Journal of the Canadian Historical Association
Revue de la Société historique du Canada

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Volume 33, numéro 2, 2023

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108205ar
DOI : https://doi.org/10.7202/1108205ar

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Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association / La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)
1712-6274 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer ce document

Delgado, G. P. (2023). Seeing North American Borders Anew: Transterritoriality and the Reimagining of Border Dynamics in Hoy's *A Line of Blood and Dirt*. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, *33*(2), 187–194. https://doi.org/10.7202/1108205ar

Seeing North American Borders Anew: Transterritoriality and the Reimagining of Border Dynamics in Hoy's *A Line of Blood and Dirt*

GRACE PEÑA DELGADO

In 2021, Oxford University published an important book by Benjamin Hoy, *A Line of Blood and Dirt: Creating the Canada-United States Borders Across Indigenous Lands*. More than a typical academic study of borderlands, this book presents a compelling history of the origins of the border between the United States and Canada. The strength of Hoy's work lies in its far-reaching examination that stretches from the mid-nineteenth century up to the mid-twentieth century. *A Line of Blood and Dirt* invites readers to confront the enduring debates about Indigenous sovereignty, the balance of power within colonial and national states, and the real-world experiences of those inhabiting and traversing these borders.

As a scholar specialized in North American border history, my attention has been mostly dedicated to the lively and often contested US-Mexico border. Recently, my curiosity led me to delve into the lesser-studied "peaceful" border between the United States and Canada. I sought to broaden my knowledge and challenge established views about the more southern border. Hoy's work provided the new insight I was looking for. His research is comprehensive, exploring selected, largely uncharted academic landscapes concerning the Canada-US border. Contrary to the US-Mexico border, which took shape as a result of a wave of American imperialism, including conflicts, military aggression, and annexation, the Canada-US border has a different origin story. It emerged progressively through a series of diplomatic dialogues, geographical surveys, and administrative actions. Hoy presents the development of the Canada-US border as a complex and non-linear process that required significant manpower and resources. Beginning its formation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries around the Atlantic Coast and the Great Lakes, the Canada-US border progressively spread westward, incorporating the Pacific Coast, Prairie regions, and Arctic regions into its domain.

In examining Hoy's work, I found myself captivated by the parallels between the events unfolding at the Canada-US border and those at the US-Mexico boundary. His book covertly nudges

us towards familiar phrases frequently used in borderlands studies, including transnationalism, transimperialism, diaspora, and migration. Although these terms might seem sparsely sprinkled or used conservatively throughout his work, it does not diminish their significance. The deeper I dove into Hoy's work, the more it became evident that he was deftly applying these fundamental borderlands concepts, all while ensuring they did not overshadow the everyday struggles of borderlands communities resisting state power. Hoy made a conscious choice of prioritizing narrative over theoretical frameworks, a clear shift towards aesthetics, thus placing the emphasis on the personal stories that compose the history rather than the conceptual frameworks that seek to contain it.

Hoy's narrative approach has an inherent pull, effectively breathing life into the wide-ranging historical characters featured in his book. Whether I was engrossed in the physical text or listening to the Audible version, Hoy's compelling storytelling had a consistent grip on me. He succeeds in animating a diverse array of historical figures, from Indigenous people in communities such as the Mohawk, Ojibwe, and Dakota to colonial administrators, immigration officials, and an array of individuals crossing the border. As historians, we are often urged to narrate stories, but the real challenge lies in understanding and appreciating how these stories profoundly influence our readers. In *A Line of Blood and Dirt*, Hoy's craft as a writer plays a key role, skillfully deploying irony to highlight contrasts and juxtapositions. Hoy's artful use of irony keeps us readers on our toes, keenly aware of simmering tensions, the threat of conflict, cultural displacement, and forced assimilation. Through his stylistic choices, Hoy ensures that we remain engaged, amplifying the complex undertones and implications of the events and figures that have shaped Canada's borders.

One figure that stands out in Hoy's chapter, "The Borders of Everyday Life," is Jim Windigo, an Anishinaabe man. Windigo's story underscores the profound personal impact of borders. His life has been significantly shaped by the challenges and changes brought about by the border, something his grandparents never had to deal with. The influence of this border infiltrates every aspect of Windigo's daily life, from where he can go and how he lives to what he eats. As a boy, Windigo cherished the freedom he had to cross over to Nett Lake, Minnesota, without anyone questioning his movements.

