



# Cunning Embodied: On Capability in Geo Maher's *Anticolonial Eruptions*

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# Cunning Embodied

## On Capability in Geo Maher's *Anticolonial Eruptions*

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Geo Maher's *Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance*, deftly draws on post- and de-colonial literatures and primary sources, vivifying in its turn many crucial examples of revolutionary uprising. *Anticolonial Eruptions* focuses on those modes of anticolonial action that tend to be cast by the colonizers as violent eruptions. Sometimes natural, sometimes human, these erupting phenomena appear to colonial powers as existential threats, at once unpredictable and destructive. Through his critical history of this discourse, Maher amplifies the radical potential within such eruptions. The resulting work is an account of rebellion, resistance, and revolution that is attuned to what sparks these fires for individuals as much as collectives. Maher's discussions of particular figures are particularly evocative, tracing how Orientalist notions of the "cunning" of the oppressed serve as justification for colonial oppression even as the colonized employ strategy, wit, and agency beyond what their oppressors imagine is possible.

Central in Maher's analysis is the language of "sight" and "blindness," which recurs amid metaphors about eyes and a notion of revolutionary seeing as a process of identifying possibilities in places overlooked or misapprehended by the colonizer. Maher draws on examples like Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, quoting Greg Grandin's argument that

[T]he story is fundamentally about blindness, an inability to see.' This blindness, moreover, 'exposes a larger falsehood, on which the whole ideological edifice of slavery rested....The West Africans used talents their masters said they didn't have (cunning, reason, and discipline) to give the life to the stereotypes of what they were said to be (dimwitted and faithful).<sup>1</sup>

In traversing the history of these resistant subjects, Maher examines numerous instances where the oppressed have used the occasion of the colonizers' "blind spots" as openings into which the colonized may wedge revolutionary activity, whether of a literally explosive variety or more subtly

undermining forms of rebellion. This language of blindness draws the reader along throughout the text, in ways that are unsettling. After all, ocular metaphors can both undermine and expose assumptions about which bodies possess requisite capabilities for, on the one hand, service to the colonizer's demands, or for the praxis of revolutionary cunning, on the other hand. The colonial power and its representatives, by claiming an authoritative stance, take a position that argues explicitly and implicitly for the colonizers' insight into the lives of the colonized, but ignores a possibility that this knowledge of the other may be something that the colonized possess.

Characterizing gaps in how the colonizers understand the colonized as forms of "blindness" underscores how imbricated this colonial language of capacity is to the shifting ways that colonizers understand the colonial subjects.<sup>2</sup> These subjects, as Maher shows us, are characterized by their oppressors as both cunning and senseless, uncannily crafty yet subhuman, strong but foolish. Far from these contradictions undermining the colonizer mindset, Maher helps us understand how these conflicting accounts are constitutive for forms of repression occasioned by revolutionary action. At the same time, Maher's expansive historical argument, which covers abundant examples of anticolonial cunning, highlights possibilities for revolutionary change below and beyond what the oppressor suspects. His attention to the language of ocularity also emphasizes another form of colonial racial hubris: its anxious relationship to the bodies of the colonized.

In his discussions of how "sight" functions as a metaphor within anticolonial resistance, Maher's emphasis remains on the ways that sight and blindness appear within the archive of anticolonial resistance in references to strategic practices of revolutionary action. The colonizers' anxiety about their own blindness and the cunning of the colonized recurs in the face of anticolonial resistance that exploits the ignorance of the oppressor through actions that, Maher argues, are at once figurative and literal. As he points out in his discussion of a case where "[i]n 1966, occupying US military forces built a base in the the Cũ Chi district of what was then called Saigon," the underground National Liberation Front developed a network of tunnels from which clandestine resistance could emerge, attacks which lend themselves easily to characterization in ocular terms.<sup>3</sup> As Maher puts it:

The tunnels, one National Liberation Front (NLF) officer later recalled, 'were like a thorn stabbing the enemy in the eye, that the US military was unable to extricate. Between the literal and figurative undergrounds, the relationship was direct: thanks to the tunnels, communist forces were able to infiltrate the US base so thoroughly that, at one point, 'all thirteen of the base's barbers were members of the Vietcong.' In the words of one brigadier general, US troops 'didn't realize that they had bicouac'd on a volcano.'<sup>4</sup>

In this example, both the NLF officer's use of the eye analogy and the brigadier general's comparison of the Vietcong tunnels to a destructive natural phenomenon connect the actions of revolutionaries to practical, material phenomena: the guerrillas can destroy the occupiers' sight as one destroys an eye and the Vietcong resistance can be as destructive as an explosion from the planet's molten core.

Maher's emphasis on the materiality of resistance gives the reader much richness, yet at times the book's exploration of the literal side of the language of ocularity elides other elements of embodied revolutionary knowledge and praxis. After all, ocular metaphors can accrete in ways that privilege the literal capability of sightedness and the possession of rational or practical knowledge over other forms of embodied insight. While I do not mean to suggest that Maher's work enacts this privileging, there is an underexplored element in his text. To be exact: within the rich battery of examples Maher analyzes, there emerge several instances of the notion of "sight" as a spiritual capacity.

