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Turning the Screw of Our Settler-Slaver Lives
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It is May 31, 2023 and this paper is due to my colleagues in less than 24 hours. I am not a delinquent academic always pushing the deadline: I am an overworked administrator who has relished every delicious moment of preparing for this writing. And, yet, here I am in the expedited pace that occurs when the godforsaken linear temporality of hegemony exerts its muscle in the form of “the deadline” and shrinks the horizon of possibility.

My pace is doubly hurried: the schoolyear has just ended for my teenager and we are taking him and his friends out of town tomorrow for a celebratory kicking into summer. My partner is scurrying about the kitchen and I must get to the grocery store this evening. We have to bring provisions because—yes—we are going to a cabin in the country.

As I gaze out the windows of my study, I see the very familiar movement of a large animal in the neighbor’s yard: a deer. Columbus is the 14th largest city in the United States and I do not live in the suburbs. Yet, deer have become part of our menagerie of “nature” in our collective backyards: they eat our precious plants, stirring desires to hunt them; they charm our children, stirring bizarre nostalgias for pasts we never had; they even spawn their newborns directly in our yards, stirring profoundly strange feelings of connectivity, even maternal care. We have plenty of “nature” and “natural connection” right here in the neighborhood.

So, why in the hell do we need to go to a cabin? Why has this become the common response to “needing a break?” Even to performing a literal break from our workday calendars into a summer rhythm?

Raymond Williams knows why.
And so do James Baldwin and Mishuana Goeman (& James Thomas Stevens & Irene Watson).
Even Karl Marx likely knows why.

Threaded together, each of these thinkers shows precise contours of how this apparently simple, and yet quite widespread among middleclass urban white Americans, act—going to the cabin, where we will undoubtedly gather some twigs from the woods—condenses the weight of settler-slaver history into a piercingly sharp exemplar of how we white folks live the abstractions and blissful ignorance of our manifold pasts of unvarnished violent greed.

Turning the Screw

I sort the threads of this screw analytically, despite my first inclination (borne of deep habit) to try to parse them chronologically. It is the screw that matters—as a tool, something like an axe or saw, that pierces and alters materially. The threads all pile one upon another to drive the screw more deeply, without regard for their ordering. (One might be tempted to call this screw ontological.)

The thread of Marx and Bersaïd

“We unpractical people, however, demand for the poor, politically and socially propertyless multitude . . . a *customary right* . . . [that] by its very nature can *only* be a right of this lowest, dispossessed and elemental mass.” (65)

As Bersaïd synthesizes, this remarkable 1842 text, the first in which Marx explicitly writes on economic issues, contests the development of a legal system across Europe that establishes “a new property code . . . based on individualism” (13) and “abolish[es] the inalienable right of the poor to common property offered by nature” (13). This legal system alters the meaning of “nature” from a logic of commons towards that of occupancy rights—part of the systemic changes across Europe that Bersaïd traces to the 1669 French law that “restricted the right of gleanings to four months of the year and prohibited the grazing of sheep and the collecting of dead wood” (15) (and led to peasant resistance movements). The impact of these legal codes on common practices such as gathering dead wood is devastating for the poor. As Marx outlines in his attention to the abolishing of monasteries and secularizing of their property (which he strikingly deems explicitly as the “right [thing] to do” (68), the poor who lived by “the fortuitous support” of the monasteries were not compensated when they were abolished; indeed, as Marx writes, “at the same time as they were deprived of an ancient right, a new restriction was imposed upon [the poor].” The restriction, of course, is private property—a phenomenon that John Locke infamously outlines as the rightful dessert of intentional labor that renders inert land useful. But the devastation of the poor is so thorough going as to be virtually complete: as the overwhelming inventory of Lascoumes and Zander indicates (9), the restriction on gathering wood renders the poor incapable of living.

One further twist of this thread--

Bersaïd concludes with a reminder from *Capital* of Marx’s revolutionary political stakes: “Between equal rights, force decides.” Force, not customs. (We live in an era of ever naked force.)

