Review

Queer Terror: Life, death, and desire in the settler colony

C. Heike Schotten

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C. Heike Schotten's *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* brings together conversations in political theory, native studies, queer theory, and biopolitics to offer a stunningly original theory of the temporality of settler sovereignty. Trenchant, polemical, and committed to a revolutionary politics against settler sovereignty, *Queer Terror* nonetheless seeks to conscript its reader to a seemingly untenable position. Schotten closes the book with the memorable and apparently indefensible declaration, 'We choose to stand on the side of "terrorism"' (168). *Queer Terror* builds a solid theoretical armature for why standing on the side of 'terrorism' is a queer and decolonial position.

The core of the book is chapter 2, in which Schotten conducts a highly original reading of Hobbes's *Leviathan* in order to theorize settler sovereignty as driven by futural, expansionist desire. For Hobbes, what is desired is possession, and possession is a temporal affair. In the state of nature, there is no hope of securing the object of one's desire from all those who would seek to take it from you. Hence, there can be no temporal continuity of desire into a future of guaranteed satisfaction. Thus, the state of nature is characterized by hopelessness and emotional stasis. The stable order of the commonwealth, by contrast, is supposed to guarantee a future of satisfied and protected possession. But in Hobbes's theory of desire, possession is never enough, as desire seeks to constantly renew itself, as well as the experience of satisfaction, by turning from one object to another. For Schotten, the expansionist character of desire within the settler commonwealth is one driving engine of imperialism. The disavowed violence of settler sovereignty – in actual settler states as in Hobbes's myth of the founding of the commonwealth out of the state of nature – is its other engine. Because the violence of native dispossession and would-be genocide cannot be acknowledged by the settler state, and because the continuing existence of native peoples threatens this disavowal, imperialism emerges with deadly force: 'Empire functions as a kind of substitutive

satisfaction to compensate for the failure of settler sovereignty to finally and fully exterminate indigenous peoples' (59). Schotten's critique of the temporality of settler colonial desire in chapter 2 thus offers shared ground for native studies and (post)colonial studies – two fields that are often seen as in tension with one another.

The second pillar of Schotten's argument is an astonishing reading of Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* as a politically revolutionary text in favor of native life and native resistance. This flies in the face of the well-established reading of *No Future* as an a- or even anti-political text. Indeed, Edelman famously critiques all politics as based on a futural temporality that must repudiate the meaninglessness and a-temporality of the death drive, which, for Edelman, is socially represented by queers. In Schotten's reading, however, *No Future's* project of saying no to the futurism of politics 'is not equivalent to abolishing politics as such and could only mean as much if every modernity were European modernity, if every politics were a sovereign biopolitics, and if every temporality were futurist' (109). Instead, she reframes Edelman as an advocate of the opposition to the futurism of settler sovereignty developed in chapter 2 – a settler sovereignty that, much like the death drive itself, posits all resistance to it as irrational ('terrorism') and/or a-temporal ('savage'). Hence, in Schotten's rereading, Edelman's project is 'wedded to life, albeit a life that is unlivable as life, which is the status of native life within settler colonial regimes' (110). To be sure, Schotten concedes that Edelman universalizes the futurism of the settler state as the futurism of *all* politics, just as he universalizes the hetero-reproductive futurity symbolized by the white child as that of *all* children. Hers is therefore less a reading of Edelman than an adventurous and compelling appropriation – for the most part, that is. For to say that native life is not recognized as life, that native futures are not recognized as futures, and thus that native life occupies the structural position of the queer, of death, and of anti-futurity, is to concede the symbolic order – the order of representation and meaning – to settler sovereignty. As Schotten acknowledges, 'it seems particularly cruel and benighted to dismiss futurist movements and political struggles when they are so often waged precisely by those who were never meant to survive' (112). Edelman would surely respond that indigenous political movements, like all political movements, are versions of futurism that queers must oppose, because every futural politics, even that of the most disenfranchised, necessarily repudiates the a-temporality of the drives. Beyond the Edelmanian frame, we might wonder whether a truly decolonial politics and theory would *decolonize futurity*, rather than conceding it to the settler state, while refuting the meanings of death, a-temporality, and structural queerness that settler sovereignty assigns to native resistance. But Schotten's faithfulness to the Edelmanian frame – and to 'high' theory itself – prevents her from articulating the alternative terms of native and decolonial futurity. Though she helps us to see how settler sovereignty falsely universalizes its own futurity, ultimately, like Edelman, she concedes the terms of political

discourse to settler sovereignty, granting it an absolute chokehold on representation itself.

