Erasure and Empire: Uyghur Muslim Cultural Resistance to Genocide under the Global War on Terror

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Abstract
This article analyzes resistance of Muslim Uyghurs to the genocide perpetrated against them by the Chinese government under the global war on terror. We use historical, political, and cultural analysis of journalism, personal narrative, poetry, film, and traditional music to argue that Uyghurs use cultivation – bearing witness, zikr and remembrance, communal religious practices, and ecopoetry – as part of their practices to actualise survival and liberation. In doing so, we uncover how the global war on terror is employed as a policy and justification by a network of states (China, the United States, and countries in the Arab world) to serve the conflicting political and economic interests that enable settler-colonial dispossession, displacement, and elimination of Indigenous and racialised people – Uyghurs and Palestinians – especially women and children.

Keywords
Muslim cultural resistance, global war on terror, Uyghur genocide, colonialism and decoloniality, gendered Islamophobia, racialisation of Muslims

> A tomb in Turpan and I was a mourner
> For the hangman who slew the poet I cry
> Fifteen times I went round the homeland

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> Fifteen drops of blood, on Judgment Day I cry
> – Uyghur poet Ghojimuhemmed Muhemmed, "I Cry"

> The [Indigenous] terrorist is the subject of the imperialist, made to reflect the righteous authority of the state.
> – Joanne Barker, *Red Scare: The State's Indigenous Terrorist*

Introduction: An unfolding geopolitical issue during a time of genocidal violence

We develop this article about the Uyghur genocide during a time of genocidal violence against Palestinians in Gaza, which makes our analysis of settler-colonialism and the resistance of Indigenous people even more crucial. In "The War on the Uyghurs," Sean Roberts argues that scholars should perceive the violence against Uyghurs and Palestinians as settler-colonialism enacted onto Indigenous people. The evidence to support this is the occupation of Uyghur land by the Chinese government, the civilising mission that requires Uyghurs to abandon their religious practices and communal affiliations, and intensified surveillance and punishment under the global war on terror. Under the global war on terror, the "terrorism industrial complex" became an institutional method to punish Indigenous practices that challenge the benevolence, modernity, and moral and political dominance of the state. Roberts compares the practices employed by the Chinese government to the US civilising mission subjugating Native Americans. However, the relationship between the two examples is more than a parallel or a similarity. The United States, in its initiation of the global war on terror, exported its tactics as justification for settler-colonial violence to the world.

This is no more obvious than in the complicity of the United States in the Palestinian genocide, and this illustrates how the war on terror is a mechanism of a global empire in which states and institutions collaborate to enact and justify ideological, political, and economic hegemony. To call attention to the globality of empire in the war on terror, Uyghur activist Hidayat Arslan connects Uyghur resistance to the Palestinian people, posting a message on social media saying:

> I am a Uyghur from East Turkistan, and I see your genocide. We see your genocide. The Uyghur people are with you. We are going through exactly what you are going through. The only difference is that you have been able to document the horrors of genocide, and we haven't been able to. The Uyghur people are taking strength from you. The fight that you have led on the ground, the fight that you have led on social media is a lesson for all oppressed people. You have enlivened what it means to stand up

> for rights, for justice for your land against occupiers, against oppression. I am Uyghur but I am also Palestinian. I share your pain and I am sure that you share mine. (Arslan)

