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Benjamin Hoy

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The Genesis, Approach, and Shortcomings of *A Line of Blood and Dirt*

BENJAMIN HOY

I am grateful to the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* for the opportunity to speak about the creation of *A Line of Blood and Dirt* and to provide a preliminary response to the thoughtful comments made by Sarah Carter, Max Hamon, and Grace Peña Delgado. I am also grateful to have the chance to speak to some of the questions that students raised during the in-person roundtable discussion about the writing process itself.

The Genesis

A Line of Blood and Dirt, like most of my projects, was born in frustration and failure. As a child, the textbooks I read in primary and secondary school provided brief overviews of the shared histories of Canada, the United States, and Indigenous nations. The books' coverage prior to the War of 1812 was not great. But it was coverage. After 1812, the situation was worse. Indigenous people only made a handful of cameos in the textbooks' depictions of Canadian history. Elijah Harper appeared around the Meech Lake Accord. A few books touched on the Oka Crisis. But mostly it was silence. I'm not an old man. That was not long ago.

As I grew older, I had an opportunity to see how different the archival record was from the Canada I had grown up learning about. Cree, Métis, Stó:lō, Mohawk, and other Indigenous actors who were absent from my early textbooks were everywhere in the archive. It was clear that the problem was a matter of focus, not a matter of material. That realization shaped a lot of what I ended up studying.

While I grew up loving history, this book was not something I ever thought I would write. My parents were professors of English, women's literature, and Indigenous literature. I was a stubborn kid. I vowed never to study Indigenous history, Canada, or anything else my parents were interested in. I am grateful for the patience and kindness of some of my early mentors who convinced me I was being dumb.

Despite spending my whole life crossing back and forth across the Canada-US border, it was not until I had a chance to work with Kris Inwood and Michelle Hamilton at the University of Guelph that I began to consider the Canada-US border as a possible area of focus. After working for two summers with them on the 1891 Canadian Census Project, I decided I wanted to become a census historian. It was an odd realization. No career choice could possibly seem blander. No child ever aspires to such work. My time at Guelph, however, had helped me realize that even the driest of sources sometimes hold the keys to understanding the world we inherited.

When I began my PhD, I proposed a dissertation that used the census to track mobility across the Canada-US border. I began by trying to answer two simple background questions: what does the Canada-US border look like, and how does it work? Despite reading many excellent books on the subject, I never got a great answer. Most of the literature I read focused on a single group, region, administrative group, or topic. Every time the focus shifted, I felt like I was reading about an entirely different border. I could not understand how each piece fit together. Months turned into years, and my work on the census never became more than a long appendix in my attempt to understand how the border worked.

By the end of my dissertation, I had gotten a few preliminary answers but had failed to produce anything worth reading. My dissertation lacked human characters, visualizations, maps, and oral histories. It was repetitive and painful to read. I knew I could do better.

I threw out most of what I had done and started again. I changed how I approached research, created maps and other visualizations to show what the border looked like, and rethought how I approached writing. Starting largely from scratch let me focus on using individual life stories to convey the complexity of the border. That worked far better than my previous attempt to use administrative descriptions to convey the same information.

Starting again also helped me realize that I was not smart or strong enough to create the book I was envisioning on my own. I lacked the expertise, time, and ability to write something of that scale. So I asked for help — a lot of it. Whatever the book's successes are, they are because of the generosity and wisdom of the more than 80 people who helped me create this book. I have no doubt I'll spend the rest of my career repaying those debts.

Approach to Writing

During the roundtable discussion at Congress, quite a few students asked me to describe my journey as a writer and how I improved over time. I hope this brief description will provide some of the lessons I have learned as well as to outline how I developed a good book out of a bad draft.

My earliest childhood memories revolve around my failures as a writer. My father was a well-known author, and as a kid I hoped I had inherited at least some of his gift. I had not, but I tried my best anyways. Beginning in elementary school my parents insisted that everything I wrote went through multiple drafts. They ripped apart each iteration. It was humbling, but it gave me an opportunity to learn a valuable lesson: “You are not your work. Criticisms of your work are not criticisms of you the person.”

That idea changed how I approached my career. Criticism started to sting less, although it never felt good. I learned that it was better to hear critiques from friends and family while I still had the chance to fix the problems than to get them from strangers when there was no opportunity for remedy. Whether I sought it out or not, criticisms would come. I learned that the worst kind of feedback was filled with generic support, but with no clear avenue for improvement.

