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After the Eruption

A Reply to My Interlocutors

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Good interlocutors are a blessing, and needless to say, I'm feeling very blessed today. This is especially true for a project in which *vision* figures so centrally, since we often see most clearly through the parallax of another's eyes. Contributors to this conversation have cast distinct lines of sight onto *Anticolonial Eruptions* that have allowed me to see both otherwise and better, to recognize which elements of my original argument remain incomplete or unclear, to glimpse what was overlooked or taken for granted, and to realize other moments where I might have been wrong entirely. They have revealed how my book, despite diagnosing colonial hubris, might reproduce blindspots that are more or less hubristic in their own right.

This apparent irony is anything but. Any book, especially one this short, slices into and across history and theory ways that are inescapably partial, leaving a generative remainder to be dealt with. But more than this, I find nothing but encouragement in how my comrade-readers have taken up the lenses provided—the colonial blindspot, the second sight of the colonized, and the decolonial ambush—to excavate and cultivate a radical second sight from the depths of the colonial blindspot. Whether diagnosing the paradoxical unseeing of ocular-centrism, my own blindness toward the revolutionary nature of care as community resistance, or the ways that tropes of inevitability might refract my political judgment, each of the critiques printed above offers, in Kevin Bruyneel's words, "more ammo for the canon/cannon" (88).

* * *

To begin with, some readers here and elsewhere have questioned the apparent ocular-centrism of my approach, with its heavy reliance on the metaphorical opposition between blindness and second sight. Althea Sircar finds my emphasis on vision "unsettling," and rightly notes how it risks reproducing the "colonial language of capacity" (83). Further, she raises important questions about what this primacy of vision might *conceal*, what

ironic blindness might be embedded in an emphasis on literal ocularity that risks eliding the importance of the body on the one hand, and “other forms of embodied insight” that we might roughly describe as spiritual on the other (84). These alternative visions, she rightly insists, might even run perpendicular to, contradict, or even be fully indifferent to sight in its limited sense: “those who will make the revolution a reality do not even need the lens,” Sircar writes, since “their acuity is not a standard one” (85).

These points are crucial, raising some intractable questions while also giving me an opportunity to clarify. First, in his analysis of the “ubiquity of visual metaphors” in *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay identifies what he describes as an “ocular permeation of language” that might render such metaphors—built-in as they are to our very understanding of the world—borderline inescapable.¹ But Jay also pushes back on ocularphobic narratives which, he notes, have also been a permanent feature of political and religious hierarchies, and points us toward a more fundamental question that Sircar hints at: that the question is less about either celebrating or denigrating sight, but instead about how, under *our* particular scopic regime, vision is both artificially separated from *and* elevated to a privileged status over other senses and modes of knowing.

Second, and here I want to be clear: the essential question for *Anticolonial Eruptions* isn’t one of sight *per se*, but of *non-sight*, and the difference between the two isn’t semantic. As I argue in *Decolonizing Dialectics*—and I will return to this basic distinction throughout these comments—decolonial theory poses the fundamental question of boundaries of the system and what lay beyond it—the internal/external divide marking in this case visibility/invisibility, above/underground—and more importantly the mobility of that boundary.² What that entails concretely in this case, operating strategically from within a particular scopic regime, is (a) diagnosing colonial non-sight, (b) excavating alternative forms of decolonial second sight that are (c) powerfully bound up with other senses and sensibilities, and in this case skills, capacities, and knowledges, and finally (d) leveraging this gap to explosively displace the boundary and expand this alternative vision beyond the strict limits of western ocular-centrism.

In other words, this is less a question of ocular-centrism than of the very sort of relationality that Sircar rightly hopes to preserve and center, even if I may have grouped these different modalities, skills, capacities, and advantages, in an admittedly clumsy way, under the heading of decolonial second sight. And more importantly, the goal is not to simply demand inclusion within the existing scopic regime—embracing a politics of visibility and representation—but to seismically destabilize and displace the underlying structures determining those boundaries and exclusions.

* * *

A second mode of unseeing to which readers have suggested that *Anticolonial Eruptions* might fall prey involves what spheres of life my approach could tacitly obscure. Begüm Adalet asks what work metaphor in general—and the metaphor of nonbeing in particular—does in the book, particularly in light of Tuck and Yang’s critical insistence that “decolonization is not a metaphor.”³ Two immediate clarifications are needed here, however.

