

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)

Author's Response—Thinking from “the Deathworld” in Northwest China

There is something powerful about having readers feel and think with me (and with the main figures in the book, Ablikim, Hasan and the others) about writing experiences and thoughts that are mine and my friends'. I am very grateful to Vivian Lu, Eli Friedman, Madiha Tahir, Joe Bryan, and Tanzeen Rashed Doha for engaging so deeply with the book. Like Tanzeen, I like this feeling of shared sociality not because it promises a way out the abyss of Northwest China, or what he refers to in an inversion of the phenomenological framing of lifeworld as “the deathworld” of Northwest China, but because this kind of close reading gives me a feeling of being in it together, on the same page. This isn't the first time I've felt this way with readers of *Terror Capitalism*. I've felt it when talking to Muslim men in Delhi, with graduate students from Kashmir, with scholars from Palestine, Pakistan, and Turkey, with people in worlds devastated by the Global War on Terror. What I am trying to articulate in this book is a structure of feeling that resonates with their worlds, which is why, I think, the feelings of rage and grief rise to the surface across the page and Zoom screens. I wanted this book to do this, to move on an affective level, because that is how I first experienced the world of this book. And because that deathworld continues on under the same moon that we all live under every night. Ablikim, my friend and guide through this world, is locked away, again, in Tanzeen's reading, in an even more profound soul-choke than I have the capacity to think.

But I also want the book to do more than this, and I'm gratified that each of the readers who have engaged it have explored particular strands that speak to them. I am grateful that they have looked beyond the knee-jerk anti-imperialist embrace of authoritarian statecraft that has compromised some of our Leftist comrades to recognize colonial formations and racialized

capitalist frontier-making as something truly insidious, even in states in adversarial contemporary relationships with of the EuroAmerican empire. They see gender, Islam, masculinity, coloniality, and global capital in Northwest China as things worth mapping out on a dry-erase board as Vivian did with her students in New York City.

Madiha's reading of the partiality of the story I was able to tell from my particular social position I found to be particularly insightful. She notes that the relationships and spaces I observed were anticolonial 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". This is certainly the case, my access to the space and the lives of Uyghur migrants were shaped by their gendered position and my own, and also the curatorial process, the ethical choices, I made as an ethnographer. I chose to spend time with men who were approximately my age and who came from rural, lower-class backgrounds, which meant that I had less of a view into domestic spaces in the city. Unlike my colleague and collaborator Sam Tynen (2022), I did not engage underground queer spaces where Uyghur and Han sociality was expressed through different forms of solidarity than in the ethnically segregated and largely heteronormative bazars and tea houses where a Uyghur derivation of hegemonic masculinity was the norm. Because of the ethical decorum elicited by my position as a white, American male researcher, I also did not engage directly with Uyghur women migrants who were sent by their families to live as nannies and maids in the homes of wealthy urban Uyghurs, the women who were pushed into forms of sex work, the women who utilized piety practices as a mode of gendered self-empowerment, or those who sought protection from men as they established their own businesses and families in urban contexts.[1]

The story I am telling instead is the way Muslim men were confronted by a virulent anti-Muslim racism, that cast them as *the* source of danger and ideological disease in Uyghur society and by extension China and the world itself. These men were the sons and brothers of women who asked them for piety and protection, even as they also protected themselves. And to get at Madiha's "specific minor key", at times the anticolonial behaviors of the same men led to them treating Uyghur women as contested objects of control relative to settler institutions and logics. The state's imperialist reframing of feminism as a process of saving Uyghur women from

Uyghur men and the Islamic danger they represented was a structural violence that both women and men strove to refuse (Salimjan 2019), and sometimes a male uptake of this refusal was a reactive misogyny.

More generally though, regardless of gender identifications, Uyghurs in the world I encountered saw Islamic practice and Uyghur knowledge as a source of protection from the forces that were aligned to desiccate the vitality of their lives. The sisterhood and brotherhood of piety movements in mosque communities, and even more so, in online spaces, where gendered and class-based norms were less stratified, provided women and men a sense of existential safety and futurity. Of course, these were the same spaces of police surveillance. By participating in digitized social networks Uyghurs exposed themselves to retroactive and ongoing algorithmic dataveillance, opening their thoughts and their social worlds to tremendous forms of violence.

Thinking about the sociality of religious practice, I need to push back a bit on Joe's suggestion that Islamic identity is a modern knowledge system that may devalue a more Indigenous Uyghur epistemology. Uyghurs have been Muslim for over a thousand years, a history that is only a century or two shorter than the history of Tibetan relationships with Buddhism. As Rian Thum (2014) and the imprisoned Uyghur anthropologist, Rahile Dawut (2017), have shown, Uyghur Islamic practice is folded directly onto attachments to sacred land and the oral traditions that narrate the land-based life practices that prefigure the modern state form. That is to say, Uyghur indigeneity—their of-the-land-ness—something that rural Uyghurs refer to as *yerlik*, is simultaneously drawn from animist and Islamic traditions. In this sense Islam and Uyghur *yerlik* practices (and Indigenous practices everywhere) are simultaneously modern and premodern. The priorness of these practices is what gives force to their claims to a community-accountable sovereignty, both in and beyond the modern state form. In some sense, Uyghurs are in a position similar to Hawai'ians: their lands are the site of ongoing settler colonialism, overlaid by imperial politics and religion, but language and land-based traditions continue to build an Indigenous future even in the midst of this structure.

