

Indigenous Sovereignty and the Border: Postcommodity's Borderlands

Kristina Parzen

Abstract

Borders are thought of as geographical and political lines that separate two independent territories from one another. However, they are also responsible for creating physical and ideological divisions between cultures (Leza, 2018). In effect, they have contributed to reinforcing social, political, and cultural binaries between groups based partly on their geographic positionality as either “inside” or “outside” of a given territory. As the border maintains this dichotomy, the experiences borderland communities have with territory and their own identities are caught up in the politics of migration, nationalism, trade, and social knowledges. This paper engages with the ongoing challenges and critiques around the impact borders have on Indigenous peoples and other borderland communities living in the areas of what are now referred to as the southern United States of North America and northern Mexico. Taking up this conversation through three works by the interdisciplinary arts collective Postcommodity, it investigates how the U.S.-Mexico border has disrupted Indigenous knowledges, controlled historical narratives, and is a physical and abstract manifestation of settler colonial ideologies. Ultimately, it argues that this physical and ideological border dividing collective bodies from each other is a complex structure that functions to strengthen the sovereignty of the dominant nation-state whilst simultaneously opposing Indigenous sovereignty. By engaging with the border, Postcommodity's works demonstrate the need for creating and renewing ideas about complexity of structures in society that the settler colonizer mind tends to oversimplify without consideration for the peoples these structures impact most severely. This paper aims to contribute to the ongoing conversation about borders in the hopes of finding additional avenues that work towards new possibilities of thinking about how borderland communities – and all communities – can move forward in dialogue, in respect, and in relationship with one another.

A vacillating line of twenty-six balloons sways back and forth at Douglas, Arizona and Agua Prieta, Sonora, along the border between the United States of America and Mexico. The balloons, measuring just over three metres in diameter, float thirty metres above the vast desert land below. This land-based installation artwork by the interdisciplinary arts collective Postcommodity was installed in 2015 as a symbolic suture, stitching “the peoples of the Americas together” by spanning a length of 3.2 kilometres across this border space.¹ In the words of the artists Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist, the project titled *Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente* comments on and critiques “the oversimplified border rhetoric of mass media and bi-partisan politics,” and is simultaneously intent upon creating an interconnected system of interchange or dialogue between the Mexican, American, and Indigenous publics and their respective governments (fig. 1).² In this collective exchange between these groups and across the border, Postcommodity’s work and land-based practice demonstrates a push toward the recovery of Indigenous knowledges and an engagement with conversations around the land’s significance for Indigenous identities and the colonial border’s impact on these identities. Their work comments on the reality of binary discourse, which aims to control and regulate social knowledge by holding hostage knowledges outside of colonial American ideologies. In other words, when the mainstream system of social knowledge or that which is particular to the ideologies of the dominant culture is reliant on thinking about and constructing the world in terms of dichotomies, a hierarchy with a specific set of goals is created.³ Its goals involve maintaining control over knowledge through a championing of “Western” concepts, imagery, and ideologies, and the erasure of knowledges that do not align with its agenda and particular values. The border, like the one dividing the United States and Mexico, is an example of this kind of Western concept, image, and ideology of control that reinforces binary division. For instance, borders are designed to differentiate between spaces of inclusion and exclusion – what Chicana scholar and poet Gloria E. Anzaldúa identifies as “places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them.”⁴ While the general function of a border

This research was conducted on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam), *Skwxwú7mesh* (Squamish), and *səlilwətaʔ* (Tsleil-Waututh) nations. I am grateful to have been able to work and live on these lands as a settler-Canadian scholar and uninvited guest. I would like to thank the interdisciplinary arts collective Postcommodity for their amazing works and interventions, which have impacted my own critical thinking about the complexity of border spaces and the potential to change them. Thank you to Dr. Michelle McGeough for her feedback on this paper. Thank you also to all my peers who provided generous input and suggestions. I graciously acknowledge the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for a Canada Graduate Doctoral Scholarship, which supports my ongoing research.

¹ Postcommodity, “Repellent Fence – 2015,” Postcommodity, accessed April 20, 2020, http://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html.

² Postcommodity, http://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html.

³ Parzen, Kristina, “The Space In-between Cultures: Site-Specific Meeting Places of Indigenous and European Knowledges,” M.A. Thesis, (University of British Columbia, 2020): 3.

⁴ Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera, The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987): 3.

is to create a separation between two nation-states, the impact of the border on the borderlands (the area in and around the border) goes beyond political and geographic division. The creation of this border and its ongoing enforcement has resulted in significant changes impacting Indigenous communities who have lived on the land for thousands of years, long before the colonial invasion from Europe. Yoeme-Chicana activist scholar and linguistic anthropologist Christina Leza notes some of these impacts in her book *Divided Peoples: Policy, Activism, and Indigenous Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Border*. Ecological destruction, threats to sacred sites, blocked access to spiritual and cultural areas, and the restriction of movement across traditional Indigenous territories are just some examples of the effects borders and border policies have on Indigenous border communities.⁵

In this paper, I will examine three successive works of Postcommodity's that engage with border politics and the impacts above. They are part of the ongoing challenge and critique of the effect borders have on Indigenous peoples and other borderland communities in what is now referred to as the southern United States of North America. These works, *Repellent Fence* (2015), *A Very Long Line* (2016), and *Coyotaje* (2017) focus on border and borderland spaces. Each work engages with different political, economic, and social impacts that borders have, both historically and in the contemporary moment. The movement of people across borders through migration, the border as a site of and for American nationalism, the border as part of a trade network (globally, locally, and historically bound to traditional Indigenous trade routes), and the border as a space that weaponizes Indigenous knowledges are just a few of the conversations Postcommodity engages with in these works.

In my analysis of these works, I will explore the border as related to its disruption of Indigenous knowledges, historical narratives, and as a physical and abstract manifestation of settler colonial ideologies. I argue that the physical and ideological border, which divides collective bodies from each other simultaneously works to oppose Indigenous sovereignty, which Michi Saagüig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson says, "is not just about land... it is also a spiritual, emotional, and intellectual space."⁶ It is "the freedom and the means to live fully and responsibly."⁷ This idea is viewed, in part, as a threat to the sovereignty and security of the United States nation-state, which understands the term sovereignty in a very different way. Some of its more common conceptualizations in the context of the United States include its definition in relation to security,

⁵ Christina Leza, *Divided Peoples: Policy, Activism, and Indigenous Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2019): 3.

