

# Critical Dialogue

**Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony.** By C. Heike Schotten. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 272p. \$105.00 cloth, \$35.00 paper.  
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— Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, *Syracuse University*

With *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony*, C. Heike Schotten has written an urgent and provocative book that is indispensable reading for anyone seeking a better understanding of terrorism, the War on Terror, Islamophobia, settler colonialism and empire, Thomas Hobbes, the liberatory potential of queer critique, and the relationship between these. If this sounds like a tall order, it is. But Schotten delivers on all counts, masterfully weaving the canon of political thought, biopolitical studies, queer theory, and settler colonial and native studies into an intricate argument that reveals terrorism as the effect of a civilizationist moralism that valorizes some lives while marking others as and for death. The book is motivated by two overarching aims: first, to explicate the connection between settler colonialism, U.S. empire, and biopolitics to show that modern European sovereignty has been, from its conception, a settler colonial enterprise whose theoretical justification depends on the privileging of settler life through its distinction from natural life that is denigrated as a “savage” and near-death existence; and second, to articulate a queer politics of liberation that is uncompromising in its resistance to empire and—because such resistance is today branded as “terrorism”—unafraid in its demand for solidarity with “the terrorist.”

Schotten dedicates Chapters 1 and 2 to the first task of furnishing biopolitical analysis with an understanding of biological life as a political category that serves to justify, rather than undermine, settler colonialism and empire. To show that any appeal to biological life, even when celebrated as a site of resistance, surreptitiously reproduces the founding gesture of settler colonial sovereignty, in Chapter 1 Schotten examines the work of the “founding father” of the field of biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben. Agamben claims that Western politics is characterized by the politicization of natural life by which the biological life of individuals is exposed to the unbridled power of the state. For Schotten, however, the distinction between natural life (zoē) and political life (bios) on which

Agamben’s argument rests betrays a moralistic hierarchization of political over natural life. Identifying Hannah Arendt as the source of Agamben’s conceptual distinction between zoē and bios, Schotten further argues that his work inherits not only Arendt’s privileging of political life but also her association of natural life with slavery and her civilizationist condemnation of lives that do not rise to her Greek-derived standard of political existence as unfree, antipolitical, and “savage.” Moreover, Schotten carefully documents what she describes as Agamben’s “Holocaust Exceptionalism,” which posits the exceptional status of Jewish victims of genocidal violence and assumes Auschwitz as the reference point for any determination of injustice and suffering, a point of view that she insists is insufficiently attuned to other sites and forms of human suffering, such as that endured by Muslims as part of the War on Terror.

Having argued that Agamben’s work thus reproduces, rather than challenges, the civilizationist moralism that animates the War on Terror, Schotten insists on the importance of an account of this moralism as the appropriate basis for critique. Chapter 2 develops this account by presenting an extraordinary reading of Thomas Hobbes through the lens of Lee Edelman’s queer futurism, on the one hand, and settler colonial and native studies, on the other. In Schotten’s brilliant commentary, Hobbes’s theory of sovereignty is exposed not as a description of the means by which life can be preserved, but as a futurist effort designed to justify settler colonialism while simultaneously dissimulating this effort through a virtual denial of the existence of the native. It is impossible to do justice to Schotten’s sophisticated analysis within the scope of this review, but the argument goes roughly as follows. The state of nature is a state without a future insofar as it is what Hobbes, in *Leviathan*, describes as a state of “Constant *Despayre*” in which our only preoccupation is our present existence. The life whose preservation is guaranteed by the sovereign is, therefore, not exhaustively described by a set of biological functions: it also entails a psychological disposition of subjects who desire their future. Life in the full sense of the term, then, is the negation of the near-death existence of the state of nature, and sovereignty is established through a political act that creates the notion of biological life in distinction from which it inaugurates the life to be preserved.

Drawing on native and settler colonial studies, Schotten further argues that Hobbes's association of the state of nature with "the savage people in many places of *America*" and its continuous displacement from a time to a condition to a place and finally to a metaphor for interstate relations effectively enacts the "logic of elimination" of settler colonialism by which natives are eliminated—through actual genocide or denial of their existence as natives—and settlers are retroactively naturalized as the native inhabitants of conquered territory (pp. 52–54, emphasis in original). By producing and denying the "savage" as the futureless other and a lethal threat to settler survival, Hobbes's theory of sovereignty thus encapsulates the biopolitical logic of any futurist politics that requires ever new and ever more mortal enemies, be it Hobbes's "savage" or today's "terrorist," as the negative foil against which the life worthy of protection comes into view.