Those early lessons helped me get over some of the mental blocks I've seen others face. I learned to swallow my pride and seek out criticism and feedback as often as possible. I also learned that it was fine to write a horrible first draft. I could fix that later. Those lessons made it easier to start.

Despite having the opportunity to train with high-level writers since I was a young, I remained an embarrassingly bad writer for a very long time. This came to a head after spending years working on a dissertation that ended up being unpleasant to read. It was heart-breaking.

I began to rethink my approach to writing by looking to parallel activities for inspiration. Soccer players got better at their sport by practicing the component parts (dribbling, corner kicks, etc.), not by playing endless matches. I began to focus on learning the individual mechanics of writing in isolation from one another rather than trying to improve my writing all at once. I took a year or two off from my core research. That gave me time to rethink my project, ask senior members of the profession to give me feedback on my work, and to

practice the mechanics of writing on smaller projects. The feedback clarified what I wanted to do and where I was failing.

Each new publication I wrote, I chose one or two specific skills to work on. In my first few professional publications, I focused on learning to use active voice, topic sentences, hooks, and narrative more effectively. In *A Line of Blood and Dirt*, I focused on learning to use metaphors and simple grammatical structures to make my work more accessible. I read the work of authors more talented than I was, studied how they constructed their sentences, tried to emulate, failed, and started again. I improved more as a writer in those two or three years than I had in the previous ten.

Like most of the changes in my life, the motivation to learn each specific skill came from personal failings. Growing up in an academic household, reading was life. To my parent's everlasting shame, I never found the joy in reading that they did. I fell in love with history through television, film, and games – not books. That path encouraged me to try to learn to create articles and books that were as fast and painless to read as possible.

Figuring out how to convey complex ideas in simple ways led me to the Flesch-Kincaid readability metrics among others. Designed for use with the US military, the Flesch-Kincaid metric was created to assess the reading level required to understand a piece of writing. There is a lot at stake in military writing. If one writes an operation manual for a nuclear submarine in a way that the crew cannot understand, people die.¹

For historians, the Flesch-Kincaid metric offers simple and practical advice: short sentences, short paragraphs, and short words. The beauty of that approach to writing is it does not require you to dumb down ideas. The ideas remain complex, but the writing just becomes easier to follow. Focusing on readability, individual writing mechanics, and frequent feedback from other scholars helped me create a far more compelling book than my earlier attempts had been. I tried, failed, asked for help, and started again. That approach is not sophisticated, but, for me at least, it was the one that worked.

Shortcomings

The contributors to this roundtable have been more than kind in their descriptions of my work. I was especially happy to see that they moved past a celebration of the *A Line of Blood and Dirt* to highlight some of

the book's many shortcomings. Carter and Delgado are right to point out that the book is weak in its explicit engagement with theory (settler colonialism, transimperialism, transterritoriality etc.) and in its historiographical coverage. Some of these challenges were the result of my attempt to keep the book as readable as possible. Some came from the editor's desire to keep the footnotes brief. But mostly, these omissions reflect my own shortcomings.

I understand history best when it is grounded in specific times, places, and people's lives. I often struggle integrating theoretical terms into my writing because they are hard to use without encouraging abstraction or skipping through time or across regions. In writing this book, I focused most of my efforts on using narrative to convey larger patterns and embedding theoretical ideas into individual stories.

Carter, Delgado, and Hamon also correctly identified the book's struggle to incorporate relevant parts of the historiography. There are hundreds of books that should appear in this book's historiography that I simply ran out of time to include. One of the most depressing parts of this career for me has been reading as religiously as possible only to see my "must read" list swell to more than 400 books in only a few years.

Carter is correct in her assessment that *A Line of Blood and Dirt* is a weird book. It is not a true transnational, Canadian, US, political, or Indigenous history. Nor is it quantitative history, or digital mapping history (HGIS), although it has pieces of each. It is a mutt — an awkward mixture of a lot of different styles, methods, and approaches. While this lack of a clear identity helps to explain some of the challenges around theoretical engagement and historiographical coverage, the problem I think goes deeper.

Focused on any one topic, *A Line of Blood and Dirt* fails to deliver. Carter points to the ways the book could have done a far better job covering the experiences of women in the borderlands. She is right. So too is Hamon about the book's coverage of Louis Riel and Delgado's discussion about racial complexity. There is so much more that can be done on each topic. As Hamon notes, contextual knowledge is vital, and it is easy to miss key pieces of it when working at this scale.