In the final chapter, Schotten constructs an illuminating genealogy of ‘terrorism’ that will not only be highly teachable but also useful to scholars of the Global War on Terror, Palestinian resistance, and contemporary anti-Muslim sentiment. Throughout the chapter, Schotten puts ‘terrorism’ in scare quotes to signal that the term, on her view, functions as a moral epithet rather than a description of any particular form of political violence. ‘Terrorism’s’ sole function is to designate a political threat as evil, making outraged condemnation and military violence the only possible responses to it. Schotten demonstrates how, during the Cold War, Western states sought to use the language of ‘terrorism’ to delegitimize ‘totalitarianism,’ whether it be Nazi fascism or Soviet Stalinism. During the same period, the Soviets sided with anti-colonial movements to brand colonial violence as ‘terrorism.’ The Global War on Terror effectively wrested the term ‘terrorism’ away from its anti-colonial usage, while adding Islam to its existing genealogies. Schotten tracks how U.S. and Israeli architects of contemporary ‘terrorism’ discourse conflated radical Islam, Nazism, Marxism, and fascism in order to delegitimize ‘terrorism’ as a threat to civilization and democracy. ‘Emptying oppositional politics of any content whatsoever,’ Schotten writes, “‘terrorism’ becomes another word for savagery and nihilism, for the negation of the West and everything it ostensibly stands for: freedom, democracy, and the American way’ (141). In a reading of two scenes in which right-wing conservative pundits face off with defenders of Palestinian resistance, Schotten demonstrates how ‘terrorism’ discourse leaves no room for dialogue or retort. Rhetorically, defenders of Palestinian resistance, particularly when they are Muslim, cannot respond to ‘terrorism’ discourse without either condemning Palestinians as ‘terrorists’ or being themselves branded as ‘terrorists.’ For those in solidarity with Palestinian resistance, the choice, in fact, is no choice at all. In a compelling use of the Edelmanian model, Schotten concludes: ‘Let’s declare that we, too, are queers, bent on the annihilation of the social order and its ceaseless reproduction of specters of nihilism and death. We choose *not* to choose empire or the endless futurism of colonial domination. We choose to stand on the side of “terrorism”’ (168).

Queer Terror is a polemical must-read for scholars of biopolitics, native studies, queer theory, and the Global War on Terror. Few readers will agree with all of Schotten’s claims, but the work of a polemic is to generate disagreement, controversy, and conversation as much as it is to convince its readers. *Queer Terror* is sure to do all of the above. Structurally, *Queer Terror* is built around a series of highly original, illuminating, and, at times, counterintuitive readings of canonical political and queer theorists. This means that, paradoxically, *Queer Terror* seeks to contribute to native studies by building an original theory of the temporality of settler desire from the works of canonical, white settler theorists. *Queer Terror* is

thus not a book about decolonial tactics or imaginaries, and it does not engage the alternative temporalities, futurities, or cosmologies of native life. Readers interested in concrete political praxis and modes of native resistance will therefore be left with questions that go beyond the book's abstract theoretical framing. What does the praxis of resistance to settler sovereignty consist of, beyond performatively declaring oneself to stand on the side of 'terrorists'? Is the choice to declare oneself on the side of 'terrorists' as available to Muslims, Palestinians, and indigenous water protectors, who are already likely to be targeted as 'terrorists,' as is it to white settler queers? Is there a danger in taking 'queer' and 'terrorist' to be structural markers of everything that settler sovereignty deems threatening, given the way these terms bundle together vastly divergent peoples, politics, practices, imaginaries, and yes, uses of violence? These and other questions of concrete praxis are the stuff of another project. *Queer Terror* is best read as an anatomy of the settler symbolic order and the impossible position in which it places native and decolonial resistance – a position, as Schotten compellingly if controversially argues, of death, 'terrorism,' and queerness.

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