While there exists solidary and/as resistance between Uyghurs and Palestinians, Uyghur political organisations funded by settler-colonial states like Israel look away from and selectively endorse genocidal violence. The World Uyghur Congress, for example, issued a statement condemning terrorism and acknowledging the loss of Israeli lives, but it remained silent on the historical settler-colonial and ongoing genocidal violence against the Palestinian people. This is not surprising considering that the Israeli organisation Elis Wiesel Foundation for Humanity funded Uyghur organisations, including "the Germany-based World Uyghur Congress and US based Uyghur Human Rights Project, and Ana Care and Education" (Hoja). Salih Hudayar, the founder of the East Turkistan National Awakening Movement, used the opportunity to fortify alignment between the United States and Israel. In a statement on X, Hudayar expressed, "While some Uyghurs may differ, I stand with Israel against the aggression of Hamas, which is backed by China and Iran. As China supports Palestine, it relentlessly wages genocide and maintains an occupation in East Turkistan. Palestine, along with many Muslim nations, shamelessly sided with our oppressors." Both the United States and Israel supported legislation and a UN Human rights declaration condemning forced imprisonment of Uyghurs while imprisoning Palestinian children under the settler-colonial regime (Lazaroff). The United States opportunistically supports Uyghurs as part of its anti-Communist global strategy. Evidence of this is the passing of the Uyghur policy Act of 2023 in the House of Representatives in February 2024, something that shows the United States government's varying definitions of genocide (*Congress.gov*). The ostentatious show of support for Uyghurs by the United States, however, coincides with barriers to Uyghur asylum seekers, as discussed in a report by Israeli-funded Uyghur organisation Uyghur Human Rights Project (Szadziewski 3). This is no surprise, since the US government's geopolitical interests are often at odds with its historical and persistent anti-migrancy discourse.

The situation is complex and ongoing, and deeply embedded in global war on terror policies and strategies that contradictorily serve imperial interests and maintain settler-colonialism and anti-Muslim coloniality. The global war on terror is a justification for the eradication of Indigenous peoples as terrorists, and the racialising of threatening Others to the state. In China, the state

> sees in the GWOT [global war on terror] a much older conflict between civilisation and barbarism or savages, and you could argue that this war is perceived by many in the West in the same way. Those characterised

> as 'terrorists' (a term that has no recognised universal definition) are ultimately those who threaten the state's vision of an orderly society and who happen to be Muslim. They are portrayed as irrational and anti-modern—traits that essentially become characterised as a part of their religion—and they must be defeated in the interests of progress. (Roberts 267)

While Muslims in general are targeted as cultural pariahs and civilisational threats, Uyghur women are more intensely impacted. Since Uyghur women are cultivators for their people, in their social, cultural, and reproductive roles, their bodies become policed to ensure conformity. This highlights the global war on terror as colonial and patriarchal. In this article, we analyze these dynamics and their ramifications, utilising interdisciplinary research that blends historical perspectives, political analysis, and cultural and literary critique. After placing settler-colonial violence in its geopolitical and historical context, especially to resist conflating the Chinese people with the state, we analyze how Uyghurs uncover and resist the raced, gendered, classed, and generational violences committed against them by the Chinese government in cultural and communal ways. We analyze cultural texts and communal practices in ways that do not conflate cultural resistance with liberalist individualism or neoliberalism. Cultural resistance is rooted organically in the relational sharing of space and resources that are generative in enabling the creativity that imagines into being the survival and futurity of colonised people.[3] Ultimately, we argue that Uyghur cultural forms of resistance enable decolonial and anti-colonial possibility because they liberate through Indigenous traditions, Muslim ways of knowing and doing, and the cultivation of social and communal connectivity.

Chinese nationalism, the global war on terror, and settler-colonialism

Since the 1930s, Uyghur political and militia organisations have sought independence from the Chinese government. The People's Republic of China began attempts to solidify its political hold over the region shortly after the end of the Chinese Civil War in 1949. Over the next three decades, it oversaw the settlement of millions of ethnic Han Chinese into the region, increasing the percentage of Han residents from 6.1 percent in 1953 to 40.4 percent by 1982

[3] This understanding of cultural resistance in its relationship to decoloniality, anti-coloniality, and Muslim and Indigenous ethical politics is meant to resist the Eurocentricity and male-centered thought of cultural studies as a field. It seeks to use a different language to discuss what it means to cultivate instead of producing culture. In doing so, it does not borrow overtly from the forefathers/scholars of cultural studies, asserting the right to speak from its own mouth un-ventriloquised. Though this method is not free from contention, it is its own cultural resistance.

