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# Visions of Resistance: Violent Eruptions, Care, and the Everyday

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It is a pleasure to be part of this conversation about Geo Maher's most recent book, which theorizes resistance to racism and colonialism as necessary, right, and inevitable. As long as racial and colonial domination exist, so will anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles, Maher asserts, and these liberation struggles will take advantage of oppressors' hubris, which "blinds them to those who would oppose their rule."<sup>1</sup> The book develops a dialectical analysis that finds in oppression the seeds of its undoing: white supremacy and colonialism generate their own gravediggers, Maher argues, all the more so since these dehumanizing systems fundamentally misrecognize the resistive capacities of the human beings they oppress. The analysis simultaneously illuminates and celebrates anticolonial and antiracist resistance. In my response, I will offer some reflections on how Maher theorizes such resistance and what that perspective allows us to see, as well as what it deemphasizes and obscures.

Maher's book centers what it calls anticolonial *eruptions*, ranging from the Haitian Revolution to the uprisings in the summer of 2020. In so doing, Maher explicitly distances himself from Afro-pessimism, which fails to see how negation generates resistance and which refuses a politics of solidarity (20, 23), and from Left dystopianism more broadly, which underestimates the possibilities to resist even contemporary high-tech warfare (92). Maher also takes aim at deconstruction, suggesting that a preoccupation with undecidability is unhelpful "as we grapple with the urgent tasks and concrete alternatives thrown forth by the present" (98). More generally, the book critiques liberals and others who demand that resistance to racism and colonialism remain lawful and nonviolent and who condemn uprisings by the oppressed as immoral or criminal. In Minneapolis and elsewhere, setting fire is a "*natural* response to police violence" (3), Maher writes. "[Y]ou can't blame a volcano for erupting" (70).

One reason the book centers anticolonial eruptions is that these events interrupt, at least momentarily, the habitual functioning of white supremacy and colonialism. Time and again, riots and uprisings are received with shock by those to whom such resistance seemed unthinkable. In other words, these kinds of events take on a particular importance from *within* the colonial and racist mindset. But Maher seems to affirm the value and importance of eruptive resistance from a decolonial and anti-racist mindset also. Explosive rebellions are not the only type of resistance discussed in the book—Maher mentions a whole arsenal of decolonial “weapons, skills, and knowledges” (49), including dissimulation, conspiracy, sabotage, and theft—but the book tends to inscribe more covert resistance practices in a trajectory that culminates in an overt, direct, and often violent confrontation. Maher writes, for instance, that those subjected to racial and colonial oppression “take advantage of the oppressors’ self-imposed blindspot” to “play the docile slave until the last possible moment” when “bowing and scraping” give way to “haunting and avenging” (49). And he notes that “Women’s resistance to slavery and colonization...did not always take the same overt forms as that of the men” (58), but he still emphasizes women’s resistance practices that at least indirectly supported violent confrontations, for instance by supplying weapons or intelligence to those engaged in armed struggle.

Maher is right that explosive rebellion is part of struggles against racism and colonialism both past and present. But what practices and approaches that could *also* advance these struggles might be deemphasized or overlooked in an approach that places eruption and confrontation at the center of resistance? Maher cites Angela Davis’ famous 1971 essay, “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves,” in which Davis writes that enslaved women “‘often poisoned the food and set fire to the houses of their masters’” (cited on 59). Like Maher, Davis privileges violent acts of “counterinsurgency,” though she also acknowledges the importance of Black women’s care- and housework for enabling enslaved people’s survival. In more recent writings on prison abolition, though, Davis theorizes resistance differently. Casting prison abolition as a global antiracist and anticapitalist movement that continues 19th-century struggles against slavery, Davis tends to emphasize the slow and unspectacular work of movement- and institution-building over the highly visible moments of protests and demonstrations. Speaking a month after the Ferguson uprising following the murder of Michael Brown, she suggests, for instance, that “[t]he major challenge of this period is to infuse a consciousness of the structural character of state violence into the movements that spontaneously arise...I don’t know whether we can say yet that there is a movement, because movements are organized.”<sup>2</sup> When we privilege demonstrations – specific, potentially spectacular events – we risk obscuring or devaluing the long-term, ordinary, and often repetitive work of organizing required to generate lasting change.

Where Davis emphasizes the unspectacular work of community organizing, abolitionists like Lisa Guenther and adrienne maree brown theorize collective efforts to cultivate self-care, healing, and pleasure as part of radical liberation struggles. A growing number of abolitionist groups affirm transformative justice principles and practices, for instance, aiming to hold people accountable for harmful behavior without inflicting further harm, and seeking to prevent future harm through structural changes that include healing and the development of strong relationships and communities. It might be harder to recognize these kinds of practices as radically resistive, but doing so could powerfully supplement Maher's efforts to reckon with colonial blindspots.

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<sup>1</sup> Geo Maher, *Anticolonial Eruptions: Racial Hubris and the Cunning of Resistance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 4. Hereafter referred to parenthetically by page number.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 15-6.