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Glen Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

We would like to begin our response to David Roediger's provocative meditation on the historical and contemporary antinomies of solidarity (in both theory and practice) with a statement of gratitude to and political acknowledgment of the hosts of the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Studies Association (ASA) held in Toronto last year: the nation of the Mississauga Nishnaabeg.

Toronto is an area rich in the theory and practice of Indigenous political alliance, holding the histories and presence of not only the Mississauga Nishnaabeg but also the Wendat and the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. These nations negotiated and continue to practice diplomatic relationships with each other to share land while respecting each other's governance, jurisdiction, and sovereignty. Each nation also exists in deep reciprocal relationships with the Great Lakes, in particular Lake Ontario, and the waterways that flow into it. These nations foster deep relations to St. Lawrence River leading to the Atlantic Ocean, the diverse plant and animal nations within their territories, the thunderers and rains, and all the physical and spiritual forces that connect them to this place, their place of creation, in an intimate and meaningful way.

To many of the Indigenous academics in attendance at the ASA, ourselves included, it probably came as little surprise to learn that the Mississauga Nishnaabeg, Wendat, and Haudenosaunee were not the hosts noted in the event's call for papers and proposals, on the conference website, or in much of the ASA's promotional materials; nor were the bulk of us likely surprised that neither their lands nor sovereignties figured much in the conference proceedings beyond symbolic opening gestures. This form of erasure—that is, the erasure of Indigenous land and jurisdiction—is one of the “miserics” that constitute Indigenous peoples' experience of our settler colonial present, both inside and outside the academy. The erasure of Mississauga Nishnaabeg, Wendat, and Haudenosaunee sovereignty from the ASA conference is not only a reinforcement of our settler-colonial present; it is a negation of the contributions of their presence in this place, a presence that has been violently

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attacked in the name of dispossession for four centuries. It is a negation of their intellectual and political practices of *governance-in-solidarity* that we ignore at our peril. This acknowledgment then, necessitates a different beginning, one in which we actively take on the contestation of settler colonization in all its violent dimensions as a point of departure, so that when we present our work on solidarity against the “misery of . . .,” we are not standing on the backs of Indigenous peoples but instead engaged as related comrades joined in critical co-resistance against the convergence of forces that divide and conquer us and the Earth on which we depend. It seems appropriate, then, to (re)center these issues—Indigenous land and jurisdiction—in our response to Roediger’s keynote address, and in doing so share some of our reflections on why these issues occupy such an ambivalent if not contentious place in the politics of solidarity in settler colonial contexts.

Being the masterful historian that he is, Roediger’s keynote (as well as its written incarnation published here) presents his audience with an “uneasy” (and uneven) history of subaltern solidarity across multiple axes of power and community. In doing so he not only discloses a rich history of enacting transformative alliances within and across nation, race, and class (from Ferguson to Palestine) but also uses this history to stress the importance of us confronting the difficulties and tensions that marked these past struggles in order to illuminate the ways in which they *continue to shape our present*. For our discussion here, one of the most telling historical examples drawn on by Roediger is his closing discussion of Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, which represents an early alliance temporarily forged across the formidable racial–economic divide of white indentured and Black slave labor while perpetuating the structure of colonial dispossession. We would like to think that Roediger purposefully ended his intervention with a nod to the significance of Indigenous dispossession and erasure because they, alongside antiblackness and heteropatriarchy, inform the structure of capitalist accumulation and state power that has come to govern the “reproduction of misery” for so many of us today.

What is it that makes solidarity such an elusive if not difficult practice? Roediger’s historical examination of the concept provides several core issues that still resonate today, including the difficulties in working with and across particular identity-related differences, working across geographic separation and coerced segregation, and contending with structures of power that function to divide us both materially and ideologically. This, of course, raises crucial questions: In what ways can and do marginalized subjects and communities work across their micro-specificities to align more effectively against macro-structural

barriers to freedom and self-determination? What is the composition of these macro-structures of exploitation and domination and what sorts of ideological attachments do they produce to blur them from view and thus block our ability to work collectively against them? Are these structures reducible to capital, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, heterosexual and cis-male dominance, and/or the violence of the state, or is our collective unfreedom overdetermined by all of these at once and in complex ways?

In my own work I (Glen) have examined similar issues in a manner that I hope foregrounds the settler colonial frame *within* which these diverse configurations of power converge to produce a host of violences: from environmental degradation to white supremacy to heteropatriarchal domination to class exploitation and inequality.¹ I conceptualize settler colonialism as a structure of domination that is partly predicated on the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples' lands and the forms of political authority and jurisdiction that govern our relationship to these lands. In doing so I draw significantly from two theoretical resources: Karl Marx's writings on the "primitive accumulation" of capital and Frantz Fanon's decolonial critique of G. W. F. Hegel's master-slave parable when applied to colonial situations. With respect to Marx, I claimed that chapters 26–33 of his first volume of *Capital* are crucial because it is there that Marx most thoroughly weds *capital* to *colonialism* by way of his theory of "primitive accumulation."

