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A Border Story Re-discovered

M. MAX HAMON

Benjamin Hoy uses metaphor to describe the complex history of the border. The border, he argues, was less a static line and more a living creature. By 1874, Canada and the United States had established "a cohesive skeleton," but "the border needed more than just bones. It required blood and muscle: revenue and personnel" (142). Metaphors are powerful writing devices because they give a name to a thing that belongs to somethings else. Even as they allow us to see things from a new perspective they create space for ambiguity. As Hoy writes, "The border had acquired more flesh and bone by the late nineteenth century, but it had never settled on a single face" (144). Such word-smithing is the result of long reflection on rough historical terrain, one full of contradiction and complexity.

This short essay reflects on how *A Line of Blood and Dirt* has the metaphors to transport us; and, as we are transported, how we ought to be attuned to the politics of what Michel de Certeau called "putting language into effect." In *The Practice of Everyday Life,* de Certeau reflects on how *metaphorai* are vehicles of mass transit in modern Athens. "To go to work, or come home, one takes a metaphor — a bus or a train."[1] He argues that narratives or stories are like metaphors' spatial trajectories. They traverse and organize places; they link them together. But they are more than simple descriptions, as they also have a distributive and performative force. What kind of analysis can be applied to these proliferating metaphors? Applied to Benjamin Hoy's project, we might ask: how shall we examine the complex syntax that he deploys to describe and represent the border between the United States and Canada?

A Line of Blood and Dirt is an ambitious project. It combines impressive quantitative and qualitative research. Maps and tables as well as oral histories and biographical vignettes describe a complex history. Given the recent explosion of literature on transnational and borderlands history, it is even more daring.[2] It builds on and adds to recent work attending to the history of the border. This new field, *within and without the nation*—to quote the title of a recent and influential collection of essays — has multiple advantages and perspectives.[3] A short list of examples speaks to the impressive range of topics that

benefit from this transnational approach. Harvey Amani Whitfield has done research on the Black experience of the border, Lissa Wadewitz discusses salmon fishing in the Salish Sea, Michel Hogue has written about the Métis and the "Medicine Line," Bradley Miller explores extradition law, and Alan MacEachern shows the cross-border history of the Miramichi Fire of 1825. Even more recently, Julien Mauduit has studied the transnational significance of Canada's War of Independence, while Molly Rozum explores cross-border childhood on the northwest plains of North America, and Heidi Bohaker's examination of Anishinaabe *doodem* illustrates how these ancient legal forms transcend national borders. Hoy's book dares to weave all this together. That is its strength. More than a history of the border, the book proposes a "framework for understanding the hundreds of local, regional, and tribal histories that have flourished in the border's shadow" (6). Presented as a cohesive entity, Hoy challenges the outpouring of research that has gone into understanding the border. What matters are the interactions and connections between these border histories: "closures and openings did not happen in isolation from one another" (6).

The argument about the Canada-US border is comprised of three elements: first, its difference from the US-Mexico border — due to American perceptions of cultural similarity and military prowess when looking north. Second, it is inseparable from the history of colonialism, hunger, dispossession and Indigenous politics. And third, the border was not simply a wall, but rather a prism of control, refracting movement across the line into different stratifications as a prism would to a beam of light.

These histories are woven together by the thread of the Indigenous experience. Like Ned Blackhawk's recent book, *The Rediscovery of America,* Hoy's book "unmakes" national mythology. *A Line of Blood and Dirt* sits within and complements a trend I see in recent histories of the modern state: Indigenous experiences simultaneously unmake and rediscover national histories.

Certainly, revising the history of the state in Canada by re-centring Indigenous experiences has been going on for some time. I was reading Sarah Carter's work as an impressionable grad student.[4] Numerous influential works now tell the history of the state by highlighting Indigenous histories. And, for years now (as Hoy points out), local historians and communities have been working hard to produce narratives, especially oral histories, that challenge the way history has

been told. Over the past decade, Indigenous histories and perspectives have radically transformed the history of the state. This book thus offers an opportunity to reflect on the performative and redistributive power of Indigenous history on the histories of the state. It also matches the theme of this year's Canadian Historical Association conference, *Difficult Histories in a Global Context*.