The first is that, if by metaphor we mean a non-literal figure of speech, then we need to be careful not to suggest that colonial nonbeing and racial invisibility are anything less than very real phenomena that are lived and felt as such. Even on the other side of the equation, where the colonial blindspot clearly functions as a metaphor, it nevertheless describes situations in which slavemasters and colonizers quite literally use their eyes without actually seeing what lay before them. Second, deploying metaphor to unify those subject to colonialism’s differential effects is qualitatively different from Tuck and Yang’s concern with euphemizing and watering down colonialism and decolonization to privilege symbolic reforms over material transformations.

Instead, I see the metaphor of nonbeing as a sort of bridge spanning and connecting the experiences of different communities—colonized and formerly colonized, enslaved and formerly enslaved—across different geographical and historical contexts. By loosening our conceptual frame just enough to accommodate different lived experiences and thereby gather material phenomena, this kind of bridge metaphor helps draw those conditions into a productive parallax and, most importantly, to unite those struggling against them. Like the philosophical concept of the empty signifier but without the pretense of emptiness, such metaphors provide points of encounter between non-identical but related *material* phenomena like colonialism, neo-colonialism, and internal colonialism, to describe contemporary primitive accumulation, gentrification, and displacement; to compare slavery to successor institutions like mass incarceration (e.g. “the new Jim Crow”); in short, to connect real (literal) phenomena that might differ but share key structural characteristics and implications. And crucially, where liberal metaphors of decolonization—decolonizing curricula, diets, and language, anything but *land*—serve to *de*-mobilize, the metaphorical unification of concrete struggles against a still-colonial world can be a material force that mobilizes and motivates action.

Finally, Adalet wonders about what specific forms of blindness the metaphor of nonbeing might tacitly contribute to, and her question points in two different directions. First, she flags my possible “erasure of the particular labor of those toiling in kitchens, bedrooms, plantations, mines, and many other sites of exploitation, dispossession, and oppression” (80) in ways that speak broadly to labor. But her question also opens toward Anna Terwiel’s concern that my emphasis on the eruptive moment “deemphasizes and

obscures” more subtle forms gendered labor and care in/as resistance, leading me to “inscribe more covert resistance practices in a trajectory that culminates in an overt, direct, and often violent confrontation” (95-96). Pushing back on my reference to Angela Davis’s 1971 essay “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” Terwiel instead turns to Davis’s more recent attentiveness to the slow over the spectacular, healing over violent confrontation.

On the one hand, I think this is true and the point is well-taken. There’s a tradeoff built into vindicating the eruptive, especially in so short a book, as many important elements recede into the background, clouded out under a soot-darkened sky. The risk of privileging the spark at the expense of the kindling extends as well to the need for community- and movement-building in those moments of political downturn that inevitably follow the eruption (although I gestured toward these questions in my discussion of underground mole work as preparing the soil of the future).⁴ This tradeoff coincides, moreover, with the more open tension of wanting to uphold women’s participation in direct forms of resistance without concealing the many less direct forms that were the logical result of their double-invisibilization. The last thing I would want is to reproduce to the historical erasure of women’s contributions to eruptive moments of direct combat *or* to artificially distinguish the eruption from the community that sustains it.

Here I should say that I’m not convinced that Davis’s essay “privileges violent acts” either (96), or at least I’ve never taken that to be her overarching concern. Instead, as I argued in *Decolonizing Dialectics*, I see Davis as radically *de*-centering the (dialectical) moment of violent confrontation and viewing the community as an (analectal) reservoir of prefigurative power without which no direct conflict with the enemy would be possible. In this sense, she also shows how community reproduction—work that is not reducible to but overdetermined by gender—provides a degree of exteriority and distance, a sort of unseen background, necessary for openly eruptive moments and sustains the longevity of struggles.⁵ Finally, and here we might disagree substantively, while not every underground war of position becomes an open war of maneuver, the eruptive moment nevertheless remains essential, community serves as a launching pad for the rebellions looming on the horizon, and collective care is not strictly an end-in-itself but instead points toward a world transformed in its entirety in which the collective can truly care and be cared for.

More broadly still, Adalet’s concern suggests that the metaphor of nonbeing—and the ontological register it invokes—might both erase the concretely laboring *being* while paradoxically undercutting potential solidarities. Here it’s worth emphasizing that the function of colonial-racial nonbeing is to enable super-exploitation by retroactively legitimizing the sorts of treatment that would be difficult to mete out to beings in the fullest sense of the word. For those condemned to nonbeing, no sympathy is required

nor solidarity accorded—all of these are reserved for humanity—much less minimum wage, labor rights, guarantees of physical safety, or personal freedoms. In other words, nonbeing *does* speak to precisely those concrete laboring activities that Adalet would hope to underline, but which are doubly-invisibilized not on accident but by design. Despite this, however, her concern would hold—and I would share it—if it entailed a re-ontologization of nonbeing. This, in fact, is the core of my concern with Afropessimism. But to speak of nonbeing in a properly Fanonian register is to be more concerned with the ontological *flaw* than ontology proper, to understand as Cedric Robinson insisted that kidnapped Africans were never reduced to pure negativity, and to insist as Lewis Gordon does that anti-Blackness is an always incomplete project, not an inescapable destiny. All of which means binding negative, internal (dialectical) ruptures within the prevailing system to those radically unexplored positivities, outside, below, and beyond (analectical) the bounds of that system.

