

# Geopolitical antifuturism

C. Heike Schotten, *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018). 241pp., £81.00 hb., £27.00 pb., 978 0 23118 746 6 hb., 978 0 23118 747 3 pb.

When George W. Bush threw down his infamous gauntlet in the aftermath of the attacks of 11 September 2001 – ‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’ – he intended the apparent choice presented in this imperative to offer no choice at all. In *Queer Terror*, Heike Schotten flips around the apparently self-evident nature of this choice to ask how anyone committed to the destruction of settler colonial empire could *not* choose the terrorists. There is something both audacious and limiting about the symmetry of this logic. Audacious, because we are invited to offer our allegiance to the very forces and discourses that empire finds most threatening. Limiting, because our choices seem, well, limited to those offered by this self-same empire. Yet whatever choice one makes or refuses to make, the dilemmas elucidated by this provocative work are ones that are likely to endure, making an engagement with its arguments both fruitful and inescapable.

Schotten attributes the persistence of ‘war on terror’ discourse to a ‘civilisationalist moralism of life and death that underpins, motivates, and defines the US imperial project’, the purpose of which is to sanctify settlement and empire as good while vilifying resistance to it as evil. *Queer Terror* offers an anatomy of this moralism, in an attempt both to rethink the biopolitics of empire and to sharpen resistance to it. Central to the book is the claim that the notion of ‘life itself’ is not a self-evident, natural or biological category, but an ideological one imbued with moralised content. Against the tendency to think of life in biologised terms, evident in the contrasting treatments of ‘bare life’ offered by Arendt and Agamben, Schotten demonstrates how the Hobbesian commitment to the preservation of ‘life’ against the putatively nihilistic threats posed by everything from indigenous ‘savagery’ to ‘Islamist terrorism’ is an intensely moralistic endeavour that seeks to shore up settler colonial civilisation. For ‘life’, then, always read ‘our way of life’.

In temporal terms, Schotten reads the settler colony’s commitment to the preservation of ‘life’ as a

commitment to futurism. In an illuminating reading of Hobbes, Schotten suggests that in looking for a mechanism by which ‘life’ might be preserved forever, the Leviathan is engaged in an obviously futurist endeavour. Indeed she goes further, arguing that the Leviathan brings the state of nature to an end in part through the creation of a sense of temporality and, specifically, futurity. This is because the ceaseless struggle of each against all to secure one’s present existence in the state of nature makes the past irrelevant and the future unimaginable because it is so tenuous. The state of nature is characterised not only by the ever-present physical threat of death, but also by the psychic condition of hopelessness, diffidence and despair. The sovereign brings war to an end by securing the possibility of a future. Much later, game theorists would deploy this insight to argue that rational self-interested actors could be induced to cooperate through the lengthening of the shadow of the future.

How better, then, to destroy the settler colonial social order than to refuse the future, and not merely *this* future but the future per se. Enter queer theory – and, in particular, Lee Edelman’s singular antifuturist manifesto *No Future*. Widely hailed as helping to inaugurate the antisocial turn in queer theory, Edelman attacks the ideology of what he calls ‘reproductive futurism’ which, in his view, invokes and deploys figurations of the Child as a representation of the innocence that must be protected from the perversity and narcissism thought to be embodied by queers. Rather than working to disabuse this ideology of its moralistic and relentlessly negative view of queerness, Edelman urges queers to embrace the role ascribed to them as destroyers of the social fabric and to become the very exemplars of negativity and death that it most fears. Schotten proceeds by way of analogy with Edelman’s argument, while also enlarging its scope and shifting scale. Thus, where Edelman takes aim at reproductive futurism, Schotten’s target is a more general logic of futurism underpinned by the supposition that the body politic must survive. What makes futurism



oppressive, Schotten explains, is its insistence that everyone accede to its moralistic mandates and its relentless queering of those who do not. Just as 'queerness', for Edelman, names not an identity category but a structural position marking those who are abjected as standing in the way of the future of the Child, 'terrorism' for Schotten is not an analytical category naming a particular kind of violence but the epithet with which resistance to empire and settler colonialism is illegitimated. We might think of *Queer Terror*, then, as a reading of the geopolitical implications of *No Future* in the era of the 'War on Terror'.

