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# Aesthetic Resistance from the Andes and Beyond: The Possibilities and Limits of Anticolonial Sensing

Omar Rivera. *Andean Aesthetics and Anticolonial Resistance: A Cosmology of Unsociable Bodies*. London: Bloomsbury, 2021, 248pp.

*Andean Aesthetics and Anticolonial Resistance* begins with a perplexing provocation to traditional conceptions of politics and justice: is it possible to understand revolutionary, anticolonial movements, like the 16th century Andean rebellion known as *Taki Oncoy* [the sickness of song and dance],<sup>1</sup> as something other than reactive and oppositional with regard to colonial structures of power and oppression? According to an oppositional conception of resistance, the political force of these movements would lie in its capacity to fuel reactions and challenges, deepening them to mobilize subjects or communities against the structures and people of power. They embody the power to transform reality. But, in a completely different register, one that informs the whole book's approach, Omar Rivera sees *Taki Oncoy* as a form of cosmological resistance "formed and maintained through aesthetic practices cultivated communally" (3). According to this view,<sup>2</sup> the subject of this revolution are not the indigenous communities or its members, but the cosmos itself [*pacha*] that, instead of forcing a confrontation between its parts, is postulated as the force of all movement, as the background that animates all transitions. For Rivera,

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- 1 The first written account of the rebellion was Cristóbal de Molina's *Relación de las Fábulas y Ritos de los Incas* (1574). According to Molina, the indigenous communities interpreted the movement as the response of the *huacas* (divinities usually embodied in the landscape) to their dethroning by the Christian God. The *huacas* would have shifted their dwelling from rocks and mountains to the embodying of the indigenous peoples themselves, making them sing and dance as if possessed and thus refusing to follow the colonial rule. (see Jeremy Mumford, "The Taki Oncoy and the Andean Nation: Sources and Interpretations," in *Latin American Research Review* 33, no. 1 (1998): 150–65). Rivera's approach emphasizes the non-reactive, cosmological stance of the movement, which differs strongly from Molina's sacerdotal perspective that understood *Taki Oncoy* as a reconquest and rising up in disobedience to the colonial regime.
  - 2 Rivera takes up Luis Alberto Reyes' reinterpretation of *Taki Oncoy* in *El pensamiento Indígena en América* (Buenos Aires: Biblos, 2008).

This constitutes an anticolonial resistant disposition for which oppressive structures appear as already passing, so that there is no need to instigate resistance (either through theory or ideological praxis) since it is always already there, effervescing in everyday concrete places, yet not as a willed act owned by oppositional rebellious masses. (6)

Aesthetic resistance thus conceived is theorized in the book as being beyond the active/passive dichotomy that our contemporary political categories often demand. To locate resistance only in the realm of “action” means that it has to become intelligible for an instrumental reason: it has to be volitional, mobilizing, recognizable, future-oriented, etc. “Passive” means, in opposition, the visible absence of these elements: indigenous peoples let themselves be colonized, they lacked a plan to resist, or the capacity to respond, etc.<sup>3</sup> Rather than passive or active, cosmological aesthetics of resistance are “proprietary,”<sup>4</sup> that is, involve a mode of sensing and inhabiting structures and spaces that both attentive to the cosmological seminality (generation, flux, destruction) and stimulating of conflict and movement. In this description, ‘attentive’ and ‘stimulating’ are not opposites, nor sequential phases of the resistance; they constitute the same mode of sentience, neither passive nor active, that nevertheless resist colonial domination.

A prominent example of cosmological aesthetics in the book is Inka architecture, which puts into question our most basic (Western) assumptions about time and space, and the limits between human and non-human. In Rivera’s analysis, Inka built spaces reverse our assumed relationship between landscape and building: instead of bringing the elements to the human spaces (through windows, skylights, pipes, doors), the carved stones bring back the human habitation to the landscape and emplace it in the cosmos. The building itself becomes the landscape, and the subject of this sensing is not the particular constructed object, but the indistinguishable character of the whole. (cf. 62–69) This occurs not only in a spatial sense, but in a temporal one: in its

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3 The trope of indigenous passivity arises precisely out of the colonial incapacity to recognize other forms of resistance. As Rivera shows (in his analysis of José Carlos Mariátegui, for example, cf. 97–100), even anticolonial, liberatory approaches fall prey to this imposition of the active/passive dichotomy. I believe we can see examples of this tendency in revolutionary aesthetic movements such as Third Cinema, and, in particular, the films of Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjinés.