Finally, Adalet wonders whether the distinction I mark between labor struggles and struggles against colonial-racial invisibility might “reproduce the blinkered vision of the oppressor” in a way that divides struggles and undercuts solidarity (81), citing my insistence that, unlike struggles anchored in ontological nonbeing, “even the most militant of labor strikes are in some sense expected.” What’s so interesting is that I wrote this passage to emphasize the opposite, immediately adding that class was “historically entwined with premodern notions of race that blend ideas of nobility, birth, blood, and stock, where the poor figure as bestial and shock at their resistance is all the more pronounced,” and emphasizing the animalistic figuration of the wildcat strike as a bridge between the two.⁶ Rather than mark a hard and fast—and thus ahistorical—distinction between race and class, my goal was to see nonbeing as an open door between (internal) economic exploitation and the realm of nonbeing (exteriority), the threshold marked by the concrete reality of *who* was invisible at what moment.

A passage to which I often return to from Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* is instructive in this sense. Few cared, Bolaño writes, about the two million African slaves who died on the Middle Passage, or the thousands massacred by the forces of order in the aftermath of the Paris Commune. Why? Because those “killed in the Commune weren’t part of society, the dark-skinned people who died on the ship weren’t part of society.”⁷ The lives and deaths of African slaves and the Parisian communards, Bolaño insists, simply weren’t “legible.” The point here is not that these two groups were identical, nor that they were subject to precisely the same conditions. It’s that, here returning to what I have said about metaphor, they are both ascertainable according to a shared theoretical frame—in this case, legibility, itself bound to questions of social nonbeing, invisibility, and exteriority. But the purchase of this metaphor, its traction and leverage in a specific case, depends on historical content and context, on the ways this illegibility was constituted in practice.

Projecting ontological differences backward across the entire sweep of history and reifying distinctions that would have been incomprehensible to those who experienced them might be useful for building academic fiefdoms, but it isn't revolutionary politics. The point, of course, is to uphold solidarity rather than foreclose on it.

* * *

Kevin Bruyneel and Henry Aoki, each in their own way, raise challenging questions about the degree to which *Anticolonial Eruptions* misreads historical shifts and the political possibility of the present by reproducing a sense, even if only a sense, of inevitability and unfounded optimism. I'll admit that when this concern was first posed, I was perplexed. After all, much of the book's framing pushes back against precisely the sort of baked-in historical progress with which Hegel's name is most synonymous. By framing my own notion of decolonial cunning against Hegel's—not "the inevitable forward march of history" but "the constant tectonic grinding of subterranean freedom struggles"—I thought I had vaccinated the project against such errors.⁸ But I want to be as clear as I can, and so I'm happy to clarify from a different vantage.

Bruyneel is straightforwardly skeptical about the inevitability of resistance, which he suspects is the product of too tight a linkage between "ontological condition" and "epistemological disadvantage," collapsing politics into ontology (90). In other words, does the condemnation to nonbeing lead those thusly condemned always and directly to the gates of revolt in a way that "naturalizes rebellion"? Well, and at the risk of sounding exasperatingly dialectical, the answer is yes and no, but what I mean by this is straightforward: resistance *is* inevitable, or as Terwiel puts it, "as long as racial and colonial domination exist, so will anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles" (95). What is *not* guaranteed is victory, much less victory writ large as the forward movement of history, a fact not lost on many enslaved and colonized people, which is why both optimism *and* pessimism rest on the same faulty foundations. Instead, I hew much more closely to C.L.R. James' tragic vision that I cite in the book's closing pages: "sad though it may be... humanity progresses" not through moral high-mindedness but the sheer contingency of struggle between a thousand clashing wills and interests.⁹ This isn't a new ontology, but the very essence of politics.