Windigo also recalls the freedom his grandparents enjoyed, able to visit Spirit Mountain, a sacred site near Duluth, Minnesota. Back

then, there were no lines drawn, no categories like American Indians or Canadian Indians. But as Windigo grows older and his grandparents pass away, the border feels more and more distant to him. Spirit Mountain, despite remaining in the same place geographically, seems to move farther and farther away. This increasing distance, this growing detachment could be quantified not just in tangible elements like distance, time, or cost, but also in the emotional and psychological chasm that grows between Windigo and his ancestry. Despite his sharp criticism of the border's limiting effects on access to traditional camping grounds in the United States, and the duties or taxes imposed on goods like wild rice or mukluks when brought back across, Windigo is careful not to overemphasize its power. The influence of the border is variable, subtly shifting and adapting according to the circumstances around it. Even though it has undeniable effects, it serves as an intermittent force in his life, not an unchanging or absolute presence.

Hoy's work transcends the confines of a mere historical account. His focus on settler colonialism invites us to examine the far-reaching implications of colonialism in national times. As Hoy illustrates, settler colonialism's effects on the lives of the Anishinaabe people, along with numerous other First Nations people, are not constrained by temporal or spatial limits; they persist and evolve, transcending such boundaries. Hoy's emphasis aligns with the critical observations put forth by anthropologist Patrick Wolfe.[1] Wolfe's principle of erasure or extermination provides an essential lens to comprehend the tactics and motivations of settler societies primarily fuelled by an unquenchable thirst for land. Erasure also works alongside attempted cultural assimilation of Indigenous communities and the enactment of restrictive government policies that curtail Indigenous rights. Such strategies are designed to control and manipulate Indigenous populations, altering their cultural protections and personal freedoms, all while refusing to recognize their rightful sovereignty.

Despite Hoy's remarkable work that privileges rich stories over terminology, the field of borderlands studies still grapples with conceptual buzzwords and their implications for research. Terms like transimperialism and transnationalism, representing relationships between empires and nations respectively, can sometimes feel unwieldy and restrictive. They might inadvertently overemphasize the influence of the central power, limiting our understanding of the nuances and complexities of borderland regions. This issue underscores the need for continued conceptual refinement within the field to ensure that our

terminology accurately reflects and facilitates our explorations of these complex historical and contemporary dynamics.

Transterritoriality is a critical term that disrupts our understanding of space and time. Transterritoriality challenges the core principle of transnationalism by moving beyond the confining boundaries of nation-states. While transnationalism encapsulates the political, cultural, and economic processes transcending national frontiers, it's inherently restricted by the structure of the nation-state. Transterritoriality nonetheless breaks away from such restrictions while privileging contests over land and land dispossession that persist after Old World colonialism ends and the national period begins.[2]

Scholars who specialize in the study of late colonial and early national periods might conceptualize "transterritoriality" as the fluid movement of ideas, influence, and agency that extends beyond rigid geographic boundaries during these periods of historical transition. By foregrounding narratives focused on the self-sustainability and autonomy of Indigenous cultures, transterritoriality offers a means to bridge these Indigenous ways of life that have roots predating the colonial era and persist through to the present day. In this way, transterritoriality emphasizes the enduring relevance and role of Indigenous communities within territories characterized by geopolitical boundaries.

In this context, "territory" symbolizes complex, localized struggles that resist being commandeered for larger narratives. Territory serves as a touchstone for those communities who refuse to perceive space merely as a commodified or privatized entity — the so-called "land." Instead, "territory" highlights those moments when space is actively contested, indicating the existence and continuity of struggle within a community. This struggle is reflective of the community's adaptation within its unique environment, shaped by its relationship to its local watershed or hydrological basin.

Hoy's work on the Anishinaabe people implicitly showcases these territorial struggles as they assert their claim to space and resist the impositions of a racial, patriarchal, and capitalist domination through their "territory" or "commons." This raises the question: how can these disputed regions in the North American borderlands be interconnected through a network of conflict? The exploration of this question allows us to weave these independent loci of struggle into a larger tapestry of resistance against settler colonialism, providing a fresh approach in the study of borderlands history and settler colonialism, as reflected in Hoy's narratives.

As demonstrated by Hoy, the settler colonial framework has been an essential tool in analyzing French, British, and Anglo-American colonial pursuits. In this way, Hoy is following in the footsteps of several scholars of the Canada-US border who worked within a settler colonial framework before him.[3] However, its application in the context of Mexico and Latin America's rich historical and contemporary tapestries has been somewhat limited due to inherent complexities. Among these complexities is the racial aspect of settler colonialism. This becomes particularly interesting when applied to the Mexican context and that of the US Southwest, where the racial-nationalist ideology of *mestizaje* is firmly ingrained. In a country like Mexico, *mestizaje* — a term that denotes the fusion of Spanish and Indigenous bloodlines and cultures — is not just a sociopolitical construct but a lived reality for many. Yet, in the settler colonial framework, it takes on a new meaning and implications.

