

Book Review Symposium

Katherine Chandler, *Unmanning: How Humans, Machines and Media Perform Drone Warfare*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020. ISBN: 9781978809741 (paper); ISBN: 9781978809758 (cloth); ISBN: 9781978809789 (pdf)

The US-led wars of the post-9/11 era have become the poster children for how the asymmetry of late modern warfare gives omnipotence and omniscience to those who can control the battlespace from above. The pinnacle of this capacity to control is the drone, perceived by many as the ultimate technology of post-Cold War violence; the starkest illustration of how advanced technologies enable more-than-human vision and violence to be commanded in the pursuit of the eradication of stateless, ideologically driven, enemies of Western capitalism and all that it stands for. Katherine Chandler's brilliant book provides a fascinating and incredibly well researched repositioning of this narrative. In *Unmanning* she tells a number of stories from the messy, often imperfect, beginnings of the US military's love affair with drones which, in ways similar to work by Jordan Crandall (2013) and others, disrupts these dominant narratives in important and unsettling ways.

One of the things that I particularly like about this book is that whilst it tells the story of how the US came to develop drones for training, reconnaissance, and bombing, it is not a book about how late modern aerial warfare became uninhabited. Rather, it illuminates the messy complexities of how key figures, and nameless individuals, were absolutely central to the development of these aircraft. Indeed, this is a book that positions a whole range of people as central to our narratives about drones. It is of course men that are those who are named in this narrative; officers from the US Armed Forces such as Delmar Fahrney, who was in charge of Project Drone during the 1930s and 1940s, and employees at key US aerospace and media technology companies such as Vladimir Zworykin, who headed up

RCA's television laboratory during the same period. And it is the nameless in these narratives who are, unsurprisingly, much more likely to be the powerless, such as the Vietnamese civilians captured on drone reconnaissance photographs during that conflict. Indeed, we are all too familiar with contemporary accounts of drone pilots watching nameless bodies from above, searching for behaviours deemed threatening, and causing a violent response. The examples Chandler draws upon may be older, but she illustrates how themes of the colonising view from above perpetrate and have perpetuated through the history of drone warfare.

There are two points I want to focus on in response to this book. The first is the concept of disruption. I have argued elsewhere (Williams 2014) that disruption, understood through an engagement with Erving Goffman's (1974) work on frame analysis and Judith Butler's (2010) work on performativity and the framing of conflict, offers an innovative way to think about interruptions and dislocations of official narratives about what military technologies do and how they operate. As I read *Unmanning* I was reminded of the ways in which attending to frame breaks, those moments when what happens veers from what is supposed to happen, offers important opportunities to see beyond official narratives, to see the actions of the nameless and rebalance the human, machine, and media assemblage at the heart of this book. Indeed, throughout the examples that Chandler documents so carefully, the presence of disruptions that impact upon the trajectory of this assemblage, exist just beneath the surface. Sometimes these become more explicit, as with the example of the drone crashes in the White Sands testing area in the 1960s that made the supposedly secret drone programme visible to the public. Sometimes the existence of this disruption is more prosaic, but no less unsettling to the perceived narrative, such as when the images on the operators' screens broke up or were inflected with white noise in the example of the use of television guided drones during the latter part of the Second World War. I was fascinated by how these examples illustrate the capacities of elements within the drone's assemblage to "act out" of what is expected, to disrupt the carefully planned and tested processes, such that the

technologies judder out of alignment and the overall assemblage of humans, machines, and media perform a version of drone warfare that is unanticipated and unwanted.

The second point that struck me as I read this book was how this long view of US drone warfare relates to the concept of aerial aftermaths, as articulated by Caren Kaplan in her 2018 book of the same name. I was taken especially with the idea that emerges from Chandler's work, that strategies to elicit the view from above can ebb and flow in their intensities as different geopolitical desires influence them. I wondered the extent to which the examples Chandler draws upon had similar rippling legacies and shadows that remained beyond the boundaries of each episode she recounts, and as Kaplan (2018: 96) suggests are "simultaneously both *of* and also *not only* of the military and the environment of war". In some of the chapters these connections are perhaps more easy to see, as with the long-standing entanglement of Ryan Aeronautical in its various guises with the US military as the main manufacturer of drones during the Cold War. Others, such as RCA's involvement in the development of technologies used in the television guided drones during the Second World War, seem to have a more blurry and imprecise aftermath within the narrative of the book. However, this example is particularly interesting as it offers a prequel to work on RCA's involvement in the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System of the Cold War period (see Mulvihill 2021). As such, all of these examples and their trajectories beyond the confines of the book connect back to notions of disruption and of violence from above.

None of these thoughts are perhaps particularly surprising, given the role that drones now play in projecting predominantly US power across Shaw's (2016) "Predator Empire", but one of the things that has stayed with me after reading Chandler's book – an aftermath for me, perhaps – are the messy multiplicities of often unexpected and unplanned aftermaths that disrupt the designed in, and planned for, expectations of the various drone projects she describes. The unnamed US military ground crews who only appear on screen in the film of the TDR-1 drone tests in the Pacific during 1944 after the drone crashes on take-off, serve as perhaps the best exemplar of this, re-manning the narrative of this drone through a crash that

disrupts its planned unmanned flight. The focus of this book on many of these accidents and incidents, which challenge the dominant narrative of drone omnipotence and give birth to multiple unexpected disruptive aftermaths, is in my view its most important contribution to wider scholarship.

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Alison J. Williams
School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology
Newcastle University
alison.williams1@ncl.ac.uk