The thread of Baldwin

“Some of the men drink with me and suggest that I learn how to ski—partly, I gather, because they cannot imagine what I would look like on skis—and want to know if I am married, and as questions about my *metier*. But some of the men have accused *la sale negre*—behind my back—of stealing wood . . .” (4)

Baldwin understands the history of Europe fully: the charge of stealing wood is the most devastating charge these blissfully ignorant Swiss folks can make against this strange Black man. While the exceptionalism of the Black American's intimacy with white culture (7) is puzzling, especially when considered alongside Fanon, Baldwin renders his distinctly American version of Afropessimism strikingly clear in "Stranger in the Village." The "American Negro slave" is unique to all other forms of enslavement, Baldwin argues, in his complete incapacity to revolt or reclaim any past (5). The American Negro slave is, as Afropessimism insists, fully abstracted as a possession. Yet, Baldwin insists that the American abstraction is not complete, unlike "Europe's black possessions [which] remained—and do remain—in Europe's colonies" (5). This is what feeds the eternal return of the same repetitious violence and twisted pathologies of the American forms of anti-Blackness: we cannot fully countenance white supremacy as "the very warp and woof of the heritage of the West" (6).

Of course they accuse him of stealing wood: in 1955, the energy economy that Ghosh illuminates (21) is just getting underway in its most damning form, carbon.

The thread of Goeman (& Stevens & Watson)

"Are we free to roam?" And if so, "Do I remain the unsettled native, left to unsettle the settled spaces of empire?" (Watson 2007, 15)." (Goeman, 76)

"Do not listen to me

But yourself listening to me" (James Thomas Stevens (Mohawk) (Goeman, 78)

Mishuana Goeman (Tonawanda Band of Seneca) unravels the long legacy of property as the driving force of settler colonialism on Turtle Island with a beauty so exquisite that it passes for ease. Contrasting place with property and maps of stories with maps of erasure, she consistently looks for the openings where a practice of meaning-making might take hold and displace the lure of "seeing like a state" (85). This lure of the state—legally to be recognized and symbolically to speak legibly—abstracts the commitments to "land" and "sovereignty" into the misnomers of "race," "autonomy," and more recently, "diversity." This lure brings forth the most strident aspects of indigenous scholars, such as Waziyathawin's call "for the complete destruction of industrial civilization" (62).

But the land persists, underneath the cement of the prison (82), and Goeman steadfastly speaks through and with others to cultivate the communal practices of meaning-making that "repair our relationships with the land and each other" (79). In this aspect, Goeman's offering to our readings is unlike the others. Her address is explicitly to indigenous communities. And her thread in this screw opens onto another sort of thread—the softer, creative sort that weaves a narrative and makes meaning.

Our Settler-Slaver Lives

My favorite line from Baldwin's essay has always been: "people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them." We all carry various kinds of pasts and inheritances, scaled across our bodies, families, communities, institutions, and so on. The tendency to hone specific histories that matter in specific manners is deeply rooted, and often valuable. It is also, especially for we who are descendants of settler-slavers, often a practice of endless deferral and a shield against the indictments at hand.

Because we who identify as "white" in any meaningful manner in the 21st century are standing fully indicted. Amitav Ghosh lays out the unvarnished violence of both Dutch and British greed almost nakedly. I continue to believe the task is to sort through the affective and intellectual acrobatics that dodge such damning portraits. The task, more positively, continues to be how to cathect with these portraits, these histories, this ontological screw. And then to work through them in our collective effort to cultivate ways of living otherwise.

There is no way out: like the villagers of Baldwin's Swiss chalet who are free to roam, we are going to the cabin tomorrow (in an electric car, alas). And you will read this either *en route* to or as I read it to you at another sort of cabin in Veenhuizen, NL. I wish us all courage and fortitude in our collective meaning-making.