The limitations around gender are particularly pronounced for me because of the project's original aim. One of my earliest goals as a researcher was to use birth records in the census to trace the transnational movement of women, and with them the contours of

communities during diasporas. Tyla Betke's work with the Big Bear community is a tangible example of the power of this kind of approach.² As Carter notes, however, the importance of studying women in the borderlands goes well beyond what they can tell us about mobility. Their exclusions and opportunities tell us fundamental truths about how, where, and why the border behaved the way it did.

It is worth expanding the limitations of the book beyond what other members of the roundtable have raised. While this book is often lauded for its scope, that is one of the areas of my work that I am least proud of. When I first started working on this project, I tried desperately to write a book that provided national coverage of the border's formation.

I failed.

A Line of Blood and Dirt mostly focuses on western Canada. The Yukon, Quebec, and the Maritimes, which deserve so much more than I was able to provide, remain small parts. This is particularly frustrating for me with respect to Canada's border with Alaska, which I think has been chronically underserved. This section of border holds an enormous potential for understanding how the borders in North America are formed. The Alaska-Yukon border developed over a longer time frame than elsewhere in the country. This provides an opportunity to assess how much of the border's development was tied to changes in bureaucracy, the relative power of the state, demography, technology, and the everyday actions and decisions of local people.

I am excited to see that, since my book's publication, established scholars like Andrea Geiger have released wide reaching books on the northern borderlands, and younger scholars like Glenn Icton and Andreas Mentrup-Womelsdorf (and many others) are working to expand our knowledge of Alaska, the Yukon, and Northern BC.³ My hope remains that future historians will not just expand our understanding of Canada's border with Alaska, but find ways to integrate it into the national story. I have similar hopes for Quebec and the Maritimes.

More broadly, I hope to see a more integrated history of the continent, linking the US-Mexico and Canada-US borders together. There is enormous potential here, but outside a few isolated works like Sheila McManus's *Both Sides Now*, it is a part of the field that has remained largely untapped.⁴ Like Delgado, I continue to see enormous potential in writing wider histories that still capture the contours of everyday life.

Conclusion

One of my dreams for my book is that it will be quickly surpassed and forgotten. There is so much more to learn about the border and how it operates than I was able to provide. I hope my book will help other scholars, particularly those doing community-engaged work, create far more sophisticated, wide-reaching, and thoughtful scholarship than I was able to create. If my work helps save those scholars time, I will consider it a success.

BENJAMIN HOY is an Associate Professor of History and the Director of the HGIS Lab at the University of Saskatchewan. His first book, *A Line of Blood and Dirt: Creating the Canada-United States Border across Indigenous Lands* (Oxford University Press, 2021) examines the creation of the Canada-US border and its uneven effects on the communities who lived in its shadow from 1775 to 1930. Hoy's broader research focuses on digital mapping (HGIS), game-based learning, and the history of everyday power along border regions.

BENJAMIN HOY est professeur agrégé d'histoire et directeur du HGIS Lab à l'Université de la Saskatchewan. Son premier livre, *A Line of Blood and Dirt : Creating the Canada-United States Border across Indigenous Lands* (Oxford University Press, 2021), examine la création de la frontière canadoaméricaine et ses effets inégaux sur les communautés qui habitaient le long de la frontière entre 1775 et 1930. Ses recherches se concentrent sur la cartographie numérique (HGIS), l'apprentissage par le jeu et l'histoire du pouvoir quotidien dans les régions frontalières.

Endnotes

- 1 Assessing reading level is quite complex even if the broad strokes for how to make a piece of writing more accessible share some similarity. Rebekah George Benjamin, "Reconstructing Readability: Recent Developments and Recommendations in the Analysis of Text Difficulty," *Educational Psychology Review* 24, no. 1 (March 2012): 63–88; J. Peter Kincaid et al., "Derivation of New Readability Formulas (Automated Readability Index, Fog Count and Flesch Reading Ease Formula) for Navy Enlisted Personnel," *Institute for Simulation and Training* 56 (February 1975).
- 2 Tyla Betke, "Cree (Nêhiyawak) Mobility, Diplomacy, and Resistance in the Canada-U.S. Borderlands, 1885 - 1917" (MA, University of Saskatchewan, 2019).
- 3 Andrea Geiger, *Converging Empires: Citizens and Subjects in the North Pacific Borderlands, 1867-1945* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2022).
- 4 Sheila McManus, *Both Sides Now: Writing the Edges of the North American West* (Texas A&M Press, 2022).