4 The term is taken from Reyes in his reading of *Taki Oncoy*.

withdrawing to the landscape, Inka architecture motivates, as well, a visibility of the cosmic past.<sup>5</sup> In the architectural removal to the landscape, for example,

[s]ight is absorbed into larger, cosmic spheres where the relations between things are stretched out too thin, or broken, impeding the unfolding of comprehensive sense. As the world metamorphoses into a playroom with toys scattered around, the visible field becomes so vast that nothing can be held in focus; and earth and sky as creative forces in a past that is not of historical memory come forth in elemental appearances. (83–84)

*Andean Aesthetics and Anticolonial Resistance* theorizes a sensuous evocation of the cosmos through life itself: everyday practices, affects, embodiments, dwellings, and relations. In the same movement, it conceives anew forms of resistance that are political because they are anticolonial, but that reject the basic conditions of what we tend to demand from political manifestations, interventions, and programs. It constitutes a wonderful, provocative, and unsettling opening for a new approach: the book offers for the reader both a non-Western conception of aesthetics and an alternative understanding of the political. Or, better said, it opens a novel configuration<sup>6</sup> of the old philosophical question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics that disrupts traditional conceptions of what these are. On the one hand, aesthetics is interpreted in the book as *aísthesis* (following the relatively recent treatment by Enrique Dussel and Alejandro Vallega) “a prior field of affective, postural, and perceptual transformations” (8) not determined by the subjective perception of objectifiable phenomena, but by what the author calls “physicalities” (14), that is, sentiences of/within postures, sense perceptions, affects, memory, and spatio-temporalities. On the other hand, cosmological resistance opens a different conception of the political beyond dichotomies of human/non-human, oppressed/oppressor, active/passive, complicit/ally, etc. From a cosmological

5 Rivera develops this analysis through a reinterpretation of the Quechua term *ñawpa pacha*, commonly taken as a reference to the past, the “olden days” can be translated as “‘the past of or in the eye is the cosmos,’ or ‘the past fills the eye as the visible cosmos,’ or ‘the past is the cosmos coming into view in the fullness of the field of the visible.’” (84).

6 The Andes as a site of philosophical exploration has been undertheorized in the Anglo-speaking discipline of philosophy. Besides the better-known works of José Carlos Mariátegui, this field is now emerging with the recent publication of fundamental studies like Rodolfo Kusch, *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010) and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch'ixinakax utxiwa: on Practices and Discourses of Decolonisation*. (Medford, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020).

perspective, according to Rivera, resisting colonialism cannot mean only a search for alternative processes of socialization or subject formation, because these reify a social closure of the political in which the resistant has to embody a role within the preconceived hierarchy to carry out a political transformation: even liberatory political movements affirm colonialism to resist it. (cf. 105–114) A cosmological conception of the political sees the “oppressed” as always already resisting, focusing on the oppressing/resisting relationship at the heart of the tension at the colonial difference,<sup>7</sup> and their propiation of seminality as the cosmological social force.<sup>8</sup>

In what follows, I expand on Rivera’s book interventions in the aesthetic and the political by further contextualizing its approach and problematizing the locations of thought and the scope of the book’s criticism of the existing frameworks of analysis.

## 1 Andean Aesthetics

If Rivera’s intervention in the philosophical configuration of its subject (aesthetics and politics) is novel, its immediate subject is not. It concerns the ancient way of life in the Andes, some of which is given to us in the book by the analysis of ruins, paintings, and depictions of the life in the region from centuries ago.<sup>9</sup> Rivera’s Andean aesthetics, however, expands this timeworn subject to include not only contemporary artists and thinkers from South America, but also from Latinx and Chicanx contexts today. “Expand” and “include” are perhaps not the best words to use here, since the author does not enlarge the

7 See, for example, Lugones: “Resistance is the tension between subjectification (the forming/informing of the subject) and active subjectivity, that minimal sense of agency required for the oppressing ↔ resisting relation being an active one, without appeal to the maximal sense of agency of the modern subject.” (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism.” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4: (2010), 746.)

8 “From the perspective of Andean cosmologies and aesthetics, colonialism/ modernity is the attempt to deny *pacha*, namely, to deny the “seminality” of the cosmos, the stillness that encompasses the reciprocity and mutual destruction of sky and earth, and the (k)notted relationality of the here/now or *kay pacha*, in order to enforce an objectifying sense of a present under human control and in processes of development” (Rivera 25). Rivera’s concept of (k)notting is defined as a “knotting through nothing,” the character of reality in Andean cosmology according to which *pacha* is an emptiness without relation to fullness, but always allowing for a new weaving of itself.

