On Method and Militant Resistance: An Appreciation of Nuanced Engagement with the Uneasy History of Settlers and First Nations

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The acclaimed novelist, poet, satirist, relentless oppositionist, and defender of all outsiders Ishmael Reed once proclaimed that "writin' is fightin'."[1] I am sure the essay that hagwil hayetsk/Charles Menzies has responded to, and the larger forthcoming book of which it is a distillation, will be the cause of some fights. As the author of these works, however, I have no quarrel with Menzies.

"Capitalism and Colonialism – Settler and First Nation; An Uneasy History" is exceedingly generous in addressing my remarks on colonialism and capitalism as they unfolded in Canada over the years between 1500 and 2023. It is also a significant and nuanced stand-alone contribution to the discussion of Indigenous-settler relations, deserving to be read as such. Situating this long history within a sophisticated periodization, Menzies rightly refuses to sidestep the violence accompanying the colonization of First Nations and their beleaguered confrontation with capitalism. He has controversial and critically important things to say about the contemporary politics of state agents, from their knee-jerk reactions at being confronted with the ugliness of the past to fostering initiatives of recognition that have divided First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities, weakening resistance. In Menzies' understanding of how a layer of Indigenous leadership has been co-opted, buttressing the needs of capitalism and colonialism, he develops an oppositional stand associated with Red Power militants of the late 1960s and early 1970s such as Howard Adams.[2]

1. Ishmael Reed, *Writin' Is Fightin': Thirty-Seven Years of Boxing on Paper* (New York: Atheneum, 1988); for an accessible introduction to Reed, see Julian Lucas, "Ishmael Reed Gets the Last Laugh," *New Yorker*, 19 July 2021.

2. See, for instance, Howard Adams, *Prison of Grass: Canada from the Native Point of View* (Toronto: New Press, 1975). Note, as well, Glen Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), bearing in mind the fraternal critique of this work in John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, "Marx and the Indigenous," *Monthly Review* 71 (February 2020), https://monthlyreview.org/2020/02/01/marx-and-the-indigenous/.

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Where Menzies offers critical comment on my essay, it is always fair minded and insightful. To my way of thinking, some of this critique stems from our somewhat contradictory positionings around method. Menzies examines the limited terrain of a specific locale, his training as a sociocultural anthropologist focusing his writin' and fightin' on "an area the size of a small island or a coastal archipelago." This allows for the illumination of specifics, and they emerge in his essay with striking effect. In contrast, I am fixated on presenting a larger, more generalized depiction of an admittedly long and unwieldy history. Humility dictates that I qualify Menzies' suggestion that, in my account, "No place, no time, no struggle has been left behind." Far from it. As Menzies' discussion itself establishes, any attempt to reveal the entirety of the decisive imprint of colonialism and capitalism on the making of Canada is destined to be incomplete.

Striving to grasp totality may well come up short, but it is nevertheless a necessary endeavour, however much it lays one's analytic head on the chopping block for critics less congenial than Menzies to lower their booms on. The interplay between the intricacies and detail of distinct, particularistic study and the generalization and abstraction of commentary that attempts to capture broad developments allows the significance of the discrete to be placed within a larger framework, even altering that framework. This is precisely the case, I believe, with Menzies' imaginatively conceived, rigorously researched, and evocative study *People of the Saltwater: An Ethnography of Git lax m'oon*.[3]

The issue of method, I believe, frames Menzies' suggestion that I have been led astray by "colonial orthodoxy," falling prey to assumptions that Indigenous peoples existed within a state of "comparative abundance." This colonialist view of the political economies of First Nations suggested that simple food production sustained them, liberating Indigenous peoples from the necessity of cultivating and developing the land, waterways, and resources of their habitats. Such misrepresentations became a staple of the argument of colonizers that First Nations lands were *terra nullius*, subject to the Doctrine of Discovery, in which European newcomers could claim such territories for ostensibly more advanced civilizations, capable of "development." Menzies provides new and powerful evidence of how the people of the saltwater intervened in the coastal ecology to sustain fish stocks, investing their labour in altering environments so that harvesting resources would be facilitated. This was cultivation of a kind that Lockean colonizers either could not see or refused to acknowledge. It was reproduced in other Indigenous locales, where understandings of property, use values, and hereditary entitlements were anything but absent.[4]

3. Charles R. Menzies, *People of the Saltwater: An Ethnography of Git lax m'oon* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016).

4. See, for instance, Menzies, *People of the Saltwater*, esp. 33–34, 96; Shiri Pasternak, *Grounded Authority: The Algonquins of Barriere Lake against the State* (Minneapolis:

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My use of the terminology "abundance," however, was not meant to convey acceptance of the colonialist ideology of political economies structured by nature's supposedly easy gifts. My use of "comparative" was not at all utilized to situate Indigenous peoples and their environments alongside those of Europeans. Rather, it was the diversity of ecologies across the spectrum of Indigenous experience that I was concerned with. I was interested in comparative exploration of the lives of First Nations and Inuit peoples. It seemed to me important to recognize that while all such peoples shared something of the sensibilities of hospitality, the "bowl with one spoon," and the Indigenous commons, there were political economies and related societal organization that exhibited differentiations. I was at pains to balance what seemed to me legitimate generalization alongside recognition of diversity.