⁶ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "The Place Where We All Live and Work Together: A Gendered Analysis of "Sovereignty," in *Native Studies Keywords*, eds. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015): 19.

⁷ Simpson, "The Place Where We All Live and Work Together," 21.

control, and authority in a society, and the control over trans-border movements.⁸ Also, in Mexico, sovereignty has had “multiple manifestations” over time. But the concept itself, generally speaking, is understood to be intrinsically connected to identity.⁹ Political theorist Arturo Santa-Cruz argues that Mexican sovereignty is diverse in how it comes to manifest throughout history.¹⁰ However, most recently, while this sovereignty is concerned with having a distinct “future-oriented national identity” separate from its ties to its northern neighbour, the complicated history between Mexico and the United States plays a key role in the development of anti-American sentiment among the Mexican public that is moderated over time, but has nonetheless influenced the expression of Mexican sovereignty.¹¹ This view remains present in Mexico’s sovereignty narrative and is particularly visible when its Revolution governments interpret United States political “concern” as an “interference in its domestic affairs,” which is a “violation of Mexican sovereignty.”¹² Alternatively and in addition to Simpson’s explanation of Indigenous sovereignty, Native American activist Winona LaDuke notes that it is “an affirmation of who we are as Indigenous peoples.”¹³ These differing and interrelated interpretations of sovereignty are important to understanding border relationships and their impacts on Indigenous sovereignty. Throughout my analysis of Postcommodity’s works, I will explain my argument by unpacking and exploring this term as it is understood socially and on the terms of Indigenous knowledges.

Furthermore, there has been much scholarship discussing the impact of international borders on Indigenous identities and the formation of the self in North America. Leza has made significant contributions to this conversation throughout her scholarly career. For instance, she notes that borders have created physical and ideological division between Indigenous peoples belonging to the same nation because of the cross-border differences of “economic and material conditions, influence of the dominant national cultures,” and education.¹⁴ Likewise, Anzaldúa also contributes to this conversation through her discussion of the experience of borderland inhabitants through different issues such as identity and colonialism.¹⁵ This paper aims to continue some of these conversations

⁸ Stephen D. Krasner, “The durability of organized hypocrisy,” in *Sovereignty in Fragments: The Past, Present and Future of a Contested Concept*, eds. Hent Kalmo and Quentin Skinner (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010): 96; Thomas S. Hornbuckle, “A Definition and Explanation of Sovereignty in the Polity of the United States,” *Houston Law Review* 3, no. 3 (1966): 369-370.

⁹ Arturo Santa-Cruz, *Mexico–United States Relations: The Semantics of Sovereignty* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 2-3.

¹⁰ Santa-Cruz, *Mexico–United States Relations*, 44.

¹¹ Santa-Cruz, *Mexico–United States Relations*, 158, 168.

¹² Santa-Cruz, *Mexico–United States Relations*, 132.

¹³ *Indigenous Food Sovereignty in the United States: Restoring Cultural Knowledge, Protecting Environments, and Regaining Health*, eds. Devon A Mihesuah and Elizabeth Hoover, foreword by Winona LaDuke (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019): xvi.

¹⁴ Leza, “Indigenous Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Border,” *Journal of the Southwest* 60, no. 4 (2018): 915.

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, 3.

with a focus on the relationships between border impacts, Indigenous sovereignty, and identity. In doing so, I will contribute to the overarching conversation while providing further insight into the border's disruption of Indigenous sovereignty and identity as well as how Indigenous artists such as Postcommodity are responding to and working to resist this disruption. However, before I address some of Postcommodity's major works about the borderlands and how they are disrupting border politics and ideology, I turn my attention to the historical context of the U.S.-Mexico border and the conceptualization of the border and borderland.

Treaties and the Creation of U.S.-Mexico Border

Three major treaty agreements between the secular governments in the region of Southern North America were signed between 1819 and 1854, which led to the creation of the internationally recognized U.S.-Mexico border. Beginning with the Transcontinental or Adams-Onís Treaty signed between the United States and Spain in 1819 that came into effect in 1821, the Spanish-occupied territory of both East and West Florida was ceded to the Americans.¹⁶ While this treaty did not end ongoing disputes between these governments, nor with the newly established independent nation-state of Mexico, it may be argued to be one of the major events leading up to the establishment of the U.S.-Mexico border.¹⁷ Following the American War with Mexico from 1846 to 1848, which ended with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, the Republic of Texas was annexed into the United States and a new border was established pushing the territorial control of the U.S. further south.¹⁸ Along with Texas, California, Nevada, and portions of Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado were ceded to the United States resulting in the “transfer” of approximately one-half of Mexico's territory.¹⁹ Professor of Law M. Isabel Medina notes that this “transfer” of lands from Mexico to the United States caused many landownership disputes and did not endow “U.S. citizenship on persons of Mexican descent residing on or owning that land.”²⁰ While the use of treaties in resolving land disputes is common practice among many cultures and nations, the interpretation of

¹⁶ J.C.A. Stagg, *Borderlines in Borderlands: James Madison and the Spanish-American Frontier, 1776–1821* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2009): 202-203.

¹⁷ This border is *international* because it functions to delineate the presence of two or more nation-states in geographic and political space. For more information see Vladimir Kolossov, “Border Studies: Changing Perspectives and Theoretical Approaches,” *Geopolitics* 10: no. 4 (2005): 612. See Kolossov's article for further reading on how different understandings and approaches to borders and border politics have changed since the early 20th century.

¹⁸ M. Isabel Medina, “At the border: what Tres Mujeres tell us about walls and fences,” *Journal of Gender, Race and Justice* 10, no.2 (2007): para. 6., accessed April 20, 2020, <https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=LT&u=ubcolumbia&id=GALE|A163050922&v=2.1&it=r&sid=summon>.

¹⁹ Medina, “At the border,” para. 6.

