

# Introduction

The central thesis of this book is that the work of the Open City of Ritoque presents a “decolonial option” (Mignolo 2011) for environmental urbanism and architecture through the embrace of a poetic foundation for architectural thought and praxis, where the poetic is defined as the hospitable discursive space in which to hear the other. More abstractly, this work is concerned with the decolonization of Eurocentric epistemologies that perceive subaltern subjects and environmental phenomena as stable objects of knowledge to be dominated and conquered (rather than heard as intellectual agents or, to use Bruno Latour’s term, as actants) through accurate and univocal representation by a (Eurocentric) agent who perceives their own “superior” knowledge as universally applicable. While this in many ways repeats the basic thesis of Aníbal Quijano’s conception of the coloniality of power, though with an additional environmentalist turn demonstrating how coloniality also pertains to a particular environmental domination, this work emphasizes that poetry as theorized at the Open City reveals a potential decolonial intellectual space within Western epistemologies. The concern of this work, then, is not the demonstration of how colonial social relations are dependent on a hierarchization of epistemologies in which “Western” and “modern” ways of knowing are deemed superior to others—a thesis that at this point has been thoroughly demonstrated by Quijano, Walter Mignolo, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Enrique Dussel, Catherine Walsh, and many others—but to delve into the treacherous waters of identifying tools at our disposal within such modern Western epistemologies to decolonize our modes of inhabiting the earth, that is, to imagine a decolonial option for modern architecture and urbanism.

This book started out with the goal of getting the story of the Open City right by providing an accurate representation of the group and its past. This initial goal arose due to what I perceived as inaccuracies in academic histories of the collective. Reflecting on the work of the Open City, however, I soon came to the conclusion that such a research goal was counterproductive insofar as such a foreclosed representation was an inherently colonial process.<sup>1</sup> Did my preoccupation that the Open

City had been treated as a unified community with a singular voice, rather than a pluralistic but nonetheless harmonious collective with internal differences, not testify precisely to the impossibility of trying to contain the City within a univocal representation? Indeed, it quickly became apparent that the very purpose of this book was, following Gayatri Spivak's arguments from *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, to problematize and question the ways that we think about representation. The Open City's insistence that we "hear the other" quickly came to signify not an attempt to represent that other—to paternalistically and colonially "speak for those who have no voice"—but to deconstruct epistemological frameworks that preclude hearing the other. While such an effort of course is not a strictly decolonial operation—Did Georg Büchner not already have Danton saying in 1835 that to know each other we would have to "break open our skulls and pull each other's thoughts out of the brain fibers" (1989: 9)?—when put into the context of the relationship between Eurocentric settlers, Black arrivants, and Indigenous communities in Abya Yala and Latin America, it can come to acquire this significance.<sup>2</sup> Such a rethinking of a relationship with another, not to know them through representation but to comprehend their position by deconstructing epistemic and representational frameworks, lies at the core of this work.

This leads to one other clarification of what this book is not: this book does not represent the Open City as essentially a collective of decolonial activists. First and foremost, I am not trying to make any definitive representation of the "essence" of the Open City. For those interested in such a representation, I recommend that you instead simply read the central literary works of the group—*Amereida*, *Amereida II*, and "Opening of the Terrains" (with the understanding that any list of the "central" works is always incomplete)—and view the architectural works of the Open City yourself on the Open City's website.<sup>3</sup> Second, as we will see in Chapters 3 and 4, the Open City explicitly and intentionally distances itself from political activism, seeking ways other than politics and activism to engage its concern for the structuration of sociality. Third, I repeatedly emphasize in this book that the City's own positionality within a colonial matrix of power distinguishes it from those subaltern intellectual agents from whom decoloniality initially emerged with "a sense of political urgency" tied to processes of decolonization (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012: 98). Decoloniality, it must be remembered, emerged through the praxis and theory of colonized subaltern subjects; that is, not elite intellectuals like those at the Open City. Following the logic that "not all the projects of the multitude are decolonial—only those whose agents are the *damnés*" (Mignolo 2005a: 392), it is (at best) inappropriate to re-

