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Byler, Darren. 2022. *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City*. (Duke University Press).

Emma Loizeaux, July 2022

Attention to mass detention, forced labor and “reeducation” of Uyghur Muslims in China’s Xinjiang is belatedly growing in the U.S. and other Western nations. In June 2022, for example, the U.S.’s Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act went into effect, curtailing imports linked to Xinjiang and shaking up supply chains for solar panels, clothing, floor tiles, and agricultural products, among others.¹ A few months earlier, hundreds of thousands of documents, records and photographs hacked from police computer systems in Xinjiang, leaked to Dr. Adrien Zenz and the BBC, revealed a trove of fresh horror.² Meanwhile, recent *New York Times* reporting has

chronicled a bloom of surveillance infrastructures across China and these contraptions’ ability to “automate prejudice.”³ What is the relationship between state digital surveillance, the detention and reeducation campaign, and Xinjiang’s economic productivity? While most accounts frame what’s happening in Xinjiang in terms of human rights abuses and cold-blooded central-state authoritarianism, Darren Byler has something more in mind in *Terror Capitalism*. Drawing on more than two years of ethnographic field research in Xinjiang between 2011 and 2018, primarily with male Uyghur urban migrants, Byler finds that what’s going on is not only violation of rights, nor simply authoritarianism, racism or Islamophobia, but rather the production and conquering of a new, colonial frontier of ethno-racialized global capitalism.

The importance of *Terror Capitalism* plays on both empirical and theoretical levels: first, Byler offers revelatory ethnographic detail of Uyghur life in Xinjiang, rendered for English-language readers, emerging from a time of tightening police control when few other such reports are available. Byler has been extensively involved in this information dissemination project for some time;⁴ *Terror Capitalism* takes the opportunity of a full-length book to move into – and masterfully so – a second, theoretical level that meaningfully advances understanding of the relationships among capitalism, race, and colonialism. Right up front, Byler has to clear away quite a few cobwebs to place Xinjiang and China firmly within this much broader conversation, rather than as its outliers. Western Europe, Byler argues, doesn’t hold a monopoly on settler colonialism. Just because China was historically subject to partial colonization and is avowedly anti-imperial doesn’t mean it can’t enact its own domestic colonization today. And just because Uyghurs are considered an “ethnic group” doesn’t mean they can’t be the target of new forms of racialization, centered around discourses of terrorism, which, a la the likes of Cedric Robinson (1983) and Ruth Gilmore (2007), support accumulation in a system of racial capitalism. With these declarations, Byler spurns the academic discourse of Chinese exceptionalism and its conclusions that “China’s just different” to instead untangle how processes in China are, yes, absolutely particular to their context, but also inextricably related

to, even shaping, contemporary global systems. What emerges by centering, rather than excluding, China, from our understanding of these processes is a more nuanced and complete understanding of the processes themselves. Here are a few of the things, roughly tracing the progression of Byler’s argument, that Xinjiang can tell us about the intertwining of contemporary capitalism, settler colonialism, and racialization:

1. New frontiers for capital accumulation are being produced not only from land and natural resource enclosure, but also from forms of “**digital enclosure.**” In Xinjiang, a techno-political system of digital surveillance has served, Byler argues, the same end as Marx’s land enclosures— to create a new class of unfree laborers to be exploited in the service of capital accumulation. This digital enclosure, which proceeds through processes like biometric identification, smartphone surveillance and analytics, and location tracking systems, corrects any misconceptions that camps and factories, or even the proliferation of cameras in public spaces, are the only infrastructures that enclose—Byler pushes us to think beyond such physicalities to consider built structures that work in and connect together tangible and intangible spaces. Perhaps because of this transgressive quality, digital enclosure is remarkably complete, including not only people rounded up and held at camps and factories, but also those who are forced to work as low-level police contractor “data janitors” and those forced to trumpet the teachings of the reeducation campaign on social media to prove allegiance to the Chinese state. Everyone ends up enclosed and serving the economic interests of the enclosure.
2. This kind of enclosure becomes a racialized process through differential **devaluation** of social reproduction. Here Byler lines up a comparison between male Han and Uyghur urban migrants’ experiences of life in the city. While Han migrants experience an opening up of their life possibilities, Uyghur migrants are stymied in their efforts to “make it” in urban life. The difference, Byler argues, is that Han efforts to cultivate value are supported, while Uyghur efforts to do so, including through engaging in “heritage trades,” are devalued. Because heritage trades are *yerlik*, a Uyghur term Byler argues should be understood as “proximate” to “Indigenous,” practicing them supports Uyghur identity and well-being; their devaluation thus amounts to a devaluation of Uyghur social reproduction. This points towards an important extension of social reproduction beyond its origins as exploited “women’s work” to encompass practices and relations that maintain not just the wage-laboring body but also the sense of self and social identity across genders. In this way Byler reaffirms but also broadens the essential feminist insistence that social reproduction and its de/valuation form a key terrain where difference is produced.
3. Digital enclosure and devaluation entwine in a brand of **dispossession** that is not merely material. Mirroring an expanded social reproduction, Byler also defines dispossession broadly as not only