(Toops 246). Despite this massive demographic shift, the government in Beijing primarily pursued integrationist policies with the ethnic minorities in the region. However, during the 1980s, the People's Republic of China (PRC) shifted towards an integrationist policy that "only served to reinforce both Uyghur nationalism and small separatist movements, with potential to undermine the territorial integrity of the PRC and the Chinese effort to build a modern Chinese nation" (Dwyer). As a result of this escalation in tensions throughout the 1990s and early twenty-first century, a series of sporadic violence occurred in the region, as those who wanted independence from China clashed with state forces.

Following the 2014 Kunming station attack, President Xi Jinping gave a series of speeches in which he "called for an all-out struggle against terrorism, infiltration and separatism using the 'organs of dictatorship,' and showing 'absolutely no mercy'" ("Brushing Off Criticism, China's Xi Calls Policies in Xinjiang 'Totally Correct'"). Following this speech, the People's Republic of China initiated a massive surveillance initiative in Xinjiang "between 2016 and 2018, individual cities spent as much as $46 million on these surveillance systems, with one county installing facial recognition cameras in each of its nearly one thousand mosques" ("The Uyghur Genocide," 18). Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders also ramped up the resettlement of Han settlers into Xinjiang or the Autonomous Region in which there is a significant Uyghur population, increasing the percentage of Han ethnicity to 60% by 2018. They created a paramilitary organisation, the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps, which began the operation of prisons and internment camps as sites of labor exploitation of Uyghurs. In 2016, former Party Secretary of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, Chen Quanguo, was appointed Party Secretary of the Xinjiang and First Political Commissar of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps. Quanguo began the systematic gathering of biometric data and brought an increased police presence resulting in estimated total internment of one to two million Uyghurs ("The Uyghur Genocide," 18).

In addition to mass surveillance, forced labor, and internment in the Chinese branded re-education centers, Uyghurs have been subjected to other measures of cultural and social eradication. In 2020, the Associated Press reported efforts to reduce the birth rates of Uyghur and other ethnic minorities in the Xinjiang region. These efforts have included imposing fines on women with more than one child, forced intrauterine devices, sterilisation, and abortions. As a result, birth rates dropped "in the mostly [Uyghur] regions of Hotan and Kashgar by more than 60% from 2015 to 2018" and by 24% in 2019 in the Xinjiang compared to a mere 4.2% reduction across China as a whole (Associated Press, "China cuts Uighur births"). The alleged medical atrocities do not stop at

measures designed to decrease births. Among the biometric data collected from the ethnic minorities of Xinjiang is blood data that reportedly has been used for DNA typing to match Uyghur detainees with those on Chinese organ transplant lists.

Officials, however, claim that the violence against men, women, and children is justified as counterterrorism. Counterterrorism as a racial project was adopted by the Chinese government in the early 2000s, around 9/11. This is no coincidence, since anti-Muslim sentiment grew in intensity following 2001. What had been localised struggles for an independent 'Eastern Turkestan' by a separatist political organisation became narrativised by the state as "part of a network of international Islamic terror, with funding from the Middle East, training in Pakistan and combat experience in Chechnya and Afghanistan" (Chung 8). The United States, at the beginning of its 'global war on terror,' which would see several human rights violations of its own, endorsed this rebranding by declaring a small group of Uyghur separatists, which the US called the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (Armitage), a terrorist group. This resulted in the conflation of Uyghur calls for self-determination and terrorism despite the pre-9/11 Chinese evaluations of the situation within Xinjiang. However, in January 2002, China released an internal white paper that linked the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement with Osama bin Laden and listed attacks that had previously never been made public nor considered terrorist (Kine). Richard Boucher, a former US Assistant Secretary of State for Central Asia, characterised Washington's willingness to accept Beijing's accusations of international terrorism as "done to help gain China's support for invading Iraq" (Kine). With the declaration of a Uyghur political group in Xinjiang as terrorist, the Chinese state furthered its indiscriminate crackdown on the region in its entirety under cover of the global Islamophobia of the war on terror for over a decade.