fer to the Open City as agents of decolonization. To see this distinction, one can make a basic comparison between the Open City and Franz Fanon's texts, *Black Skin, White Masks* and *Wretched of the Earth*. As I repeat throughout this book, the Open City, insofar as it maintains a close connection to the dominant culture of colonialism, is not a subaltern collective (just as Spivak insists that she also is not a subaltern subject). Although this book is founded on (and assumes the reader has a familiarity with) the intellectual, political, and social work of decolonial theorists and political agents (Fanon, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Eve Tuck, Fausto Reinaga, Guaman Poma de Ayala, Albert Memmi, Ranajit Guha, Édouard Glissant, Gloria Anzaldúa, and so on), it is, following Priyamvada Gopal (2019), more precisely examining how their decolonial theory and praxis "not only contributed to their own liberation but also put pressure on and reshaped" some elite Latin American ideas about habitation, modern architecture, and poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Against any attempt to form a definitive representation, *Politics of the Dunes* instead seeks to stage a productive conversation between the Open City, decoloniality, and environmental studies. This way of reading is nothing new to the world of literary studies. For instance, Joshua Schuster's *The Ecology of Modernism* (2015) conducts an ecocritical reading of Gertrude Stein, yet this reading does not signify that Stein is essentially concerned with the environment and that the various other ways of reading (for instance, those that focus on her understanding of gender) are mistaken; saying that Gertrude Stein has a particular vision of the environment is not equivalent to saying that she is concerned only with forming an environmental vision. Similarly, as I argue in Chapter 5, my comments on the relationship between the Open City, decoloniality, and environmental studies are not meant to negate the wonderful work that has been published about the group—there are multiple ways of reading the Open City of which this is only one—but are an attempt to "know more" about the group rather than "know better" (de la Cadena 2015).<sup>5</sup> This book seeks to move away from attempting to define the Open City, instead asking what the Open City can teach us about decoloniality and environmental studies and what decoloniality and environmental studies can teach us about the Open City.

This leads to the Open City's ambiguous relationship with decoloniality. Although I have at other moments fiercely critiqued Catherine Walsh and Walter D Mignolo's thinking<sup>6</sup>—specifically their vision of communality and their relationship towards hegemony (a critique that is tacitly implied within this book as well)—their recent *On Decoloniality* (2018) has proven to be an invaluable research tool while completing this book. Their conceptualization of decoloniality not only as "the emphatic

*no* understood as defensive opposition—a social, cultural, and political reaction *against*” (33), but in addition “a propositional and insurgent offensive *for* that challenges and constructs” (33)—is a guiding notion of *Politics of the Dunes*. As they summarize in a phrasing that will be repeated throughout this book, “insurgency here denotes the act-action of creation, construction, and intervention that aims towards an otherwise” (34). It is the central argument of this book that the Open City pursues such a mode of living in common *otherwise* than the politics of the colonial nation-state. Yet the Open City is in an ambiguous position insofar as the “emphatic *no*” that forms the foundation of decoloniality is issued from a positionality exterior to colonial epistemologies in Indigenous and Black reasons (Domingues 2009; Mbembe 2017). The Open City asks what it means to be within a dominant culture and social structure and attempt to enunciate that “no.” It is for this reason that this work also heavily turns to Gayatri Spivak’s (1999: 191) theorization of deconstruction, which is based on saying “no” to a cultural landscape that one “inhabits intimately.”

This decolonial “thinking otherwise” is similarly reflected by a questioning of the position of the State as the “proper” field for structuring sociality. *Politics of the Dunes* follows Laurent Dubreuil’s (2016: 4) call to move towards a “*non-political* elsewhere” in order to construct a more livable life in common. Even further, this book is concerned with a more precise conceptual division of how sociality is variously structured, seeing the politics of the liberal State as one option among many. As such, throughout the work one will see distinctions between: politics, the political, political nonpolitics, poetic political nonpolitics, apolitics, postpolitics, depoliticization, and so forth. Following José Rabasa (2001: 197), I am interested in how these fields affirmatively conceptualize their own modes of sociality, refusing to insist that one of them is uniquely a “more mature” mode of structuring a life in common. This book is interested in exploring how the Open City’s focus on constructing a poetic mode of living in common is dedicated to a thinking other than politics, demonstrating that there are multiple modes of engaging sociality and not just the one concerned with intervening in State apparatuses. Poetics at the Open City becomes a political nonpolitics concerned with an alternative vision of organizing a life in common.