With this account of the civilizationist moralism of settler colonial sovereignty in hand, Schotten is now in a position to outline a form of critique that is up to the task of resisting, rather than reaffirming, the futurist insistence on the survival of the settler polity and its determination of settler life as life *simpliciter*. Accordingly, Chapters 3 and 4 turn to Foucault and Edelman to actualize queer theory's political potential as a queer liberatory politics that understands "queerness" as a structural position in relation to power and liberation as a radical antimoralism that refuses the moralization of settler life as the only life worthy of survival and protection. The result is a notion of queer critique as a radical left coalitional politics of struggle for the survival of all those who fail or refuse to conform to the norms of a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal settler polity—that is, of those who do not desire the particular (settler) life that is posited as life as such. Such refusal, or lack of the proper desire, cannot but appear as a mortal threat to life itself under the logic of settler colonial sovereignty. As a consequence, any form of critique that is genuinely emancipatory must take the form of affirmation of what settler sovereignty determines as death and as terrorism: "If the only options are . . . 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'" (p. 130).

There is no doubt that this position will appear to many as either gratuitously provocative or as a scandalous incitement to violence. But this objection says more about the rules of discourse that structure debates about terrorism than it does about Schotten's argument. For "terrorism," on her account, is not an objectively observable kind of violence to which one must respond, but rather the effect of the very civilizationist moralism that privileges settler life as the only life worthy of survival. Chapter 5 illustrates this theoretical argument by documenting the establishment of a U.S.-Israeli alliance

against terrorism since the late 1970s, which determined terrorism as a lethal threat to the existence of Israel and a Western way of life—a determination that, as Schotten's study of the American Right's discourse of terrorism shows, continues to shape the discursive terrain on which any debate about terrorism is possible. Because the current discursive and political order immunizes itself against criticism by constraining the range of available positions to either being "with us" or "with the terrorists," the way forward, for Schotten, is an affirmation of a stance outside of this order—a position that is impossible because it can neither be determined positively nor appear as anything other than terrorism from within the logic of settler sovereignty.

The theoretical structure of settler sovereignty that Schotten so clearly and compellingly identifies might, however, not be as totalizing in practice as it is in theory. To be sure, from the vantage point of settler sovereignty, any resistance to settler life appears as an attack on life as such. But this perspective is absorbed into political practice only gradually and never fully. Take as an example Israel's relationship to terrorism, which precedes the period examined by Schotten by at least three decades. In the decade preceding the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Zionist paramilitary group Lehi explicitly endorsed terrorism against British authorities in an effort to end Britain's mandate for Palestine and against Arab and Jewish people who were perceived as obstacles to a colonial effort to conquer the land and establish Jewish sovereignty. Against accusations of being a terrorist organization, Lehi argued that terrorism was an "intentionally distorted concept," disagreements over whose meaning were "typical Don-Quixotism if not intentional fooling," and affirmed terrorism as the means of choice against "an enemy whose moral perversion is admitted by all" ("Terror," in *He Khazit* 2, 1943).

This brief example allows us to raise questions about the material conditions by which terrorism was transformed from an instrument of colonization against a morally perverted enemy into that very enemy, the political practices in which the logic of settler sovereignty that fuels this transformation is instantiated, and the practices of contestation and disruption that are made possible by it at the same time as they disrupt this process. These questions are not intended as an objection to Schotten's sophisticated and compelling theoretical argument. If I find myself wanting to hear more about the concrete historical conditions in which terrorism became the privileged site of modern settler sovereignty and about the ways in which the futurist logic of settler sovereignty has played out in these contexts, it is because I share her conviction that resistance is urgent and necessary. And although I agree that it is not the task of the theorist to dictate what should take the place of that settler colonial order and its theoretical logic that ought to be refused, alternative arrangements beyond refusal already exist in the

political actions of those who are marked for death and in the lives they live in open refutation of the logic of settler sovereignty.

### Response to Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson's review of *Queer Terror: Life, Death, and Desire in the Settler Colony*

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— C. Heike Schotten

In her meticulous and thoughtful review, Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson raises important questions about *Queer Terror* that challenge both its understanding of terrorism and its accounting of indigenous existence and/or resistance.

With regard to my book's understanding of terrorism, Erlenbusch-Anderson references a pre-Nakba Zionist paramilitary organization, Lehi, to show that, rather than always or only demonizing "terrorism," settler colonial projects have in fact justified themselves precisely because or insofar as they are terrorist. How, Erlenbusch-Anderson asks, did terrorism go from being a valorized strategy by which perverse threats to survival are eliminated from the settler colony to the very enemy of that settler colony itself, as in today's War on Terror and Israel's racist demonization of all Palestinians as terrorists?

