore filled with explanations of the accurate definitions of terms, and a not insignificant amount of the pedagogical labor of many sovereign citizen texts involves explaining what a word truly means.[7] What is striking is their strongly held belief that the *right* legal language can performatively undo the work that deceptive legal language has done and that what is at stake is fundamentally a battle of words.

This battle is linked closely to their understanding of how current nation-states function in a capitalism structured around debt. Government officials are viewed as duplicitously offering contracts that require people to inhabit a legal persona—a Strawman—that only benefits the corporate government. This deceptive practice begins from birth onward: the birth certificate is the moment in which the government lays a financial claim on the future labor of the baby, looping the child as a corporate citizen into becoming collateral for government debt. Croft explains the practice, which for her began when countries left the gold standard:

> Since USA/CA have been bankrupt for decades, having no substance such as gold and silver to back it, the only asset it has are men and women and our labour. We are the collateral for the interest on the loan of the World Bank. Each of us is registered, via the application for a birth certificate. The Treasury issues a bond on the birth certificate and the bond is sold at a securities exchange and bought by the FRB/BoC, which then uses it as collateral to issue bank notes. The bond is held in trust for the Feds at the Depository Trust Corporation. We are the surety on said bonds. Our labour/energy is then payable at some future date …. The birth certificate created a FICTION (the name of the baby in upper case letters). The state/ province sells the birth certificate to the Commerce Department of the corporations of USA/CA, which in turn places a bond on the birth certificate thereby making it a negotiable instrument, and placing the fiction, called a STRAWMAN, into the warehouse of the corporations of USA/CA. (Croft 2007, 21–22)

From the birth certificate on, the corporate government seeks to entrap people, yet these snares can be avoided, first by one's parents resisting the birth certificate. But if the parents were not aware of the deception and arranged for a birth certificate, then, as an adult, one can reverse the state's hold and access the funds assigned to one's Strawman by submitting the proper paperwork. As Croft goes on to explain:

[7] As ethnographers, we take this fixation on definition as an all too familiar moment of logical contradiction: sovereign citizens believe simultaneously that language can be transparent and that many words require definition.

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> In order to get one's liberty and independence back, one must first secure the title and ownership of the Strawman. Once one controls the straw man, then one controls the rights of the property that the strawman acquires. For one to regain title to his body the Birth Certificate must be secured. After we have redeemed it and filed public notice via a financing statement, then we have the right of property ownership through our Strawman whom we now control. (Croft 2007, 27)

In Croft's account, one can see that the rejection of the corporate state requires a tremendous amount of paperwork; it is no accident that sovereign citizens are described by court officials and law professors as "paper terrorists."

Sovereign citizens' focus on documents is reminiscent of Hetherington's astute ethnographic account of Paraguayan guerilla auditors, who strategically manipulated documents through state bureaucracies for their own ends, and to the occasional bafflement of bureaucrats (Hetherington 2011). Unlike the guerrilla auditors that Hetherington analyzes, however, sovereign citizens do not focus on how documents circulate inside legal bureaucracies but rather focus on producing documents that resemble a legal register. To that end, while engaging in this document war, they also expend considerable effort revealing how signs on various legal documents prove the corporate state's duplicity and stand not as a simple orthographic convention or evidence of a change in bureaucratic organization or documentary regimes over time, but as evidence that a conspiracy is afoot. They will focus, for instance, on the fact that birth certificates often have names printed in all-caps as a metalinguistic signal that a legal persona is being created through the document. Netolitzky points out that in trying to find documentary evidence of the corporate state on birth certificates, some Canadian sovereign citizens have focused on the fact that some "older British Columbia birth certificates display on their backs 'Revenue Receipt No. [number][M/F] For Treasury use only.'" This notation, allegedly, demonstrates that the birth certificate is more than a simple identification document. However, again this text has a mundane explanation. Birth certificates have an associated fee. The number is simply used for audit and inventory tracking, and the "Revenue Receipt" and "Treasury" text relates to what is now called the "Ministry of Finance" (2018, 1074) These document markings are sometimes also elements in a web of citationality, much to the bemusement of institutionally entrenched actors. The linguist David Griffin notices that not only do many sovereign citizens in Cook County, Illinois use thumbprints (in their own blood) as a signal that this is an authentically signed document, but that one person even used a footprint. Griffin posits that the footprint is an intertextual reference to US hospitals' practice of adding a baby's footprint to a birth certificate since the 1960s (Griffin 2022, 210). Indeed, both Netolitzky and Griffin have documented numerous similar instances in which sovereign citizens pay attention to aspects of legal documents that lawyers tend to find inconsequential, if they even notice those features in the first place (Griffin 2022; Netolitsky 2018).