²⁰ Medina, “At the border,” para. 6.

making treaty differs across them. For instance, the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo interpreted by the United States and Mexico as a kind of transaction demonstrates how the land was thought of by these nation-states as an object to be possessed. This language of possession by settler colonial governments and peoples continues today. Alternatively, when looking to Indigenous perspectives on treaty-making, they are described as an essential way of beginning a relationship between a tribal nation and the United States government authority.²¹ However, more importantly they are promises between nations that mark the beginning of long-term, forever, agreements.²² Other Indigenous perspectives interpret them as “adoptions of one nation by another.”²³ My view of these Indigenous understandings of treaties is that treaty-making is viewed as a relationship where both parties involved benefit equally. However, Tseshah/Nuu-chan-nulth professor Charlotte Coté writes, in reality and “through the treaty process, Indigenous peoples relinquished control over vast areas of their traditional territories in return for protection of smaller portions of their lands from non-Indian settlement.”²⁴ This demonstrates that while benefits on both sides were stipulated, because they were defined under the terms of the settler colonial American governmental body, they would be regulated by this system of authority. The settler colonial language of possession and ownership further points to the governmental policies and violence enacted upon borderland communities and their identities when they suddenly find themselves forced under the control of a foreign government whose position of power was not earned through the consent of their communities. This reflects these governments' tendencies to disregard the knowledge systems and culture of border communities when their own worldviews differ or are seen to come into conflict with the settler population and its colonial government.

The final major event and treaty that led to the creation of the U.S.-Mexico border, was the Treaty of La Mesilla, also known as the Gadsden Purchase of 1853. This purchase of territory by the United States from Mexico included the land South of the Gila River and west of the Rio Grande River (present-day Arizona and New Mexico). What is most significant about this Treaty is that the land was purchased to allow the United States to patrol the land and increase state-sanctioned enforcement along the border.²⁵ Patrolled enforcement and the militarization of borders plays a

²¹ Amy E. Den Ouden and Jean M. O'Brien, “Recognition and Rebuilding,” in *The World of Indigenous North America*, ed. Robert Warrior (New York: Routledge, 2015): 221.

²² Parzen, “The Space In-between Cultures,” 18.

²³ Harold Johnson, *Two Families: Treaties and Government* (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Ltd., 2007), 13. While this is an interpretation of treaty that is particular to Harold Johnson, law scholar and member of Montreal Lake Cree Nation, I included it in this section to demonstrate the importance of *relationships* in Indigenous treaty-making.

²⁴ Charlotte Coté, “Food Sovereignty, Food Hegemony, and the Revitalization of Indigenous Whaling Practices,” in *The World of Indigenous North America*, ed. Robert Warrior (New York: Routledge, 2015), 244.

²⁵ Monica Muñoz Martínez, “Recuperating Histories of Violence in the Americas: Vernacular History-Making on the US-Mexico Border,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 665.

significant role in regulating and preventing the free movement of people across the border. This type of border enforcement is specifically addressed in Postcommodity's 2017 work *Coyotaje* and will be discussed in more detail following.²⁶

By situating the border within its historical context, it is clear that treaty agreements were an integral part of the process of its creation, both physically and in the imaginary of local and global communities. However, some questions that arise with this history in mind are what role did Indigenous nations and peoples have during these events and how were they impacted by treaty processes? How does the creation of the U.S.-Mexico border and its enforcement affect Indigenous communities and their identities today? These questions have been widely addressed by scholars such as Leza and Anzaldúa, as well as others on both sides of the border. Their works point to the complexity of the borderland and its physical and ideological role in shaping identities as they are constructed in relationship to nationality, Indigenous community, ethnicity, politics, and economics.²⁷ What treaties demonstrate in relation to this scholarship, is how the border manifested both physically and ideologically as part of a settler colonial American governmental policy to solidify the status and sovereignty of the American nation-state. In combination with the Northern U.S.-Canada border, the United States asserted its independence as separate from the British Empire through its control of land and territory. Today, the U.S.-Mexico border manifests conceptually, visually, physically, and ideologically on a global stage as the dividing line between the United States and Mexico. However, this border also maintains a presence in the realm of social knowledge where it is reinforced and realized through mainstream and dominant ideology. It is this presence in physical, ideological, and social space that creates disruptions in Indigenous sovereignty and identity. For instance, one such area of social knowledge where the border is widely discussed is in the field of geography.

The Border, the Transborder, the Borderland, and Sovereignty

The border, within the discourse of geography, is a concept used to designate a physical and intangible line or boundary around and / or through a territory including land and water. It is often talked about with the notion of separation in mind to distinguish between two or more collective bodies.²⁸ For

²⁶ It is important to note that there were many additional events not mentioned that contributed to the creation of this border; and the colonial occupation of lands by European settlers is far more complicated in this regard.

²⁷ Leza, "Indigenous Identities on the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Journal of the Southwest* 60, no. 4, (2018): 914.

²⁸ For further reading see Etienne Balibar and Erin M. Williams, "World Borders, Political Borders" *PMLA* 117, no. 1 (2002): 71. Balibar discusses the complexity of the term border in the context of Europe. The definition I offer here is one that I have developed from my readings and how I understand it to be discussed generally by mainstream society.

example, in Professor of International Security Nick Vaughan-Williams book *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power*, he makes the comparison of a border to that of a compass. A border enables a positioning or orientation of a common group of people, a history, a nationality, an identity, a language, and a culture that converge in a designated territory.²⁹ As such, the border “is a pivotal concept that opens up – but can also close down – a multitude of political and ethical possibilities.”³⁰ In this way, the border demarcates the limits of territory at the domestic and international level based on a view of territory as an inside / outside space. This space comes to be defined by the internal dominant group in contrast with those who are positioned externally (often minority groups). The border maintains this dichotomy which impacts the experience borderland communities have with both territory and their own identities that are either included or excluded from the border space. As such, Vaughan-Williams notes that everything residing within the border space becomes a “citizen-subject,” whose freedoms are bordered by the law within the boundary of the nation-state.³¹ Upon this view, the citizen-subject is determined to be any individual subject residing within the physical border of the nation-state. What implications does this have for Indigenous peoples and Indigenous sovereignty when the border represents the boundary that possessively holds hostage not only the land and everything on it, but also regulates the identities formed and maintained over generations by the traditional stewards of the land?

Furthermore, borders exist physically in environments as human-made structures such as fences, roped areas, roads, buildings, etc. They exist naturally as rivers, tree lines, mountain ranges, oceans, lakes, etc. They also exist in an abstract capacity in imagination, ideology, social experience, etc. all of which may be said to be part of human systems of knowledge about the world. At the abstract level, the border does not have a material form. It is a part of an imaginary in the realm of social knowledge; it is the way we think about an understand a phenomena. In this paper, I look to the work of Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson who talks about the dominant culture as reflecting a European-descended, Eurocentric, Christian, heterosexist, and male-dominated way of thinking that pervades society and its ideologies.³² I suggest that this dominant culture comes to have significant control over social knowledge. In maintaining this control, the dominant culture constricts or limits knowledge production, which is transmitted to individuals and collectives. This knowledge becomes mainstream and particular to the thinking and ideologies of the dominant culture, which in the context of the United States is a Western settler colonial way of thinking and understanding. Settler

²⁹ Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics: The Limits of Sovereign Power* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009): 3.

