Over the course of writing this book, the impetus of social life in Ürümchi moved from competing ideas of global Chinese and Islamic contemporaneity to an investment in the so-called Global War on Terror and an economy structured explicitly around ethno-racialized theft of Uyghur labor and sociality. Between 2009 and 2020, Uyghur life was enclosed. The freedoms, desires, and openings that were fostered by Uyghur urban migrant sociality and social media were subtracted. The flourishing of Uyghur cosmopolitan Islamic piety and self-fashioning was used as justification for a new state-funded frontier of global capitalism, a political and economic configuration I call “terror capitalism.”

As I built relationships with dozens of young Uyghur and Han migrants to the city, I became more and more aware of how what began as a developmental state project to draw Uyghurs into the multicultural Chinese nation had been transformed at least in part into a profit-making security project funded by state capital and used as a space for techno-political experimentation in surveillance. As state and private institutions intensified their efforts to reeducate Uyghurs during the so-called People’s War on Terror beginning in 2014, I came to see firsthand the fear and anxiety that came from regular home invasions and large-scale detentions of suspected reformist Muslims.

Some readers may question whether capitalism is the correct frame for this system and instead expect an analysis that centers on Chinese state terror and authoritarian governance. While these expressions of state power are important aspects of Uyghur reeducation, this book shows that such framings do not fully explain the power of transnational economic and political forces, the autonomy of technology companies and reeducation factories, or the lived experience of settlers who are engineering and profiting from this system.
As anthropologists of the state have shown (T. Mitchell 1999; Gupta 2012), states produce powerful effects, but they are always made up, in the end, by public and private institutions and ultimately individuals who are motivated by a range of discursive and economic interests. While the capitalist system I discuss is certainly supported by state capital and mandated by central state authorities such as Xi Jinping and Chen Quanguo, the forms of terror it produces are largely carried out by private technology companies, coupled with privately contracted policing technicians, Aid Xinjiang “volunteers,” and other Han settlers. These institutionalized agents act on behalf of the state and their own economic interests in dispossessing Uyghurs and building and maintaining the security systems that restrict Uyghur freedom to move and live. Many of the security and intelligence workers in this space are employees of state-owned enterprises or private technology or security companies and are motivated in large part by economic incentives, not directly by state power. Although strict loyalty and discipline is enforced through the threat of prosecutions, demotions, and criticism, many of what Primo Levi (2015) might have referred to as the “swarm of functionaries” in the Xinjiang reeducation system are making banal choices to join the campaign to dehumanize and dispossess Uyghurs. As I discuss in chapters 2 and 5, these state proxies are often primarily interested in creating a better life for themselves and their families rather than strictly political motivations. Uyghurs and other Muslims who join the security forces as low-level workers are often confronted with a choice between protecting themselves and their own detention.

Institutionalized ethno-racism and settler colonialism found in both private and public enterprises are major aspects of this frontier in capital accumulation. The political framing of counterterrorism functions in large part as a way of securing funding, claiming resources, and acting with impunity toward Uyghurs and other Muslim peoples. This is not to deny that state-mandated policies of “rounding up those who need to be rounded up,” showing “absolutely no mercy,” and prosecutions of state authorities who do not follow these policies, are not central guiding factors in the full establishment of the system. Nor does it deny the way older Maoist-era campaigns to reengineer so-called class enemies inform some of the tactics and organizational shape of the surveillance system (Grose 2019; Leibold 2019; Smith Finley 2019). It is simply showing that, in addition to a more normative reading of political power that places Chinese state authorities at the center of historical change, contemporary configurations of power are also shaped by global capitalism and the colonial relation it carries in frontier locations. Framing the political and economic stakes of Uyghur colonization as a frontier of global capitalism rather
than as a manifestation of tyrannical state communism or Asian despotism, as it is often framed by xenophobic North American politicians, also works to refuse a revival of Cold War binarisms. Instead, it shows how the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror and the force of global capitalism come together to create forms of dispossession in new locations.

