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On Geo Maher's *Anticolonial Eruptions*

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Geo Maher's *Anticolonial Eruptions* is a force to be reckoned with. As a reading experience, it's a bloody delight, even as – and maybe because – Maher guides us down in to the depths of the volcanoes stoking the explosive fires of rebellion. We also get to follow the moles below and high above ground as they wait for their moment to emerge, shock, and rebel. These moles are blind in one sense, while in another sense they can tell time, or more accurately they create time in the form of political time; marking the potential beginning of a new era. This political time is created in the moment of the emergence of these moles from the shadows in order to ambush and take advantage of the "hubris" of colonizers who are comfortable in their own blindness, in not seeing what they cannot grapple with, that which is right before their eyes; colonization and all it has wrought upon the colonized. A new political moment is then birthed, time starts anew, and this is a result of the colonizer's limitations in grasping the depths and heights of their oppression of the colonized. To Maher, oppression produces in the oppressors what he consistently refers to as their blindspots. Where the colonizers are blind, the colonized, the oppressed, the enslaved, those nonbeings in the colonizer's worldview, attain super-vision, or second sight, drawing on W.E.B. Du Bois's concept. Second sight is the virtue drawn from, produced by, the tragedy of colonialism and enslavement. The colonial blindspot is the Achilles heel of the colonizers, the opening for attack, ambush, and shock – the ontological condition which to Maher makes rebellion not just possible, but inevitable, not expected, but a shock, not a tap on the shoulder, but a bloody ambush in the middle of the night, from the Haitian Revolution of the late 18th century to the Ferguson rebellion and Minneapolis uprising of the 21st century. In many respects, *Anticolonial Eruptions* enacts in writing what it narrates and theorizes, which is the reversals of power, of categories, and of possibilities to be revealed to the reader.

For example, Maher focuses on the colonizer's attribution of "cunning" to the oppressed as an Orientalist form of demonology and fear-mongering. He then turns the tables on this stereotyped cunning to consider, laud, and

center the actual cunning of the decolonized, not in a stereotypical way but rather regarding the resistant and creative agency and practices of the colonized – as he states “the oppressed, on the other hand, have resorted to cunning as a specific kind of knowledge developed *of* and *through* their subjection.”¹ The ontological non-being of the oppressed in the worldview of the oppressor thus unintentionally nourishes an epistemological awakening and development for the colonized that becomes an asset and advantage. This rhetorical strategy of flipping the script speaks to a key political strategy or condition, which is that of taking that which is deemed a marker, practice, or outcome of oppression and turning it, or revealing it to be, the source of inevitable resistance, of eruption. The pressure of the oppressive, colonial systems produces the “plastic explosive” beneath the palaces and parliaments of imperial rule. (19) It is not a matter of if, to Maher, but when, as he implores his readers to shift or expand our own vision on this matter: “What if we decenter the white anxieties that animate the walling campaigns of the present, to instead recenter the cunning of resistance from the ontological to the literal ground? To do so means lauding the sappers, diggers and moles of our world...the soot covered ‘black army of vengeance slowly germinating in the furrows,’” (93) as he draws upon Émile Zola’s compelling imagery. Maher’s imagery throughout the book is intensely, and I sense intentionally, visual and filmic so as to compel the seeing and centering of that which he views as willfully unseen and decentered. In so doing, in this re-centering, Maher aims for the book to “contribute to a broader project of building – rather than burning – bridges between movements struggling today against settler colonialism and anti-Black racism...this project builds an alternative canon...” (22) This canon could include the work of the likes of Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg writer, artist and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who dedicates one of her poems, “caribou ghosts & untold stories,” to “the intelligence and commitment of Black Lives Matter Toronto for halting the Pride parade in 2016” to protest anti-Black racism and general mistreatment of Black LGBT people by the Pride Parade organization, particularly regarding its collaboration with the police. Simpson concludes “Caribou Ghosts & Untold Stories” with these words:

catharsis is still elusive
 so we'll save that
 for another day
 meet me at the underpass
 rebellion is
 on her way²

This is solidarity from an Indigenous writer and activist to Black queer radicals on Turtle Island. It is a form of bridge building towards rebellion which occurs under the bridge, at the “underpass,” in the colonial blindspot. Here I sense is an example of what Maher’s *Anticolonial Eruptions* seeks to center; more ammo for the canon/cannon.

