


40. Amin, Specter.

CHAPTER 2

Gaagegoo Dabakaanan miiniwaa
Debenjigejig: No Borders, Indigenous Sovereignty

Dylan Miner

"No fences, no borders. Free movement for all."

During the mid-1990s, I frequently crossed the Canada-USA border—as was common for youth living in the borderlands—to go to clubs and restaurants and, more importantly, for punk and hardcore music shows. I was an art student (and later, art school dropout) living in Detroit, on the U.S. side of the Detroit River, just across the Medicine Line from Windsor, Ontario. Before the arrival of Europeans in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, this place was called Waawiyaaatong, "at the curved shores." Historically, Waawiyaaatong was—and remains—an interstitial space, where Kwakwaka'wakw (Kwickapow, Meskwaki (Fox), Sault (Sacs), Wendat (Wyanondot or Huron), Anishinabeg (Odawa, Potawatomis, and Ojibwe), Miami, Mascouten, Metis, and other peoples gathered or settled at various times.1 Today, Detroit remains a vibrant urban Indigenous center.

In 1996, following the release of Propagandhi's second album, Less Talk, More Rock, I decided to cross the Ambassador Bridge and see the Winnipeg-based punk band play a show somewhere in southern Ontario (maybe London or Guelph or Hamilton, I don't recall). Traveling with an Arab-American friend, we were stopped and questioned for potential gang involvement. This border stoppage delayed us enough so
that we barely made the show—that was what seemed important to us at the time, as teenage punks. Although I am an Indigenous person, my white privilege (or what might be better called “light-skin privilege”—a topic that light-skinned Indigenous and Latinx should talk more about) and class privilege allow me to cross the border with less violence than brown-skinned Indigenous peoples, Latinx, Arabs, Black folks, and other people of color. Although borders are inherently violent, settler-colonial nation-states enact border violence in ways that are not distributed equally.

Historian Jürgen Osterhammel defines colonialism as “a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and minority foreign invaders.” He continues: “Rejecting cultural compromises with the colonized population, the colonizers are convinced of their own superiority and of their ordained mandate to rule.” The systematization of colonialism enables racist, classist, and heteropatriarchal structures to infiltrate nearly everything, while the interconnectedness of these machinations may, at times, be hidden by the system itself. The xenophobic language of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign is only the most recent articulation to lay this bare.

Here on Makanal-minis, what we may call Turtle Island or the Americas, we are all very much still contained within colonial structures and their hegemonic reproduction. While independence movements of the twentieth century offered self-determination for many former colonies in Africa and the Caribbean, the United States and Canada—as nation-states—remain colonial powers in which Indigenous nations are legally constructed as dependent entities within the settler-colonial nation-state.

Historian Patrick Wolfe distinguishes between the systematized workings of colonialism, on the one hand, and those of settler colonialism, on the other. Wolfe writes that “the primary object of settler-colonization is the land itself rather than the surplus value to be derived from mixing native labor with it. Though, in practice, Indigenous labor was indispensable to Europeans, settler-colonization is at base a winner-takes-all project whose dominant feature is not exploitation but, replacement.” Settler-colonialism is, at its core, a project of land appropriation, destruction of societies, and the repopulating of Indigenous territories.