The specific settler-colonial story I am trying to narrate in the book is the way colonial socialism in the 1950s (see Byler 2022) begins a structured process of Uyghur dispossession, and how that process is radically accelerated by capitalist enclosure and settler occupation of Uyghur

lands in the 1990s. It is in this moment of China's turn to the global market economy when an internal colonial relation is transformed into the structure of an internal *settler* colony. The Islamic contemporaneity and capitalism of the 2010s that I describe as part of the process of digital enclosure also accelerated Uyghur dispossession—by reorienting young Uyghurs toward urban, self-investment and away from communal sociality—but I don't view this as an indictment of Islam. Rather it is an outcome of the boundary struggle between Islamic Uyghur forms of sociality and the entrepreneurial demands of global capital. The colonial-capital relations that confront Uyghurs today is what pulls them out of relation to each other, producing forms of dependence on the market and state-contractor built infrastructure, resulting in their further exposure to the technology-assisted settler gaze.

What I have been observing in Northwest China then is the way that contemporary settler-colonial projects—particularly in memetic colonialisms of imperial states like Israel, and subimperial states of the formerly colonized or semi-colonized like China and India—tend toward a particular form of flexible digital control. The process of digital enclosure establishes a system of hierarchical inclusion, where finely graded racialized populations are automatically monitored in real-time to maintain control. Meanwhile, protected settler populations are given unimpeded access, as their entry into spaces is pre-approved, allowing them to move freely. This form of enclosure, which originates from European and American military and policing theory and “counter-terrorism” technology, is being modified by government agencies and corporations to place marginalized populations into the realm of actionable intelligence. As a result, state violence is normalized as a necessary series of operations, accelerating the adaptation of this banal, indifferent violence. This, as Eli points out, is the ultimate lesson that Xinjiang provides when it comes to thinking about the future of political and economic systems in China, but also across the world.

The digital enclosure is part of the structure of dispossession that confronts Uyghurs. It is layered on top of the material enclosure of Uyghur lands through fences, roads, pipelines, and the paperwork of legalized theft that form the resource extraction economy. The digital enclosure works to extend colonial dispossession beyond the expropriation of land, to the theft of the body. Utilizing a compound labour regime that is reminiscent of Apartheid South Africa (Burawoy

1976), hundreds of thousands of Uyghur villagers have been deemed surplus, removed from their land and communities, and assigned to work in privately owned and state securitized factories. The coercive proletarianization and thought reform elements of the campaign also draw directly from China's own Maoist past, when class enemies and wayward compatriots in a revolution gone awry were subjected to similar forms of violence (Byler 2022).

However, the logic of colonial racial capitalism in this context is not exhausted by the theft of land and labor. As in contemporary Indian and Israeli colonialisms, it wants the behavioral data of the colonized too. Here there is a resonance with Sahana Ghosh's (2019) argument regarding biometric surveillance of the Muslim Other in Indian borderlands. Such population-level data collection is about the production of the detectability of a particular type of gendered, ethno-religiously marked body and thus automating processes of anti-Muslim racism. This process and the data harvesting that it fosters, itself has direct implications for the development of computer vision technologies and the scaling up of dataveillance tools across the world. In the Chinese context, computer vision start-ups who receive state security contracts develop commercial applications in domains such as smart warehousing, fintech, and so on in the space of two years (Ayed 2022). The digital operational enclosure of the Uyghurs and the symmetrical, high-fidelity datasets it has produced is also an incubator at scale for automated population management technologies that are now embedded in the logics of smart city systems across China. This is also a part of what has made China a leading exporter of digital forensics superseded only by its antecedents Israel and the United States.

Terror Capitalism emphasizes the ideological discourses and capacities of digitized racial capitalism in co-constructing settler colonialism in Northwest China. I did this because I want to emphasize that this is a story of the current global moment, not China's alone, and to show as clearly as possible how systems of digitized racialization produce a brutal, unthought violence in communities and families—eating into their ability to reproduce themselves. However, while this is case, at the same time relations of care continue to exist beyond the capacity of surveillance systems. Recognizing this is important because it shows that even in a limit case such as the Uyghur homeland, the design and intent of these systems are unfinalizable as people still strive to find ways to live, *and die*, in families and communities beyond their control.

Thinking about this as part of an emergent global sequence of race-making shows how contemporary colonial capital travels, but also how the deathworld of racial oppression and colonialism cannot control what Tanzeen might call “a tremor in the earth”, nor can it silence the stories that the living tell.

Endnote

[1] For scholarship on the way Uyghur women were positioned in migrant spaces, see Tynen (2021). For discussions of Uyghur women’s relationship to piety movements, see Huang (2009). For a discussion of Uyghur migrant women and sex work, see Smith Finley (2015).

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Darren Byler
School for International Studies
Simon Fraser University
dbyler@sfu.ca