While Maher focuses much of his argument on the presence and impact of the blindspots of the colonizers, the audience or aim for this argument is to challenge, shake loose and refuse the blindspots on the political left. He is particularly concerned with those who may disavow eruptions as mere ephemera, what are sometimes dismissively and myopically labelled symbolic politics, as he writes: "In a moment in which some sectors of the Left dismiss militant struggles against racist policing and denigrate the hard-won (and astonishing) victories of the past five years as neoliberal window-dressing, it is clear that the blindspot remains a fatal barrier to revolutionary change today." (30) Here Maher calls out the blindness of some on the left to the generative importance and possibilities produced by the blindspots of the colonizer. This caution is needed as a corrective to these sort of dismissals and disavowals on the left, to be sure, but this intervention also raises the question about the claim of the inevitability of resistance posed in the book. As he states, Maher is seeking to make the left see what they/we refuse to see, and if not – if this blindspot is not overcome – revolution is going to be stalled, faced with "a fatal barrier" as he puts it, never to get off of, or out of, the ground. This is a claim worth posing in juxtaposition with the colonial blindspot that he claims fosters and assures rebellion, although not necessarily the success of the rebellion. A central plank of Maher's argument is that what the colonizers cannot see they cannot be prepared for, cannot forestall, and this in fact makes way for rebellion (in this sense, he does not want the colonizers to see it, better they stay blind to both produce and be more vulnerable to the ambush), but for the left the presumption here is the opposite: comradeship is critical to revolution, and thus the blindness of the left to the "colonial blindspot" and its possibilities leaves rebellion itself in the dark, a lost opportunity for bridge building, coalitions, and abolitionist world making.

To this end of refusing this blindness, Maher urges us on the left to pay attention to the psychic register, specifically the psychic vulnerabilities of the enemies rather than getting politically paralyzed by the anxieties and fears of ourselves and our allies. As he states: "But from drones to walls, the colonial hubris of total visibility and impenetrability is on full display today. When it comes to such questions, however, the anxieties of our enemies on the right are often more insightful than the dystopian fears of allies on the left." (91). A hearty bravo to this sentiment for the fact that it keeps us in touch in productive ways with the psychic register, which itself is too quickly disavowed at times in left discourse as seemingly not tangible, material. Thus, Maher directs us to a productive locale of insights and opportunities for struggle and resistance, and for opening up world-building imaginaries. That said, this does raise a question: Whose blindspots are productive of rebellion and whose undermine it? The colonizers' blindspots produce resistance, making it inevitable, but for certain parts of the left their/our blindspots make it less inevitable, and in fact "a fatal barrier" to rebellion. Is there a tension in these positions, and if so which has more weight, with what political and

theoretical implications? The source of this question may well be a product of my own "dystopian fears" and left anxieties, which I admit I do carry around in great abundance; more the size of checked baggage than anything that could fit in the overhead bin. Still, the core of the question is a product of possibly some traps or limitations baked into the book's over-riding metaphor of "blindness" to speak to the ontological and thus epistemological condition of the oppressor, and the related political claim about the inevitability of rebellion by the oppressed as a consequence of this blindness of the colonizer. A couple questions arise here: Does the too close linking of ontological condition to epistemological disadvantage and advantage over-determine the prospect of and for anti-colonial political struggle? Does the fraught, indeterminate dynamics of politics itself get elided so as to naturalize rebellion as an inherent characteristic of the move from ontological non-being to being by the oppressed?

Maher seeks to get in front of this very question. Early in the book he assures us that his argument is not simply the flip-side of Ta-Nehisi Coates' take on a white supremacy as being a seemingly naturalized, *just is* hard reality, 'like the weather.' To readers who might be inclined to see *Anticolonial Eruptions* as premised on a counter-veiling geothermal pattern, baked into the earth, where resistances, revolutions, riots are the volcanoes ready to erupt at any time, Maher sets out that this is not his view and premise. I do wonder, however, if the component parts of the argument point us in that direction even unintentionally, since the heart of Maher's argument is implicitly and explicitly grounded in the nature of the condition of oppression, the terms of non-being in the eyes of the oppressor, and its seemingly inevitable relationship to acts of resistance. In this regard, rebellion is ontological at its core, or so it seems, as Maher writes in the chapter on the cunning of decolonization: "Decolonial cunning doesn't respond to invisibility with a demand to be more visible but instead takes advantage of the strategic virtues of *nonrecognition* and *invisibility* to mount an unexpected ontological ambush." (24) The ontological ambush from the position of nonbeing to being – one of the shocks experienced by the colonizer/enslaver, usually when it is too late – is posited here as at the same time a political ambush from being an invisible non-agent to the visible political actor engaged in the fraught and often violent struggle against oppression and for freedom. It is the ontological position of nonbeing that is the fertile soil for the colonized to cultivate their political critique and nurture and develop their epistemological insights on the power dynamics at work and their capacities to do something about them. As Maher puts it, "...the curse of condemnation to nonbeing might also contain a paradoxical cunning gift." (86) Now, what are the political legs of this gift? To put another way, is this "cunning gift" a gift that keeps on giving, or by its very nature is it tied tightly to the moment of eruption, of shock, of the ambush, but not beyond that? As posed in the book it seems more of a flame to the tinderbox, which still needs more air to breathe and sustain its effort in order not just to burn down the palaces of colonialism,