In the so-called “New World,” we could argue that French and Spanish colonial projects expanded through more classical examples of colonialism, while British “colonialism” more actively employed strategies of direct land and resource appropriation that accelerated after the “colonies” gained political “independence.” Of course, as Wolfe argues, these colonialisms often used both strategies, one of exploitation and one of replacement. It is important to recognize that the “American Revolution” was “won” by settlers, not Indigenous or colonized peoples, and that Anglo-Americans then pursued an aggressive project of Euro-American expansionism, land appropriation, and replacement. Manifest Destiny required the creation of legal and economic systems that permitted European colonists and their descendants to become legal title-holders of the land. Manifest Destiny is, quite simply, settler colonialism. However, both projects—colonialism and settler colonialism—are also integrated with the racializing logics and the employment of colonialism, the practice of discriminating against darker skinned individuals. And both colonialisms—as systems and as structures—employed racialization, blood quantum laws, and colorism within their own regimes. We can see the violent ramifications of these practices in some Indigenous and Latinx communities. On the one hand, many tribal communities continue to use blood quantum policies in determining who is eligible for enrollment; on the other, light skin (as a marker of being less Indian and less African) is commonly viewed as a positive. How do we undermine these racist and colonial logics that impede so much of what we do?
Remembering my own border-crossing experiences, and thinking about my current work as an artist-activist-intellectual, brings to mind one particular eighty-eight-second Propagandhi song, "Fuck the Border." As these Winnipeggers proclaimed in their searing song: "No fences, no borders. Free movement for all. Fuck the border." There is no ambiguity here. The anarchist orientation of certain sub-genres of 1990s hardcore helped me, as a youth, understand the implications of global capitalism and the intersectionality of colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy, among other structural oppressions. Bands like Propagandhi, Los Cruces, Limp Wrist, Chokehold, and Bikini Kill were particularly relevant to me at one time or another. Punk was simultaneously an epistemology and an ontology. However, what does punk have to do with Indigenous sovereignty, migration, and the Canada-USA border? This is a question that I have asked myself for over two decades and one that I hope in this chapter to begin to think through.

While my own political commitments are quite similar to those articulated in Propagandhi's "Fuck the Border" song, as an adult with daughters attending university and secondary school I have struggled to find ways to talk about radical political positions that may complicate the simplicity of North American sound bites. Academics love to complicate what are often, in reality, not overly complicated issues; inversely, the news media frequently oversimplifies what may, in fact, be complicated. My own activism has likewise emerged from a place of direct opposition, an epistemology that does not always facilitate a way of being that understands my own hegemonic complicity. So the question becomes: how can we think about the intersectionality of our own lives—our various privileges and oppressions—without reducing the potential for everything to be lined in a network of ambiguities?

What is crucial to my thinking here is how, as a teenager and young adult, I was unable to fully comprehend the manner that colonial and capitalist ways of being in the world restrained my own ability to think (and act) outside them. The border—as a manifestation of the settler-colonial and capitalist nation-state—constrained my own being and, in turn, constrained my capacity to think beyond the limits of its own borders. Although I may ask this question frequently, I earnestly inquire if we can truly think outside or beyond the limits of colonialism? In his articulation of the "coloniality of power," Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano would tell us, in fact, that we cannot. In the 1990s, I screamed "Fuck the Border" because it had very real implications on the lives of my ancestors and those of my partner, Estrella Torres. My paternal ancestors cris-crossed the Canada-USA border and literally fought against its creation, while Estrella is the child of migrant farmworkers and was herself a seasonal laborer and student (and then teacher) in schools for migrant children. Her family has been in what is now the United States since time immemorial, but as is commonly said: "they didn’t cross the border, the border crossed them."

Saying "Fuck the Border" was a cathartic and medicinal act that, although I did not name it such at the time, moved me towards decolonization. But, are decolonization and healing the same for those who can easily cross borders with little or no trouble (or, more likely, do not need/want to cross borders to leave the USA or Canada)? What about the individuals and communities who are violently affected by these same borders? I cannot help but think about those Mexican and Central American migrants who die—some might say structurally murdered—while migrating north in response to the contemporary ramifications of centuries of colonialism and capitalist globalization.

By saying "Fuck the Border," or voicing similar political provocations, are we actually moving toward a decolonized border and immigration practice? Are we individually and collectively seeking to create a world where Indigenous sovereignty exists beyond the limits of the settler-colonial nation-state? While I would not hesitate to say no, I do believe that in hearing this song—and the radical political ontologies associated with it—many middle-class and suburban settler-youth began to challenge their own privilege, even if they did not seek to fully dismantle a system that gave them this privilege in the first place.

As Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us, "colonialism is a system" and, as such, we are all implicated in its vicious systematization. Colonialism is violent to both colonizer and colonized, as Frantz Fanon and others have long noted. Sartre writes that, "when we talk of the 'colonial system,' we must be clear about what we mean. It is not an abstract mechanism. The system exists, it functions; the infernal cycle of colonialism is a reality. But this reality is embodied in a million colonists, children and grandchildren of
colonists, who have been shaped by colonialism and who think, speak and act according to the very principles of the colonial system.” To some extent, colonialism has shaped and informed every single one of us and our ancestors whether Indigenous, settler, or arrivants.” As Caribbean intellectual Aimé Césaire acknowledged in the early 1950s, colonialization “dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it.”

On Mohawks-minis (Turtle Island), and I am not certain that Sartre or Fanon—or their peers—fully understood how colonialism functioned in this hemisphere, are we all implicated in settler colonialism as a structure. Recent work by Audra Simpson and Glen Coulthard, among other Indigenous scholars—often in the pages of Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society—have brought earlier anti-colonial theorists into conversation with the uniquely North American variant of settler colonialism. Coulthard argues, with credit to anticolonial theorist and psychiatrist Frantz Fanon “that the reproduction of a colonial structure of dominance like Canada’s rests on its ability to entice Indigenous peoples to come to identify, either implicitly or explicitly, with the profoundly asymmetrical and non-reciprocal forms of recognition either imposed on or granted to them by the colonial-state and society.” Coulthard and Simpson both advocate the refusal of colonial forms of recognition and governmental power. Since we—Indigenous, settlers, and arrivants alike—are physically located on Indigenous lands and yet still situated within settler colonial nation-states, we must fully understand what it means to say “Fuck the Border” and the implications that this statement has on both Indigenous, settler, and mixed communities. While, I may no longer walk around yelling “Fuck the Border,” the political ontology embedded in Propagandhi’s song nevertheless assists me in understanding how settler-colonial and capitalist structures seek to discompose various parts of an otherwise interconnected structure. Moreover, this song may help us think about how these colonial systems (and settler-colonial structures) should not be intellectually unlinked. Rather, understanding them as an integrated unit shows how they must be simultaneously and reciprocally dismantled, not attacked on the isolated or individual level. If intersectionality helps us understand various oppressions and privileges, it will also help us understand the inseparability of structural and systematic inequalities.

Immigration policy—in the USA, Canada, and even Mexico—cannot be understood outside a history of longer and deeper systemic and systematic appropriation of Indigenous lands, seizure of resources, and denial of sovereignty. As Coulthard argues, we must also acknowledge the establishment of violent assimilative systems to convince Indigenous people that they were/are Canadians, Americans, or Mexicans. To identify with the nation-state is to undermine the capacity for authentic Indigenous governmentality. At the beginning of the 2016 presidential election season, Republican presidential hopeful Rand Paul said that, “I think assimilation is an amazing thing. A good example of how even in our country assimilation didn’t happen and it’s been a disaster for the people has been the Native American population on the reservations. If they were assimilated, within a decade they’d probably be doing as well as the rest of us.” Contextualization is not even needed to understand how Rand understands the workings of hegemonic systems and what this means.

In North America, settler colonialism is, in fact, the system. The question becomes, I think, how do we dismantle the many-headed hydra of settler colonialism, capitalism, and heteropatriarchy? How do we work to revitalize Indigenous sovereignties—including aesthetics and artistic articulations of sovereignty—in ways that acknowledge how capitalization globalization precipitates migrations across settler-colonial borders by Indigenous, deindigenized, and other oppressed peoples? What does it mean when Indigenous people migrate onto the traditional homelands of other Indigenous people? Moreover, can we ever escape the systematization of colonialism, as Sartre convincingly writes, or the coloniality of power, as Quijano has it?

Enacting Sovereignty, or Imagining Away the Colonial Nation-State

I have been accused of imagining or wishing away the settler nation-state. At first I did not fully know what this critique even meant, but have grown to embrace this criticism coming from a very limited way of being in
the world. As I have heard this response to my work a few times now, I think it means that my line of thought imagines that we can somehow live as if the settler-colonial nation-state is not always in control. While I understand the limits of settler-colonial and capitalist hegemony, I wonder why we cannot live in ways that are not fully contained by it. While this criticism was, at some point, a hurtful one (I am not certain why I felt inadequate for this challenge), I now wear this critique as an honor and intentionally work in ways that creatively seek to dismantle the nation-state, while also imagining a world without it.