A comprehensive answer to this question lies beyond the scope of this response; however, it is worth noting that the War on Terror's distinctively moralizing "terrorism" discourse developed, in part, out of an elaborate ideological effort to cast anticolonial movements and struggles as abject, nihilist, and evil, an effort that was led, on the global stage, by Israel. The roots of the War on Terror's deployment of "terrorism," in other words, lie in the era of decolonization and a moment when Israel was busy managing its own struggle with a militant PLO. That organization's importance as a symbol and ally of anticolonial struggles around the world—including indigenous resistance and Black Power politics in the United States—was one important material source that fueled the ideological fire that was to become "terrorism."

I would add that Erlenbusch-Anderson's observation about Lehi only fortifies the claim made in *Queer Terror* that the War on Terror is, indeed, a distinct chapter of U.S. imperialism and, as such, it mobilizes "terrorism" in historically specific ways. In other words, not all usages of "terrorism" are settler colonial, nor do all settler colonies rely on or mobilize "terrorism" as a form of social defense. What remains the case, however, is that the twenty-first-century version of American empire reenacts its own (obscured memory of) settler conquest via contemporary anti-"terrorism" measures that have been seized on and

fortified by Israel in its own eliminatory, settler colonial project against the Palestinians.

Erlenbusch-Anderson raises an even more powerful question in her observation that "alternative arrangements beyond refusal exist already in the political actions of those who are marked for death and in the lives they live in open refutation of the logic of settler sovereignty." I take this as an elaboration of the Palestinian liberation slogan that insists that indigenous existence *is* resistance. Although that existence only registers in the eyes of the settler state as an absurd and existential threat to the very survival, coherence, and intelligibility of the world itself, perhaps what this antagonizing illegibility means for liberation is not simply a political solidarity with that threat (which I characterize, in *Queer Terror*, as "standing with" the "terrorists") but also a turning away from the terms and tools of settler colonialism, which may pervade our very political theorizing to such an extent that it only renders indigenous modes of living unintelligible, meaningless, and "savage." Perhaps, in other words, it is time to dismantle "canonical" political theory by turning toward the necessarily disconcerting, disaggregating, and discommodulating lives of indigenous peoples, lives that have been obscured but not eliminated, and whose resistant existence may therefore be the necessary beginning points for a decolonization not simply of "life" but of political theory itself.

### **Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire.**

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— C. Heike Schotten, *University of Massachusetts, Boston*

Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson begins her important new study of terrorism with the assertion that "we seem to have a pretty good sense of what terrorism is" (p. 1). She starts here not because she thinks this is true, but because *Genealogies of Terrorism*, like so much good philosophical inquiry, begins with a seemingly simple, commonsense intuition only to complicate it and compel us to rethink our assumptions.

This is an urgently needed intervention. The long-standing shared academic/policy-maker endeavor to define terrorism has failed spectacularly, to the point that cliché now best expresses the term's meaning. "One man's [*sic*] terrorist is another man's [*sic*] freedom fighter" is effectively the reigning default wisdom on political violence, a collective throwing up of hands at the impossibility of eliminating relativity from this morally overloaded term and a synopsis of the intellectual and political state of things when it comes to terrorism expertise. Notably, this vacuum has diminished neither the importance of terrorism as a policy priority nor attenuated its stigmatized status

as beyond the pale of humanity. As with the definition of pornography offered in Justice Potter's famous Supreme Court opinion, we may not be able to define terrorism, but we still think we know it when we see it (and we know it is *really, really bad*).

*Genealogies of Terrorism* not only shows that we do *not* have "a pretty good sense of what terrorism is" but it also refuses the will to truth that would demand its author simply supply a better definition to quell the uncertainty her study provokes. Indeed, Erlenbusch-Anderson rejects "a definitional approach" because "terms like *terrorist* or *robber*. . .do not refer to a natural kind that exists in the world independently of human thought and practice" (p. 5, emphasis in original). Rather, "acts of naming something *terrorism* are impositions of power" (p. 6) and thus participate in constituting the very thing they attempt to describe. Moreover, such impositions of power are historical, and thus contingent and variable. This means that "ostensibly objective and universal definitions of terrorism are divorced from the social world they describe," leading to "rarefied, impoverished, decontextualized, and ahistorical account[s] of terrorism" (p. 162).