racism, patriarchy, and capitalism, but to build a new world on its wreckage. Here, then, I am curious about the relationship between and possible collapsing of the ontological and the political, and the entailments of the meaning and practice of politics it may imply. There are many references in the book, assurances about, the colonizers' blindspot as a constitutive fact that will produce these inevitable eruptions. But what are the limits of this metaphor of vision and blindness? Does the ontological ambush clear the ground for but not thereby engage in the political world-building – those fraught and indeterminate efforts to engage directly with and overcome barriers on the left, to build and maintain bridges of coalition? I pose these questions as ways to think about how the naturalizing metaphors of the body, of visibility especially here, may run up against their own limitations as to thinking through the politics of abolition and decolonization prior, during, and after these moments of eruption.

In short, what might be the blindspots of the metaphor of colonial blindspots, not merely as an analytical question but as a political one? For example, were the slave-masters, colonizers, and their legislative supporters so blind when they were passing and enforcing Fugitive Slave Laws, organizing frontier posses to attack and lynch Black and Indigenous peoples, engage in pogroms against Latinx and Asian communities, as well as the many other forms of surveillance and legal and extra-legal violence? This blindness to which Maher refers is a willful blindness to be sure, but by that very fact of being willful it is also strategic form of colonial seeing and unseeing, be it intentional or not. It is a productive schizophrenia to build upon Maher's important and necessary framing along the psychic register. But just as the zone of ontological nonbeing produces its own cunning gift of political acumen, epistemological insights and capacities to resist, the willful form of blindness of the master is also a product of and reproduces a starkly visual and fearful imaginary that enslavers had of the enslaved, the colonizers of the colonial other. I posit this due to its implications for resistance itself, for ambushes and their success or failure, given that Maher states, "From the perspective of those cataracted and willfully opaque regions of self-imposed colonial blindness, this ambush appears above all a shock, and one that varies in direct proportion to the dehumanization of those involved." (19) But is it a shock, or always one, or more precisely, what sort of shock is it? If one is attributing cunning to the colonized as Maher no doubt rightly claims the colonizers did and do attribute – along with powerful projections on to the colonized regarding vengeance and violence, especially sexualized violence – is the ambush so shocking or does it confirm what is persistently feared? I am pointing here to the schizophrenia of the colonizers, the un-seeing that is also at the same time a terrified and very stark vision of retaliation – what Maher refers to as the way that "Black and colonized people are simultaneously overseen and underseen, recognized without any semblance of recognition, invisible and *hypervisible* at the same time." (28) And thus when the eruptions and ambushes do occur, the colonizer's projections on to the colonized and

the enslaved become proof of this cunning which fuels the even more brutal counter-revolutionary violence and oppression. This raises the question of what is lost, or not seen, by asserting that the obliviousness of the oppressor is "endemic to the institutional twins of colonialism and chattel slavery." (28) For example, pair this idea of endemic obliviousness with this claim: "During the Civil War, white southerners were so unnerved by this subterranean intelligence apparatus that some spoke French in the presence of their slaves." (54) Maybe then we need to factor in another of the five senses: Is the oppressor maybe willfully blind while at the same time not deaf, not seeing what it does not want to see, but also hearing footsteps, even if those footsteps are often the psychic product of the "anxieties of our enemies"? This speaks to a beautiful tension in the book, and I mean that in sense of the opening up of possibilities. This tension is a product of the colonizer's "schizophrenia" of seeing and not seeing, or hyper-seeing, hearing and not hearing, or imagining, their relationship to the colonized as a central facet that the colonized need to come to grasp, assess, leverage, and calculate carefully as it concerns the forms of resistance on offer, from foot-dragging to throat-cutting. When Maher works through these tensions, and their productive possibilities, as he does so well, *Anticolonial Eruptions* draws out and compels us to live and grapple with these uncertainties, and their attendant possibilities. It also raises questions for me when Maher writes, "Even the most militant of labor strikes are in some sense expected...When the colonized subject springs forth from the zone of nonbeing, by contrast, it is not as a known adversary on a well-staked-out field of battle." (84) This may well be true in many of the examples Maher discusses. However, to take those such as Ferguson, Baltimore and Minneapolis in the uprising against policing and police violence in the 21st century, does this count as the "not as a known adversary" Maher refers to, or has this now become a "well-staked-out field of battle"? State authorities now expect just such eruptions when the murders by cops are made public, or in response to court decisions (often acquittals) about these murders. Cops fill the streets in preparation for eruption, and more often than not provoke these very eruptions to justify their violent reactionary violence and arrests. My point here connects to a concern regarding the idea of the inevitability of rebellion, and even at times the success of it, that is posited as the consequence of the endemic nature of colonial obliviousness and blindness.