But while rebellion is inevitable, it's also notoriously hard to predict exactly when and where it will explode. In the book, I engage with James C. Scott's well-known formulation of the hidden transcript as a zone of covert resistance, while moving beyond Scott by shifting from domination in general to racial-colonial domination in particular. More recent conversations about the book, however, have let me to push back explicitly on Scott's dismissal of hydraulic metaphors, his insistence that the hidden transcript functions as a safety valve more often than it channels and emboldens resistance, and his

consequent privileging of micro-resistance over structural transformation.¹⁰ In reality, hydraulic metaphors have a great deal to teach us about the explosivity of subterranean resistance, because pressure does indeed have a telos. Just as no one fracks innocently, as a recent spate of unnatural seismic activity across Appalachia makes clear, no one dehumanizes without increasing subterranean pressure, either. As Nipsey Hussle once put it, in a lyric I cite in the book: “It’s pressure built up and it’s proolly gon’ blow,” even if we know not when, where, or precisely how (96).

Toward mapping this rumbling terrain, Bruyneel observes a variety of blindspots impacting even our own ranks, and rightly asks: “Whose blindspots are productive of rebellion and whose undermine it? The colonizers’ blindspots produce resistance... but for certain parts of the left their/our blindspots make it less inevitable” (89). But while Bruyneel sees this as a tension “baked into” the book’s reliance on the visual metaphor and the presumption that one’s ontological condition automatically generates second sight, my read is a little more obvious. From old debates on base and superstructure to the relationship of class-in-itself to class-for-itself, to interventions by W.E.B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and C.L.R. James that teach us how white supremacy and coloniality complicate such simplistic equations, we know that between force and ideology the relationship is complex and dynamic, the simultaneous product of structure and will. We want to *see* better than our enemies, but this isn’t guaranteed either.

But while conceding what he terms a “productive schizophrenia” among the powerful (91), a way of seeing and not seeing at the same time, Bruyneel nevertheless presses me a bit by insisting that, in some sense, Ferguson, Baltimore, and Minneapolis *were* expected. And more than expected: crowd control barriers were erected, police schedules were shifted and overtime approved, and the press corps deployed with bated breath to report on the anticipated chaos. This evident truth gives me an opportunity to sharpen my point by clarifying that the shock provoked by an eruptive moment is a moving target determined by the historical terrain, varying in relation to expectations. Just as slaveowners feared resistance while denying its very possibility, the shock that the Minneapolis Rebellions provoked had everything to do with their severity, duration, and above all their unexpectedly viral spread across the country and the globe.

It is precisely straddling these shifting historical grounds that Henry Aoki similarly wonders whether I have in fact blinded myself to the cunning of our enemies, violating in the process Amílcar Cabral’s cardinal rule: to claim no easy victories. In my (heartily admitted) zeal to unearth the revolutionary potential of unified struggles across vast stretches of time and space, Aoki suggests that I might be guilty of a hubris of my own. By assuming the colonial blindspot remains constant across the centuries, I have failed to recognize that “our enemy is cunning” as well, and that this cunning

has a name: *neo-colonialism* (99). We are not, Aoki insists, fighting literal slaveowners, and the fundamental gesture of neo-colonial cunning is to replace overt colonial rule with the indirect rule of national elites, a strategy reproduced in the cheap representation politics so predominant today (101). Neo-colonial rule in the present, moreover, is upheld by the tactical refinement of the counterinsurgent apparatus, by iron fist and velvet glove alike: “We may be inherently more cunning than the Klan,” Aoki writes, “but we are not inherently more cunning than the CIA, or the Ford Foundation, or any of our Universities” (100).

These are very real concerns, but they also point toward a worrying defeatism. To Aoki’s first point: we know perfectly well that the colonial blindspot remains. We see it in the palpable shock that greeted the rebellions and the resort to volcanic metaphors to make that shock digestible to a liberal audience. We see it in both the speed and the breadth of the protests’ spread, and the capaciousness of their expansive frame, which came to accommodate not only police violence but global white supremacy, the legacy of the Confederacy, and colonialism as well. Narrowly, we see it in the dramatic shifts both on the fickle terrain of public opinion but more importantly in the rhetorical—and in some cases, concrete—embrace of radical demands by elected leaders, shifts that were *involuntary*. And more broadly, we see it in the precipitous collapse of the postracial myth that briefly prevailed during the Obama years. The underground, in short, remains potent.

This is in large part because neo-colonialism is *still colonial*, and the metaphor holds precisely because capitalism continues to benefit immensely from a category of nonbeing that allows certain communities to be super-exploited and, where this is no longer desirable, confined to ghettos or warehoused in prisons. Conversely, when Aoki suggests that neo-colonialism eliminates the “straightforward invisibility of the colonized,” I worry that he has misunderstood a fundamental piece of my argument since this invisibility was *never* literal, but instead marked by deep denial and a cognitive dissonance bordering on schizophrenia. Slaveowners knew their subjects were human and sought freedom too, but they needed desperately to deny both facts. Formal abolition and decolonization didn’t fundamentally change this. Taking visibility too literally leads Aoki to a strangely unidirectional view in which the arc of history bends toward visibility and the overwhelming power of our enemies. But we are neither “inherently” more or less cunning than they are, simply because *nothing* is inherent on the terrain of the strategic and tactical. Everything is a question of the accumulation and balance of forces, and yes, the cunning of their deployment.