Is it a contradiction to understand that colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and associated structures are always encaptulating us, but simultaneously try to locate and exacerbate fissures in their structure? Or better yet, can we imagine a world without limitations and commence building new worlds—based in the teachings of the ancestors—that are not overdetermined or delimited by settler-colonial and capitalist constraints? Can I acknowledge the presence of existing systems, but live as if they are not in control? I am not a political scientist or a politician, and do not arrive at this proposition as one committed to “polities” as we know them. Instead, I ask if we should not all be imagining a world where nation-states and corporations do not control things. What is the meaning of our collective existence if we cannot imagine something beyond colonial ontology?

As an artist, my task is not to simply work inside the contours of this existing world and its political and ontological structures. Artists must fundamentally express ambiguity, while creating tangible works that exist both inside and outside structural limitations. It is for this very reason that I have been thinking through and writing about “Indigenous Aesthetic Sovereignty,” a concept similar to that printed on a T-shirt in celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC). On this shirt, the ACC advocates Activating Indigenous Creative Sovereignty.

What aesthetic or creative sovereignty means, exactly, is unclear. The opacity of Indigenous sovereignty is part of what makes it, as a concept, so powerful. Just as the Idle No More movement was not entirely fixed, so too is Indigenous sovereignty somewhat indeterminate. Sovereignty, in this context, is shorthand for self-determination or self-governance or autonomy and should not be understood in its purely Westphalian interpretation. Westphalian sovereignty is a principle of international law which holds that nation states maintain sovereign power over their own territories and domestic affairs. This principle came to prominence in Western Europe following the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Through colonial and imperial interventions, Westphalian sovereignty emerged as the dominant practice.

Indigenous sovereignties existed long before—and will long after—the nation-state became the dominant global policy. As a political manifestation that emerges from within Indigenous ontologies, Indigenous sovereignty is not limited by the nation-state, even if the settler-nation-state can still exert authority over it. While I am committed to reclaiming “aesthetics” (can we talk about aesthetic self-determination?) from its colonization by Kantian thinkers, both the ACC (a multiplicity of voices, of which I am a member) and I understand that there is an undeniable relationship between Indigenous sovereignty and the maintenance or revitalization of Indigenous aesthetics. All of this exists within colonialism and capitalism and heteropatriarchy, but is not contained by it. I guess that is what I am trying to get at here: the nation-state can, in fact, be imagined away, if only we envisage living without it.

Being utopian and desiring a place for true Indigenous liberation does not come from a place of naivety. To not imagine a way of being that is simultaneously beyond and before (and after) colonialism, is much more naïve. I have read Fanon and understand the “pitfalls of national consciousness.” Even so, imagining that “otro mundo es posible” (to borrow from Marcos and the Zapatistas) is what we must all be struggling for. Didn’t the Zapatistas imagine away the nation-state, while also working within it? If you read the EZLN communiqués, you will certainly see how the Zapatistas imagined away the nation-state and, at the same time, created alternative governance models (caracoles). As I write this chapter, Indigenous communities are continuously forced to assert themselves against capitalist and colonial encroachment. In the unceded territory commonly known as British Columbia, Canada, the Unist’ot’en Camp is protecting the interests of Shííx̱áa7zaa7kwé (Mother Earth) by exercising their own sovereignty to stop the encroachment of big oil in their traditional territory. In Anishinaabewaki, the Indigenous
lands that we know by the Dakota name Mne Sota (Minnesota), Anishinaabe harvesters are confronting the Minnesota state government as it interferes in their harvesting of manoomin (wild rice) and gigiowinaag (fish).

