

*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)

In recent panic attacks, I have discovered that even though the heart (*qalb*) is the starting point for mapping sorrow, a sensation from the heart quickly travels to the legs and to the arms. The legs shake, and the arms tremble. There is an inability to write, or to stand, or to hold things without running the risk of dropping them. Ceramic plates and glasses fall and break as they hit the hardwood floor. When I survive panic attacks, I go for walks, and immediately, I sense the heart's condition to have a direct relationship with the limbs—a relationship based on coordination, rhythm, and pace. Byler's interlocutor Ablikim also likes walking in the city "to fight his boredom and depression" (p.153). What is this "boredom and depression"? In a different context, Stefania Pandolfo writes about "soul choking", which she explains through reference to the Qur'anic term "*al-qanat*", namely "melancholy-boredom, loss of all hope, which empties the self, and 'sends it off' into nothingness" (Pandolfo 2018: 218, 326). Ablikim, in Byler's text, thinks about images he encounters in the city as he walks, creating a "kaleidoscope of feeling". Even though Byler's *Terror Capitalism* identifies technologies and enclosures of a War on Terror economy to be creating the conditions of possibility of feelings of suicide and nothingness, panic attacks and "melancholy-boredom" may not have direct causes. Memory is never simply a record (of absence). It contains figures from facets and mirrors: ghosted friends, disappeared brothers, a dead best friend in '95, a father in an emergency room plugged into a life-support machine waiting for his son to convince others that it is transition time. After the *janaza* (Islamic funeral), and after journeying with the dead body from the unbearable city to the village—where the cemetery for the extended family is next to a small mosque by the pond, a dreamy image—the unknowability of origins still creates the conditions of a vertigo.

Byler writes about Ablikim’s depression, which “stemmed not only from his experience with policing but also from the apathy and discrimination of his coworkers at the school where he worked as a teacher” (p.144). Byler explains how this leads to suicidal thoughts and friendship is what allows one to refuse death: “He gave up his job. He developed a constant tremor in his hands. He stayed in his bare, concrete apartment for days at a time, sleeping little. He often spoke about suicide and how his friendship with Batur prevented him from ending his life” (p.134). In the Uyghur context, Byler suggests, friendship is “essential in the boundary struggle against enclosure and devaluation” (p.136). He emphasizes that friendships among Uyghur men allow for a kind of “existential stability” (p.137). Storytelling and sharing of “life rhythms” (p.137) allow for an intersubjective being-together among Uyghur men. Byler historicizes friendships in Uyghur culture, explains how there are many words for friend, like *dost*, *adash*, and *borader*, creating a polysemy of meanings, but *jan-jiger dost* is the most special. In this kind of friendship, life (*jan*) and liver (*jiger*) are shared. The liver is “the seat of courage in Uyghur epistemology”. Fundamentally courageous, such friendships allow for the formation of a particular kind of masculinity outside of conventional patriarchy.

Byler’s focus on masculinity is an important intervention in this category. Under conditions of the War on Terror, when Muslim men—generally identified as terrorists, to be humiliated and dishonored—spit at the feet of women whom they consider immodest (p.24), they are not merely exhibiting misogyny; they are revealing their desire to spit at secularity itself and its totalizing de-Islamization of Uyghur society. The spitting is misdirected, of course, but it is also instructive as it identifies Uyghur women as occupying a foundational role in the reproduction of the Uyghur world, a world in antagonism with Chinese state capitalism (of which processes of forced secularization are a political consequence), and a world slowly forced to disappear into oblivion. Byler confirms that Islamic faith is central to the Uyghur world, and notes how the Chinese state specifically intervenes to disrupt access to Islamic heritage and knowledge systems:

They had always been Muslim, but because of the way the state in China had limited their access to Islamic knowledge and other Muslim communities, many young Uyghurs

had little opportunity to actively explore this side of their history and knowledge system.  
(p.38)