As Grace Peña Delgado points out in her essay, the framework of settler colonialism offers promise for understanding border histories, particularly where Indigenous populations are involved. When I began my PhD in 2011, the reading group for my comprehensive exams discussed the first issue of the *Journal of Settler Colonialism Studies,* and the term has drawn considerable attention and critique over the past decade.[5] This leads to my first reflection on how Hoy's work might metaphorically transport us. One of the challenges that researchers have faced with respect to the settler colonial framework is that it seems to displace the critical need for more Indigenous Studies.[6] Hoy's book pushes us to have that conversation about settler colonialism and Indigenous histories in the CHA. To echo Kēhaulani Kauanui: this is not just about the past but about how we historicize the present.[7]

In Hoy's book the settler colonial state reduces Indigenous power through violence, reserves, and hunger. However, *A Line of Blood and Dirt* does not fall into the trap of over-determining state power. It shows that many people, including Indigenous people, continued to live across settler lines and often forged important new transnational ties. Moreover, echoing Bradley Miller's observations, the border that Hoy has shown us sometimes limits the power of the state itself.[8]

On the other hand, keeping an eye on the state and non-state agents requires balance, one that Hoy achieves. As critics of subaltern studies have warned, writing about local social orders and anti-hegemonic epistemologies might seem to provide an alibi for colonization.[9] The colonial forces that control the prism of the border really do restrict and limit Indigenous and others' lives. He points out that power is not at the line itself, but the real strength of the border was to widen and broaden it. Economic, political, legal, and policing mechanisms were designed to structure the "hassle" of border crossing enough to deter unwanted border crossers. The book demonstrates the complexity and ambiguity of border power, where illegal crossings as well as the creation of border police are interwoven with the "mind of the state" and everyday perspectives of border crossings.

The second reflection is best framed as a question: does it assume what we need to know? In *A Line of Blood and Dirt* we have a retrospective view of the state. As Tina Loo and others have shown, the state was never uniformly envisioned in Canada. The state, as Elsbeth Heaman puts it, is better envisioned as a chained series of institutions and individuals with their own histories.[10]

In asking this question, I am distinctly aware of Colin Grittner's contention that the new political history "might allow new political historians to more fully explore the messiness of past politics,"[11] especially to include the visions of those that were not always successful — the links that might have been. It is not only about contingency, but also to make sense of their impact on the past as well as the present. The life of Louis Riel, a quintessential borderlander, is a good example. As one of the most written-about figures in Canadian history, his life has been unfortunately interpreted in the shadow of the resistance to the state. While the foundation of Canada literally displaced Riel's life, it certainly did not erase his vision, which continues to inspire the Métis in their negotiations with the state today.

During Riel's life, many Canadians framed Métis resistance, like Fenian and republican violence, as an American threat or even conspiracy. And it is true that the American government did twist the lion's tail in 1870. But Riel was not just eying Canadian and American public reaction in his politics. He was more concerned about the Métis public. For instance, when Riel took Archibald's hand in 1871 to ostensibly support the Canadian government against the Fenians, he was also making a statement for the Métis public. Riel needed to show that William O'Donoghue's influence was spent. The Canadian public saw Archibald embarrassed, but the Métis public saw Riel's unifying leadership.

For Riel, the boundary between Canada and the United States was less significant than the boundaries he drew between the Métis and Canada and the Métis and the United States. Canadian and American officials misunderstood this, and, if we only see the threat that Riel posed to Canadian sovereignty, we follow their errors. We ought to look beyond the zero-sum game that was fashioned by Canada and the United States.

Riel's citizenship is a useful illustration of this point. Hoy observes that in the early 1870s Riel remained hopeful of forcing Canada to honour its agreement with the Métis, but by 1878 "he had begun to change" and resolved to become an American (80). I think

this interpretation minimizes the continuity of Riel's vision. Consider the context more carefully. The change noted by Hoy follows Riel's request to US President Ulysses Grant in 1875 to support a planned invasion of Canada. This purports to show Riel's changing loyalty. That document, however, an object of interpretation for multiple biographers interested in describing Riel's political ambitions, is difficult to unpack.[12] There are three basic issues that undermine the reliability of this document. The letter is undated, Grant is never named (the heading is "Mr. President"), and finally, the letter was almost certainly never sent. Riel may have met with Grant in December 1875, as he claims, but was the letter written before or after this meeting? Moreover, Riel's mental state during this period of his life is particularly problematic. Later on, Riel himself referred to 1876 as his period of "folie."[13] That was the year Riel was placed in the "lunatic asylum" in Longue Pointe under the care of Dr. Lachapelle (a former classmate). And, many years later, Major Edmond P. Mallet wrote that Riel's admission to the asylum followed immediately after he met with Grant.[14] Those closest to him worried that he had lost the ability to distinguish reality from his ambitions. The 1875 letter should not be dismissed as the writing of a "lunatic," but it should be read carefully. Moreover, and this bears emphasis, nowhere does Riel suggest that the invasion was a way to separate Manitoba from Canada, much less to annex the Northwest to the US.