The language of counterterrorism continues to be employed by the Chinese state, and the war on terror continues to be a justification for global violence. During the 44th regular session of the United Nations Human Rights Council in 2020, Valentyn Rybakov, Permanent Representative of Belarus to the UN, read a joint statement cosigned by forty-five other nations praising China for "no single terrorist attack in Xinjiang in the last three years" (Rybakov). Except for the Russian Federation, all the additional signatory states are members of the Non-Aligned Movement, many of them, including Belarus, being also accused of human rights violations.

Those states that support China's denials do so for a number of political and economic reasons. On the political side, China's foreign policy is expressed in what are named the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence," first

enumerated in 1954. The two most salient principles are mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of another state. The colonial occupation that China experienced at the end of the Qing dynasty, first by the British and then by the Japanese, informs these principles. China's non-interventionism has made alignment with China an attractive option for countries across the global south, many of which have a history of being subjected to colonial domination and seek an alternative to Western hegemonic aid. Aid by Western economic institutions often involves limiting the sovereignty of the recipient country. Further, the West's calls for human rights investigations in these states are hypocritical considering that global north nation-states are responsible for and have "undeniable complicity" in genocidal violence. A dozen US former officials and organisations like Amnesty International detail US complicity in the Palestinian genocide. Additionally, a New York civil liberties group, the Center for Constitutional Rights, is suing the Biden administration for the "$3.8 billion in annual military support the US sends to Israel" ("US President Biden"). Taking this US funding and support into consideration, PLO's Mahmoud Abbas chose to endorse China's foreign and domestic counterterrorism policies against the Uyghur people (Kashgar).

In addition to being motivated by economic gain, some predominately Muslim Middle Eastern states support China based on these principles of sovereignty and non-interference as a bulwark against their human rights issues. As Haisam Hassanein writes, "Saudi Arabia does not want to invite any more international pressure than it already faces regarding the Jamal Khashoggi case… [and] Egypt is leery of international calls to improve conditions for its thousands of political prisoners" ("Policy Watch 3169"). States across the region also have reason to employ the language of terrorism against their internal political rivals, whether ethnic, sectarian, or political. Thus, supporting the Chinese government helps keep atrocities, committed under the guise of counterterrorism, a rhetorically justified excuse.

Racial eugenics and gendered Islamophobia

The systemic violences enacted against the Uyghurs are colonial, racial, and patriarchal. The measures to "integrate Xinjiang with China," have "been a quest not only to consolidate China's territorial control and sovereignty over the region but to absorb, politically, economically and culturally, the twelve non-Han ethnic groups of Xinjiang into the PRC" (Clarke 128). The forced assimilation of the Uyghurs and the attempts at social dissolution and cultural erasure make women targets for the state's violence. In this gendered violence, religion is seen as an inherent quality and genetic characteristic that can be "bred" or socialised out of

Muslim Uyghur women, thereby racialising religion. These methods are often rooted in eugenicist racial superiority. According to Julia Stern, "Uighur women [are subjected] to pregnancy checks, forced intrauterine devices, sterilisation, and abortions" which impacts the body sovereignty of these women and the sovereignty of the Uyghur people (Stern 26). The methods used by the Chinese government are meant to establish the state's judgement about Indigenous women's bodies as the most rational, therefore degrading Indigenous women's ability to self-govern in relation to their own ethical, religious, and social investments and commitments.

Beyond racial eugenics and the control of women's reproduction, the Chinese government established "Project Beauty" that uses propaganda and checkpoints to police women's performance of Muslim affiliation. It "aims to discourage mostly Uyghur women from wearing traditional headscarves or veils," which establishes liberal secularist notions of freedom as a modern ideal to deny these women body sovereignty (Clarke 129). Narratives around standards of beauty that establish the uncovered body as an ideal strip "the Uyghur Muslim women of their core identity as the campaign forcefully encourage the Uyghur women to showcase their 'beautiful features' as similarly to those of non-Muslim Chinese" (Alchatib and Suharyanto 164). Since the hijab is seen as radicalising, the state's Islamophobia is clearly gendered. Alchatib and Suharyanto describe this "beauty standard modification" as a way to achieve a "neutralized identity" (165). The un-dressed body is made to be the ideal of beauty, and the hijab as a performance is connected to terrorism, therefore making the Chinese government both the patriarchal regulator and colonial civilisational protector. National non-religious identity becomes a neutralised safe and ideal identity, and this form of body modification enables submission to the state as the regulator.

