

RESEARCH  
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# Erasing the Line: Mapping Indigenous Community across the US–Canada Border

Guntram H. Herb  
Vincent Falardeau  
Kathryn Talano

*North American settler colonialism is not a historical event, but an ongoing process that strives to silence the continued presence of the original Indigenous inhabitants in the United States and Canada. The map, Erasing the Line, attempts to challenge the primacy of existing sovereign states by showing contiguous Indigenous community across the US–Canada border. This subversive visualization is inspired by nationalist maps and uses official census data to challenge the settler state narrative from within.*

The aim of this map (**Figure 1**) is to challenge the primacy of sovereign state boundaries and to disrupt the settler colonial logic in the depiction of Indigenous peoples in the United States and Canada borderlands. It is a subversive visualization that is meant to complement work on Indigenous borderlands along the US–Canada divide ([www.border-rights.org](http://www.border-rights.org)). The US and Canadian settler states strive to overwrite the landscape of the original inhabitants and to sever contacts between and within Indigenous nations and communities. The segregation extends to separate nomenclatures: First Nations and American Indians, reserves and reservations, Ojibwe and Chippewa, Blackfoot and Blackfeet, and so on. These distinctions translate into different rights and

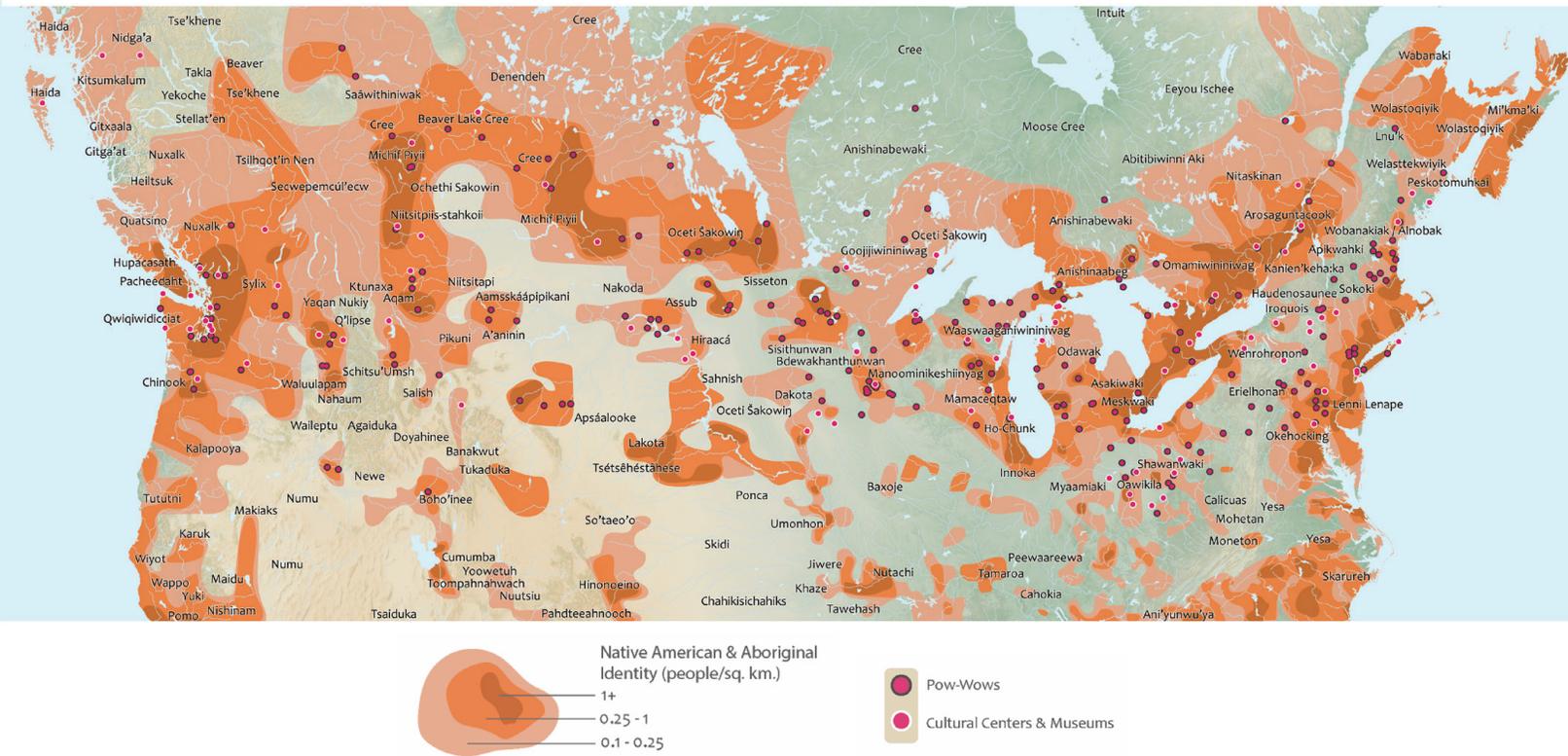
rites for crossings. *Erasing the Line* is a cartographic exploration from within the settler episteme that seeks to counter the almost universal silencing of a contiguous Indigenous presence and exchange across the border in official maps as well as in popular scientific publications, such as National Geographic’s map of “Indian Country” (<https://www.natgeomaps.com/re-indian-country>).