9 The few vestiges of *Taki Oncoy*, for example, date from the late 16th century, and are heavily mediated by the colonial perspective of priests and bureaucrats dealing with the question of the danger and placation of the rebellion.

Andean context historically to contain these manifestations, nor suggests that they are part of the same form of social oppression. Rather, what begins in the book as an *Andean*, mostly Inka world-view emplaced in the mountains and constructed worlds, becomes a *cosmological* conception that decenters its subject toward a special here/now, *beyond* the Sacred Valley and the 15th century. Rivera justifies his “retroactive” approach to the Andes as arising from “a sensibility informed by Latin American and Latinx aesthetic traditions” (1). Furthermore,

[t]he turn to the Andes in this book is prompted by complex, situated junctures of anticolonial resistance in a number of diverse historical and geographic contexts – where the clear demarcations between oppressed/oppressor, oppressor/liberator, and human/non-human are forged and contested – rather than by a commitment to cultural authenticity as inherently resistant. (1)

I am deeply interested in this gesture, both in what it opens for us philosophically, and in what it allows and risks politically. The book’s analysis goes beyond any form of purist retrieval of an indigenous pasts, or the essentializing of an identity in political terms. This is true both for the Indigenous, Andean aspects of the proposal, manifested for example in Rivera’s criticism of Mariátegui in Chapter 3, and for the North American dialogues that the book establishes with figures such as Gloria Anzaldúa. In the case of the latter, for example, an important part of the configuration of a cosmological aesthetics is offered as a (theoretical, non-chronological) development from an Anzaldúan elemental aesthetics (cf. Chapter 1).

This non-authenticist approach to the Andes, then, is motivated by a contemporary, and wide-ranging conception of a Latin American tradition of thought. The dialogues that inform a cosmological aesthetics constitute a series of extensions that the book enacts casually, in conversation, without the urgency of justifying lineages of thought, traditions of conversation, borders of identities. Andean cosmologies are interpreted thus with the help of María Lugones’s concept of active subjectivity, which helps reconstruct the idea of propitiation, or her configuration of a decolonial feminism, in order to understand resistance.<sup>10</sup> As I have said, also, the idea of aesthetics itself is composed

10 See, for example, “I interpret Lugones’s “decolonial feminism” not as theory but as an aesthetic intervention that makes visible *ayni* and the *cosmos*, and thus the “colonial difference” and anticolonial, propitiatory, cosmological resistance. This is an intervention in the perception of socialities, visibility in particular, in order to disrupt an “inspective gaze” informed by colonialism and racialization, and driven by suspicion about the humanity of the oppressed” (111).

in dialogue with the concept of *aísthesis* as theorized by Enrique Dussel and Alejandro Vallega.

While I deeply appreciate the sensibility behind Rivera's method, and his inventive dialogue in the search for a novel category of resistance, I wonder what we gain from calling this approach "Andean," and not more properly "cosmological"? If the return to the Andes is, as Rivera says, retroactive, out of a present configuration of a tradition of thought and not in the search of an originary or genealogical cultural insight, don't we lose the extensive character of the proposal by tying it back to a specific region and a specific time? Indeed, the argument of the book is not first outlined from the Andes, and then put in conversation with Latinx and Chicanx authors, artists, and preoccupations. It is properly an American reconfiguration of the aesthetic/political question, or, perhaps, a 'cosmological' reconfiguration if we allude to its mode of sensing. My point here is not that we should safeguard the authenticity of the cultural aspects of the Andes or of its identities; I welcome the ground-breaking dialogues that the book proposes and I agree that they configure a tradition-in-flux that we desperately need in the Americas. Rather, I disagree with the gesture of tying back to only one region and one time the remarkable variety of artists and thinkers considered in the book.