This distinction might seem from a scholar's perspective to be an act of interpretation. Sovereign citizens are, after all, carefully scrutinizing documents and selecting features as markers of legitimacy that those in another interpretative tradition find

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inconsequential. Yet sovereign citizens would not typify this as an act of interpretation. Rather, they believe they are discerning the signs, available to all, that reveal how reality is truly organized.

To engage with law and to refuse to acknowledge context also, it turns out, leads to forms of persistent repetitious assertions. Sovereign citizens file the same documents, formatted in identical ways, across a wide range of courts, regardless of national jurisdiction. To offer one common example, they teach that the United States' own rules for how to interpret contract offers a key to escaping contracts through sections of the Uniform Commercial Code, or UCC. The UCC is a mid-century effort by legal scholars to rationalize and standardize judicial practices of contract interpretation in ways that were supposed to reflect industry norms and practices. But sovereign citizens have a bewilderingly different read. Consider UCC section 1–308 (previously 1–207), which states that a party with a good faith dispute can continue to perform on a contract without waiving the right to litigate the dispute. It reads:

> A party that with explicit reservation of rights performs or promises performance or assents to performance in a manner demanded or offered by the other party does not thereby prejudice the rights reserved. Such words as "without prejudice," "under protest," or the like are sufficient. (American Law Institute 2023, § 1–308)

That is, one can continue to fulfill part of a business contract, despite believing that other parts of the contract have not been followed, without being interpreted by the court as agreeing to overlook the violation and thus no longer able to sue. All one has to do to reserve one's right to demand legal redress is signal, while one is nevertheless fulfilling the contract, that one is doing so with strong reservations—"under protest."

Sovereign citizens, however, assign this language radically different meaning: they teach that when someone "in the know" invokes the code section next to one's signature on any sort of legal document, say, by writing "without prejudice UCC 1–308," they have unambiguously communicated the following message: "I reserve my right not to be compelled to perform under any contract or commercial agreement that I did not enter knowingly, voluntarily, and intentionally. Furthermore, I do not accept the compelled benefit of any unrevealed contract or commercial agreement" (Franks and Simpson 2023, underlining in original). Hence sovereign citizens will write "without prejudice UCC 1–308" (or 1–207) on their birth certificates or social security cards or driver's licenses, if they haven't otherwise renounced them, to render these documents without legal effect.

Writing "without prejudice UCC 1–308," like many other legal techniques, circulate widely—this and other components of the sovereign legal register learned in US workshops have started appearing in Canada or Germany. To offer another example, sovereign citizens will also focus on particular semiotic tokens as signaling the formation of a contract. They might devote significant time in workshops and other instructional material to revealing that "understand" should be viewed as inviting someone to accept a contract in which they are hierarchically subordinate and "standing under" another person. An Irish Freeman (n.d., 12) illustrates in the Freeman Guide:

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> If/when the Judge asks: "Do you understand (e.g. the charges)?" He is offering a Contract (meaning 'Do you agree to the charges?'). You might respond by saying "No, I do not understand. I don't understand a word you are saying! … Do you understand Judge?" At which point the Judge should realise what is going on (you are making a counter offer) and they would be careful with their response. If they say 'Yes' - they have granted you authority over them by stating they Stand-under You. If they instead say 'No' you can proceed to say "Judge, I believe we have had an offer and a counter offer. Neither party can agree to the terms so we can no longer proceed. Have a happy day!"

Here the Guide models for readers a conversation that hinges on a familiar hermeneutic strategy of sovereign citizens, insisting on a semiotically determinate and alternative take on a question signaling the opening of a legal ritual. The judge asks a rote question to align the defendant with the proceedings. The sovereign citizen defendant views a key term—"understand" as "under stand" or "stand-under"—in their contractual terms and refuses to engage in the predictable conversational turns and, ultimately, refuses to participate in the legal ritual entirely.