In the southerly reaches of the Pacific Northwest, for instance, rare environments allowed for limited accumulation. As surpluses were possible, however precarious their longevity, coastal settlements in this region constituted one of the most densely populated, largely non-agricultural regions in the pre-capitalist world. Ranks and orders evolved, taking on the trappings of class/caste distinctions, with chiefs at the top and slaves, captured in war and held as labouring chattels of those marked by higher rank, at the bottom. Elaborate Indigenous dwellings, adorned with impressive artistry, not to mention rituals like the potlach, might be situated within this complex, differentiated, social formation, which developed out of a particular ecological context. Among the Inuit of the Arctic North, no such social differentiation existed – a product, I would suggest, of the more austere environment, where a kind of iron law of mutuality was intrinsic to survival.

Material contexts among Indigenous peoples thus varied greatly, however much they shared a common separation from the mores and sensibilities of European newcomers. As Indigenous environments offered up quite divergent quantities and qualities of necessities vital to human sustenance and survival, the societies and practices developing within them exhibited some unique characteristics as well as common features. These commonalities loomed large as all such First Nations and Inuit peoples ended up confronting colonialism and capitalism, albeit at different times and in particular ways, relying on resilience to weather a generalized process of subordination. But just how the distinctiveness of different Indigenous groups, rooted in material circumstances prior to European contact, structured the ways that First Nations encountered colonialism and capitalism is also important.

University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 99–125; Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams: Indians and the British Columbia Frontier* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1981); Chief Gary Potts, "Teme-Augama Anishnabai: Last-Ditch Defence of a Priceless Homeland," in Boyce Richardson, ed., *Drumbeat: Anger and Renewal in Indian Country* (Toronto: Summerhill Place/Assembly of First Nations, 1989), 201–228. For a theoretical discussion of relevance, see Brenna Bhandar, *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

Menzies has rightly insisted that my language of description separate itself unequivocally from legacies of colonialism, a useful reminder that whatever our intent in writing and fighting for equality, our words can be taken to refract past meanings, even as we have something else in mind. I take this criticism to heart and have revised some of the wording around this issue of "abundance" in my larger book-length study.

I find Menzies' insistence that trade and the European commodities transforming Indigenous lives be regarded not as desired objects but as necessary adaptations to the "massive death waves that followed European and American sailing ships" perceptive and convincing, as far as it goes. Newcomers, be they colonizers or sojourners lured to new lands and waters by the illusions of riches, certainly brought disruption, not only in terms of epidemic disease but in all manner of other destabilizing intrusions, from religious proselytizing to the debilitating introduction of spirits, which were both a trade item and a part of the reciprocities of Indigenous-European exchange. But to situate trade, as Menzies seems to do, largely at the interface of "the onslaught of genocidal diseases" and a subsequent necessary "desire to survive and absorb labour-saving technologies," while perceptive, perhaps understates long-standing practices of economic interaction that, in certain regions of Canada, predated the onslaught of European-originating epidemics. Again, contrasting methods, in which zeroing in on the particular as opposed to canvassing the general, inevitably influence interpretation.

For certain coastal groupings, devastated by the dislocations and diseases following in the wake of European contact, the compulsion of adapting to rapid and debilitating change certainly structured the attraction to labour-saving technologies available through trade. Yet this was not likely the whole story if the totality of Indigenous experience is considered. I am inclined to think that trade's attractions and the goods (tools as well as other items) that were in play as Europeans established lucrative and exploitative exchange relations with Indigenous peoples were a consequence of complex factors. These may well have involved *both* the harsh necessities imposed by the ravages of colonialism and nascent capitalism *and* a desire to access products that Indigenous peoples valued intrinsically.

What is most pleasing to me about Menzies' response to my essay is that he grasped the purpose of my intervention into the vexed history of First Nations–settler relations. Appreciating the necessity of building alliances capable of sustaining militant resistance to the inextricably entwined and historically embedded processes of colonialism and capitalism, he calls for a politics of class struggle. Like me, Menzies is aware that colonialism's legacies and capitalism's adroit massaging of First Nations dispossession through a variety of state initiatives, especially over the course of the last decades, has thwarted the kind of class alliances and political mobilizations that would bring into common struggle militant and potentially anti-capitalist and anticolonialist workers and First Nations peoples. In his recognition of the

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complexity of practically and pragmatically addressing the political realities of a class-ordered Indigeneity in our times, Menzies is not starry-eyed. But he is nonetheless audacious in demanding a future socialism that knows no privilege and rests on non-exploitative social relations. Menzies certainly appreciates how difficult it will be to transcend the long history of acrimony and division that is the uneasy settler-Indigenous relation. His willingness to stand the difficult ground of acknowledging the necessity of building a mass, class-based opposition that goes against the grain of centuries of Indigenous-settler history rests on a sober assessment of what is demanded and what hampers the realization of this political necessity. Negotiating the always changing terrain of modern Indigeneity, state policy, class formation, and militant mobilization is a protracted and endlessly challenging endeavour.

Menzies, of course, has differences with what I have written. He will likely have more in the way of questions and challenges in the future. I look forward to addressing them, for such fraternal disagreement is the stuff of intellectual exchange and political clarification. In the meantime, I thank Charles for his thoughtful reflections. That hagwil hayetsk/Charles Menzies, an Indigenous Marxist whom I hold in considerable regard, considers my essay and the longer book that it summarizes as an "intervention offer[ing] an analytic framework that helps us focus practice today and tomorrow," charting an "emancipatory history that is inspiring and offers hope for achieving a classless society in our future," is gratifying indeed.