Rather than viewing *mestizaje* as a tool for racial harmony or cultural integration, it can be perceived in the context of Mexico and the US Southwest as a method of erasure — a tactic to suppress Indigenous identities, cultures, and territorial rights within the settler colonial initiative. This paradigm shift draws us away from a preoccupation with racial purity and authenticity in the northern Mexican context or the racial classification of Mexican (American) and Indigenous communities on the US side of the border. It instead nudges scholars studying the US-Mexico borderlands to explore more complex, intertwined matters such as dispossession and *mestizo* or white nationalism.

Through this updated lens, border scholars could scrutinize how the respective *mestizo* and white nation-building projects systematically veiled or disregarded Indigenous autonomy and territorial rights. As a result, settler colonialism in regions that would emerge as the US-Mexico borderlands after 1848 might not conform to the typical model of replacing Indigenous populations with European settlers, as might have occurred in Canada. At the US-Mexico border, settler colonialism could demonstrate how Indigenous populations were integrated into the nation or nations while concurrently influencing political contingencies that facilitated various co-existing arrangements. This viewpoint broadens the understanding of settler colonialism, moving beyond simple racial dichotomies and the logic of erasure.

A Line of Blood and Dirt reveals parallels to the situation at the US-Mexico borderlands. While Hoy explores settler colonialism in the context of the Anishinaabe people and their experiences with

settler societies, there are striking similarities in how Indigenous identities and cultures are suppressed or redefined, much like the *mestizaje* process in Mexico.[4] The Anishinaabe, similar to Indigenous groups in Mexico, face a systematic erasure and transformation of their identities and traditions as settler societies impose their own frameworks. In his examination of the Anishinaabe experience, Hoy delves into the socio-political mechanisms that facilitate this erasure, mirroring the principle of erasure central to *mestizaje* in Mexico. While the specific contexts differ, the themes of erasure, assimilation, and cultural transformation reverberate across both regions, and the contrasts at the US-Mexico border and similarities at the Canada-US border are all the more striking when thought of in this continental perspective.

Hoy's research compels us to perceive settler colonialism not as a solitary historical incident, but as a complex, ongoing process that has many impacts Indigenous communities across varied geographic and cultural landscapes. During the in-person roundtable discussion at Congress, Hoy expressed his hope that his work would aid scholars in revisiting and reshaping borderlands studies, and that in a decade, the work would be seen as outdated. Essentially, Hoy posed a challenge to borderlands scholars to shift their focus. His work highlights the necessity for a broader comprehension that goes beyond the conventional binary constructs and acknowledges the intricate complexities of settler colonialism. In response to this, I am embracing Hoy's challenge.

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Endnotes

1 For more on settler colonialism, see Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology* (London: Cassell, 1999); Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4: 387-409; Patrick Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 885-905; Lorenzo Veracini, "The Imagined Geographies of Settler Colonialism," in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place, and Identity*, eds. Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 179-197; Lorenzo Veracini, "Patrick Wolfe's Dialectics," *Aboriginal History* 40 (January 2016): 249-260.

2 For more on transterritoriality and its related concept, deterritorialization, see Daniel Mato, "The Importance of Territorial References in Transnational Processes. A Critique of Case Studies Based 'Deterritorialization'," *Estudos de Sociologia* 12, no. 2 (2007): 35–63; Sheila Croucher, *The Other Side of the Fence* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 76–92; Susanne-Sophia Spiliotis, "The concept of transterritoriality or: where does society take place?" *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 27, no. 3 (2001): 480–88.

3 See Sheila McManus *The Line that Separates: Race, Gender, and the Making of the Alberta-Montana Borderlands* (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 2005); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and Empire and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1871* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Lissa K. Wadewitz, *The Nature of Borders: Salmon, Boundaries, and Bandits on the Salish Sea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); Andrew R. Graybill, *Policing the Great Plains: Rangers, Mounties, and the North American Frontier, 1875-1910* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

4 For more on *mestizaje* in Mexico see Ben Vinson, *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Christina A. Sue, *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race*

Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); David Dalton, *Mestizo Modernity: Race, Technology, and the Body in Postrevolutionary Mexico* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2018); Beatriz Reyes-Foster, "Grieving for Mestizaje: Alternative Approaches to Maya Identity in Yucatan, Mexico," *Identities* 19, no. 6 (2012): 657–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2012.734766.