Like forced sterilisation and a secular anti-Muslim beauty ideal, forced marriages of Muslim women play a role in a form of Darwinist social manufacturing. Officials from the Chinese government came to the homes of Uyghur women and "said either the women had to marry a Han Chinese man, or the officials would take their parents into detention. To prevent this, the women committed suicide" ("2018 Report"). Forced marriages are meant to transform the bloodline racially into something that more resembles the dominant group, as a form of racial eugenics, but they are also meant to domesticate women into assuming a Chinese national identity that is not Uyghur. They especially target women because they assume that through the patriarchal exploitation of the institution of marriage, the Chinese government will enforce submission of these women as wives. In a sense, this securitises even the home.

Since the Chinese state perceives Muslims as a threat to its security, securitisation becoming secularisation. Religiosity is framed as ideologically radicalising, and institutions of learning assume the role of ideological hegemony. To accomplish this, "[r]egional authorities built a system of extra-judicial detention and coercive education programs, affecting all Turkic Muslim peoples in Northwest China" (Anderson and Byler 17). Within these centers, the use of the Chinese language is enforced and any visible form of Muslim or traditionally Uyghur performances of selfhood for men, such as growing a beard or wearing unsanctioned garb, is prohibited and punished. Therefore, detention or re-education camps are carceral facilities that punish resistance to the state's social, cultural, and secularist dictums. During the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, all "'religious activities' — all religious or cultural activities that take place outside of state-sanctioned parameters" became illegal (Clarke 129). Muslim religious leaders were incarcerated when they practiced their religion through the recitation of the Qur'an or when they discussed religion in places of worship. These gatherings and religious practices are central ways that communities cultivate connectivity and affiliation, and ethical political knowledge.

The attack on the Muslim family and the community also included Muslim youth. Under the guise of counterterrorism, Uyghur youth were invited to participate in "neighborhood" committees that surveilled the economic activities of Uyghur businesses based on the assumption that affiliating with Muslim communities and their knowledges and practices will lead to the funneling of money into terrorist organisations. This breeds suspicion and enforces conformity in communities, and it leads to an internalised inferiority in Muslim youth in whose psyche becomes entrenched the connection between Muslim practices and knowledges, and violence.

Uyghur cultural resistance

To resist these colonial forms of erasure, eradication, control, and domination, Uyghurs use cultural methods that bear witness to atrocities, maintain kinship structures, and pass down and generate strategies that sustain communities. In the five-part narrative titled *One by One, My Friends Were Sent to the Camps,* Uyghur poet and filmmaker Tahir Hamut Izgil tells the story of his friend Munire and her husband Kamil who was taken by the Chinese government to a reeducation camp. Munire and Kamil grapple with silencing as a tactic used by the carceral state to intimidate Uyghurs and invalidate the realities of their experiences. Izgil documents the encounter between Kamil and Munire:

> Kamil was being held in an apartment inside the courtyard. The moment he saw Munire, he started crying. He couldn't bring himself to speak. The police told Munire to trust that the government would resolve the situation fairly. They told her not to inquire with them about Kamil…. After that, Munire lost all contact with Kamil." (Izgil, "Part Three")

Efforts by Izgil and his wife, Merhaba, to comfort Munire would be met with a request

> not to tell anyone what had happened. Whatever the cause of an arrest, and regardless of whether it was just or unjust, people in Xinjiang would fear interacting with those who had been arrested. If one member of a family was detained, especially for political reasons, those who caught wind of it would feel uneasy around that family, or avoid them entirely. (Izgil, "Part Three")