Repetition and change

Legal scholars have described this unwavering commitment to the sovereign register and documentary strategies as an irrational commitment to failure. After all, these strategies aren't in fact successful in any court, and yet sovereign citizens repeat these strategies over and over again and teach others how to do the same. Yet once one accepts that sovereign citizens' semiotic ideology of legal language is opposed to any notion of interpretation, this repetition is far more understandable. In a fundamental sense, to change tactics is to recognize how legal language has failed to connect effectively to the circumstances of that particular moment and to attempt to find, through interpretation, a different strategy that might be more effective. Sovereign citizens are so committed to their semiotic ideology that there can be semiotic determinacy—that context has no effect on the workings of law—that they will not change their practices.

This does not mean that no change occurs. Some sovereign citizens develop new techniques or attempt to repurpose established institutional forms, such as private members associations, offering these novel practices through online workshops, and these strategies will then spread through social media and word of mouth. Thus change might occur through adoption and education, but not through interpretation or by transforming utterances in response to contextually specific demands. And, as another corollary, techniques tend not to be openly rejected. They have no interpretive strategy available to them to sieve which version of legal communication might be effective or not, so they can adopt techniques and gradually drift away from techniques, but we have found only one instance in which someone discusses a strategy's effectiveness and rejects (or continues) it on this basis. Indeed, in general, they tend to avoid debate over the logic of a technique. Evaluating techniques, after all, would center interpretation and context in a fashion that is anathema to sovereign citizens' semiotic ideologies.

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Legal scholars have seen parallels between sovereign citizens and the current dominant conservative legal approach to the Constitution—originalism—in the turn to a rigid focus on foundational texts (Harris 2005, 318–319). After all, both sovereign citizens and originalists tend to read the founders' writings in terms of plain language: anyone should be able to engage with the language efficaciously in principle, although, as members from both groups claim, many are deluded in practice. As Howard Freeman, an early sovereign citizen author explains: "The Framers of the Constitution wrote in language simple enough that people could understand, specifically so that it would not have to be interpreted" (Freeman 1991). Yet originalists are fundamentally engaged in the process of adjudication and contextual interpretation, and as a result, hermeneutic concerns arise for them that the sovereign citizen counterpublic never needs to engage with, because their practice is largely focused on resisting illegitimate exercises of power. In addition, originalists have had disagreements about whether the founders' intention is knowable, and thus whether the author's intention should decide how a text should be determined or if the objective publicly available meaning of terms should be the hermeneutic guide (Solum 2017). Sovereign citizens have no such debates. Originalists also allow for the possibility that the Constitution can be amended. When sovereign citizens make interpretative claims about constitutional texts, it is largely to dismiss parts of the Constitution added during Reconstruction. They will reject additions to what they consider to be the Constitution and insist it should be shielded from a range of potential interpretations.

Under the original Constitution, sovereign citizens hold that there is a true form of Common Law or Natural law. In many versions, this is God-given. While it is unclear how available this law is for interpretation when applied within their own communities, its forms and limits are taken to be self-evident. The Common Law is often summarized as follows: "you are free to do whatever you want as long as you do not infringe on the life, liberty, or property of anyone else" (Freeman 1991).[8] Any other rule that purports to be law is illegitimate: "there is no law other than the one which protects the life, liberty, and property of all living souls" (Croft 2007, 28). As such, the Common Law can never itself direct action; it can only create spheres of freedom. To be sure, when one person infringes on another's freedom, a remedy is needed. But sovereign citizens believe that this rule system is simple and clear enough that lay juries can determine how to resolve specific claims of harm and injury. As Croft explains,

> Since laws cannot compel performance, there can be no law telling a property owner that he must build his house on a particular area of his property. Because, what if he doesn't? Upon whose rights is he infringing? Well, possibly his neighbour, in which case the neighbour would be obliged to file a signed, sworn complaint, ideally also signed by a deposable witness, and have a jury decide if he is indeed an injured party. (Croft 2007, 43)

[8]Freeman continues: "If you don't want to perform, you don't have to. The only way you can be compelled to perform under the Constitution in the continental United States, is if you have entered a contract. But, if you are not under a contract, you cannot be compelled to perform" (Freeman 1991).