Such a conceptualization is of course limited insofar as it accepts a division between poetics and politics as it appears at the Open City. I do not deny that this vision of the autonomy of the poetic has been repeatedly demonstrated to be a veiled expression of a bourgeois will to universality and, in the case of Latin American poetics during the Cold War, an ideological means of imagining a theoretical space free from the influence of the Soviet Union and the United States (Franco 2002).

Moreover, that such a strict division between the poetic and the political cannot account for works like Bertolt Brecht's, which operate in a space between politically committed works of art and avant-garde aesthetic experimentation, demonstrates its limited functionality when expanded beyond the boundaries of the Open City. Even further, Godofredo Iommi's critique of Breton as a compromised poet during his interaction with communism during the 1920s and 1930s (see Chapter 1) seems to ignore the complex relationship between Marxism, surrealism, and the politics of the French Communist Party (PCF), not to mention internal strife within surrealism itself (Rose 1991). Indeed, if one tries to understand many of the claims of the Open City as analytical conclusions mirroring North-Atlantic academic epistemologies, some may appear to be somewhat dubious. I think, for instance, of frequent claims made at the Open City of Ancient Greece being the beginning of Western Civilization, a convenient myth invented during the Romantic era to justify Eurocentric supremacy (Dussel 2000), and of appeals to Rimbaud's phrase that in Ancient Greece "the word rhymes with action," a phonocentrism that required a power-driven discriminatory logic of *whose* orality counted as a voice, since in Ancient Greece, "multiple voices [were] legitimate and praiseworthy when, and only when, they [were] authorized by a divine figure such as Zeus or Apollo" (Too 1998: 23). (Not to mention that such a positive vision of Greece seems to gloss over the slavery and patriarchy on which that society rested.) I would like to encourage the reader to see these not as truth claims within the discursive and epistemological structures of the North Atlantic academy, although the Open City is connected to this world, but rather as means to think through their poetic vision. In this way, their idea of the poetic should not be used as a conceptual tool with which to judge other poetries or as positivist interpretations of poetics and architecture, but rather as an exploration of what poetry can offer for thinking through an urban mode of living in common other than that of politics. That is, prior to putting the Open City in dialogue with academic questions of the limits of such a theorization of the poetic, *Politics of the Dunes* calls on us to understand what this vision has to offer.

In the end, I argue that the urban and architectural form the Open City ultimately arrives to is characterized by a poetic hospitality. This dedication to hospitality, defined as deprivileging social space so that all residents are categorized as guests living in an urban space rather than owners of a plot of land or of a house, requires a constant decentering of urban subjectivity, positionality, and structure. As such, this book makes a distinction between this *poetic method*—the act of hospitably hearing the other in their otherness—and *poetic works*—architectural, sculp-

tural, or literary products that are a consequence of this hospitality that often fall short of their methodological aims. I therefore follow Chela Sandoval's (2000) insightful against-the-grain reading of Roland Barthes as a decolonial theorist by investigating how the Open City's poetic foundation leads to a specific decolonial architecture and urbanism that calls for rethinking how we relate to the earth and to one another. As such, *Politics of the Dunes* is a highly theoretical book, exploring principally the written works of various members of the Open City using the tools of literary, environmental, and architectural studies.

