Hypatia (2022), **37**, e2, 1–4
doi:10.1017/hyp.2022.38

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

BOOK REVIEW

Devuélvannos el Oro: Cosmovisiones perversas y acciones anticoloniales. Colectivo Ayllu. Madrid: Matadero. Centro de Residencias Artísticas, 2018

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Devuélvannos el Oro: Cosmovisiones perversas y acciones anticoloniales brings together the results of more than a year of workshops, exhibitions, public interventions, reflections, and artistic manifestations by the Colectivo Ayllu. Located in Spain, this action group brings together collective research and artistic and political intervention from racialized migrants and queer, sexual, and gender dissidents from former Spanish colonies all over the world. *Devuélvannos el Oro* includes more than thirty documents of this work, many of which were included in the exhibition of the same name organized in Centro de Residencias Artísticas de Matadero Madrid in 2017. Across a wide variety of genres and styles, the collection comprises photo-performances, poems, visual interventions, personal reflections, and essays. Many of the documents, like their creators and the collective itself, resist being included in the traditional categories with which we have been taught to understand the world, performing the very disruption that the book aims to describe and prescribe, a "shifting/orgasming [*corrimien to*] of the normative forms of rationalist and intellectualocentric knowledge" (10).

The character of this resistance is already graspable in the concept of "ayllu," which gives the collective its name and is invoked as the central image of the book. Ayllu is a Quechua and Aymara form of community that has existed in different regions of the Andes, in what today is known as South America, before the extension of the Inca empire; it still exists today. The word refers to the form of political organization in place (the shared distribution of labor in an area, not necessarily self-sufficient, based on relations of solidarity and exchange with other ayllus), but also to community ties: ayllus comprise people who see themselves as sharing a distant ancestry, and thus constitute a form of extended family defined by their location in the mountains and not necessarily by blood ties.

This last element speaks eloquently of the character of those included in *Devuélvannos el Oro*, and of the collective itself. Their tenuous location in the "Kingdom of Spain," particularly Madrid, sometimes makes it impossible for them to be identified as racialized migrants rejected by the racist Spanish society, undocumented and othered, exoticized and fetishized. Yet there a kind of family tie summons writers, artists, and activists to the book and to the workshops and interventions of the collective, which can also be extended toward different territories colonized by Spain in the Americas and Africa.

In its opening pages, the book is described as a way to both "spit an anti-racist rage against the political regime of whiteness" (8) and a demand to repair the harm, recuperate what was stolen, unlearn what was imposed:

> "Returning the gold" is then not a confrontation with the kingdom of Spain from the capitalist reading of the precious metals stolen from the global South, but rather a demand to return all the lives, cosmologies, epistemologies, and sexualities that the West, and in particular the Spanish Empire, has wanted to steal from us. By shouting "Give us back the gold" we want to recover what has been uprooted, the presence of what does not exist, of what they tried to erase, of fugitive lives, banished bodies, feathers, kidnapped *elekes* and gods, lost souls, forbidden fruits, manatees and caged birds, spilled blood, silenced songs, gold, silver, diamonds, sugar cane, potatoes, vices, extirpated idolatries. (10; my translation)

I am intrigued by the polysemy of this demand to "return," and how it is performed in the diverse character of the pieces included in the collection, by how, in particular, these varied approaches to the demand, not always compatible, play out throughout the book and configure a migrant, queer, racialized cry from the heart of the "former colonial metropolis, the necropolis" (9). As can be grasped in the book, this cry is not only, and not always, intellectual; it demands a form of intervention that is practical, material, graspable that Colectivo Ayllu has enacted in different spaces, sometimes with the protection of art institutions and at other times persecuted and surveilled. The book does not attempt to hide these ambiguities, the incongruencies of a multilevel approach to anticolonial performances, or the complicity of the art world that is nevertheless one of the vehicles of Colectivo Ayllu. On the contrary, from the very space of a public institution, supported in part by the Spanish state (Matadero Madrid), the publication transgresses the limits of genres and the expectations of an academic publication, holding back nothing of the rage of its contributors and that of millions in the Americas.

The first of the book's modes of understanding the demand to "return the gold" has to do with the needs and possibilities of repair, both epistemic and material, of the damage inflicted by colonialism. Return as repairing means literally fixing the damage and filling the voids created by pillage and extraction with objects, resources, and compensations that undo some of this damage and create the possibility of reconstructing what was there before. Two particular interventions stand out in this respect: the attempt to decolonize museums and the rejection of the Spanish "Ley de Extranjería."