When we consider what Riel actually wrote to convince the President to support the invasion, we see that sovereignty was not a zero-sum game. First, he writes, the US will gain the electoral support of French-Canadians and Irish Catholics in the US. Also, Riel promises to issue bonds that will be sold to new settlers to make money off the sale of lands. Even more remarkably, he also suggests that this would be a good excuse to prepare for war, which "it would be wise to push on actively against Spain and Mexico." The document is remarkable and worth investigating, but it was not written from the perspective of someone trapped between absolute sovereignties.

As Sarah Carter writes in her reflection, histories that refuse the sovereignty of the settler colonial state are imperative. They can historicize our present. As Audra Simpson reminds us for the Kanienenka'haka living across settler states, there is more than one political game in town.[15] Indeed, Riel was not the only one to refuse the zero-sum sovereignty of settler states. Likewise, Susan Neylan shows that the choice of the Tsimshian in the late nineteenth century

to move from old Metlakatla in British Columbia to new Metlakatla in Alaska was about more than American or Canadian flags.[16] Historians should be wary of how perspectives informed by settler borders belie Indigenous intentions.

In *A Line of Blood and Dirt,* the competing sovereignties of the United States and Canada attempted to erase Indigenous ideas of territoriality, and Hoy deftly shows that these visions were ultimately unsuccessful. But I wonder if we need to narrate the nested and overlapping sovereignties that co-existed rather than just the history of the border as we see it today. Or, to put it another way: if we are to be transported by our metaphors, where are we going?

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Endnotes

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, translated by Steven Randall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), p. 115.

2 The word *daring* I hope echoes Ted Binnema's call for *defiance* of borders. See Binnema, "The Case for Cross-National and Comparative History: The Northwestern Plains as Bioregion," in *The Borderlands of the American and Canadian Wests: Essays on Regional History of the Forty-ninth Parallel* edited by Sterling Evans (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 17-41.

3 Karen Dubinsky, et al., *Within and Without the Nation: Canadian History as Transnational History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

4 I read *Lost Harvests* (1990), *True Spirit and Intent of Treaty Seven* (1996), *Capturing Women* (1997), *The Importance of Being Monogamous* (2008) in 2011-12.

5 The popularity of the term has not waned; the term appeared in multiple conference panels and papers at the 2023 CHA conference. Eight panels refer to settler colonial or settler colonialism and six the term Indigenous. There are roughly the same number of papers that use the each. The literature here is too voluminous to cite, but for reference to some key debates see Mahmud Mamdani "Settler Colonialism: Then and Now," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 41 (Spring, 2015): 596-614; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "A Structure, Not an Event," *Lateral* vol. 5, no. 1 (Spring 2016); and Allan Greer "Settler Colonialism and Beyond," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* vol. 30, no. 1 (2019): 61-89.

6 I am indebted in this reflection to the seminar with Allan Downey taught at McGill during my studies.

7 J Kehaulani Kauanui, As Kauanui writes "Understanding settler colonialism as a structure exposes the fact that colonialism cannot be relegated to the past, even though the past-present should be historicized."

8 Miller, *Borderland Crime: Fugitive Criminals and the Challenge of the Border, 1819-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

9 Robin Brownlee and Mary-Ellen Kelm, "Desperately Seeking Absolution: Native Agency as Colonialist Alibi," *The Canadian Historical Review*, vol 75, no. 4 (2016): 543-556.

10 Heaman, *A Short History of the State in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 1.

11 Colin Grittner, "Greater Expectations: Politics, the New Political History, and the Structuring of (Canadian) Society," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 100, no. 4 (Dec. 2019): 602-619.

12 Louis Riel Poetry, PAM MG 3 D 2, file 26, pp 18-34. In the *Collected Works of Louis Riel* [here after CWLR], see "Memoire to Ulysses S. Grant," #2-003, pp. 5-15.

13 "Ignace Bourget to Louis Riel 2 January 1876," PAM MG 3 D 1, 318. Digitally available at Societé Historique Saint Boniface.

14 See editor's notes *CWLR* #2-003, p. 14.

15 Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

16 Neylan, "Choose your flag: Perspectives on the Tsimshian Migration from Metlakatla, British Columbia, to New Metlakatla, Alaska, 1887," in *New Histories for Old: Changing Perspectives on Canada's Native Pasts* edited by Ted Binnema and Susan Neylan, 196-219.