I would like to end here by citing one extremely helpful source that goes unmentioned in the body of this book: Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia* (2008). In her own narrative retelling of the *Aeneid*, Le Guin has the first-person narrator, Lavinia, the wife of Aeneas who never speaks in the Vergil's original epic, ponder to herself, "How is it that you understand me, who lived twenty-five or thirty centuries ago? Do you know Latin? But then I think no, it has nothing to do with being dead, it's not death that allows us to understand one another, but poetry" (5). This significance that Lavinia ascribes to poetry as the discursive space to hear the other would apparently be contradicted by Lavinia herself who claims that Vergil, "slighted my life, in his poem" (3). Yet Lavinia also insists, "without him would I even have a name? I have never blamed him. Even a poet cannot get everything right" (262). Le Guin's vision of poetry as the discursive space in which to hear the other, in addition to her embrace and celebration of Vergil at the same time that she notes moments where he fell short, is in many ways a guiding light for this current book. Indeed, in her afterword Le Guin claims that her desire "was to follow Vergil, not to improve or reprove him" (275) and calls his poetry "profoundly musical, its beauty is so intrinsic to the sound and order of the words, that it is essentially untranslatable" (273). If Le Guin is critical at moments, it is a critique based in a fundamental love of Vergil's poetry—a surprising conclusion for a work that might otherwise be considered a feminist retelling of the *Aeneid*. Even further, Lavinia's final claim about a poet "getting everything right," speaks to another element: there is a poetic methodology in which one can make errors. In other words, at the same time that one celebrates the poetry of Vergil (following him rather than improving or reproving him), one can outline missteps of his along the way while simultaneously resisting the temptation to insist on a singularly correct historical and nonpoetic mode of representing reality. I aim in the following pages to outline the poetic methodology of the Open City, the value of such a methodology for architecture and urbanism, and, in select moments, to speculate about a few instances in which members of the City did not "get everything right" according to this methodology.

## A Note on Terminology

The careful reader will note two changes of institutional names that are not fully discussed in this work: the change of the Catholic University of Valparaíso (UCV) to the Pontifical Catholic University of Valparaíso (PUCV) and the change of the Amereida Cooperative to the Amereida Cultural Corporation. First, Pope John Paul II gave the title of “pontifical” to the university and it was adopted officially in 2003. For simplicity’s sake, I will consistently refer to the university as “PUCV” throughout this book, recognizing that there was this change in the institutional name. Second, the shift from the Amereida Cooperative to the Amereida Cultural Corporation in the 1990s was a logistical issue resulting, I have been told, from the weakening of the laws surrounding Cooperatives during the 1980s as well as a desire to reinforce the collective nature of the terrains of the Open City. While an interesting case study from the perspective of those interested in designing a collective similar to the Open City and in the various legal and policy tools available to accomplish this task, it is largely inconsequential to the themes and topics of *Politics of the Dunes*.

## Methodology and Outline

Research for this work was conducted via three routes. First, research in the archives of the Open City was conducted on three different occasions: a week-long visit in January 2016, a week-long visit in November 2016, and a year-and-a-half stay between October 2017 and January 2019. During this time, I examined various unpublished documents of the Open City from the time of its foundation as well as various documents from the 1980s that have not been widely circulated, in addition to reading the numerous documents publicly available on the PUCV School of Architecture’s Casiopea website. Second, I lived at the Open City in the *Hospedería Rosa de los Vientos*, also referred to as the “Cells.” My time in the Cells allowed me not only to witness everyday life at the Open City but to experience it. Third, I conducted a series of both informal and formal interviews with residents at the Open City in addition to attending various tours conducted by Open City residents, in which they explained the history of both the larger site and individual constructions to visitors. Seeking a plurality of stories turned out to be of the utmost significance since various citizens have differing accounts of the past and present of the Open City. For instance, I have heard four different versions of the history of the construction of the Palace of Dawn and Dusk.

Any history of the Open City that takes into account only a few perspectives misses this multiplicity underpinning its sociality.

This book proceeds through six chapters. In Chapter 1, I outline the key theoretical conclusions that will be taken up through my analysis of the Open City. Here I make two key arguments. First, I decouple concern for the structuration of a life in common from politics and political theory, thereby making the claim that other fields such as poetry can act as theoretical foundations for alternative socialities. Second, I argue that discussions of decoloniality require an epistemic reconstitution of our ways of knowing the earth. To decolonize not only requires the expulsion of dominating foreign powers and the dehierarchization of epistemic frameworks but also a reconsideration of terrestrial knowledges. What goes unexamined in this chapter, since it is largely a question of the Open City itself to be explored in the body of the book and not linked to broader theoretical questions, is that Open City's poetic mode of living in common which "delinks" (Mignolo 2007) from the Chilean nation-state is a decolonial urban structure.