Would imagining away the nation-state mean that you or I, or folks harvesting manoomin in Minnesota, or that the Unist’ot’en resistance to oil pipelines, would not face state confrontation or enforcement by the nation-state? Likely no. Does the presence of continuous and uninterrupted self-governance by Indigenous nations or tribes or bands somehow exist outside the presence of the settler-colonial nation-state? Of course not. However, thinking (and living) beyond the limits of the nation-state can do something else. What would happen if we collectively imagine true sovereignty—or something else that better describes Indigenous autonomy and self-determination? I believe that it is up to us—and the ancestors and spirits and rocks and land and water, among others—to prefigure something else.

DEBENIGEG, INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY

In my utopian desire to prefigure better and more just ways of being in this world, I consistently turn to the ways that Xicarx (Indigenous Mexican-Americans) and Wiisakodewiniwag (Cherokeewiowak or Mëtis or Michif) communities have imagined away the border since its very inception. These communities have consistently asked if borders must exist. In a similar way, can’t we collectively imagine a non-colonial ontology where borders are not needed? I see the creative imagining of a non-colonial way of being as central to the work I do. If we cannot imagine a way of living beyond the limitations of the nation-state (or any imposed limitation), we are doomed to not only destroy Shkakekaamikwë, but also annihilate ourselves in the process.

At various points in time, my paternal ancestors travelled the vast expanses of Mikinaak-minis, using the rivers and lakes as pathways. Because they so intimately knew both aki (land) and nihi (water), settlers employed them—as was common of Wiisakodewiniwag at the time—to serve on survey expeditions and as translators. While geopolitical borders meant little to First Nations people and their Halkomelem cousins, the segmentation and privatization of land ownership was paramount to colonial agents and the system they imposed.

Mapping and ownership over the land, as an abstract and inanimate object, was what settlers so greatly desired. Inversely, kinship and land-use was (and still is) far more important for Indigenous communities. These are very disparate ways of relating to the land and distinct ways of being in the world. Each respective relationship—one based on ownership, the other on usage and relationality—forms the core of two conflicting modes of sovereignty and the politics that then emerge from them.

As has been frequently noted, Indigenous communities were (and still are) stewards of the land and territories were commonly shared—a concept that Western nation-states and their settler-colonial administrators cannot comprehend. Indigenous territoriality was not a monolithic and individual claim. Alliances and confederacies were (and are) common across Mikinaak-minis. Although we shouldn’t pretend as if war and conflict never occurred, we should also recognize that how we understand sovereignty (that is as a form of Westphalian sovereignty) and its unique form of territoriality is a colonial imposition. If decolonization, anti-colonialism, and the non-colonial are not simply metaphors, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang write, then we need to imagine modes of understanding Indigenous “sovereignty” beyond dominant juridical and political systems. For me, this begins with imagining something else.16 As an artist, that is what I do.

Currently, at least according to Wikipedia, there are five ongoing border disputes, with many more historical ones, between Canada and USA. The very presence of a Wikipedia page titled "List of areas disputed by Canada and the United States" reflects this ongoing problem of how contemporary
nation-states imagine their boundaries. Isn’t this border supposed to be a non-conflictive one? Unfortunately, the Canada-USA border, like all geopolitical borders, is violent and conflictive. However, the structures and discourses circulating around the Mexico-USA border are even more violent. The Canada-USA border masks its violence better than the border located twenty-five-hundred kilometers to the south. Contemporary “cities” have their origin in continual colonialism and capitalism, there is no denying this.

The Canada-USA and the Mexico-USA borders share many similarities with other geopolitical borders. But even when borders are not militarized or viewed as conflictive, the border—by its very presence—enacts a certain power over individuals and especially over Indigenous and migratory peoples. As an indigenist—that is, someone who takes Indigenous issues as their utmost priority—I am particularly concerned with the violent imposition of geopolitical boundaries and the nation-states that impose them. With the ongoing impact of climate change on Indigenous communities, as well as the eminent threat of armed violence and the economic clash of capitalism, Indigenous capacities to self-determine are quickly being further and further eroded.