There were targeted efforts at terrifying Uyghurs into dissolving social structures that connect them to one another, while vilifying them and their religious investments. In a report by Human Rights Watch, Chinese religious affairs official Maisumujiang Maimuer speaks about Uyghurs on August 10, 2017, stating that the government should "[b]reak their lineage, break their roots, break their connections, and break their origins. Completely shovel up the roots of 'two-faced people,' dig them out, and vow to fight these two-faced people until the end" (Van Schaack et al). This tearing at communal and kinship ties produced a severe and continuous trauma for the Uyghurs "at the emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, and social domains with impacts at all levels of Indigenous communities" (Mitchell et al. 83). Describing this, Izgil narrates that after the discussion with Munire, he and his wife "were silent all the way home. There was nothing for us to say. I was shattered" ("Part Three").

In bearing witness, Izgil subverts the government's rhetorical narrativising of the Muslim as terrorist who is "inferior to beasts," vilified as "evil forces," and "enemies" that need "root[ing] out" (Y, "Cultural Genocide"). Instead, it is made apparent that terror is a result of the state's anxieties about Muslims threatening the purity of the nation-state and its political hegemony. Kamil's incarceration resulted not from extremist activities but from his research using "Chinese-language mimeographed" government books that "had been compiled to help 'purge the poison' of so-called Pan-Islamism and Pan-Turkism from the Uyghur region, and to assist in the struggle against 'ethnic separatism'" (Izgil "Part Three"). This rhetoric that pathologises Muslims, depicting Islam as illness, is not new and is a global phenomenon rooted in imperial and expansionist ambitions. This rhetoric is found as early as the Crusades. It carries into nineteenth century Orientalism, intensifying in the rhetoric used by Israel in

the early to mid-twentieth century to justify European expansion and settler-colonialism in the Arab world. The rhetoric became adopted globally as political justification in its current manifestation as Islamophobia during the global war on terror. It justifies the racial profiling of Muslims, especially Uyghur students and scholars within China and also in the diaspora, with the Chinese government establishing a "sprawling system of transnational repression by working through the legal and political systems of foreign countries" (Jardine, Lemon, and Hall).

A report from the Uyghur Human Rights Project and the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs documents that "[b]eginning in early July 2017, more than 200 Uyghurs, many of them students of religion at al-Azhar, were detained in Egypt after being rounded up in Uyghur restaurants" (Jardine, Lemon, and Hall). The Egyptian government collaborated in deporting these scholars and students.

Both as a global and local phenomenon, anti-Muslim policies and rhetoric contribute to the displacement of Indigenous Uyghurs and the dispossession of their lands. Professor and poet Abduqadir Jalalidin was incarcerated "in 2018 as part of its crackdown on Uyghur intellectuals," which he illustrates in his poem "No Road Back Home." He says, "I long to go to you, I have no strength to move/ Through cracks and crevices I've watched the seasons change/ For news of you in vain I've looked to buds and flowers/ To the marrow of my bones I've ached to be with you/ What road led here, how can I have no road back home" (lines 8-12). The connection to home and land for Jalalidin is embodied. The carceral facility is unnatural in denying him life, and it is juxtaposed with the flowers and buds that are life affirming. The state's carceral facility is as much a violence to the land as the incarceration and confinement are pains to his body. All the while the land changes, the former incarcerated and the latter remaining colonised, and both subjected to violences of the settler-colonial state.

We see what Martineau and Ritskes describe as fugitive aesthetics and liberatory epistemic. The "indigenous understandings of land run counter to the cognitive ordering of colonial modes of domination and property ownership" (VI). In writing these short verses from within the prison camps, the poet rejects the absurdity of his condition, with the "silent thoughts [that] torment," asking not only of himself, but also of the world, "how can I have no road back home?" The terrorism industrial complex cannot constrain the words, and relationality becomes the road toward liberatory alliances configured through a "radical relationality with the land" (Martineau and Ritskes VI). These alliances in disruption of state carcerality enabled Joshua L. Freeman to translate and disseminate Jalalidin's speech act, but there exist many more that are silenced and

repressed (Freeman). Forms of cultural resistance have only intensified the vitriol of the Chinese government as "the targeting and persecution of those who are often seen as primary creators of culture – i.e. intellectuals and artists" has become even more widespread (Davidavičiūtė 609).