The first of these attempts is portrayed as a form of aesthetic disobedience (25) in museums by staging performances and, literally, invading and assaulting these institutions in Europe that not only preserve the colonial memory of dispossession, but continue it by refusing to return the stolen objects that comprise their permanent collections. Some of these invasions take place in ways that cannot be documented or whose documentation had to be erased by orders of the police or museums security guards, but most of them take place in fantasy, as sometimes the only way to enter the safeguarded realm of a "coloniality made culture" (20). The demand to repair the damage by assaulting the museum is not only enacted by the attempt to recuperate the material remnants ripped off, but also to irrupt in a space of whiteness itself, where racialized migrants are granted entrance only under special conditions.

A similar demand is presented in other texts that denounce the swiftness with which racialized bodies are "returned," by deportation, to other countries, while the objects stolen from those same places are kept and exhibited. One of the most interesting

https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2022.38 Published online by Cambridge University Press

contributions of *Devuélvannos el Oro* has to do with the uncovering of part of the racist history of the "Ley de Extranjería" from 1985, and in general with the description of the life of undocumented migrants and their constant persecution by the state, their poverty, and their displacement. Next to newspaper articles showing massive support of the Spanish population of the 1985 legal framework, *Devuélvannos el Oro* includes several poetic evocations of what it is to live in the persistent fear of deportation, while at the same time having to go out on the street to look for jobs. As shown in numerous texts, the racist framework outlined thirty-five years ago, although repealed in new legislation, is still present today in the lived experience of racialized migrants.

In one of these accounts of the migrant experience, "Perder la Fascinación: Remedio Destemporizador para el Dolor Migra" [Losing the Fascination: De-temporizing Medicine for Migrant Pain"], after recounting the painful and humiliating experience of traveling to Spain from Latin America ten years before, the author asks herself what exactly made her desire to board a plane and submit herself to the constant questioning of passengers and border officers, to their suspicion and arousal at her exoticized presence in Spanish land. The answer is hinted at as a form of fascination with the metropolis that mirrors the colonial fascination with "India." The author's response, after ten years of living in Spain, is the growing desire to unlearn such fascination.

To unlearn the fascination is thus another form of *devolver el oro* explored in the book. As an aesthetic demand, in poems, reflections, and essays, the book describes the painstaking process of fighting against the colonial categories that determine what an acceptable life is, who has the right to live in which territories, what stories are told and what others are concealed, what bodies are desirable and under what circumstances. Trans, queer, and racialized bodies and lives are pushed to the forefront of the text, sometimes even shyly and apologetically, in order to disrupt the traditional Spanish narrative of whiteness, heteronormativity, and gender binarism.

This demand, however, uttered from the experience of migration to Spain, reaches back as well into an exploration of the colonial constructions of race, gender, and sexuality in Latin America. These constructions are of course not independent of what the migrants experience in Spain, but have their own conditions and demands. Two of the texts included in the book commemorate and analyze, for example, the decriminalization of homosexuality in Ecuador in 1997, following the detention of over 100 people for "breaking the law," what it meant at that time for queer people, and what it means today. Documenting newspaper reports around the persecution of homosexuality,[1] as well about performances and public interventions to protest and denounce what the authors call the "invention of sodomy" in 1492, the texts especially emphasize the linguistic aspects of state and media persecution, and the racialized origins of some of the words used: "meco" or "meca" as slurs used to refer to homosexuals, for example, is tied to a designation of nomadic peoples in what today is Mexico, the Chichimecas, who resisted the assimilation to Spanish customs and were never fully colonized. The texts emphasize as well as visual aspects of state persecution, and how media can be repurposed and reused today in order to denounce and resist the ongoing persecution of sexual diversity and resistance to colonial gender roles.

The polysemic demand for our gold to be returned, uttered by racialized migrants currently living and organizing in Spain, constitutes a novel intervention in the decolonial and anticolonial literature as we see it unfolding on the American continent, and in particular in the United States. By resisting the demands imposed on these bodies by Spanish society, the art world, academic discourse, and white and *mestiza* feminisms, the contributors to *Devuélvannos el Oro* display the complexity and incommensurability

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of the millions of lives living in the margins of European society. This multiplicity, however, is also shown as organizing around the endless possibilities of collective and political action that, in the case of the Colectivo Ayllu, put forward experiences and demands impossible to mute again.

Note

1 The emphasis on homosexuality of article 516 of Ecuador's Penal Code, declared unconstitutional in 1997 by the Constitutional Court, put forth a homogeneous approach to sexual diversity and factually erased the existence of other gender identities and ways of enacting sexuality. As it was enforced, this erasure included any form of deviancy from the gender binary and its imposed roles. The texts in question analyze in a compelling way what this uniformization meant for lesbians, transsexuals, and *travestis* before and after the decriminalization of *homosexualismo*.

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