In July 2015, the Haudenosaunee Women’s lacrosse team withdrew from the Federation of International Lacrosse U19 World Championship held in Edinburgh, Scotland. In 2010, the Haudenosaunee Men’s team—commonly known as the Iroquois Nationals—also withdrew from the World Lacrosse Championships in Manchester, England. On both occasions, European governments failed to recognize the legitimacy of Indigenous passports, asking instead that each player submit either a Canadian or U.S. passport in conjunction with their Haudenosaunee one. On both occasions, Indigenous sovereignty was challenged and, in the face of global transnational migration, Indigenous presence was denied. Inversely, in 2015, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy stamped the passports of members of the English national lacrosse, welcoming them to Onondaga territory for the World Indoor Lacrosse Championship.

We are in the midst of a never-ending settler-colonial barrage against Indigenous peoples and their abilities to self-govern, maintain Indigenous political and economic structures, and travel in traditional and contemporary ways. Border and immigration policies across the continent are indicative of this. Since the initial arrival of Europeans to this continent, immigration and Indigenous sovereignty have been irreducibly linked. In many ways, it has not been Indigenous peoples who have made this so, rather it emerges from the settler-colonial logics of Manifest Destiny and Canadian Confederation. While many Indigenous communities are fundamentally linked by and through seasonal and other migration patterns, the cementing of geopolitical boundaries between different nation-states significantly impedes this ability, if not ending it completely. Two decades after Propagandhi taught me to sing along to “Fuck the Border,” I am inclined to, once again, reflect upon these words and their ongoing relevance today. Shall we continue to uncover ways to resist the border and its imposition on each of us?

Over the course of the three years, I created a series of posters coming from an Indigenous understanding of the Canada-USA border. These were commissioned by curator Stinmoye Mfira for an exhibition cycle at the Art Gallery of Windsor titled Border Cultures. In 2013, for the

"No Borders, Indigenous Sovereignty," posters created for Border Cultures exhibition. Dylan Minn
first Border Cultures exhibition, I created a series of screen-printed posters, in addition to an installation and mobile screen printing units with Indigenous and Latinx youth on both sides of the border. The posters, printed in the art gallery during the exhibition’s opening, included the text “Gaagegow Dabahaaamwa(n)” and “Debenjigw.”

As is common when I work on a project, I asked an elder how I would say a particular English-language idea in Anishinaabemowin. As a language-learner, I still need to make direct translations, knowing the futurity of this task, but also acknowledge the power in my attempts to move beyond my colonial language usage. These posters communicated “No Borders” and “Indigenous Sovereignty.” While a small and seemingly insignificant act, on some level these collective actions sought to undermine the power of the border and imagine a world without it.

In an art gallery, geographically located on the Detroit River on the Canada side of the settler-colonial border, a small group of Indigenous, settlers, and arrivants collectively printed posters in Anishinaabemowin language text that called for the dissolution of borders and assertion of Indigenous sovereignty. Working and acting collectively, we were struggling for a world without borders and where Indigenous sovereignty was not limited. Now, a few years later as I continue to imagine ways of being in this world, I think I had better ask an elder how to say “No fences, no borders. Free movement for all.”

Notes

1. The North American Indian Association of Detroit, established in 1936, is perhaps the oldest Indian center in the United States.
3. Ibid., 17.
7. Sarre, 17.
8. As Chickasaw literary scholar Jodi A. Byrd writes, arrivants is a term that she borrows “from African Caribbean poet Kamau Brathwaite to signify those people forced into the Americas through the violence of European and Anglo-American colonialism and imperialism around the globe.” Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xii.
12. Idle No More is an ongoing Indigenous social movement that began in late 2012. The movement, named by three Indigenous women (Nina Wilson, Sylvia McAdam, and Jessica Geafore) and one settler ally (Sheelah McLean), in response to anti-Indigenous and anti-environmental policies of then Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper. Idle No More became a loose set of pro-Indigenous activities in Canada and the US, as well as throughout the Fourth World.
15. See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_areas_disputed_by_Canada_and_the_United_States
We Are Aztlán!

Chicanx Histories
on the Northern Borderlands

Edited by Jerry García