## 2 Anticolonial Resistance

Besides the delimitation of an aesthetic realm, the cosmological turn theorized in Rivera's book intervenes in a configuration not only of the political, but in particular of what constitutes political resistance in a colonial context. As I have shown in the analysis of *Taki Oncoy*, part of the failure at recognizing the rebellion for what it is has to do with the incapacity of the oppositional conception of politics to listen to the non-mobilizing cosmological mode of resistance. This failure, however, is not exclusive of those who occupy the upper stratum of the colonial hierarchy. Most of the book's criticism is directed at movements for liberation that embrace the colonial attitude toward the colonized by forcing them into the passive/active binary that has been previously criticized and seeing them as in need of redemption. Rivera, following Lugones, focuses

on the bodily aesthetics of the social formation of resistance in terms of racial and colonialist visual registers in order to shed light on what I call the "social closure of the political." By this term I mean the ways in which perceptions of those deemed non-human enforce exclusions from both dominant oppressive systems and liberatory socio-political

movements that are supposed to represent the oppressed. I emphasize how perceptual patterns act as gatekeepers not only for dominant institutions of the state and the economy but also for belonging into groups identifiable as “resistant,” “liberatory,” or “decolonial.” In other words, I recognize in the socialization of resistance a locus of oppression articulated aesthetically. (95)

Throughout the book, Rivera levels different sets of criticism of the liberatory and decolonial framework as enactment of the social closure of the political. I want to focus on these criticisms because they offer the most original intervention of the book in the political sphere, one desperately needed given our current tendency to dogmatically accept the decolonial as the only form of resistance. It is in these responses where readers working in decolonial studies, and, in particular, scholars and activists who identify with the modernity/coloniality framework inspired by the work of Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, can find the most productive proposal of the book.

We can see at least three criticisms of the liberatory framework throughout the book.

i) Just as I previously reconstructed with regard to colonialism, liberatory demands tend to deny *pacha* in that they see as politically relevant only human agency intervening in an objectified social and natural realm, aiming to replace the seminality of the cosmos. The processes of transformation, destruction, and creation are now predicated of the social movements and the chosen political category (the proletarian, the person of color, the woman). By calling for a mobilization and reordering of agency, these frameworks are blinded to the cosmological forms of resistance that the book reconstructs, which, as I said, are not exclusive of an ancient Andean realm but can be replicated (echoed? prophesied?) at least in other contexts in the Americas.

While I agree that liberatory demands can be sometimes at odds with cosmological resistance, I find that Rivera’s likening of colonial, state, and liberatory demands is too generalizing. According to the argument of Chapter 3, the oppression enacted by the state and by liberatory movements that demand preconceived roles of the revolutionary actor is of a similar kind. (cf. 101–102)<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, these oppressions are equated to the murderous violence of the Shining Path against indigenous communities in Perú during the 1980s and 1990s, and by Mariátegui’s figure of the “revolutionary Indian” (cf. 97–100).

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11 The example here is that of the border-crosser women who join social organizations that demand from them to adhere to images of “empowered, and emancipated” womanhood by refusing to fulfil their husbands’ expectations at home.

Rivera groups together political manifestations that are of a radical different nature and that cannot all be understood under the same “social closure of the political” (95). More importantly, liberatory efforts do not always rule out other forms of political engagement, including mobilization, that are anticolonial but not flawed by the narrow conception of action criticized in the text.

Furthermore, how do we embrace a cosmological resistance when it is life itself the one at stake in the struggle for liberation? How else, if not through mobilization, do we protect the lives of our communities against coloniality and imperialism?<sup>12</sup>

ii) In line with the previous criticism, and responding perhaps to my last question, Rivera references Lugones’ discussion of agency in the context of liberatory struggles.<sup>13</sup> In Rivera’s words,

the demand that resistance be reduced to action is a mode of oppression. It denies the oppressed the possibility of resisting or, more precisely, the possibility of finding themselves already resisting in their everyday, in the concrete inhabitation of institutions that exclude them, in their range of affectivity, in their sorrow. In the modern/colonial context the demand that resistance be only action puts resistance a step removed from the physical situatedness of the oppressed, and obviates the physical aspects of both oppression and resistance. (12)

It is indeed possible, as Lugones has demonstrated, to configure a decolonial form resistance that locates the response of the oppressed at the heart of the colonial difference without demanding to conform to preconceived, ready made categories of reaction. As an alternative, it is possible to theorize and recognize an active subjectivity of all the oppressed as a form of embodied resistance (cf. 110, 174) that can then “germinate” reconstituted frameworks of liberation, no longer abstract, encapsulating, or oppressive. (25)<sup>14</sup> With

12 I am thinking here in the success with which South American social movements opposed right wing, fascist governments in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Brazil, just to cite some, between 2019 and 2022. The movements of resistance involved in the National Strike in Colombia, or the *Estallido Social* in Chile, can be read as responding to mobilization demands that created forms of agency first in the streets, and then at the electoral level in presidential elections.