³⁰ Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics*, 3.

³¹ Vaughan-Williams, *Border Politics*, 3.

³² Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008): 35.

colonialism seeks the permanent occupation of the land through the forced removal, assimilation, and repression of Indigenous peoples and their knowledges.³³ While this particular conceptualization of the border exists within social knowledge, it is not contained nor isolated within it. Rather, its complexity varies and is fluid as it moves between different systems of knowing and understanding much like the concept of sovereignty.

Also important to the concept of the border, which further complicates our understanding of it, is that of the transborder, a term which Postcommodity utilizes in their work to point out the complexity of borders and borderlands. The transborder refers generally to a crossing or space extending across two different nation-states. This definition also includes the space extending across two different collective bodies or groups including territories within nation-states, cultures, and between public and private space, etc.³⁴ This transborder space is the place where border communities interact with one another and come together. It is the meeting place that has the capacity for what Cristóbal Martínez calls “Indigenous re-imagined ceremony” to which I will return to in the following section.³⁵ The transborder and border itself tends to indicate the space that is represented physically either in the real world (e.g. a fence) or on a document (e.g. map), but this border space also comes to manifest in an abstract way through ideology and without material form.

Alternatively, following Indigenous ontologies of the land, Simpson argues that borders for Indigenous peoples are about sharing rather than lines that divide.³⁶ They are not, she says, “rigid lines on a map but areas of increased diplomacy, ceremony, and sharing.”³⁷ In my reading of this perspective, the land is not a space that is owned as it is thought of in settler colonial discourse. As part of this conversation, sovereignty is often discussed in relation to borders. While the concept of sovereignty in the United States is defined by settler colonial discourse – as the legal authority of the state over a territory as the governing body and the state’s inherent right to self-government without the interference from other states – it also exists as a concept among Indigenous peoples and is integral

³³ Walter L. Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013): 5.

³⁴ A transborder is a crossing between two distinct spaces, bodies, or groups. I have expanded this definition to include the crossing space between nation-states, between cultures, and between public and private space as these are also distinct bodies.

³⁵ Bill Kelley Jr, “Reimagining Ceremonies: A Conversation with Postcommodity,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 39 (2015): 28.

³⁶ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “The Place Where We All Live and Work Together: A Gendered Analysis of ‘Sovereignty,’” in *Native Studies Keywords*, eds. Stephanie Nohelani Teves, Andrea Smith, and Michelle Raheja (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015): 19.

³⁷ Simpson, “The Place Where We All Live and Work Together,” 19.

to their nations rights to self-determination.³⁸ Lenape scholar Joanne Barker discusses Indigenous sovereignty as consisting of the right to self-government, territory wholeness, and cultural autonomy, but as a discourse it is limited in its ability to capture Indigenous meanings about law, governance, and culture.³⁹ Self-determination in turn may be thought of as “a legal category that came to be defined by both group and individual rights not to be discriminated against on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or physical or mental ability, and to determine one’s own governments, laws, economies, identities, and cultures.”⁴⁰ As such, the way sovereignty is thought of in both settler colonial and Indigenous ideological perspectives is interrelated, but these concepts maintain a difference from one another. Therefore, while the American settler colonial concept of sovereignty is very much related to the concept of the border as a line separating two or more sovereign bodies from one another, the Indigenous concept of sovereignty is more about territory wholeness in relation to the more widespread borderlands, the land, the water, the earth, and everything that characterizes it as a shared space. The idea of the borderlands, while directly related to the “border,” is discussed by Anzaldúa in her 1987 book *Borderlands: La Frontera, The New Mestiza*:

A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants... The only “legitimate” inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.⁴¹

According to this definition, the borderlands is a space of contestation and one that is hostile to that of communities who are not white. Hostile to Indigenous communities among others. However, this thinking of the borderland places this space in a very negative context, which cannot necessarily “escape” from the colonial control of for example, the dominant government. This is one way of thinking about the borderlands. As an alternative, Postcommodity’s work and art practice offers another where the borderlands become a productive space for learning and sharing while critiquing the impact of the U.S.-Mexico border on borderland communities.

³⁸ “Sovereignty,” *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, Incorporated, 2020), accessed April 22, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sovereignty>. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines *sovereignty* as the capacity for a state to have supreme power over a political body and is free from external control.

³⁹ Joanne Barker, *Sovereignty Matters: Locations of Contestation and Possibility in Indigenous Struggles for Self-Determination* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006): 18.

⁴⁰ Barker, *Sovereignty Matters*, 19.

⁴¹ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera, The New Mestiza*, 3.

Postcommodity: Non-combative Art Practice and the Permeable Border

When we think of the U.S.-Mexico border today, often images of American military men armed along a chain-link fence comes to mind. On the southern side of the border, we may picture the Mexican migrant, viewed by the American Government as a foreign threat. These are the images and language that the American settler colonial authority reinforces in the imaginary and minds of the public through mass-media, journalism, film, popular culture, and politics as part of the system of social knowledge, produced and re-produced by the ideologies of the nation-state. However, while the dramatization of some of the images are not accurate, but rather work to reinforce the idea of the foreign threat, the lived reality of border communities, especially on the southern side which are so labelled is very real. What is also very real along the border is the border fence or wall that works to physically separate two nation-states. Ramon Resendiz, Rosalva Resendiz, and Irene J. Klaver trace part of the border wall history in their article “Colonialism and Imperialism: Indigenous Resistance on the US/Mexico Border.”

In 2005 the US Congress began enacting legislation for building a physical fence along the US-Mexico border. The proposed “border wall” sought to fence a total of 700 out of the 1,954 miles of the international boundary between Mexico and the United States. As of January 8, 2010 the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) deemed the construction of the border fence complete...⁴²

The border fence / wall, still present today, has significantly impacted border communities who live along the border. Not only is their movement affected, but so too are their identities. Indigenous peoples who have faced border challenges and impacts throughout colonization continuing today are among these communities who are affected.