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These (imagined) acts of legal deliberation—applying law to facts as it were—between "living souls" stand in sharp distinction to how sovereign-citizen actors engage with the contemporary (illegitimate) state legal systems. David Griffin has noted in his analysis of court filings that, in court, they "will explicitly deny that either the judge or the opposing party have any power while simultaneously claiming ultimate authority for themselves for a variety of pseudolegal reasons" (Griffin 2022, 132). Many of their legal strategies in courts and on legal documents involve refusing any hint of legitimacy that legal institutions performatively assert, thus also denying the implicit assertion of sovereignty that states make through claims to jurisdiction (Richland 2013). Sovereign citizens reject the felicity conditions presumed by a legal institution, insisting that in courts, as elsewhere in social and political life, all relationships and acts of authority are built upon individual contracts. At first glance, it might seem that by appearing in court, they are acceding to the performative claims of sovereignty and authority that Richland views all courts as making. Yet, by loudly declaring their refusal in court, they are in fact being true to their language ideology which holds that silence is acquiescence. In short, sovereign citizens' approach to semiotic determinacy in these instances re-reads all the social fabric implicit in notions of jurisdiction that Richland traces (2013). When courts perform their authority, sovereign citizens take all their utterances to be contracts that can be refused.

Quantum grammar

Thus far our examples of sovereign citizen metadiscourses have all been readily translatable into non-sovereign citizen terms, even if they remain relatively far afield in terms of their underlying semiotic ideologies. We turn here to the "quantum grammar" of David Wynn Miller, a popular sovereign citizen guru who successfully marketed his constructed language as a silver bullet for achieving absolute denotational stability and context independence. As Miller assured would-be consumers of his quantum grammar, users were absolutely, invariably guaranteed success in all court interactions and encounters with representatives of the corporate state. In practice, litigants failed every time they followed Miller's instructions.

Two sample sentences of quantum grammar (all caps intentional):

> FOR THIS STYLE OF THE SYNTAX-WRITINGS ARE WITH THESE CLAIMS OF THESE CERTIFICATIONS OF THE SYNTAX-LANGUAGES AND: QUANTUM-MATH-COMMUNICATION-SYNTAX WITH THE FRONT-WARDS AND BACKWARDS-MEANINGS OF THESE POSITIONS OF THESE [PREPOSITION]=POSITION WITH THESE FACTS-AS-FACTS AND NOW-TIME-AS-NOW-TIME OF THESE SAME TERMS, DUTIES, MEANINGS, CAUSES WITH THE NOW-TIME. [SAME-MEANINGS FOR THE BRIDGE IS OVER THE RIVER. FOR THE RIVER IS UNDER THE BRIDGE. ABOVE-BELOW, UP-DOWN, IN-OUT, ON-OFF]

> *FOR THE KING-KAMEHAMEHA-III'S-DEATH AS THE LAST-HAWAI'IAN-BLOODLINE-MONARCH-LAND-OWNER IS WITH THE*

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

VACATION-DEATH-CLAIM OF THE FORTY-FIVE(45)-DAYS-TRUST-LAW-PLUS-THREE(3)-DAY-CONTRACT-LAW-NOTICE WITH AN OFFICIAL-LAND-LODIAL-TITLE-(1.8-MILLION-ACERS)AS-VOID OF THE STARTING OF THE 20-YEAR-TIME-LINE WITH THE FREE-LAND-SETTLEMENT-PROCLAMATION

These sentences are deeply challenging to gloss (the former might be freely translated as, "This form of writing is the same in any order because of its underlying mathematical-logical structure, which is the same in any direction"; the latter might be translated as, "The death of King Kamehameha III, the last monarch of the Hawai'ian bloodline, voids a contractual land claim after 20 years"). What is important to emphasize, however, is less the semantic or denotational senses of these sentences than what Miller claimed to *do* with the signal form of his invented language. Put differently, what other gurus of the movement do with discourse Miller claimed to do with code: namely, to remove context altogether from the performative efficacy of legal language qua contractual language. By excluding action verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns, Miller asserted an ideology that lies on an admittedly extreme point on a continuum with metadiscourses articulated by Croft, the Freeman Guide, and others, but one that is nevertheless continuous with them.