13 María Lugones, “From Within Germinative Stasis: Creating Active Subjectivity, Resistant Agency,” in *Entre Mundos/Among Worlds*, ed. Analouse Keating (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

14 In this sense, a cosmological reading (and generation) of the previously mentioned movements of resistance in South America would emphasize not the emerging political program first, but the affective, embodied, not necessarily programmatic practices of

Lugones's decolonial feminism, a cosmological aesthetics focuses on the space between subjectification (oppression) and the active subjectivity (110); in keeping this space open, liberation becomes and embodied possibility.

iii) *Andean Aesthetics and Anticolonial Resistance* offers a somewhat veiled, but strong critique of the modernity/coloniality framework as "continuous" with colonialism. Rivera subscribes to Reyes's argument according to which

if resistance is reduced to [theological, legal, or philosophical] acts, then it is intelligible *from* and *for* colonialist perspectives (including social, religious, economical, and gendered perspectives), since it occurs within the purview of the colonial system and its projections. In this sense, resistance would appear to be a striving for a social and political stage that is continuous, even if dialectically so, with colonialism. Resistance would be, then, a movement in which assimilation, development, progress, and socialization are at play. (6)

This continuity and intelligibility are at the heart of Walter Dignolo's understanding of epistemic disobedience and the decolonial option,<sup>15</sup> just to name one theorist of decoloniality. Interestingly, Rivera does not level this explicit criticism of decoloniality at any theorist in particular, and justifies his use of "anticolonial" in the increasing looseness of the term 'decolonial' and not on a disagreement with the continuity of the project.<sup>16</sup> It is clear, however, that what the decolonial option entails is a demand for intelligibility within the oppressive framework itself that can be extended globally, that is, to people outside this particular form of oppression.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, Rivera seems to be suspicious

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resistance to governmental oppression. Among countless others, then, an aesthetics of schoolgirls jumping subway turnstiles in Santiago de Chile and of graffiti art in the streets of mayor cities in Colombia denouncing the extrajudicial killings of 6402 civilians by the military.

15 Cf. Walter Dignolo "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto," in *Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011): 44–66 and "Chapter 1: The Roads to the Future," in *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011).

16 See Rivera 195.

17 For criticism to the rejection of intelligibility and the demand for a radical rupture, see Santiago Castro-Gómez, "Razón poscolonial y filosofía latinoamericana" in *Crítica de la Razón Latinoamericana*, (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2011) and "¿Qué Hacer con los Universalismos Occidentales?" in *El tonto y lo Canallas: Notas para un Republicanismo Transmoderno* (Bogotá: Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, 2019). In the former, Castro-Gómez argues that even in the case of Kusch's categories of *ser y estar*, which Rivera understands from the cosmological perspective as non-continuous with colonialism, are to be thought from within the modern episteme.

of conceptions of resistance that include demands fully understood in terms compatible with colonial institutions or colonial reason. If they are intelligible within this reason they do not exemplify real alternatives, but merely process of assimilation and socialization.

Does this formulation suggest that only the unintelligible could become truly resistant? What is ultimately wrong with wanting to be heard and understood? Should we abandon this political terrain of incidence for fear of the continuity with colonialism? As I argued responding to the first criticism of liberatory forms of resistance, it is not only very difficult to group together all these movements and demands under an “intelligibility” umbrella, but also impossible to conceive of responses and resistances that are fully devoid of programmatic demands. Even though Rivera wants to reject the purism of cultural authenticity, the endorsement of this criticism of intelligibility seems to point precisely to an untouched, autonomous sphere that, in my opinion, is almost absent in the Americas. A demand to be understood and respected, as Édouard Glissant remind us, is not necessarily a demand for full transparency or full assimilation.<sup>18</sup> The political terrain in the Americas (and everywhere else) is complex, multivaried, thick with layers of demands, memories, contradictions, and refusals. This is as well one of the lessons of Lugones’s theorizing of complex communication, and a fundamental insight from *Pilgrimages*.

While Rivera does not negate the importance of these other socializing resistances, this last criticism to liberatory movements shows a deep mistrust of the agents of revolution and the history of the Left in Latin America. I believe the emphasis on the cosmological, aesthetic possibilities of resistance that this book theorizes, as perhaps a more fundamental, prior construction of refusal, might help us reconstitute some of these same programs for liberation into anticolonial struggles in the Americas.

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18 Cf. Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity,” in *Poetics of Relation*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997) and a non-purist reading of this demand in Benjamin Davis, “The Politics of Édouard Glissant’s Right to Opacity,” in *The CLR James Journal* 25, no. 1 (2019).