However, as insightful as Marx's primitive accumulation thesis is, I argued that several issues must be addressed within his work to make his writings on colonialism relevant for analyzing the relationship between Indigenous peoples and liberal settler states (in our case Canada, but the United States would fit here too). First, I argued that Marx's thesis on primitive accumulation must be stripped of its rigidly *temporal* character; that is, rather than posit primitive accumulation as some historically situated event that sets the stage for the development of the capitalist mode of production, we should see it as an ongoing practice of dispossession that never ceases to structure capitalist and colonial social relations in the present.

Second, I argued that Marx's theory of primitive accumulation must be stripped of its early *normative developmentalism*. In other words, while it is appropriate to view primitive accumulation as the condition of possibility for the development and ongoing reproduction of capitalism, it is not so to posit it as a *necessary* condition for developing the forms of critical consciousness and associated modes of life that ought to inform the construction of its alternatives. I also suggested, as does Roediger himself, that Marx came to see

the problematic character of this early teleological formulation of his thesis and worked to correct it in the last decade of his life, as exemplified in his correspondence with populist Russian defenders of the *obshchina*, or peasant village commune, such as Vera Zasulich and NK Mikhailovsky.²

Now, one might ask, why start with Marx given the significance of these obstacles? Why not jump straight into Fanon's contribution, whose socio-diagnostic of the intersections of race, class, and colonization have already eschewed much of these problems?³ Or better yet, why not just jump straight into Indigenous peoples' thoughts on these matters, given that this is the diverse community from which we think and speak?

Part of the answer to this question is similar to what animates Roediger's insistence on both *learning* from past theoretical traditions and movements while *challenging* the ways in which these traditions can stubbornly foreclose the possibility of forging radical solidarities in the present. In the case of Marxism, while it may provide the most internally diverse and robust critique of capitalist exploitation, we are less convinced that the tactics and strategies it has historically relied on to move us beyond the violent mess we have inherited has entirely stripped itself of the falsely universalizing, urban, white, heterosexist, masculinist, class reductionist, and state-centric character that informs a significant amount of Marx's own work and dominant Western articulations of Marxism.

In the context of Indigenous peoples' struggles in Canada and elsewhere, this has historically resulted in not only in a very shallow solidarity with respect to Indigenous claims and struggles (when it can even be said to exist) but more often than not a call on Indigenous peoples to forcefully align their interests and identities in ways that contribute to our own dispossession and erasure. For self-proclaimed "historical materialist" critics Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard (to employ a particularly belligerent yet contemporary example), the core problem with Indigenous peoples' claims is that insofar as they "encourage the native population to identify in terms of *ethnicity* instead of *socioeconomic class*" they must be discarded as inherently "divisive and reactionary."⁴ The authors then go on to tritely conclude that it is only by "eliminating this fundamental 'difference' [namely, *class* difference] that we can become a global tribe and the 'world can live as one.'"⁵ For Indigenous nations, this requires that we abandon our parochial, indeed "neolithic," attachments to land, language, and culture in exchange for our integration into the simultaneously disciplining yet enlightening fold of the modern proletariat.

In no way do we intend to hold up Widdowson and Howard's slobbery analysis as representative of the contemporary Left's position on Indigenous

self-determination efforts in Canada. What we ignore to our detriment, however, are the incredibly resistant normative assumptions that underwrite it. At least two of these assumptions stick out in our minds. First, it adheres to a modernist view of history and historical progress informed by a Eurocentric developmentalist ontology that historically ranks variation in “human cultural forms and modes of production” according to each form’s “approximation to the full development of the human good.”⁶ And second, it treats the locatedness of land, culture, and place as material and ideational impediments to the formation of broader coalitions and, in turn, posits them as factors that need to be abandoned for the sake of our own emancipation. Again, these are not assumptions associated strictly with white supremacist apologists. They are foundational to what Walter Dignolo and others have identified as the “coloniality of modernity” itself.⁷ As such, they have long informed the dominant liberal and Marxist Left’s concern over what they claim to be the inherently parochial and particularistic orientation of “identity politics” that is serving to undermine more egalitarian and universal aspirations, like those focused on class and directed toward a more equitable and nonexploitative distribution of socioeconomic goods.

The concern with Indigenous claims to self-determination grounded in and informed by our attachments to land and sovereignty has also been raised recently among radical scholars and activists that one would intuitively assume might serve more organically as authentic comrades in co-resistance with Indigenous communities. In particular, we are thinking of the recent critiques leveled at Indigenous studies in particular and Indigenous social movements in general by Jared Sexton and Nandita Sharma.⁸ We believe that both Sexton and Sharma are committed antiracists. Sharma’s writings on the implication of capitalism and the state-form in the perpetual displacement of and violence perpetrated against migrants is crucial, and we, again, ignore them at our peril. The same goes for Sexton’s vitally important interventions highlighting the specificity of anti-Blackness and its relationship to state-formation and capitalist accumulation in North America and elsewhere—in the past *and* the present. Following this, it would be impossible for them to uphold the racist teleology that informs the arguments of so-called historical materialists like Widdowson and Howard. However, that being said, both advance lines of argument that are perhaps unwittingly but nonetheless infected with their own brand of anti-Indigenous sentiment insofar as they demand that Indigenous peoples separate their justice claims from the supposedly antimigrant and anti-Black character of our commitments to the land and jurisdictions that inform our identities as well as ethical relationships with others. Our concern is that this

misrepresentation of Indigenous studies and activism does an unwarranted disservice to the decades of solidarity work that those scholars and activists before us have labored so hard to establish within and between our respective communities inside and outside the academy.