In 2015, Postcommodity installed the *Repellent Fence*, which ran perpendicular to the U.S.-Mexico border as a culmination of eight years of work to critique and explore the impacts of the border on Indigenous and border communities, whilst reinvigorating and reinforcing the interconnectivity of these groups of people. The vacillating balloons which are constantly moving in different directions point to the complexity of movement around, on, through, and between the border and the borderlands. The intention of this project was to establish “a network of dialogues between Indigenous, United States, and Mexican publics” to facilitate the recovery of transborder knowledges in support of border communities.⁴³ The balloons themselves are enlarged replicas of a

⁴² Ramon Resendiz, Rosalva Resendiz, and Irene J. Klaver, “Colonialism and Imperialism: Indigenous Resistance on the US/Mexico Border,” *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology* 16 (2017): 16.

⁴³ Postcommodity, “Repellent Fence – 2015,” Postcommodity, accessed April 22, 2020, http://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html.

visual bird deterrent or “scare-away” balloons that are often used to prevent birds from nesting in specific sites or to keep predator birds away. While ineffective in their use, these bird repellents are used symbolically by Postcommodity to critique how borders represent a physical space to deter the movement of people in, out, and through one place to another. I argue that the transformation of these balloons through Indigenous iconography and medicine colours further pushes for a shift in the rhetoric toward a productive dialogue of healing and engagement with critical questions regarding colonial histories and the ongoing challenges of border politics (fig. 2). A dialogue that is “respectful of Indigeneity upon which borders and trade policies have been fabricated.”⁴⁴

In an artist talk at Bockley Gallery as part of the Artist Op-Ed Series put on by Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Postcommodity discussed the *Repellent Fence* and explained this eight-year journey and evolution of the project as resulting in “an ephemeral grounds for Indigenous reimaged ceremony.” When talking about what Indigenous reimaged ceremony is, Martínez notes:

Indigenous reimaged ceremony is not “reimagined indigenous ceremony”... [in practice] we recontextualize and adapt contemporary art to reflect the values and the knowledge systems by which we were raised. We spent eight years both fundraising and engaged in very focused bi-national diplomacy to co-intentionally, with peoples of the borderland, build a grounds for four days of Indigenous reimaged ceremony, which is what repellent fence was.⁴⁵

Through the community engagement aspect of this project, Postcommodity worked to generate dialogues between community leaders and city administrations in both Douglas and Agua Prieta. While the project only lasted 4 days, the years of work to arrive at *Repellent Fence* demonstrates the importance of Indigenous community involvement in border politics and ongoing relationships among border communities and their respective governments. The borderland communities participated in this project over the eight-year course of its development by discussing and collaborating on what form the final shape of the project would take.⁴⁶ Raven Chacon notes the importance of only having *Repellent Fence* exist as a temporary place-specific installation because “we didn’t want to stamp our place into the land and disrupt the land in that way. We didn’t want to carve out our names into the dirt. We didn’t want to put steel rods into mother Earth.”⁴⁷ The temporary nature of this project demonstrates the impermanence of human created objects like borders. The act of drawing a line through the land does not erase the peoples who live there nor their territorial and land relationships. And while the

⁴⁴ Postcommodity, “Repellent Fence – 2015”.

⁴⁵ Walker Art Center, “Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity,” March 10, 2017, Bockley Gallery, MPEG4, 1:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or0nsRZoFyw&t=2220s>.

⁴⁶ Nikki Otten, “Focus on the Collection: “Repellent Fence,” *Weisman Art Museum*, February 7, 2018, <https://wam.umn.edu/2018/02/07/focus-on-the-collection-repellent-fence/>.

⁴⁷ Walker Art Center, “Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity,” March 10, 2017, Bockley Gallery, MPEG4, 1:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or0nsRZoFyw&t=2220s>.

colonial government's intention may be to weaken relationships between and within Indigenous nations and other peoples divided by this border, these relationships will always remain regardless of whether there is a physical and imaginary border line to divide them. This is not to say that borders do not impact Indigenous communities, but rather what Postcommodity's work demonstrates is that the relationships between and specifically within Indigenous nations along the border and in general are so powerful that they cannot be severed by a fence or wall. But this wall does indeed negatively impact communities. *Repellent Fence* made visible the interconnected relationships between border communities by stitching a path across the border rather than parallel to it. In the process of doing so, the artists of Postcommodity revealed not only these connections, but also how they have been hindered by the border. For example, as their name suggests, much of Postcommodity's art practice engages with the global market of capitalism and the effect its economic, social, and political systems have on geographies and Indigenous peoples. The border as a part of this system is a mediator of capitalism as some goods and people are permitted to move through it, while others are not. The shared space between Indigenous nations that Simpson describes becomes disrupted by the border, which disregards traditional Indigenous trade networks, intellectual spaces of sharing and understanding. Therefore, access to place is an integral issue in border spaces.

Moreover, I have noted that borders often conjure up images of militarization. As such, borderlands are often thought of as combative areas where groups are in conflict and disagreement with one another. However, as they trace the evolution of their own project, Postcommodity notes that *Repellent Fence*, although it started out as a project of protest and one that was ready for a fight with the border, was realized over time as a non-combative project seeking to generate productive conversations about the issues involved.⁴⁸ Kade L. Twist describes the non-combative nature of their art practice during this time:

The art at the border tends to be very didactic and preachy and have an us vs. them mentality and that was a framework we were trying to break out of by organizing postcommodity in the first place. We were trying to get away from that type of degenerative process...balloons capture the imagination. It takes people into a framework where it's not combative. It's almost like the conversation, when the balloon is present, takes on that gentleness and honesty of an object being pushed by nothing but wind. The readymade that we chose to work with was structured to be disarming and that was something that we didn't learn until much later in the process.⁴⁹

The community involvement was an integral part of the non-combative nature of this project. “[The communities] were telling their story through this work, through the organizing efforts and all these

⁴⁸ Walker Art Center, “Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity.”

⁴⁹ Walker Art Center, “Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity.”

economic efforts, political efforts, cultural identity-based efforts in order to build this transborder capacity,” Martínez emphasizes when discussing the work.⁵⁰ This story-telling occurred through collective discussions and sharing conversations when the artists (who are Indigenous) and other Indigenous peoples were present together.⁵¹ Much like many Indigenous art practices today, these efforts are intended to remain as part of the communities involved long after an installation is removed from the land. Thus, the symbolic suture remains, maintaining relationships between communities, with the land, and with their cultural practices and protocols. The encompassing and lasting project and community involvement, demonstrates an active present of Indigenous sovereignty that is reflected through practice, tradition, contemporary tradition, language, etc. all part of the Indigenous identities of Indigenous border nations / communities.