Maher addresses one important instance of the notion of a spiritually resonant "second sight" in a turn to "the *atravesado* subjectivity cultivated in that particularly inhospitable terrain that Gloria Anzaldúa calls the borderlands, among those who cross—and are crossed by—borders both internal and external."<sup>5</sup> Central to Anzaldúa's account of the resistant subjectivity for those who inhabit *la frontera* is her generative notion of *la facultad*. Maher discussion of *la facultad* puts it as follows:

This skill, what Anzaldúa calls *la facultad*, builds an additional corporeal attunement to gendered violence into decolonial second sight as well. 'Those who are pounced on upon the most,' she writes, have it the strongest—the females, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.... Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone the radar. It's a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. This *facultad* can only be understood, Anzaldúa concludes, as 'a sixth sense that's lain dormant from long-ago times,' sharpening the senses, honing the radar, and shaping subjectivity in resistance.<sup>6</sup>

In the passage above, Maher astutely highlights the way that *la facultad* functions and how it facilitates anticolonial skills within the colonized subject. Yet Maher's discussion of *la facultad* as a skill that heightens embodied, practical capacities by "sharpening the senses, honing the radar, and shaping subjectivity in resistance," as he puts it, captures only part of the power of *la facultad*, casting its "second sight" as "a kind of survival tactic" rather than something that unites the mystical with the embodied in ways that empower the very bodies that the colonizer disdains.

Instead of understanding *la facultad* as a skill, other theorists who have taken up Anzaldúa's Nèpantla spirituality call for understanding "second

sight” in Anzaldúa’s account of *la facultad* as a capacity that denotes much more.<sup>7</sup> *La facultad* is not a facility to be gained but instead a way of being that accesses forms of knowledge and experience grounded in community and ancestral communion. This does not mean that there are not skills associated with *la facultad*. Pointing out this spiritually radical potential of *la facultad* should not be read as undermining Maher’s broader point that the colonized possess skills and abilities of which the colonizer cannot even dream. Rather, I am suggesting that being attentive to the mystical and spiritual inheritances of *la facultad* brings forward an important element of Maher’s argument, namely his ardent call for the emergence of revolutionary cunning that “lies shrouded in the invisibility of nonbeing, swathed in the folds of the colonizer’s own blindness,” an emergence of “the explosivity of the ontological ambush.”<sup>8</sup> This ontological effusion may manifest in the forms of strategic revolution and cunning skill that Maher so deftly presents to us, but it may also require the subjective experiences of *la facultad* that sustain the colonized in the face of their oppressors, and in ways their oppressors cannot fathom.

Indeed, it may be strategically wise for the colonized subject to keep these spiritual knowledges deep and obscure. For even as settlers buy bundles of sage from Urban Outfitters or Goop, the colonizer cannot access the revolutionary potential of the spiritual practices of the oppressed. *La facultad* cannot be replicated. It is rooted in lived and embodied experiences of struggle and insight. The colonized might be better served, too, by metaphors that recognize their ocularity is not the ablist, rationalist ocularity of the colonizer. Maher suggests that the revolutionary “future remains indistinct by necessity, as seen through the blurry lens of those in the present that will soon make it a reality.”<sup>9</sup> What I offer here is a slight amendment: those who will make the revolution a reality do not even need the lens, their acuity is not a standard one. On the contrary, their activism is, following Anzaldúa, a spiritual one.<sup>10</sup> It bubbles within, a mystical brew that is poison to the oppressors but lifegiving to the oppressed.

- <sup>1</sup> Maher, Geo. *Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 27.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Ben Whitburn and Rod Michalko's argument for decentering ocularity in the study of blindness: Ben Whitburn, and Rod Michalko, "Blindness/sightedness: Disability Studies and the Defiance of Di-Vision," *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020), 219-234. Also relevant here are Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Tobin Sieber's *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).
- <sup>3</sup> Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions*, 87
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-88
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 52
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53
- <sup>7</sup> For more on Anzaldúa's spirituality, see Jeanette Rodriguez, "Mestiza Spirituality: Community, Ritual, and Justice: Encountering Latino and Latina Catholic Theology," *Theological Studies* 65, no. 2 (2004): 317-339. A thoughtful engagement with the difficulties of reading Anzaldúa across secular and spiritual questions can be found in Rafael Vizcaino, "Secular Decolonial Woes," *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2021): 71-92. For a more practice-oriented reading of Anzaldúa, which de-emphasizes the mystical qualities of her theory, see Christopher D. Tirres, "Spiritual Realities and Spiritual Activism: Assessing Gloria Anzaldúa's Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro," *Diálogo* 21, no. 2 (2018): 51-64. Finally, two edited volumes on Anzaldúa's thought influenced my reading here: AnaLouise Keating and Gloria González-López, eds. *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldúa's Life and Work Transformed Our Own* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011) and AnaLouise Keating, ed., *EntreMundos/AmongWorlds: New Perspectives on Gloria E. Anzaldúa* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- <sup>8</sup> Maher, 104
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 104
- <sup>10</sup> An account of what this may enable can also be found in Irene Lara's "BRUJA POSITIONALITIES: Toward a Chicana/Latina Spiritual Activism," *Chicana/Latina Studies* 4, no. 2 (2005): 10-45.