Schotten is acutely conscious of the critiques to which *No Future* has been subject in the fifteen years since its publication. Disavowing any intention to defend the text against all of these, she nonetheless focuses on two. Critics such as Jack Halberstam have worried about *No Future's* too easy slippage from the antisocial to the apolitical. After all, Edelman's Nietzschean critique of the freedom-denying effects of moralism also extends to the moralism of revolutionary desire, so that the only 'better' future (if it can be called one at all) is the death of the social order as well as the calls for justice that em-

anate from it. In response, Schotten argues that we do not need to take Edelman at his word when he claims to reject politics per se. As she astutely points out, to advocate for anything at all, and to do so in a text that adopts the rhetorical forms and conventions of a manifesto by purporting to answer the question that all manifestos do (what is *to be done?*), is to adopt a future-oriented position. A politics of no future is therefore both a politics and a future – one that advocates neither capitulation to, nor compromise with, futurism's mandates, but instead urges us to accede to its worst nightmares.

José Muñoz, among others, has pointed out that the antisociality of Edelman's polemic is achieved at the expense of viewing sexuality as a singular trope of difference, uncontaminated by gender, race and other particularities. Muñoz does not recognise queer or colour children in the sanctified figural Child in whose interest futurism operates. And we might wonder, with him, whether only those queers most able to inhabit the present can afford to disavow the future. This is why Muñoz thinks of the future as queerness's domain, as a temporal space that might offer refuge from the injustice of the present. Recognising the force of this cri-

tique, Schotten argues that while the concrete referents for queerness in Edelman's text are primarily white, gay and male, because queerness is treated as a structural position, his thesis is not incompatible with the now substantial queer of colour scholarship demonstrating how as privileged queers assimilate into the mainstream, queerness becomes displaced onto other figures such as the Muslim fundamentalist and the illegal alien. Importantly, she concedes that futurity and survival do not mean the same things in canonical theory as they do in traditions of the oppressed. The problem is that Schotten does not give us much of a sense of these 'traditions' and of how they might compel us to alter our views of futurity and futurism.

The implications of this become more apparent in the final chapter of the book, which situates its thesis more firmly in contemporary 'war on terror' discourse. Here Schotten applies her understanding of queerness as naming the position of those abjected by the social order, and the praxis of queerness as entailing the affirmation of that abjection rather than flight from it, to the question of 'terrorism'. Offering a genealogy of the concept in political discourse that reveals it to be less an analytical category than a term of illegitimation, Schotten argues that if 'terrorism' is the name that the imperial settler state gives to its existential nightmares then resistance to it entails affirming 'terrorism'. In her words, 'If the only options are, as Bush says, to side with a futurist, settler, and imperial "us" (whether as avowed advocates of empire or its collaborationist liberal compromisers) or with a queered, "savage", and "terrorist" other, the choice, I think, is clear: we must choose to stand with the "terrorists".' But are these the only options? In *The Intimate Enemy*, Ashis Nandy long ago suggested that the most subversive responses to colonialism were those that did not simply negate or invert the binary options offered to them by colonial discourse but deconstructed and refused them altogether.

What Schotten intends to suggest, I think, is that these are the only options that are legible to Bush, and, by extension, imperial settler colonialism, and that the affirmation of the 'wrong' option within these terms is deeply threatening to that order. This becomes clear in her narration of highly mediated instances of con-

frontation in which Muslim US activists have frequently been invited to choose between 'us' and the 'terrorists' and have typically found it impossible to render their opposition to US policy legible in any terms other than 'terrorism'. Here Schotten is rightly suspicious of liberal attempts at compromise, which invariably produce insidious differences between 'good' and 'bad' Muslims thereby retaining the sense of Islam as a potential problem. And she is also right to be pessimistic about prospects for the expansion of the terms of mainstream discourse given the all too familiar structural constraints of state regulation and corporate media ownership that frame these conversations. Yet her argument makes me wonder what might be lost in its insistence on offering resistance in terms that are legible to the imperial settler state. Why be the opponents that it wants and, in some sense, creates? Might sovereignty not be threatened far more by what it does not and cannot know or understand, by the 'unknown unknowns', as Donald Rumsfeld might have put it?

And what would it mean for us – 'us' who stand against settler colonial empire – to embrace our status as 'terrorists' rather than to protest that we are 'freedom fighters'? What are the consequences of naming and understanding ourselves – of becoming legible to ourselves – entirely in the terms imposed by the coloniser? Fanon was deeply preoccupied with this question, theorising the epidermalisation of inferiority as the result of self-recognition in the terms offered by the dominant other. Indeed we might understand the enduring hunger for alternative world-making, of which the surge of interest in Afrofuturism is but one manifestation in our own time, as the reparative dimension of this Fanonian insight. Schotten is right that all futurisms are destined to fail because the future can never finally or fully arrive. But if some futures are more emancipatory than others, then their failures also mean very different things for the world. A manifesto against futurism that hesitates to enter into these distinctions for fear of reintroducing moralism, this time in the guise of appropriately revolutionary desire, may have the virtue of logical consistency. But it threatens to bracket a great many of those questions that we have come to call political.

**Rahul Rao**