In turn, the Chinese government embarked on its own propaganda campaign, especially targeting Uyghur young people. One can see this in the "state-backed musical" *The Wings of Songs* ("China Tries to Counter"). Directed by Vice Chairman of the Xinjiang Film Association, Kelimu Abulizi, along with Huanggang Gao, the film portrays young Uyghurs in an idyllic Xinjiang dancing and making music to establish a "connection" to an idealised Chinese heritage. In a statement on the site of the Jocunda Music, Film, and Theatre Festival, the director describes the "ideological presentation" of the film as functioning on "two conceptual levels of the 'Chinese dream' and 'spiritual inheritance'" (Mushi and Qi). In the statement, Abulizi adds:

> The modern youth's pursuit of their musical dream (their Chinese dream) is closely connected with the spirit of 'guarding the border, protecting the country' and 'selfless dedication' of the previous generation. The journey of pursuing dreams is both safeguarded and sustained by the spirit of inheritance, and the nourishment of spiritual inheritance provides a powerful drive and sense of inner strength in the pursuit of their dreams. (Mushi and Qi)

Uyghur cultural heritage is relegated to the past, and the future lies in becoming ethnic by assimilating to Chinese cultural identity. Becoming ethnic is the outcome of a "Chinese dream [that] is a continuous dream" (Mushi and Qi). Colonised peoples' traditions and cultural heritage are relegated to a disappearing past and Chinese identity is a way toward modern progress. As a result, some Uyghurs such as Hamut Izgil have migrated out of China, and many young people assimilated out of fear of state disciplining. In their article on the role of Uyghur musical traditions in the contemporary era, Byler and Anderson stress that "Uyghurs feel as though they are in a void. There is no place to burrow away and hide, no atmosphere in which to fly away or even air to breathe. The only way to survive is to eat Hanness" (Anderson and Byler 24). The only sanctioned way to actualise is to adopt an identity in degradation and erasure of their communities and expressions. Moslih Kanaaneh, in his research on Palestinian resistance, argues that colonisation involves the vilification not only of colonised people but of their creative practices as well. To become modern and civilised, colonised people must become invested in an erasure of their own identities. He argues that "the colonizers always try to silence the colonized, arguing (and perhaps truly believing) that the music of the colonized is nothing but a 'primitive' tool for the

incitement and resistance against 'the purveyors of civilization"' (Kanaaneh 2). This "constructed notion of 'primitivity' becomes a justification for colonizing 'the primitive' in the name of modernity and civilization" (Kanaaneh 2). There is therefore a cycle of vilification, internalisation, erasure and assimilation, and then submission to justify the right of the state to colonise as a savior of civilisation.

The "process of the forced consumption of an imposed identity" through media propaganda encourages internalised inferiority and submission (Anderson and Byler 24). The Chinese government incentivises performances of loyalty that erase through "unification." Red Song competitions and Chinese operas have become ways for Uyghurs to escape the re-education camps by performing a "safe" identity unquestioning of the state. On the other hand, Uyghur communal cultural practices have been coopted by the state in these performances of loyalty, such as the *meshrep*, "a community-based assembly tradition of regular performances that include music, dance, drama, acrobatics, oral literature, foodways, and games" and the "canonization" of "certain aspects of classical traditions, for example the *muqam*, a suite of classical epic song and dance performances" (Anderson and Byler 20). As a result, the epistemic violence especially for young Uyghurs can only be challenged through a liberatory epistemic disobedience.