The Line and the Spatial Vocabulary of Colonialism

Following the installation of *Repellent Fence*, in 2016 border politics continued as a theme of focus for Postcommodity’s artistic practice in *A Very Long Line* (2016). This work consisted of a four-channel video installation on an infinite loop (fig. 3). Different views of the land in the same area where the *Repellent Fence* (2015) was installed, zoom past the viewer. Each image of the land is superimposed by a border fence that runs across the channel screens at various speeds, accompanied by a dissonant soundtrack, and leaving the viewer unsettled and disoriented. As a critique of their nationalist implications through the reinforcement of the sovereign border of the nation-state, Postcommodity points to the violence of the border as “a very long filter of bodies and goods,” through its mediation of imperialism and market capitalism.⁵² Simultaneously, the artists emphasize that all Indigenous peoples are intermeshed in the current immigration crisis, which the current border fence acts as a filter to prevent what is termed “illegal immigration,” into the United States.⁵³ When viewing the video, the viewer may find that the speeding up and slowing down of both the images and soundtrack reflects a symbolic connection to how goods and people may move through the border. Some goods and people pass easily and quickly, while others are questioned, slowed down, and even prevented from passing to the other side. But who decides who and what passes? Much like the treaty processes that occurred between 1819 and 1854 to finalize the U.S.-Mexico border, the facilitation of goods and

⁵⁰ Walker Art Center, “Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity.”

⁵¹ Walker Art Center, “Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity.”

⁵² Postcommodity, “A Very Long Line – 2016,” Postcommodity, accessed April 23, 2020, <http://postcommodity.com/AVeryLongLine.html>.

⁵³ Postcommodity, “A Very Long Line – 2016”.

people through the border is controlled by the nation-state(s) who manage this space to secure their own interests and possessions, real and imagined. Indigenous nations and border communities are left out of the historical and contemporary border rhetoric much like the treaty negotiations previously discussed that helped solidify this border because their consent is not viewed as necessary. If consent is not acquired and made to be a requirement, then exploitation occurs where one group benefits more or solely at the expense of the other. In *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (2017), Simpson talks about the importance of consent in building relationships:

The word consensual here is key because if children learn to normalize dominance and nonconsent within the context of education, then nonconsent becomes part of the normalized tool kit of those with authoritarian power. Within the context of settler colonialism, Indigenous peoples are not seen as worthy recipients of consent, informed or otherwise, and part of being colonized is engaging in all kinds of processes daily that given a choice, we likely wouldn't consent to.⁵⁴

Postcommodity's critique of the border as a part of the system of capital flow, which mediates the exchange of commodities and resources, points to this idea of non-consent with the exploitation of these resources and their extraction from the land that has been demarcated by a boundary line. This exploitation comes at a great cost to Indigenous peoples who cannot, for example, access spiritual and cultural sites nor move freely across the land.⁵⁵ The land is further exploited when physical border walls and fences are constructed causing ecological disruptions to animals that can no longer move freely across the border. Plants are also negatively impacted because they rely on animals to propagate and increase in diversity as a natural process to protect themselves from diseases and extinction.⁵⁶

Other iterations of the border and its impacts are discussed by Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. She says the Western conception of space including boundaries as part of the "spatial vocabulary of colonialism," consisting of the line, the centre, and the outside.⁵⁷ The line is important because it is used by colonial powers to map territory and mark the limits of their power.⁵⁸ In *A Very Long Line*, Postcommodity points to the line as a disruptive and violent part of this spatial vocabulary of colonialism through its framing of

⁵⁴ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017): 161.

⁵⁵ Sarah Maddison, "Indigenous Peoples and Colonial Borders: Sovereignty, Nationhood, Identity, and Activism," in *Border Politics: Social Movements, Collective Identities, and Globalization*, eds. Nancy A. Naples and Jennifer Bickham Mendez (New York: New York University Press, 2014): 157, 171.

⁵⁶ Margaret Wilder, "Exploring the Ecosystem of the U.S.-Mexico Border," *Scientific American*, December 6, 2018, <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/exploring-the-ecosystem-of-the-u-s-mexico-border/>.

⁵⁷ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999): 52-53.

⁵⁸ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 53.

nationalism and its fabrication and facilitation of settler colonial constructed trade networks while opposing traditional Indigenous ones. It is also through the reinforcement or strengthening of this line that simultaneously works to oppose Indigenous sovereignty. The line on a map representing a border may function to organize the space being represented by acting as a marker which distinguishes two places from one another. Australian author and scholar Sarah Maddison notes that the desire to organize space by creating “tidy” new spaces simultaneously created chaos for Indigenous nations.⁵⁹ In other words, through the use of the line or border to organize the land and separate the nation-state from the foreigner and foreign lands, colonial governments are able to impose their systems of control over everyone and everything who are contained within their borders and even maintain a level of control over those who are without. However, Maddison stresses that “contemporary Indigenous nations are no less sovereign because they have been subsumed within a colonial nation-state, with new borders and boundaries inscribed over the top of existing borders.”⁶⁰ This is an important point because Maddison is acknowledging that Indigenous sovereignty exists regardless of its status in the eyes of the colonial nation-state. It is up to the nation-state to move away from settler colonial formations of social knowledge and come to a meeting place that is open to learning about Indigenous ontologies of knowledges in a way that is respectful, attentive, and consensual. This nation-state and American settler colonial “authority” must meet Indigenous peoples in their own spaces because this is a way in which Indigenous peoples are able to exercise self-determination for their own cultures.⁶¹ And as Tuhiwai Smith notes, Indigenous self-determination is necessary for processes of transformation, decolonization, healing, and mobilization to occur.⁶² She also says self-determination is further interconnected to Indigenous sovereignty and identity as well as a wider complex movement of Indigenous cultural “revitalization and reformulation.”⁶³

Reclaiming Indigenous Knowledge in the Borderlands

In the 2017 work *Coyotaje* (2017), Postcommodity created an inflatable sculpture of a chupacabra, or mythical creature coming from the oral traditions of Indigenous cultures in the regions of Latin America and Southern United States, which is named for its sucking the blood of goats and livestock

⁵⁹ Maddison, “Indigenous Peoples and Colonial Borders,” 156.

⁶⁰ Maddison, “Indigenous Peoples and Colonial Borders,” 155.

⁶¹ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 7.

⁶² Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 120.

