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 Arc of the Drone

Those who have been paying attention to the rise of drone warfare over the last two decades will know well the story of how the drone came to be armed. The combining of "sensor" and "shooter" into a singular platform was lauded by US government and military officials as a major technological breakthrough. Now, the very same technological unit that "spotted" the target could also "neutralise" or "prosecute" it. In the old paradigm, reconnaissance informed attack but for much of the previous century these were largely separate functions. Even as late as the 1990s the "kill chain" was sluggish and this vexed state militaries wanting to attack mobile targets before they were lost. I recently interviewed Lieutenant General David Deptula about his role in orchestrating the air component of the First Gulf War, and nearly 30 years later he remained palpably frustrated by the inability of the US Air Force to target Saddam Hussein's mobile Scud missile launchers as they fired and swiftly vanished in the vast deserts of Iraq. But with the combining of sensor and shooter just-in-time for the War on Terror came a lethally powerful compression of time-space. What once took months and weeks was now almost-instantaneous, so terrifyingly efficient that President George W. Bush would herald drone warfare as a new form of what he called "sudden justice" (Woods 2015).

We are far less familiar with what came before the arming of the drone and with the spectacular failures – crashes, mishaps, dead-ends, experiments gone wrong – that precede the Reaper and the Predator. Katherine Chandler's *Unmanning* expertly retells the history of drone warfare, recasting the late-modern weaponisation of the drone in a genealogy of failure. Vitally, her account ends where most begin – with the first drone strikes in

Afghanistan (2001) and Yemen (2002) – situating the drone in a longer, buried history. From 1953 onwards drones served reconnaissance functions by way of aerial photography, but Chandler identifies a second period between 1936 and 1944 in which drones were used as targets for anti-aircraft training. The bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 is testimony to the dismal failure of these early experiments: navy anti-aircraft gunners shot down less than ten percent of over 350 Japanese aircraft (p.36). Her forensic documentation of this particular permutation of the drone reveals, fascinatingly enough, that the drone was once itself a target, the hunter once the prey.[1] But in another arguably more important sense the drone-as-target speaks to the heterogeneity of what today is rendered singular. In Chandler's telling *the* drone does not exist, and her genealogy reveals not a linear narrative of progress but instead multiple iterations of different techno-cultural assemblages, many of them failures and dead-ends, that cohere around context-specific and ever-changing meanings of what came to be called "the drone".

Other drones we learn about are drones-as-missiles, encoded by the US as a humanistic or "civilised" alternative to racialised understandings of the suicidal figure of the *kamikaze*. There are also drones that "save" pilots from being shot down over enemy territory during the Cold War, drones that deliver nuclear tests as progress and which displace indigenous communities from the Bikini Islands, and drones that serve as decoy signals in the Arab–Israeli War of 1973. All of this speaks to a violent politics which, Chandler argues, has been written out of the history of drone warfare. The dogma that she so eloquently challenges here is that the human is not replaced but is rather *extended* by the drone and that this singular putatively "technological" artefact is animated and made possible – performed – by a complex interplay of "human, machine, and media" (p.2). Said another way, what *unmanning* does is something other than the removal of the pilot from the cockpit: at every turn and despite insurmountable failure the drone is presented as progress, as a benign or less risky

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[1] Today drones are rare but valuable military targets jammed or shot down over enemy territory, and they are also the object or "target" of sustained activist and political critique – but these contemporary dis/continuities are not pursued.

alternative to piloted flight and, above all, as a *technical* solution to a series of ethico-political problems.

Although Chandler does not explicitly use the term, *Unmanning* stands as a refusal of history as teleology. Assembled from contemporary vantage points it is easy to read the various iterations of drones, their failures and the "lessons learned", as inevitable progress toward the putative precision machines that different communities have come to love and hate. What survives in such accounts are reified and idealised versions of technological prowess where the very assemblages that make "unmanned" flight possible are erased to create the aura of pilotless flight. Chandler encourages us to see this as a disavowal of the human, or the confusion of human and machine, but she also insists that it is a disavowal of the structures of failure that continue to animate drone warfare today. That said, I would have appreciated a more detailed account of how the history of drone failure weighs on contemporary drone failure and a discussion of the extent to which the coordinates of drone failure may have changed not only from 1936 to 1992 (the focus of the book) but also from 1992 to the present.

Michel Foucault famously pointed out that the prison has succeeded in failing for more than 150 years, but of course it failed in different ways in different contexts and those failures nevertheless served particular constellations of (state and police) power. Chandler leaves little doubt that drones have – and are – failing, but there is no theory of failure *per se* and although there are novel and lively discussions of the "historical" politics of failure, much of the contemporary politics is left unsaid. These are less omissions than they are opportunities for further exploration. Alongside failure Chandler offers the metaphor of corruption for understanding drone politics, where corruption is understood as systemic rather that isolated, and where corrupt files and databases are woven into the fabric of contemporary drone and algorithmic decision-making (see also Amoore 2020). Today, drones are failing different communities; first and foremost, they are failing racialised populations spanning a vast geography from North Africa to Afghanistan and Pakistan, many thousands of whom have been killed or maimed and who live in daily terror of clear blue skies. They are also

failing in their aim of keeping safe the populations of Western liberal democracies who seem to live in ever greater fear of manifold enemy Others; and meanwhile drone assemblages inflict moral injury and PTSD on military and civilian personnel and weigh excessively on national budgets that could be spent elsewhere. (How) are these drone failures tied to the eight decades of experimentation and failure of drones that Chandler documents? For whom are these failures a success and what communities benefit from an idealised history and sanitised contemporary that disavows failure? In what ways is drone failure tethered to broader failures and inequalities in global geopolitics? Here I have in mind not only the waning of American hegemony and the skewed planetary cartographies of the bombers and the bombed, but also the signal failure – if that is what it is – over the last century or so of abandoning peace in favour of "humanising" war (Moyn 2021).

Another failure of the drone is one of secrecy, or rather the failure to disclose exactly what the state is doing with drones, where, and for what reason. Chandler fittingly opens with a discussion of the first drone strike in Afghanistan – a strike justified as "appropriate" because those killed were allegedly "not innocents" (it turned out that they were most likely civilians). The war in Afghanistan was bookended with another drone strike, an almost final departing act as troops hurriedly retreated from Kabul in August 2021. Like the first strike 20 years earlier, the disastrous strike that killed ten civilians, including seven children, was accompanied by a justificatory speech act, except this time General Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called it a "righteous strike" (Cooper and Schmitt 2021). We would have never known about either set of civilian casualties – and all those in-between – were it not for the work of Afghani civilians fighting to clear the name of their loved ones and brave journalists willing to help them do so. What they seek is not the sudden justice that Bush so long ago promised them, nor the ethico-legal absolution offered by drone assemblages (Jones 2020; Zehfuss 2018). Because if there is a lesson to be learnt from Chandler's brilliant book it is that the arc of the drone bends not toward justice, but failure, and contemporary experiments in drone warfare that fail do not so much crash, go haywire,

or plummet into the sea. Instead, they maim, kill, and destroy, and disavow these acts as techno-mechanical progress.

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Craig Jones
School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology
Newcastle University
craig.jones@ncl.ac.uk