As Maher writes, "This cunning originates in what I call the 'colonial blindspot' among the powerful, whereby the very same dehumanization used to justify racial-colonial domination blinds those at the top to the inevitability of resistance from below." (18) This language and claim about inevitability, however, may fall into a circular trap in the sense that one cannot by definition see this resistance from below until it emerges, and therefore cannot disprove inevitability. Every resistance that we see is inevitable, what you are blind to you cannot deny, and once you are forced to see it what you see was an inevitable product of "an arsenal of the invisible." (19) But then this sort of claim, which as I note I am not sure is even disprovable, seems to bake in some

assumptions about the impact of eruptions that surrender politics to ontology, and contingency to inevitability, and thus leaves us – us being those on the left say – to our own shock when it does not pan out as predicted or expected, or maybe we start to see what we want to see.

For example, as it concerns the eruption after George Floyd's murder, Maher writes, "Minneapolis has set off a chain reaction of material and symbolic victories with no sign of backlash in sight," (68-9) and "In short, the symbolic trappings of white power are in full retreat, driven by a feedback loop of militant rebellion and public opinion." (69) Well, speaking of blindspots, has Maher's own framework blinded him a little to this very backlash, which is not to say there have not been successes, of course, and with work, will continue to be achieved, but how can one say there are no signs of backlashes or that symbolic trappings of white power are in "full retreat" given the rise of even more pro-cop and white system loyal vigilante mobilization and actions (such as the murders by Kyle Rittenhouse of Black Lives Matters' protestors, for which he was acquitted) and signifiers (proliferation of blue line flags, and pro-cop signifiers across the socio-cultural and political spectrum etc.)? There has been a retreat, for sure, then also push back, a struggle, a political struggle the ends of which are not inevitable. In terms of backlashes or the status of white power and the power of the police we should have the empirical debate about the impact of rebellions, but it seems the wider narrative here does not need to lean on claims about inevitability to make the point about rebellion, about eruptions. Of course there will be and has been backlash, but that is the nature of the politics at hand; the rebellion that erupts in Minneapolis, as one of many eruptions, is still oozing its lava, but at the same time there is a fight at hand, and the success here is not that the other side, white power/the cops, are in full retreat but that the fight is openly engaged over say Defund the Police, and there is no inevitability to the outcome.

Maher is aware of how this argument can be read as an inevitable and teleological one, and makes clear that this is not what he is claiming, but at the same time: "Abandoning teleology does not inevitably mire us in fretful undecidability..." (98) Okay, we don't necessarily want fretful undecidability – although don't we all fret about things that are undecidable, the undetermined, all of which are inherent to politics? I return again to the psychic register that, for this reader, was the one I kept rethreading in the narrative so as to not settle on certainty and inevitability as an empowering modality for resistance, but to see the radical potentiality in the uncertainties and the idea that nothing is inevitable, but that the future is in our hands.

I want to end my effort to grapple with this vital book with one of its (many!) compelling quotations. This one is on the notion of the mole as a political and ontological being, and more: "Today, scientists tell us that, far from being blind, moles have the peculiar ability to see time..." He then connects the zoological insight to a political one by referring to Jean-Jacques

Dessalines, a leader of the Haitian Revolution, as a type of political *mole* who had the “finger on the pulse of the people and keenly aware that the ground of the future is prepared in the present.” (103) This focus on time is not the sort you could set your watch to. It is not pre-determined, but rather is political time that seeks to mark and create the divide between the past and the present politically; to a new era, cultivated, created, mapped out, rerouted, and seeking to shape the future on the premise that it is open. The image Maher offers here speaks to how from all sides, oppressor and oppressed, fitful ally and anxious enemy, there is a consistent struggle and tension between what one wants to sees and does not want see, as a vision not only about our mediated relationship to the world but also as it concerns vision of a better world, an imaginary of a world that is more just and liberated and communally caring than the one we have today. Maher provides us the sources, conceptual framework, and a fantastic narrative, analysis and much-needed inspiration and conceptual teeth and spine (to return to the body) in these often dark times to help us understand – and well, see – that out of the darkness emerges the forces of eruption as sources of world-building possibilities. It is up to us then to prepare for the shock and be part of the movement to keep feeding this fire the air it needs and do the work required to build and maintain coalitional bridges. *Anticolonial Eruptions* does this work.

¹ Geo Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions: and the Cunning of Resistance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 11. Hereafter parenthetically referenced in the text with page numbers.

² Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, “Caribou Ghosts & Untold Stories,” Track 4 on *F(l)ight*, RPM Records, 2016.