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loss of property (fueling capital accumulation elsewhere, in the David Harvey (2014) sense), but also as loss of self-determination (pp.100) and as “a relationship of the mind to the self” (pp.111). This broadening allows Byler to link ethno-racialization strongly to dispossession, and is key to his argument that what’s happening in Xinjiang is both colonization and capitalism. Byler walks us through three moments of Uyghur dispossession—the rise of industrial farming, the advent of TV and smartphones, and the People’s War on Terror—where we can trace not only processes of dispossession but actually preceding promises of self-possession. Self-possession, as others have argued, is confounding in that it establishes the preconditions for dispossession (Nichols 2020). In Xinjiang, a pattern emerges where a measure of self-determination is offered up in these historical moments, but when grasped, morphs into a tool for dispossession. Smartphones, for example, initially opened up possibilities, through participation in online religious forums, for Uyghurs to claim the self in new ways, but turned out to work as a “capitalist modality” (pp.111) that obscures broader forces of enclosure. These forces in the end have weaponized self-possession, using Uyghur engagements with those online forums as grounds for detention.

4. In the midst of dispossession, **friendship** should not be overlooked as an anticolonial practice of survival. In this argument, Byler shifts from the “this-is-how-the-system-of-dispossession-works” portion of the book to a “here’s-the-hopeful-practice-of-resistance-already-happening” section. Uyghur “life and liver friendships” between young men take on new importance under conditions of enclosure; these friendships are animated by storytelling, a “powerful weapon in maintaining a sense of existential well-being” (pp.141). Byler here participates in the important work of reallocating agency to the dispossessed without turning away from the very real and limiting conditions of their oppression and of looking to their expressions of agency and refusal to extrapolate a way forward for us all. Byler labels Uyghur friendships *anticolonial*, limited by the processes of enclosure from becoming something fully decolonial; indeed, he heartbreakingly renders the severing of one such anticolonial “life and liver friendship” when one friend is disappeared into the camp system. Hope here, slim as it may be, lies in the discovery that subjectivity can be built through relations of friendship, as well as through relations of unequal power and enclosure (pp.158).
5. **“Minor politics,”** a practice that works to reproduce minority life through “epistemic disobedience” (pp.168), including through the political act of witnessing, offers another kind of hope. Byler tells the story of a Han photographer’s commitment to documenting Uyghur life in Ürümqi as a different kind of anticolonial refusal of terror capitalism. By drawing on aligned identities, Byler suggests, we can access otherwise obscured touchpoints of commonality (here, the photographer’s identity as a “blind wanderer” Han migrant shares partial similarities with the Uyghur *musafir* identity, a traveler figure with mystic and religious connotations). Most compellingly, accessing these touchpoints transgresses imposed boundaries, bringing the Han photographer, for example, into Uyghur spaces in the city and resulting in what Rancière (2005) would call a redistribution of the sensible, or “political torsion” (pp.183). The torsion of witnessing, Byler argues, feeds not an assimilating politics of inclusion, or Chinese multiculturalism, but rather feeds the conditions for difference to flourish. This is minor politics. But this torsion is limited, too, by enclosure.
6. In terror capitalism, all such efforts to reproduce minority life through minor politics, friendship, and also religious economy ultimately end in the failure of **subtraction**. Byler shows how residents of a mid-demolition Uyghur informal settlement in Ürümqi and a young Uyghur participant in online Islamic forums both lean on the religious *musafir* traveler tradition, along with the social and

psychic communal resources that come with this identity, to sustain themselves. A key finding here, building on scholarship on “everyday” Islam, is that increasing religious piety (here, reformist Islam) occurs not in isolation, but rather can be motivated by broader societal processes, namely, terror capitalism. The resulting religious economy sustains life, but only temporarily. Subtraction, “a form of enforced disappearance that coexists with ongoing social life” (pp.214) and the method through which Uyghurs are rendered economically productive through forced labor and harvested data, ultimately and terribly prevails.