What was an ethnographer to do in the face of this structural violence? The task of telling the stories of young Uyghur friends who anticipated their arrest and were then disappeared by state contractors into the reeducation system as “extremist-separatist-terrorists” became a means of holding on to social life even as it began to break apart. As in Audra Simpson’s work on Indigenous sovereignty in North America (2014), it meant attempting to refuse to turn their stories into a kind of pornography or objectification of settler-colonial oppression while at the same time acknowledging its totalizing presence. Simpson argues that one way to avoid participating in the violence of the colonial gaze is by writing the political and economic ethnographically. For me, this meant focusing on the way forms of dispossession were lived. Writing the economic ethnographically meant thinking with Uyghurs, and Han settlers, and trying to understand how a confluence of state capital and private technology–enabled forms of ethno-racialization began to subtract social relations and sociality itself. In other words, it meant attempting to understand how the capitalization of information (R. Benjamin 2019; Wark 2019; Zuboff 2019) has begun to enclose the lives of people. Thinking from this vantage point allowed me to consider how counterterrorism both feeds more normative forms of surveillance capitalism and intensifies forms of expropriation—the legalized theft of land and labor permitted by a lack of civil and human protections for ethno-racialized populations—that are particular to the current global moment. Terror capitalism, a distinct configuration of state capital, techno-political surveillance, and unfree labor, might begin with targeted groups like the Uyghurs, but it might also find similar expression among Muslim populations in Kashmir or with watch-listed Latinx asylum seekers in Texas.4

As a scholar committed to decolonial and feminist critiques of global capitalism, I focus less on the work of technology and security workers and more on the lives the system dispossesses and expropriates. In this context, the human data of the surveilled, including their cultural production or digital content, and the very existence of Uyghur life have become the primary drivers of a contemporary techno-political capitalist system. In order to demonstrate this, I focus on the coerced “user experience” of this system. Uyghurs have become an unfree class of laborers, a position that Mackenzie Wark (2019) refers to as the “contemporary subaltern,” who have no choice but to feed the system by
producing data and coerced economic activity. The Uyghur reeducation camp system is now being described by regional authorities as a “carrier of economy stability,” and by private technology industry leaders as a space with “unlimited market potential,” on par with older coal, oil, and natural gas industries that shaped the first wave of Uyghur colonization. The economic value of the reeducation system comes from the way it acts as an experimental space for the research and development of predictive policing products, provides thousands upon thousands of security- and education-related jobs, and produces hundreds of thousands of unfree Uyghur laborers who can be forced to work for low wages in the textile industry and service sector.

The Uyghur Autonomous Region (Xinjiang) is located in contemporary far Northwest China (see map 1). It borders eight nations ranging from Mongolia to India. The largest group of people native to this large Alaska-sized region are the Uyghurs, a Turkic Muslim minority of around 12 million that shares a mutually intelligible Turkic language with a population of 15,000 Uzbeks and, to a lesser degree, with the population of 1.5 million Kazakhs and 200,000 Kyrgyz who also call parts of the region their homelands. Like the Uzbeks, Uyghurs have practiced small-scale irrigated farming for centuries in the desert oases of Central Asia. At the founding of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, the population of Han-identified inhabitants of the region was around 6 percent, with Uyghurs comprising roughly 80 percent of the population. Today Uyghurs make up less than 50 percent of the total population and Han more than 40 percent. This shift in demographics began in the 1950s when state authorities moved several million former soldiers into the region to work as farmers in military colonies in the northern part of the province. These settlers, members of the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (Ch: bingtuan), were pulled into the borderlands through a combination of economic incentives and ideological persuasion. Initially, the primary goal of this project was not to assimilate Muslim populations but rather to transform Kazakh pastureland into irrigated farming colonies, redistribute the population of former soldiers, and secure the territorial integrity of the nation.