Understanding terrorism in the contemporary moment, then, requires not abstract philosophical reflection but genealogy, a method Erlenbusch-Anderson borrows from Foucault (and which Foucault himself borrowed from Nietzsche). Genealogy tracks the vicissitudes of history and power that both bring something into being and are produced by it in turn. Moreover, genealogy investigates particular kinds of objects: objects that are understood as objects precisely because of their journey in and out of discourse and specific historical situations of power. Foucault calls these objects *dispositifs*. A genealogy of the *dispositif* of terrorism, therefore, reveals what a definitional approach cannot: how configurations of power/knowledge transform and are transformed by a seemingly singular element—in this case, terrorism—and how those transformations endure and inform contemporary usage, regardless of what particular speakers may understand by their own invocation of terrorism.

Erlenbusch-Anderson argues that the distinguishing feature of the *dispositif* of terrorism is its function as a mechanism of "social defense." Whether in revolutionary France, revolutionary Russia, French Algeria, or the contemporary War on Terror, terrorism justifies the sovereign taking the life of some in the name of protecting the greater good of the life of all—whether that "all" be the race, the nation, the revolutionary class, or even the revolution itself.

In this sense, then, we certainly will know terrorism when we see it, but not because it fits into a prefabricated definitional or behavioral framework. Rather, we will recognize terrorism anytime we see sovereign power—

that is, the power to let live or make die—being mobilized in the name of social defense. In Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault distinguishes between sovereign power and biopower, neither of which falls solely within the domain of the state. Rather, the distinction parses power's relationship with life and death: whereas biopower nurtures and sustains the life of some population(s) and neglects others, leaving them to decay and die off, sovereign power, by contrast, allows for *the* population to live—except in cases of juridical transgression, when it exercises its punitive power to make die. Foucault calls the mobilization of sovereign power in the name of social defense *racism*, which Erlenbusch-Anderson actually argues is misplaced. Rather, she reworks Foucault's theorization of racism to show that it better names the broader function and operation of terrorism. (This may not be so far off from Foucault's original usage, however: many have persuasively argued that terrorism's twenty-first-century usage functions to produce the racialized subordination, abjection, surveillance, and targeted elimination of Arabs, Muslims, and other "Middle Eastern" populations.)

Erlenbusch-Anderson takes the reader on a whirlwind tour of various important moments of radical political history, elaborating the dizzying number of usages of terrorism in the last 200 or so years: to describe the rule of Robespierre, to critique the rule of Robespierre, to name the system of government Robespierre inaugurated; to name a political philosophy of government akin to "liberalism" or "Republicanism," to identify adherents of a particular political philosophy; as a description of Bolshevik state violence, as a defense of Russian antistate revolutionary violence; as the proper mode of governance in French settler colonialism and as the self-description of the FLN's violent resistance to that settler colonial governance. She usefully classifies these different usages according to how they are mobilized in specific contexts: *charismatic terrorism* (the rule of Robespierre), *doxastic terrorism* (terrorism as political philosophy), *identitarian terrorism* ("terrorist" as the name of the adherent of terrorist political philosophy), *strategic terrorism* (as a tactic for revolutionary success), and *polemic terrorism* (as a legitimate means of warfare, whether invoked by the colonizer or the colonized).

Each of these different historical forms of terrorism remains as a kind of trace in the contemporary moment's invocation of terrorism, which Erlenbusch-Anderson names *synthetic terrorism*. Today's terrorism is "synthetic" presumably because it is a kind of synopsis of terrorism's many prior meanings, but also because, to return to the problem of definition, in contemporary usage, terrorism is by turns "applied to tyrants and dictators, failed or rogue states, belief systems, racial identities, criminal actions, tactics of warfare, and types of war" (p. 135). This is possible (and not simply

incoherent) because terrorism is not an objective or natural “kind” that preexists the social world, but rather is a *dispositif* that has accumulated sedimented layers of meaning throughout its constitutive and constituting journey through world politics and history. Indeed, Erlenbusch-Anderson asserts that it is precisely because of this sedimented meaning that synthetic terrorism has such a powerful hold on us today.

*Genealogies of Terrorism* is a refreshing refusal of both philosophical and political orthodoxies that have only obscured clarity on the subject of terrorism, whether they be a dogmatic insistence on the definitional enterprise or the outright refusal of history. Erlenbusch-Anderson also rightly refuses to answer the “so what should we do?” question that so often attends critique. This is in keeping both with Foucault’s aversion to intellectual saviorism and the resolutely non-normative character of genealogical inquiry. As she explains so well, problematization is the point of genealogy, and such critique is worthwhile both in its own right and as the necessary precursor to normative action.