⁶³ Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 114.

in legend (fig 4).⁶⁴ This canine-like creature has been described as hairless with large, sharp teeth, a figure of horror and nightmare appropriated by popular culture in film and stories.⁶⁵ In *Coyotaje*, Postcommodity utilizes this Indigenous creature from community stories in the borderlands of the Upper Sonoran Desert to comment on the appropriation of Indigenous storytelling by, for instance, border patrol agents whose night-vision goggles resemble the eyes of the chupacabra. A description of the work and its significance follows as:

This monster speaks to migrants in camouflage, beckoning them to safety — a deceptive lure to captivity. *Coyotaje* demonstrates how decoys and mythic metaphors function as mediators of strategic expectation. By rendering the intersection of decoy and myth, within this particular work, Postcommodity hacks these mediators, as they are being operationalized in the borderlands and within our larger society.⁶⁶

The sculpture is situated under a green light and closed-circuit video feed surveilling the visitors who enter the space. A soundtrack in Spanish calls out to the viewer. “Ten cuidado!” (be careful), “puedes morir aquí” (you can die here), “escuche, ven conmigo” (listen, come with me), and “mira! la policía” (look! the police). Each phrase thoughtfully chosen to lure the viewer closer to the chupacabra, mimicking the use of “decoys” by United States border patrol as a tactic to deter individuals from crossing the border. Yet, once the viewer arrives close enough, they are shocked to find the green light is reflecting an image of themselves onto the sculpture, transmitted by the closed-circuit surveillance camera hanging above. Writer for Canadian Art, Valérie Frappier notes that the experience of *Coyotaje* evokes fear, which points to the very fear the United States border regime instills as migrants try to cross the border into the United States at night only to be met and apprehended by the border patrol agent.⁶⁷ The visitor, like the migrant, becomes subject to the weaponization of Indigenous knowledges and their own self image, becoming the subject under the surveillance of the state and its ideologies as they enter a borderland or border space. The accompanying photograph of two dogs standing over a horse carcass titled “Es más alcanzable de lo que se imaginaban” and translated to “It is more reachable that you imagined,” further marks the border as a site of ongoing contestation of territory

⁶⁴ *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, ed. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 1988): 95. Much literature about the chupacabra now exists in the public realm. However, while Indigenous voices on this mythology are sparse in literature, the chupacabra is a well-known creature in the oral traditions and stories of Latin American and Southern United States Indigenous cultures. The chupacabra’s presence in written literature of settler colonial writers is reflective of the appropriation of Indigenous cultural stories into social knowledge. While I cannot speak of these stories directly, I may offer a brief visual description of a chupacabra. However, this description from the text referenced here is equally an example of an appropriation of Indigenous stories into literary descriptions.

⁶⁵ *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, 96.

⁶⁶ Postcommodity, “Coyotaje – 2017,” Postcommodity, accessed April 25, 2020, <http://postcommodity.com/Coyotaje.html>.

⁶⁷ Valérie Frappier, “Postcommodity,” *Canadian Art* 35, issue 2 (2018): 122.

(fig. 5). As the viewer passes by the two dogs one stares attentively, while the other looks elsewhere, claiming the space where the carcass lies, and yet restricted by the border fence in the background.

The border, which has become a line of separation in colonial North America has contributed to the continued physical control of particular groups of people in spaces that have been redefined by colonial governments. This physical control also manifests as a tactic to regulate social knowledge, but also results from the production of a particular worldview and its ideologies. Postcommodity uses both the story and representation of chupacabra to disrupt the settler colonial appropriation of Indigenous knowledges by turning the viewers attention to how Indigenous knowledge is used by patrol agents along the border against Indigenous peoples and migrants throughout the borderlands. By relating the viewer's position to the experience of Indigenous peoples and migrants crossing the border, they are forced to confront the realities of border enforcement, the fear and anxiety of militarization and apprehension, the restriction of movement in the borderlands, and misuse of Indigenous knowledge through appropriation to maintain control over specific groups of people. In *Coyotaje*, the artists point to the issues surrounding the appropriation of Indigenous knowledges. They further problematize how these appropriations along the militarized border have serious consequences for borderland communities and crossing migrants. As border patrol agents actively enforce the prevention of movement across territories at the direction of their governments, they assert the authority of the nation-state over the land, disregarding Indigenous sovereignty. Thus, *Coyotaje* further demonstrates how the weaponization of Indigenous knowledges like the legend of the chupacabra, is transposed out of a nationalistic tendency to "protect" the security of the American nation-state.⁶⁸ However, Postcommodity's use of chupacabra is both a turning of the gaze and a reclamation of an Indigenous story. While the American settler colonial government through its border patrol agents' attempts to other Indigenous knowledges by placing them outside or foreign to mainstream social knowledge, Postcommodity reclaims Indigenous stories and uses them to communicate the realities of the borderlands and border impacts to a wide audience. While colonization as Mohawk and Anishnaabe scholar Vanessa Watts argues has "endangered Indigenous agency," I suggest that this agency has the capacity to be resituated in Indigenous identity and communities through works like *Coyotaje*.⁶⁹ As the viewer confronts the chupacabra, their experience with fear is personalized while

⁶⁸ I use the term weaponization to demonstrate how Postcommodity is showing how the legend of chupacabra is being first, appropriated and second, misused by United States border patrol agents to instill fear in migrants crossing the border who are familiar with chupacabra as a figure of fear coming from traditional oral stories. Border patrol agents thus weaponize chupacabra to assist them in deterring people from crossing the border and create fear, anxiety, and consequence if they do.

⁶⁹ Vanessa Watts, "Indigenous place-thought & agency amongst humans and non-humans (First Woman and Sky Woman go on a European world tour!)," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 2, no.1 (2013): 23.

related to migrants and Indigenous peoples, connecting them to the effect border violence has on all borderland communities.

Where does this leave Indigenous sovereignty?

In the beginning of this paper, I asked what effect international borders have on Indigenous communities and their identities. In examining the work and art practice of Indigenous art collective, Postcommodity, borders can be explored in a way that complicates current discourse of border politics and its rhetoric. *Repellent Fence* (2015), *A Very Long Line* (2016), and *Coyotaje* (2017) demonstrate a resistance to the binary discourse in the realm of social knowledge that is regulated by settler colonial ideologies. The signing of treaties during the nineteenth-century worked to assert and expand the sovereign territory and authority of the United States nation-state while simultaneously diminishing the nation-state of Mexico. Yet, in doing so Indigenous voices were ignored as colonial governments failed to acquire proper consent for the creation of a border as well as changes made to it over time. These governments still fail to acknowledge Indigenous knowledges and worldviews, especially when these views are seen to conflict with their own. For instance, while the concept of land may, in part, be viewed as a space for sharing and understanding from one perspective, it may be viewed as a possession from another perspective. This is exactly the kind of binary discourse that Postcommodity is trying to move away from, advocating instead for the consideration of the complexity of structures like borders to create a more productive and nuanced conversation. These conversations are needed and necessary in order to educate society on the real impacts borders have on Indigenous cultures, migrants, and borderland communities outside of the dominant ideological discourse and mainstream social knowledge. Once this happens, more productive conversations about Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty can occur on the terms of Indigenous peoples, but with a wider public engaged in these conversations.

