

Book Review Forum

Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1764-6 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-1502-4 (cloth) ISBN: 978-1-4780-2226-8 (ebook)

To read *Terror Capitalism* is an exercise in discipline. While I have been broadly aware of the enclosure of Uyghur communities and the attacks leveled upon them, I read *Terror Capitalism* with mounting levels of shock, frustration, grief, and, especially, anger—that dangerous affect that can mark a Muslim as volatile, excessive, and suspicious. I use the management of emotions as an entrée into Darren’s book because it locates the intersection of terror capitalism within its affective embodied intimacies with everyday life. It is this intersection that Darren’s rich ethnography captures so beautifully—not only the structures of what he calls terror capitalism, but how it is lived by Uyghur subjects creating, breathing, and surviving.

It bears noting explicitly that while *Terror Capitalism* draws its insights from fieldwork conducted among Uyghur communities in China, this is not an area studies project. Byler’s conceptualization of terror capitalism as the entanglement of state and private capital—that is, capital flows that exceed the borders of the Chinese state—reveals the multiscalar, transnational entanglements through which China (and other states) realize their particular geopolitical projects. *Terror Capitalism* “works to refuse a revival of Cold War binarisms” and frames the colonization of Uyghur communities as a “frontier of global capitalism” (p.xii-xiii). In this view, China is not the Other of the US, but a complex figuration that draws on multiple legacies from colonial histories to global capitalism as well as the splintered ideological circulations of the US-led Global War on Terror to shape enclosure and dispossession in new geographies and wage its own “People’s War on Terror”. In so doing, Byler is in good company building on the well-established literatures of racial capitalism and Indigenous settler-colonial studies. This attention to the pluriverse of entanglements also situates *Terror Capitalism* within emerging anthropological scholarship on transnational security studies that is calling for a more robust

accounting of the gray zones, complicities, muddled intimacies, and nebulous agentive capacities of minoritized actors, that together constitute imperial and national geopolitical projects (see e.g. Al-Bulushi et al. 2020, 2022; Amrute and Murillo 2020; Mikdashi 2022; Razavi 2021).

Byler's project joins this relational scholarship attentive to the politics of location from a transnational feminist analytic lens by foregrounding how techno-political dispossession is lived. His interlocutors survive amidst the violent transformation of Uyghur life into value as coerced labor, a brutal transmutation that distinguishes the enclosure of Uyghur communities into carceral camps from the warehousing of minoritized and racialized Black populations in the United States. Here, digital enclosure produces "a permanent underclass of ethno-racial minority industrial workers" (p.33). This racialization also entails specific gender performances that turn Uyghur women into objects to be saved by competing forms of state and yerlik Islamic patriarchies. Consequently, some Uyghur men understood violence towards Uyghur women as attacks on Uyghur male agency and their role as paternalist protectors. That role could also mean disciplining women seen to be outside normative gendered expectations. One man, Byler observes, spat at the feet of Uyghur women who, he thought, were dressed "immodestly" (p.24). These attitudes, however, were by no means uncontested, and Byler renders his interlocutors with sophisticated complexity.

While *Terror Capitalism* focuses on the production of a racialized, unfree, and coerced labor force, the conceptual framing of "terror capitalism" can account for a broader array of relationships. This is a profit-making security project and a space of "techno-political experimentation in surveillance" (p.xi). In other words, it is a project that moves beyond the question of labor and engenders space to consider the value of non-laboring, racialized, and gendered populations as data subjects who have been used as targets for experimental technologies of war and surveillance. Value is thus also produced through an economy of experimentation that can occur inside and outside the carceral camp as state and private capital test and reshape surveillance technics in light of forms of Uyghur digital practices, or intransigence, refusal, and resistance. For instance, Byler explains how the prevalence of digital *audio* messaging on the WeChat platform among Uyghurs engendered a semi-autonomous digital public sphere for discussion of Islam and politics. Consequently, under the counter-

terrorism mandate of the Chinese state, the technology firm, the “National Champion” iFLYTEK, developed tools to automatically transcribe and translate Uyghur-language audio into Chinese “where it could then be analyzed for precriminal and criminal content” (p.41).

Uyghurs, for their part, responded to the overwhelming surveillance of their lives with what Byler calls a “minor politics of refusal”. When ownership of Islamic material became criminal and digital surveillance deepened, some buried their phones in the desert while others froze their SD cards with Islamic texts inside dumplings (p.52). Uyghur men also developed homosocial friendships to endure and care with and for each other—what Byler calls “anti-colonial friendships”. These companionships, characterized as *jan-jiger dost* are saturated with intense affective attachments. Translated as “life and liver friendships” wherein the liver is the organ of courage and acute sentiment in Uyghur (and South Asian) epistemology, the *jan-jiger dost* is that companion who is both beloved soulmate and caregiver and one for whom one’s own life can be sacrificed.

Byler argues that these homosocial friend-bonds enact anti-colonial praxis through caregiving, shared storytelling of experiences of trauma, and mutual obligation. As a Muslim-woman-of-color intellectual, reading about Byler’s ambulation through the city with his male interlocutors, convening and discussing together in public cafes, I become quickly attuned to the gendered erasures that undergird these *jan-jiger dost* friendships. That there appear to be no women in these circles because it is largely men who are migrants, is evident. However, as I noted earlier—and as Byler himself observes—the gendered masculinist performances and social worlds of Uyghur men are also predicated on attempts to control the social and material life of women, including shaping and limiting their mobilities. It is through these gendering entanglements and gendered exclusions that spaces like streets and cafes come to take shape around certain kinds of normatively cis-male bodies, a point I take from Sara Ahmed (2006). In other words, the disappearance of women from the scene is not only backdrop but *continually* reproduced through myriad gendering practices that then also shape homosocial friendships. Like historical anti-colonial movements, therefore, anti-colonial friendships perhaps also operate in a specific minor key: seeking to destroy some of the explicit structures of colonial oppression

while preserving its gendered permutations under the guise of preserving the “authentic” nation or culture of the oppressed.

These issues pose particular kinds of gender problems for the cis-male ethnographer: what are his obligations to his immediate interlocutors—when they are mostly composed of other cis-males—and how can he ethically engage those responsibilities while being mindful of not deepening gendered exclusions and oppression? This is perhaps all the more vital for normatively racially white-presenting ethnographers in colonial settings because the racial legacies of colonialism have also ascribed an authoritative legitimacy to whiteness. That one can reckon with these questions is a gift of Byler’s book. It is precisely because *Terror Capitalism* delivers finely-tuned ethnographic material and is already sensitive to questions of gender that such questions can even be raised—ones that future scholarship must consider and engage.

Finally, through the framework of anti-colonial friendships, Byler offers a crucial guide for anthropologists conducting fieldwork amidst violence where the scholar will inevitably be captured into struggles over power. Byler rightly argues that in these contexts, ethnographic engagement and fieldwork with colonized subjects means becoming an “accomplice in their grief and rage” (p.160). This can be anthropology at its most ethically powerful—alert, attentive, and attuned to the relational dimension of fieldwork.

Terror Capitalism is a sharp, deftly researched contribution to critical transnational studies scholarship—required reading for scholars who want to trace techno-power as it shifts, moves, and morphs across multiple scales.

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