In Chapter 2, I engage in a literary analysis of *Ameréida*, the epic poem that would subsequently become the intellectual foundation for the Open City. Against common interpretations of the Open City as largely engaging European aesthetic, artistic, poetic, and architectural trends, I argue that *Ameréida* follows a long genealogy of Latin Americanist texts examining what Iommi would later identify as "the only thing that [is] really American": asking what it means to be American (Iommi 2018: 211). My thesis is that *Ameréida* outlines an American identity dedicated to unsettling and decentering colonial European settler epistemologies when put into contact with Indigenous Abya Yalan socioecological systems. Even further, the work identifies the space of the poetic as a discursive field in which it is possible for those coming from a settler positionality to hear the other decolonially. The poetic, in short, becomes a way for *Ameréida* to decolonize Latin Americanism.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I argue that the Open City's poetic foundation serves to think through questions of the structuration of an urban life in common *otherwise* than that of the nation-state and politics. This appeal to a poetic urbanism subsequently serves as a means to delink from the coloniality of the Chilean nation-state and as a theoretical foundation for a robust critique of the Pinochet regime. It is in these chapters where I theoretically outline what the Open City's poetic political nonpolitics concretely signifies.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore the theoretical consequences of putting the Open City into dialogue with subaltern studies. If Chapter 5 reflects on the consequences for historiography, Chapter 6 examines the recent



engagements by some at the Open City with the anthropization of the earth. The central conclusions of these chapters are that the Open City refuses to speak for the subaltern or from a subaltern positionality. Indeed, any such conceit would be more accurately an appropriation of that position for their own services. What they are interested in, however, is how such subaltern experiences and epistemologies require a reorientation of their own ways of thinking, creating, and living.

### Notes

1. Throughout this book I use the term “foreclosed” and “foreclosure” as developed by Gayatri Spivak (1999: 6) referring to the process through which “the ego rejects the incompatible idea *together with the affect* and behaves as if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all.” Foreclosure refers to rhetorical exclusion of the other through casual dismissal, a rhetorical conceit that is central to coloniality.
2. The term “arrivant” is from Kamau Brathwaite (1973). For a full genealogy of the term “arrivant” see De Line and O’Shaughnessy (2018).
3. As with any list (much less a list of only three titles), this one is incomplete. For a full list of significant texts from the foundation of the Open City, see Cáraves (2007: 68). In addition, the reader is recommended to follow the edited volumes (there will be six in total) of Godofredo Iommi’s writing currently being edited by Manuel Florencio Sanfuentes Vio and published by Ediciones Escuela de Arquitectura y Diseño PUCV.
4. I would like to reemphasize this point: this book is founded on an assumed familiarity with decolonial politics and theory. The Open City should not be perceived as being on the front lines of decoloniality. It must always be recognized that that work is being conducted from the position of the colonized.
5. This is especially important in considering the transnational character of the Open City. This book’s focus on the Open City’s Latin Americanism should not be seen as a denial of the transnational character of the group. As Jahan Ramazani (2009: 36) argues in his powerful theorization of transnational poetics, there is a problematic tendency to assume “that in the formation of a poet’s sensibility, the essential ingredients are mother tongue and familial, religious, and educational background; and the frequent corollary is that no amount of geographic, cultural, or linguistic displacement can alter these fundamentals. While these views have some validity, they can easily be taken too far, neutralizing the often transformative, or at least defamiliarizing, effects of migration from an ‘original’ to an ‘adopted’ home or language or religious outlook, of being smitten by literary and artistic works across national boundaries.” For wonderful work on the transnational character of the Open City see Correa (2017) and Pendleton-Jullian (1996). My work seeks to complement these understandings, not replace them.
6. My critiques are largely contained in two articles, “Decoloniality, Communitarity, and Anti-Semitism” and “Punk Urbanism” (both in press).