That said, Erlenbusch-Anderson nevertheless diverges from her otherwise resolutely non-normative practice of genealogy near the very end of her book, where she claims that genealogy *is* normative to the extent that it investigates aspects of our contemporary moment that Foucault called “intolerable”—his primary referent for which was the prison—and that genealogy examines the intolerable from an interest in “transformation” (p. 173). This made me desperately want to know more: What makes terrorism (like prisons for Foucault) intolerable for Erlenbusch-Anderson? What kind of transformation of this *dispositif* motivates her genealogical study?

I do not think that Erlenbusch-Anderson needs to answer the “so what do we do?” question. But I do want to know where her genealogy comes from and why she undertook it. Nietzsche would be the first to point out that genealogy, even when ostensibly divorced from normativity, is nevertheless always undertaken by a specific person located in a specific time and place. It is thus necessarily informed by a set of contexts and commitments that can in no way be either “disinterested” or “objective.” Given her invocation of the intolerable, then, I am curious: Who and where is Erlenbusch-Anderson? What does her genealogy tell us about what she finds intolerable and why? She declares the aim of her book to be a return to thinking: “My point has not been to offer a better answer to the question what terrorism is but to loosen the rigidity of our thought and make us a little freer by rendering seemingly obvious answers a little less obvious” (p. 184). Yet in her brief mention of the intolerable, she also suggests that such freedom of thought is “required for defensible and productive strategies of transformation” (p. 173). What are Erlenbusch-Anderson’s aspirations for transformation?

These questions are perhaps more important from an expressly political standpoint than a purely philosophical one. But they are no less urgent for all that, given how many people are surely interested in greater transformation of the *dispositif* of terrorism because they find its current form intolerable, yet for wildly divergent reasons. Indeed, in the twenty-first-century War on Terror, reactionary forces across the globe are interested only in expanding the reach of the security state and extending its imperial, colonial, and military power. Indeed, if Erlenbusch-Anderson is right, the War on Terror may be the twenty-first century’s premier form of securitized racism. Nietzsche aside, then, it seems all the more pressing for any genealogy of the “multiple origins” of terrorism to make clear precisely what it finds to be intolerable and to what it aspires when it comes to the future of this historically variable yet politically quite resilient *dispositif*.

### Response to C. Heike Schotten’s review of *Genealogies of Terrorism: Revolution, State Violence, Empire*

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— Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson

I thank Heike Schotten for her careful and generous review of my book and for giving me the opportunity for reflection on the commitments that led me to undertake this project. As Schotten correctly notes, my aim in *Genealogies of Terrorism* is to offer a critique of the received wisdom about terrorism, understood as an account of the conditions of possibility of our present discourses and practices around the phenomenon that we call “terrorism.” In this sense, it is a decidedly non-normative reconstruction of the objectification of terrorism; that is, of its becoming an object of political and scholarly concern in need of intervention. As a description of the historically contingent and specific processes through which terrorism became the problem it currently is, this account is thoroughly uninterested in generating a program for action, and to this extent it is non-normative. Yet, Schotten is also correct in pointing out that such a project of critique cannot but be motivated by a sort of second-order normativity, a pretheoretical sense, that the specific object of inquiry is, in fact, in need of critique. This may be a different kind of normativity from the one we find in prescriptive theory, but it is normativity nonetheless.

Here is an easy answer one might be tempted to give to the question what it is about terrorism that is intolerable. On the one hand, those who understand terrorism in its everyday sense as a particular form of violence against innocent civilians will insist that such violence is *obviously* intolerable and that anyone who denies this is, by the logic Schotten articulates so clearly in her own work, a terrorist

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sympathizer. On the other hand, those who regard appeals to terrorism as a pretext for increased surveillance, military intervention, new forms of racism, and a dismantling of rights will argue that the oppression enabled by such appeals is *obviously* intolerable.

What strikes me about both positions is the claim to obviousness, which, from a philosophical point of view, I find itself intolerable. For appeals to what is obvious, what everybody knows, and what is self-evident betray a form of thought that substitutes cliché for creative thinking, privileges common sense over good sense, and ends all conversation by reference to what, ostensibly, we

all know. To my mind, it is precisely the resort to what is obvious and to a kind of thinking based on what we already know and recognize that makes terrorism—and the militarism, imperialism, and racism that it facilitates—such an insidious and intractable problem. As a work of philosophy, *Genealogies of Terrorism* is thus motivated by philosophical hostility to common sense, but it is not apolitical. Instead it is committed to restoring our ability to think as one, although not the only, tool we have available to sway those who welcome old and new forms of oppression, exclusion, and securitization under the pretext of terrorism.