I have demonstrated that borders are complex structures that are defined within geography and the realm of social knowledge as lines (physical and imaginary) used to separate two or more groups or collective bodies from one another. Yet while the sovereignty of the nation-state is strengthened by the border, the physical and ideological border line simultaneously works to interrupt the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. This occurs through upsetting and restricting access to the land, cultural sites, limiting the movement of people and ecological communities, as well as the overall disregard for traditional territories and their occupants. By engaging with the border rhetoric, Postcommodity's works demonstrate the need for creating and renewing the complexity of structures

in society that the settler colonizer mind tends to oversimplify without consideration for Indigenous peoples. In *Repellent Fence*, this rhetoric is complicated by revealing the connections between and among border communities by temporarily drawing a line that constantly shifts position through fluctuations in nature. Despite its temporality, these connections remain after the physical installation is removed from the land. In demonstrating the impermanence of human-made objects like borders, *Repellent Fence* simultaneously emphasizes the strength of human and community relationships. While a temporary installation, *Repellent Fence* revealed the relationships between Indigenous peoples (of the same nation divided by the border) that transcends the physical and ideological barrier of separation created by the border. Its suture remains even without a physical object showing its place. As such, *Repellent Fence* resists the physical and ideological U.S.-Mexico border through an assertion of Indigenous presence and by challenging the very presence / absence binary relationships created by borders.⁷⁰ *A Very Long Line* communicates a need for questioning the extent to which the border mediates imperialism and market capitalism. It further demonstrates the effect this exploitive economic system impacts Indigenous nations and their traditional trade networks. In 2017 with *Coyotaje*, Indigenous knowledges were reclaimed at the border by implicating the role of the military, the public, and popular culture in holding hostage these knowledges as they assert the sovereignty of the colonial nation-state.⁷¹

The complexity of the border is why it is so important to continue finding additional avenues to investigate to examine new possibilities of thinking about how borderland communities – and all communities – can move forward in dialogue, in respect, and in relationship with one another. Likewise, this conversation is not unique to the United States. It exists in Canada and other nation-states produced through colonization. The colonial legacy still continues today of which borders are a prime example. As such, the discussion of borders within these different contexts is still needed. I end with these words of Cristobal Martinez who advocates for such conversations and interventions:

⁷⁰ I suggest here that the border seeks to establish a binary relationship between the presence of American settler colonial culture and the absence of Indigenous culture, by dividing Indigenous traditional territory and nations. However, Postcommodity resists and disrupts this binary narrative created by the settler colonial nation-state by making visible the seemingly invisible connections between Indigenous peoples across the border. When the installation is removed, the presence of these connections remains, demonstrating the enduring presence of Indigenous peoples while simultaneously disrupting and rupturing the permanence of the border and the authority of the settler colonial government and system of social knowledge.

⁷¹ I would like to note the complexity of Postcommodity's works and artistic practice and as such, there are many avenues yet to be explored regarding these three pieces and their critique of border politics. Postcommodity's art practice is significantly engaged with global market capitalism and its impact on Indigenous communities. In particular, *A Very Long Line* with regards to its critique of capital trade through the border. The effects of capitalism on Indigenous sovereignty is a topic that I was unable to address in this paper. While just scratching the surface of this topic with the border and border politics in mind, this analysis is far more complicated and requires a significant amount of additional research.

We entrench ourselves within the entanglements and in many ways create ever more entanglements, because what we're interested in doing is not creating these simple models. We're trying to mediate the complexity, not simplify it, because the simplification is creating social stratifications that are polarizing. We're not so much interested in the nodes as much as we are interested in the connections between nodes... We are hoping we can mediate a more nuanced conversation.⁷²

This artistic practice is an assertion of Indigenous sovereignty.

Kristina Parzen is a Ph.D student in Art History at Concordia University in Montreal. Her dissertation research examines the history of anthropomorphic maps produced in Europe since the 14th century. She questions how anthropomorphic maps represent and characterize place and engages with scholarship across the disciplines of art history, geography, literature, and political science. Her research is currently funded by a Canada Graduate Doctoral Scholarship provided by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Kristina completed her M.A. at the University of British Columbia in Art History & Theory resulting in a thesis titled "The space in-between cultures: site-specific meeting places of Indigenous and European knowledges." This work was supported by a SSHRC Canada Graduate Scholarship Master's Award and is intended as an alternative way of understanding knowledge in settler colonial nation-states away from Eurocentric perspectives toward a system based on inclusion. Kristina completed her B.A. at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon in Art History.

⁷² Walker Art Center, "Artist Talk + Op-Ed Launch: Postcommodity," March 10, 2017, Bockley Gallery, MPEG4, 1:20:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Or0nsRZoFyw&t=2220s>.



Figure 1: Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente*, 2015, land art installation and community engagement (Earth, cinder block, para-cord, pvc spheres, helium), Douglas, Arizona, U.S.A. and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, https://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html.



Figure 2: Postcommodity, *Repellent Fence / Valla Repelente*, 2015, balloon close-up, land art installation and community engagement (Earth, cinder block, para-cord, pvc spheres, helium), Douglas, Arizona, U.S.A. and Agua Prieta, Sonora, Mexico, [https://postcommodity.com/Repellent Fence English.html](https://postcommodity.com/Repellent_Fence_English.html).



Figure 3: Postcommodity, *A Very Long Line*, 2016, video still, four channel video with sound, Whitney Biennial, 2017, New York City, New York, U.S.A, <https://postcommodity.com/AVeryLongLine.html>.



Figure 4: Postcommodity, *Coyotaje*, 2017, inflatable sculpture, close circuit night vision video, sound, and photograph, Art in General, Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A, <https://postcommodity.com/Coyotaje.html>.



Figure 5: Postcommodity, *Coyotaje*, 2017, photograph close-up, inflatable sculpture, close circuit night vision video, sound, and photograph, Art in General, Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A, <https://postcommodity.com/Coyotaje.html>.