Moreover, Byler explains not only how Uyghur men are specifically targeted as terrorists, but how the Chinese state mobilizes “an imperialist and fundamentally false form of feminism” (p.24). I agree with Byler that there are different possibilities within feminism, but I am unsure if such multiplicity—implying false and true forms of feminism—is a proper safeguard against what appears to be a categorial confrontation between Islam’s normative corpus (which has specific legal, moral, and political discourses around sex and gender, and in which the subject is not foundational) and feminism itself (for which the autonomous subject is foundational and is assumed *a priori* as legitimate).[1] The re-presentation of Uyghur men as “pathologically dangerous” and Uyghur women needing to be saved “from Islam and Uyghur gender relations” (p.24) reveal the Chinese state’s fundamental interest in neutralizing Uyghur capacity to reproduce themselves as Islamic. By disrupting the traditional Islamic family, the state seeks to proletarianize Uyghurs “into an unfree but economically productive workforce” (p.9). It is clear then that Uyghur men are not considered “pathologically dangerous” only because they can be read as potential terrorists; their orientation within Islam and their masculinity is also seen as disruptive to the capitalist expropriation of labor power. In this sense, the Uyghurs are an economic threat, not just a political one.

Byler’s ethnography gives us access to the specific context of *terror capitalism* in China, where Islam’s orthodox tradition has become an impediment to capitalist homogenization and totalization. Capitalism’s structuring of the family requires a particular Protestant Christianization of home life for the reproduction of the worker.[2] The heteronormativity that emerges from Protestantization is distinct from normative traditions in Islam.[3] The Islamic normative family is itself a complex unit irreducible to heteronormativity as such, though there are empirical overlaps in contemporary manifestations.[4] Because of these overlaps, a general condemnation of heteronormativity in the context of Muslim traditional life is often complicit with anti-Islamist counterterrorism measures. Moreover, if anthropologists are to take norms seriously as an ethnographic object of inquiry, then they must accede that, as Saba Mahmood

teaches us, “norms are not simply a social imposition on the subject but constitute the very substance of her intimate, valorized interiority”; there are a “variety of ways in which norms are lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (Mahmood 2004: 23). Byler does what Mahmood recommends. As an ethnographer, he embeds himself in the world of the Uyghurs, and writes an engaging, dynamic, and ultimately transformative ethnography in which his interlocutors *live, inhabit, aspire to* and *reach for* Islam’s norms—its pedagogical heritage, its political potential in refusing state interventions, and its self-disciplinary cultivation of a prophetic ethics. But Byler’s work also shows the impossibility of living, inhabiting, and aspiring. The Uyghurs are thrown into re-education torture camps, surveilled, disappeared, their families placed under erasure, their masculinity obliterated. Byler’s focus on homosocial friendships and masculinity yields not only descriptions of a complex discursive field and social life within a constellation of Islam’s normative world; it is also a narrative from the abyss of death.

Byler’s work moves beyond reading normativity as the revivalist positing of virtue ethics as a means for the construction of an alternative agency. Instead, his ethnography focuses on the impossibility of agency—what it means to dwell in devastation, to anticipate impending death. When he explains that “Uyghur male friendships can define manhood less in terms of the domination of women ... and more as protection from the dispossessing effects of enclosure and devaluation” (p.137), Byler indicates that norms, concepts, and practices in Islam become meaningful as immanent formations within the urgencies of history. Friendship as a form of care acts as a “fragile source of Uyghur existential stability” in a tormenting history (p.137). Byler’s ethnography explores the thin line between life and death, possibility and impossibility, fragility and stability. This thin line really is between and within different forms of death. The possibility of life collapses into a fragment within death, and stability functions as a momentary placeholder within a fragile life. This immanent becoming of death is death as non-actuality finding itself as death in its own home. What does it mean to have *jan-jiger dosti* within this process of death’s self-actualization? Han settlerism affects Uyghur men to transform “the ethical imperatives of jan-jiger friendships” into “obligations of being together” (p.140). Friends attentively listen to each other’s stories, stories in which they “feel as though ... [they have] entered into the same

experience” (140). This is deeper than empathy. If “love is the slowest, most direct form of suicide”,<sup>[5]</sup> then this is that kind of love, that kind of friendship. You will lose your life-liver friend; hold his hand tighter. This may be the last time you will see them; give them flowers.