Both Bruyneel and Aoki, in short, worry that I exaggerate the strength of our own ranks—overstating in particular the victories wrought by the 2020 Rebellions—while dangerously underestimating our enemies and their counterinsurgent efforts. Bruyneel asks, “has Maher’s own framework blinded him a little to this very backlash” (93) and, given the devastating

effectiveness of two years of open counterinsurgency, I might be inclined to agree in retrospect. The ballot initiative to dismantle the Minneapolis police was delayed for a year and then defeated; most defunding efforts have proven more symbolic than substantive; and despite this, a nationwide panic has emerged blaming defund for a recent spike in some violent crimes in some cities. But counterinsurgency is no surprise: it's an inevitable part of the terrain, not evidence of our own failures. There's more than a whiff of defeatism here, and if we should claim no easy victories, we shouldn't concede unnecessary defeats, either. By insisting that our victories weren't truly ours and that our power has been exaggerated, we run the risk of doing the counterinsurgents' work for them.

What to make of the fact that, despite the ballot measure being delayed for a full year, some 44% of Minneapolitans still voted to dismantle the police department? While Aoki would emphasize the 56% who voted no, we can't ignore how dramatically the Rebellions reshaped the terrain. What to make of the fact that Joe Biden among others speaks loudly and emphatically today of the need to *re-fund* the police, not because defunding is a pipe dream—in which case he would hardly need to say it—but because it was and remains a real threat to power. We need to keep our eyes trained on everything that has been accomplished *despite* this counterinsurgency, even if those accomplishments are immeasurable—consciousness, discourse, public opinion, and movement strength—and even if any our victories are always, as I put it in *A World Without Police*, simultaneously “a containment strategy whereby those in power seek desperately to maintain the status quo, and a concession to—and index of—the power of our movements in the streets.”¹¹

What comes next, after the eruption, as the cooling lava blankets and reconfigures the landscape? How does invisibility persist despite such explosively visible moments? How does subterranean pressure begin to build once again? In the same ways it always has: with soothing ideological bromides, foundation funding for nonprofits, and a doubling down on policing and incarceration that can only be read as a cognitive dissonance bordering on blindness—all in the name of reestablishing the disposability of certain communities, concealing the legitimacy of their demands, and breaking the movements that would uphold them. Crucially, the two pieces of Aoki's argument—his skepticism toward the persistence of the colonial blindspot and his emphasis on counterinsurgency in the present—here cut squarely against each other. For Aoki, the effectiveness of counterinsurgency forced the movement back underground, and in a certain sense this is true. But by minimizing structural transformation, future eruptions become all but inevitable.

Capping the pressure doesn't disperse it: it only continues to build.

* This conversation began as a roundtable at the 2022 meeting of the Western Political Science Association. My thanks to Althea Sircar for organizing the roundtable and to the other participants not included here for their generous commentaries. Some years ago, John Drabinski provided the original impetus for this book with a conference invitation, and I thank him once again today for seeing this conversation through to its published form.

- ¹ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 1-2.
- ² Geo Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). See also Enrique Dussel, *Twenty Theses on Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
- ³ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1-40.
- ⁴ Geo Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance* (Oakland: University of California, 2022), 99.
- ⁵ Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics*, 166-167.
- ⁶ Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions*, 84-85.
- ⁷ Roberto Bolaño, *2666*, trans. N. Wimmer (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2008 [2004]), 266-267.
- ⁸ Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions*, 16.
- ⁹ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 63; cited in Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions*, 103.
- ¹⁰ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990) 219-220. At a book event at Red Emma's in Baltimore, Christy Thornton suggested that Scott's posture—ironically, for a theorist of ubiquitous resistance—reflected a conservative reaction compatible with the conservative moment in which he was writing, a pessimism of the intellect where the will had long since left the building. Thornton has pointed me toward the useful critique of Scott's conservative tendencies offered by Matthew Gutmann, "Rituals of Resistance: A Critique of the Theory of Everyday Forms of Resistance," *Latin American Perspectives*, 2:2 (1993): 74-92.
- ¹¹ Geo Maher, *A World Without Police: How Strong Communities Make Cops Obsolete* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2021), 94.