Uyghur filmmaker Mukaddas Mijit challenges both the silencing and cooption by revitalising communal cultural practices on her own terms, especially those that center women and the maternal. Mijit's films and video ethnography contain recordings of communal dancing in the public square, communities participating in wedding celebrations, and other multi-dimensional forms of communal and cultural lived experiences. She features artists like singer Sanuber Tursun and storytellers such as "a grandmother from a remote place [who] sends a message of peace, respect and generosity" in the short film *Rahime* (https://mukaddasmijit.wixsite.com/mukaddas-mijit). In her videographic examination of Sufi practices, titled *Nurjan Hapiz: The last Sufi master of Ghulja, Uyghur Homeland,* Mijit documents a rhythmic form of Muslim spirituality, featuring the profile of Hapiz as he sings alone while projecting outward as if speaking to the public. This differs from the silent forms of prayer found in Eurocentric epistemic understandings of the spiritual as private and internal. To the right of the film, she centers her own voice alongside Hapiz's, writing,

> I started to understand who I was when I started to research about my own culture. Nurjan Hapiz (in this video) was the first master who gave me the very first key to this long journey of countless closed doors. I'm . . . remembering (Zikr) about him and his brothers every time when I go back to my 100 something hours of field recordings. (Mijit, *Nurjan Hapiz*)

In the act of remembrance, *zikr* (also the word for musical or poetic forms of worship), Mijit finds her agency in her connection to her people. It is this very dynamic that asserts that the filmic gaze that centers relationality and subjectivity invigorates a will to life and resistance to colonial domination. Therefore, in the same way that

> we can think of the sonic aspects of the [Chinese government's cultural] campaign – the mass singing and dancing, the forced singing of revolutionary songs and repeated denial of faith in detention centers – as acoustic palimpsest based on political acts of erasure . . . we can read the Xinjiang soundscape as an acoustic palimpsest, composed of layers of sonic memories that can be reanimated and activated at any time. (Harris 216)

In Mijit's cultural work there is no delusion of a utopian ethnically cleansed and sterilised Xinjiang from which the violences of colonial domination are sanitised, such as those that we see in *Wings of Songs*. There is also not a nostalgia for an idealised past, but the visual and sonic texts of this culturally generative act as a palimpsest of protest developed through agential, relational, communal, and socially embedded practices of empowerment that center a connection to history and tradition while asserting Uyghur survival and futurity.

Conclusion

It is evident that the cultural speech acts of Uyghur peoples are a central form of resistance against attempts at their eradication and erasure by the Chinese government. The tactics, including the surveillance and policing of knowledges, traditions, and embodied practices of the Uyghur people, represent a form of colonial governmentality that is rife with political xenophobic appeals to a global anti-Muslimness. The colonial nature of the Chinese government's eradication measures borrows from those diffuse forms of hegemony developed in the Global North after 9/11 and those that are persistent in settler colonial states such as Israel in our contemporary era. The war on terror rhetoric justifies the enforcement of conformity and assimilation through violent policing and punishment of bodies, cultural and religious practices, and communal affiliations. Through bearing witness, remembrance and memory work, activism and critique, and the reclamation of Indigenous traditions and Muslim communal and spiritual practices, these cultural forms of resistance uncover and challenge state terror.

They counter measures to silence Uyghurs and their histories, facilitating in their poetic, visual, sonic, and narrative expressions of agency to voice Uyghur lived experiences while challenging attempts at homogenising and essentialising these communities to serve the government's political indoctrination. In

confronting the mechanism of colonial surveillance, policing, and disciplining from a range of geographical locales – from the heart of carceral "re-education camps" and throughout migrant transnational spaces – they give life to other forms of struggles for survival. As we write about the struggles of the Uyghur people from the context of the Global North, from the United States, we cannot but realise its complicity in the atrocities committed against the Uyghur people. The United States initiated the war on terror and utilised its rhetoric to facilitate states of exception throughout the world that close doors in the face of Uyghur refugees and other refugees directly impacted by US support of colonial governments. While the government continues to fund Israel's genocide against Palestinians to serve political agendas, institutions of learning are coopted in ways that vilify racial, ethnic, and religious Others as terrorists and as moral and civilisational threats. Women and families are especially subjected to the terrorism of the state. This makes cultural resistance an important strategy for understanding and working towards liberation. It is our aim that this work supports these forms of anti-colonial and decolonial resistance.

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