As a settler colonial power, Canada has structured its relationship to Indigenous peoples primarily through the dispossession of Indigenous bodies from Indigenous lands and by impeding and systemically regulating the generative relationships and practices that create and maintain Indigenous nationhoods, political practices, sovereignties, and solidarities. The state-sanctioned murdering, assimilating, and disappearing of Indigenous bodies (asymmetrically distributed across genders) are, as the Mohawk scholar Audra Simpson says, a direct attack on Indigenous political orders because these bodies generate knowledge, political systems, and ways of being that contest the hegemony of settler governmentality and thus make dispossession all the more difficult to achieve.⁹

Attacking the relationality of Indigenous political orders through the strategic targeting of Indigenous peoples' relationship to land has been a site of intense white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, serving as a mechanism to submit Indigenous lands and labor to the demands of capitalist accumulation and state-formation. Historically, Indigenous peoples have responded to this violence and negation through fierce and loving mobilization. Indigenous resistance and resurgence in response to the dispossessive forces of settler colonization, in both historical and current manifestations, employ measures and tactics designed to protect Indigenous territories and to reconnect Indigenous bodies to land through the practices and forms of knowledge that these practices continuously regenerate.

What we are calling "grounded normativity" refers to the ethical frameworks provided by these Indigenous place-based practices and associated forms of knowledge.¹⁰ Grounded normativity houses and reproduces the practices and procedures, based on deep reciprocity, that are inherently informed by an intimate relationship to place. Grounded normativity teaches us how to live our lives in relation to other people and nonhuman life forms in a profoundly nonauthoritarian, nondominating, nonexploitive manner. Grounded normativity teaches us how to be in respectful diplomatic relationships with other Indigenous and non-Indigenous nations with whom we might share territorial responsibilities or common political or economic interests. Our relationship to the land itself generates the processes, practices, and knowledges that inform our political systems, and through which *we practice solidarity*. To willfully abandon them would amount to a form of auto-genocide.

The land we gathered on this fall for the ASA annual meeting holds the relationships that inform Nishnaabeg nationhood and provides them with the political processes to engage with the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and Wendat nation on the north shore of Lake Ontario. It provides them with the practice and knowledge that allows them to critically interrogate capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy. It provides them with the material culture to rebuild their political orders and conceptualization of nationhood without replicating the heteropatriarchy or anti-Blackness normalized in our settler colonial reality. When we disappear Indigenous presence from our intellectual endeavors, our movement building, and our scholarship, we not only align ourselves with the wrong side of history, we necessarily negate any form of solidarity and become actors in the maintenance of settler colonialism. Given the clear stakes at play, we would like to thank David Roediger for opening up this crucial line of critical inquiry via the association's presidential address. Mahsi cho / Chi miigwetch.

Notes

- We would also like to thank David Roediger for his thoughtful lecture and John Munro for his insightful comments and suggestions on previous drafts of this piece.
1. See, in particular, Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
 2. Karl Marx, "A Letter to Vera Zasulich" and "A Letter to NK Mikhailovsky," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLelland (London: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 3. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Boston: Grove, 2008); and Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (Boston: Grove, 2005).
 4. Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, "With Friends Like This, Aboriginal People Don't Need Enemies: A Reply to Peter Kulchyski," *Canadian Dimension*, March 2009, canadiandimension.com/articles/1710/; emphasis added.
 5. Frances Widdowson and Albert Howard, *Disrobing the Aboriginal Industry* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008), 264.
 6. Robert Nichols, "Indigeneity and the Settler Contract Today," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39.2 (2013): 166.
 7. Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
 8. Jared Sexton, "The Vel of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," *Critical Sociology* (2014): 1–15, planetarities.web.unc.edu/files/2015/01/sexton-unsovereign.pdf; Nandita Sharma, "Postcolonial Sovereignty," in *Native Studies Keywords*, ed. Andrea Smith et al. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015). For outstanding critical engagements with the work of Sexton and Sharma that have influenced our perspective here, see Rita Kaur Dahmoon, "A Feminist Approach to Decolonizing Anti-Racism: Rethinking Transnationalism, Intersectionality, and Settler Colonialism," *Feral Feminisms* 4 (2015): 20–37; and Iyko Day, "Being or Nothingness: Indigeneity, Antiblackness, and Settler Colonial Critique," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1.2 (2015): 102–21.
 9. See Audra Simpson, *Mohawk Interruptus* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014); and Simpson, "The Chief's Two Bodies," keynote address, International R.A.C.E. Conference, Edmonton, October 2015.
 10. For an elaboration of the concept, see Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*.