These are Byler’s central and significant theoretical contributions. But he offers methodological ones, too. In the later chapters on friendship, minor politics and subtraction, we can see Byler wrestling not only with the limits of anticolonial gestures within Xinjiang, but with the limits of his own practice of anthropology and of ethnography itself— how could he not, having watched terror capitalism subtract people around him? As a figure within the research sphere, he is very much present in the chapter on friendship, where he discusses his own friendships in the field and formulates a methodological theory of anthropology as “the work of anticolonial friendship” (pp.160). In the section on minor politics, too, the “epistemic disobedience” (pp.168) of witnessing seems to reference the anticolonial possibilities of ethnography as well as photography, and invites consideration of the “political torsion” involved with field research as a whole. Byler’s call to those of us who may aspire to “scholar-activism,” then, is less a call to exit the ivory tower and fill the streets (though I doubt Byler would oppose that), and more an imperative to refocus our research practice on *making relations*. Such an aim imposes no conflict with making knowledge; the book as a whole proves otherwise and indeed, Byler argues that friendship produces “its own forms of knowledge” (pp.161). These arguments are a far cry from a “data collection” approach to ethnography, and build strongly on feminist critiques of fieldwork.

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And yet the greater contribution may be Byler’s ruminations on the limits of anticolonial ethnography: “the failure of representation that *musafir* sociality points us toward calls into question the work of film and ethnography, and my own investment in decolonial friendships and minor politics” (pp.218). In Xinjiang’s system of subtraction, Byler leaves us with really only a flicker of addition: there is nothing in the end but “intimacy, sitting knee to knee,” in a way that, Byler hopes, “might restore some of their *authorship* over their own lives” (pp.219, my emphasis). When you write another’s life, can it deliver them a measure of authorship as well? In what ways does authorship sustain life, and in what ways does it fall short of doing so? Byler delivers no clear answers here, but

does offer a piercing honesty that lays particularly bare the contradictions between the epistemic power of storytelling and the troubles of representation.

Terror Capitalism does leave one significant area to future research: Uyghur women’s experiences of terror capitalism. This is necessarily the case— Byler’s male identity afforded him certain accesses and denied others. Byler by no means ignores women, and at one point does offer an intricate argument that Uyghur men’s devaluation in the urban marketplace deepens dispossession of Uyghur women, a kind of concatenation of ethno-racialized dispossession with gendered dispossession. Byler’s commitment to feminist critique of political economy throughout the book, given the empirical focus on Uyghur men, is

quite remarkable, but also leaves the reader deeply curious about other-gendered experiences of enclosure, devaluation, dispossession, and subtraction. It seems one outcome of terror capitalism may be that women were subtracted from this book before it even began.

Throughout *Terror Capitalism*, Byler's intimate, heartfelt, and extensive research serves to illuminate how settler colonialism and ethno-racial capitalism conspire to digitally enclose, devalue, dispossess and subtract Uyghur lives in Xinjiang, and how practices of anticolonial friendship and minor politics of witnessing refuse, limitedly, these conditions. The concept of "terror capitalism" compellingly demonstrates that Xinjiang and China have a lot to teach us about these global processes. Indeed, terror capitalism is being made in China, based on a newly constructed infrastructure of surveillance technologies and data analytics, along with camps and factories. *Terror Capitalism* opens fresh lines of inquiry into how infrastructures—digital and traditional—engrave ethno-racial difference into landscapes and into lives.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/f205b47a-923e-431d-8d92-eb05ab12f216>

² <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-8df450b3-5d6d-4cd8-bdcc-bd99137eadc3>;
<https://www.xinjiangpolicefiles.org/>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/25/technology/china-surveillance-police.html>

⁴ See, for example, Byler's writing for The Guardian (<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/darren-byler>), SupChina (<https://supchina.com/author/darrenbyler/>), and ChinaFile (<https://www.chinafile.com/contributors/darren-byler>), and the collaborative Xinjiang Documentation Project (<https://xinjiang.sppga.ubc.ca/>)