Whether approaching Supreme Court cases, historical events, understandings of personhood, or judges' comments, sovereign citizens view public officials as both duplicitous and capable only of semiotically determinate and acontextual speech. In any given legal situation, there are two possible frameworks available. First, there is the dominant illicit corporate institutional frame in which government officials attempt to ensnare naïve people into choosing to inhabit their legal personas, a role for which the only protections against wrongdoing are at the discretion of an illicit government. Or, there is the alternative, and far more desirable path, in which people have inalienable rights that can be claimed if only the right utterances are made in the right ways. Their interactions with government officials revolve around revealing (and asserting) that they are aware of the sleight of hand that the institutions are engaging in, that they can see through these corporate attempts—which in practice are repetitively asserted traps—and that they instead choose to live by the universal and legitimate alternative.

Conclusion

This paper has analyzed the ways in which sovereign citizens mobilize an understanding of contract law as a framework through which to reject what they see as the illegitimate exercise of corporate state authority over non-consenting individuals. Their understanding of contractual language is resonant with conspiracy theory—with alternate realities in which appearances are almost always deceiving; in which a change in the material form of a bureaucratic document belies sinister intent to hide the truth of economic exploitation and continued forms of chattel-slavery-like labor regimes; or in which a routine but specialized institutional-verbal formula belies attempts at domination. Yet crucially, the adherent is not simply a pawn or dupe of power within the sovereign citizen ideologies of language. They are agentive actors capable of repeatedly

https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5 Published online by Cambridge University Press

recognizing and refusing the litany of bad contracts offered to them by an illegitimate corporate state. In this way, sovereign citizens reconfigure strands of thought that have their roots in longstanding, reflexively western language ideologies that are traceable to Locke and the Protestant Reformation (Silverstein 2023; see also Bauman and Briggs 2003), drawing them together and teasing them apart in ways that respond to our neoliberal moment, but whose outcomes remain very much in flux.

As we have illustrated, the imagined conspiracy is happening not just at the scales of national history or institutional arrangements but also at the level of language itself. Sovereign citizens' language ideologies are underlain by Lockean language ideologies in which the use of words refers first and foremost to concepts that inhere in the minds of speakers—not in a relativistic way but with degrees of greater or lesser conceptual precision and ontological adequacy that diagram their relationships to the real world most overtly in the "literal" use of referential language (Silverstein 2023, 225–30). But sovereign citizens locate the performative efficacy of words not just through an imagined word-to-world (non-)correspondence but through an efficacious, context-independent use of contractual registers. Sovereign citizens rely centrally on the "real connection" or "causal link" that is the hallmark of indexicality (Nakassis 2018, 282). Yet for them, the use of contract-like performative speech acts—and acts of silence—yields an invariant result that depends not on context or reference but on the determinacy of the contract as a textual genre.

As we have argued in this paper, sovereign citizens' legal ideologies and verbal strategies attempt to push back against indexicality, the context-dependent, context-indicating and -implicating aspects of semiosis that are always ambivalent (Nakassis 2018; Parmentier 1985). Sovereign citizens work to reject the indeterminacy that follows from the context-specificity and context-dependence of semiosis by insisting on a semiotically determinate and deterministic link between genres, speech acts, and social relations. Within their projective frame, contracts in the failed world regulate encounters between the contemporary corporate nation-state governments and those who are aware—individuals who are autonomous, self-determining, and aspirationally propertied actors. This happens not through negotiation of the contract but through acceptance or rejection. As a mediating register reflective of social relations broadly, the contract is not open to interpretation, only revelation. In this, sovereign citizens present a case in which semiotic determinacy, rather than indeterminacy, is driving a set of transnational, group-based efforts at transforming social organization away from coercive regimes of debt and nonconsensual economic relations and toward a vision of the constructed social universe that is more just, in their view, in its invariant instantiation of God-given rights, law, and order.

Acknowledgements. We owe a great deal to Jonas Johnson, our research assistant. We couldn't have written this article without him. Our thanks to Melissa Demian for her insights throughout the process. Our anonymous reviewers also had trenchant and welcome insights into improving our arguments. We also want to thank James Costa, Rob Gelles, David Griffin, Mike Prentice, and participants in the European Linguistic Anthropology Network workshop, and Sorbonne Nouvelle's linguistic anthropology graduate seminar for all their insights into how to make this paper better.

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Cite this article: Babcock, Joshua, Amy Cohen, and Ilana Gershon. 2025. "Semiotic Determinacy: Sovereign Citizens' Approach to Legal Language". *Signs and Society* 13 (1): 102–121. https://doi.org/10.1017/sas.2024.5