What does death hide? Friendship is an exploration of what death conceals. I read Byler’s description of “life-liver” friendship as a reflection on this hidden dimension of life. The ethnographic details show us not only what Uyghur dispossession reveals about capitalist enclosure and colonial domination, but also how it hides an entire complex of affect, dispositions, motivations, and feelings from outsiders. These friendships do not simply function as coping mechanisms. They are ways in which Uyghur men sense and feel that their lives are not just their own. Jan-jiger friendships are an immanent breakdown of individual subjectivity within a larger temporality of devastation. Byler writes that “the work of reproducing anticolonial sociality under conditions of dispossession is not contained in a single life” (p.162), and “the story of Ablikim’s life after 2009 was more than just his own”. Friendships move beyond singularity into a broader deathworld.

When I read *Terror Capitalism*, I see death, devastation, sorrow. I read about jan-jiger friendships and I like what I feel, not because there is anticolonial sociality or a haunting dream of a future, but because to feel, even briefly, is to know momentarily that death’s inscription in our bodies is also a tremor in the earth. The ground we stand on that founds the world as such (the story we tell ourselves), itself proves to be unstable. Life-liver friendship is another name for the consensus that the world is ending; it is the ability to see and feel such a consensus together, a kind of confirmation that no reform, no revolution, no abolition can save what cannot be saved, state-capitalism included, and not just Chinese.

## Endnotes

[1] See Doha (2018). In this article, I make a categorial argument about the incompatibility between feminism and orthodox Islam. However, I cite specific works by Gayatri Spivak, Hortense Spillers, and Sunera Thobani as exceptions to my general point about incompatibility.

[2] See Weber (2001). Weber's analysis is foundational, but I read the Christianization/Protestantization of the family to be the result of material conditions of capitalism. The relationship between capitalist production and accumulation and Christian ideology is dialectical. See Lukacs' essay "What is Orthodox Marxism?" (1971) on dialectical materialism as a method. Also see note 4 in chapter 15 of Marx's *Capital, Volume 1* (1976): "Even a history of religion that is written in abstraction from this material basis is uncritical".

[3] See Barlas (2002). I do not agree with Barlas' overall project of dismissing classical Islamic scholarship, but she makes an important hermeneutic point about the irreducibility of God to Father in Islam. This allows us to see the difference between Christian patriarchy and Islam's normative traditions around gender, sex, and family.

[4] The standardization of monogamy is central to heteronormativity under Christian secularity. The Islamic family structure can vary from monogamy to polygyny depending on hermeneutic and sociocultural and political contexts. Therefore, normativity in Islam is constituted differently compared to Christianity and bourgeois secularism. In the context of Uyghur life there is evidence of practices of polygyny even under conditions of extreme surveillance. The Chinese state targets Islamic polygyny and Byler confirms that this is one of the reasons why *nikah* rituals are completely illegal (see article 59: <https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/chinese-sources/online-sources/identifying-religious-extremism/?fbclid=IwAR3ni9sWTXyXy2-iL9BieYLzBtq9cxkqzauqkBCRhMedleBvxfDgzLd4CTY>). While I do not suggest that Islamic polygyny is inherently anti-capitalist because it refuses bourgeois monogamy, I bring this point to show that normativity (including normative masculinity) in Islam is constituted differently compared to general hetero-patriarchy. While polygyny depending on specific economic conditions may help Uyghur men as workers by allowing them access to two or more homes for their reproduction as proletariat, the state certainly finds polygyny to be an obstacle for its modernization policies (in which de-Islamization of Uyghur families is key).

[5] Former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson defines love in this manner in an interview.

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