The map’s aim is to destabilize the settler view of the borderlands, rather than to represent official or authentic Native community interests. Just as Henri Magritte said of his painting of a pipe, we say of the map *Erasing the Line*: “this image is not Indigenous land”. Indigenous cartographic critique explains that Western maps are not

**Guntram H. Herb**, PhD, Professor of Geography at Middlebury College, Middlebury, Vermont, USA.  
Email: [herb@middlebury.edu](mailto:herb@middlebury.edu) Web: [www.border-rites.org](http://www.border-rites.org)

**Vincent Falardeau**, BA (Geography), Geospatial Data Analyst, Rhumbline Maps, South Bristol, Maine, USA.  
Email: [vincent@rhumbline.com](mailto:vincent@rhumbline.com)

**Kathryn Talano**, BA (Geography), Conservation GIS Specialist, Naples Botanical Garden, Naples, Florida, USA.  
Email: [ktalano@naplesgarden.org](mailto:ktalano@naplesgarden.org)



**Figure 1. Erasing the Line: Mapping Indigenous Community across the US-Canada Border, by Vincent Falardeau, Guntram Herb, Kate Talano.** Disclaimer: Indigenous peoples' names labelled without intimate knowledge of their history. Spellings may reflect varied sources. Isolines of population have been drawn freely from county choropleth maps. Data on Pow Wows and cultural centers collected from online sources for all states and provinces that touch the US-Canada border pre-COVID-19. This map does not intend to represent official or authentic native community interests. Sources: native-land.ca, powwows.com, SRTM Elevation Data, Natural Earth, US ACS 2019, Canada Census 2016. A higher-resolution TIF (90 mb) is available here: <https://tinyurl.com/5y3kcnpj>

able to capture the holistic nature of Native conceptions of land, such as spiritual dimensions or changing seasonal importance, though there are Indigenous mapping projects that use cartography and GIS as tools to empower communities, such as the Indigenous Mapping Collective (<https://www.indigenousmaps.com/>) (see also Louis et al. 2015; Pearce & Louis 2008; Rose-Redwood et al. 2020). We want to stress that as non-Indigenous authors, we do not speak for the multitude of Indigenous nations and communities included on this map. We have consulted diverse sources to label nations and communities with their original names, but ensuring that all are correct or that the list is fully inclusive was not feasible for this project (such a task would require contacting all known communities across the borderlands and widely publicizing announcements to offer all communities a chance to be heard). The lead author did travel with a Sault Ste Marie Chippewa tribal member along the entire US-Canada border and met with about 30 Indigenous communities between 2016 and 2017 (see "Fieldwork" at <https://sites.middlebury.edu/borderrites/about/fieldwork/>). This map is not to be understood as a documentation of all Indigenous

borderland communities, but as an argument that there are close and multifarious Indigenous links across the US-Canada border that render the line highly problematic.

Many Indigenous counter-maps break the settler colonial logic by reinscribing the names and places of the original inhabitants. For example, Aaron Carapella raises awareness of Native peoples in North America by mapping their preferred original names with his well-designed, captivating maps (<https://www.tribalnationsmaps.com/>). Margaret Pearce's cartography has no equal. Her stunningly beautiful maps are based on meticulous, respectful research, feature truly astonishing numbers of Indigenous place names, and include disclaimers about the ownership of these names (<https://www.studio1to1.net/work>). Yet, even these counter-maps often end at the official US-Canada border, which reinforces the sovereignty of those settler states, though that is quite obviously not the intent.

Our map is thus not an *Indigenous* counter-mapping effort per se, but an attempt to draw attention to the need to destabilize existing sovereign borders because

they divide Indigenous peoples. We offer a subversive cartography from within the settler episteme of Western cartography. The population data in our map derives from settler state agencies—US Census ACS survey 2019 and the Canadian Census 2016—but is visually re-organized. The shades of red depict numbers of census respondents per square kilometer who indicated that they have “Native American” (US) or “Aboriginal” (Canada) identities. Rather than adopting the irregular and arbitrary boundaries of political units to represent these different concentrations of Native peoples, we created isolines free-hand from administrative district choropleth to show smooth gradations of concentrations across the borderlands. The design is inspired by Eugeniusz Romer’s innovative use of isolines for the depiction of national groups (Romer 1916). These surfaces of contiguous transborder Indigenous presence are augmented by cultural centers, Pow Wows, and community names that are based on publicly available online sources: Pow Wows listed on [PowWows.com](http://PowWows.com) (2017–2018) and select community names from [www.native-land.ca](http://www.native-land.ca) and atlases, such as Anton Treuer’s *Atlas of Indian Nations* (2013). The map not only shows Indigenous community across the border, but also reveals historical colonization strategies, which resulted in dispersed settlements in Canada and more concentrated settlements through confinement on reservations in the

US. *Erasing the Line* attempts to show an alternate view of borderlands and hopefully prods us to question why state borders are generally taken for granted and reified in maps.

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