Although Uyghur lifeways were deeply affected by the Maoist reforms of this era, Uyghurs continued to live in Uyghur-majority areas in Southern Xinjiang. This began to shift in the 1990s when private and public investment brought new infrastructure to the Uyghur homeland. Since these projects began, millions of Han settlers have moved into Uyghur lands to turn deserts and farmland into oil and natural gas fields and transform Uyghur oasis cities into centers of transnational commerce. This more recent enclosure of the Uyghur commons has had a strong effect on local autonomy, as it has significantly increased the
MAP 1. A map of infrastructure developments prior to 2009 in Chinese Central Asia demonstrates how the Uyghur homeland in Southern Xinjiang has become a major site of resource exploitation as a result of state capitalist “Opening up the West” development. Since the 1990s, the region has become the source of nearly 85 percent of Chinese domestic cotton. Map by author. Data source: National Geographic (2009); Gro Intelligence (2019).
cost of living for Uyghurs while at the same time largely excluding them from new development projects.

In an attempt to come to terms with this history and the racialized violence I observed, I read through the scholarship on European and American settler relationships with Indigenous others. I also found inspiration in feminist, decolonial scholarship on the co-construction of racialized capitalism and settler colonialism as an institutionalized social system. Reading these bodies of scholarship in concert with the ethnographic evidence I gathered through years of fieldwork in Northwest China gave me an understanding of the way systems that were implemented in China were linked to similar projects that emerged from Europe, Japan, India, North America, and the Soviet Union. I began to see the way that linkages between these earlier and, in some cases ongoing, processes tie a particular form of socialist original accumulation to settler capitalist expansion in the Uyghur region and a new sequence of racialization. Although this sequence in racialization was largely disconnected from North American and European histories of slavery, it was very closely linked to Western processes of settler colonialism and the new racism of Western Islamophobia and wars on terror. The implementation of a passbook system, the building of internment camps, and the infrastructure of a police grid system of control mirrored attempts in Apartheid South Africa, Israel-occupied Palestine, US-occupied Iraq, and India-occupied Kashmir to systematically control colonized populations (Byler 2019; Kaul 2020). As in settler colonial contexts elsewhere, in Northwest China the process centered on the systematic elimination and replacement of the Native, or, in Uyghur, the yerlik. This term refers to an instantiation of indigeneity that emerges from Uyghur epistemology and, as I will explain in the book, is connected to transnational Islamic and place-based identifications. This conceptualization of the yerlik, which means “people of the land,” carries with it a feeling of indigeneity or rootedness in the sacred landscapes of Southern Xinjiang.7

In this context Native elimination is premised on a process of replacement with settler bodies, institutions, and epistemes—a process I describe in chapter 6 as “subtraction” (Uy: kimeytish) in which social life is simultaneously disappearing yet ongoing. As in the North American context, this process is justified by positioning the colonizers as benevolent liberators of the Natives—a colonial variation of “repressive assistance,” which Chinese authorities use to target “problematic” (Ch: wenti) populations across the state (Pan 2020). In the Uyghur region, such assistance promised to warehouse unsalvageable Uyghurs in a drastically expanded prison and camp system while saving the majority of the Uyghurs from themselves by putting them to work as unfree laborers monitored by
biometric surveillance systems, and expropriating Uyghur lands for the Chinese fossil fuel industry and industrial agriculture. It used a number of euphemisms to refer to this structural violence. First it was a process of “Opening up the West,” which led to the People’s War on Terror, and finally a process of “reeducation” (Ch: zai jiaoyu) and coercive “poverty alleviation” (Ch: fupin), which masked new forms of domination and control.

This book develops a theoretical model for understanding how Uyghur young men use homosocial friendships to protect themselves from the development of this new economic formation and accompanying forms of gendered, ethno-racial violence. It also shows how a small minority of Han migrants to the city actively witness Uyghur suffering and develop an interethnic anticolonial politics. Ultimately, however, it argues that the violence of state-directed capitalist dispossession is co-constructed with a colonial relation of domination. Together, these forces subtract the spirit and vitality of Uyghur social reproduction through camps and surveillance, while linking Han life paths to this form of domination and expropriation. Because of the range of material and digital enclosure and near absolute absence of institutional forms of direct resistance, the dispossession confronting Uyghurs is perhaps more totalizing and rapid than in other instances of colonization. At the same time, the proliferation of media forms allows them to bring their stories into the global present. Terror Capitalism is made up of stories of violence. My hope is that reading these stories will allow the reader to sit with my friends and share their grief and rage if only for a moment.