



## *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)

On 29 August 2021, Zemari Ahmadi was murdered by an American drone strike together with nine members of his family (seven of whom were children) at their home in Kabul, Afghanistan. The strike on the Ahmadi home was preceded by eight hours of aerial surveillance, in which a US team mistook dozens of jugs of water being collected by the aid worker for combustible material they imagined was intended to add explosive power to a car bomb.

The world knows the truth about this bombing – a truth eventually acknowledged by the US military, who subsequently issued an apology – because it occurred in the Afghan capital at a moment when the American evacuation of the country was receiving peak scrutiny and attention from international news media (The Guardian 2021, 2022). Less an ending, this event marks something of an inflection point in the 20-year-long US-led “war on terror”, as the United States abandons its previous commitments to boots-on-the-ground military occupation and pivots instead toward a reliance on “over-the-horizon” capabilities that involve a combination of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), special forces, and more traditional intelligence operations.

Katherine Chandler’s book, *Unmanning: How Humans, Machines and Media Perform Drone Warfare*, gives us a number of critical tools to understand this August 2021 bombing and its connection to a longer genealogy of UAV technology. Animating the work is an empirical and conceptual emphasis on *failure* – the incoherence, contradiction, and error that for UAV technology always haunt the networked relay between operator, media, and machine. Yet even as the “drone and the scenes of war it shapes and is shaped by come apart in contradictions,

accidents, and contingencies”, it is the “ontology of unmanning”, argues Chandler, that allows for a “repeated negation of what is human” about the drone (p.39). Weaving together insights drawn from science and technology studies, feminist psychoanalytic theory, and media theory, Chandler traces how this process of failure, negation, and disavowal operates as a constitutive feature of drone technology from its very advent in the 1930s – and shaped its continuing, iterative evolution (often via unsuccessful and hastily aborted military experiments) throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is the book’s detailed historical examination of these 20<sup>th</sup> century experiments that offers its most substantive empirical contributions to scholarly literatures on drone technology and drone warfare. Among the programmes examined are “Project Drone”, a pilotless anti-aircraft training platform launched in 1936, and the first to adopt this now iconic appellation; the failed WWII-era use of TDR-1 and B-17 aircraft as radio- and television-controlled “flying torpedoes” (precursors to today’s cruise missiles), and the subsequent adaptation of these B-17s to monitor US nuclear testing in the Pacific; the Firebee, a jet-powered UAV first used for targeting and later for unmanned reconnaissance in Southeast Asia; and the Mazlat Pioneer remotely-piloted surveillance vehicles famous for their use during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Taken as a whole, Chandler’s robust historical treatment of and theoretical reflections on these unmanned platforms and their manifold shortcomings offers a rather useful and original interpretative framework that can be applied to assess the contemporary drone programme – one that disrupts claims of technological novelty or imperial triumphalism, and emphasises instead the expansive, expensive, cumbersome, and contingent networks of actors, institutions, and geopolitical arrangements that are all necessary for the platforms to operate.

However, if Chandler’s text walks us toward such an assessment, it stops short of fully delivering this on its own. Notwithstanding an effort in the book’s introduction to contextualise its theoretical contributions via a short discussion concerning the earliest uses of armed Predator

drones after the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, it is left to the reader to apply these insights to the considerable expansion of military drone operations that has since followed.

For *this* reader, among the most urgent questions the text raises is the relationship between drone technology and the broader dimensions of US counterinsurgent strategy and practice, particularly in light of the United States' recent military humiliation in Afghanistan. We might consider, for example, the morbid and cynical arithmetic by which US military and CIA operators have, throughout the “war on terror”, routinely categorised *ex post facto* any military-aged male killed in proximity to a drone strike as an “Enemy Killed in Action”, and therefore a legitimate target – regardless of whether that person’s identity is known, or of any attempt to verify an actual connection to known terrorist or insurgent activity. This may allow for the exigencies of US intelligence and Department of Defense prerogative to be exercised impervious to countervailing realities on the ground; however, as many commentators have observed, it has also delivered an arbitrary cascade of civilian casualties, an outcome that is likely only to have exacerbated anger and resentment toward the United States (see Scahill 2016).

Yet it is inadequate and misleading to describe these deaths as merely “accidental”, or incidental to “legitimate” counterterrorist operations – particularly if we take seriously Chandler’s observations regarding failure and contingency as essential *features*, rather than a bug, of drone technology (an observation that resonates strongly with Paul Virilio’s well-known insistence that, for any given object “we must think about both the substance and the accident – substance being both the object and its accident” [in Virilio and Lotringer 2008: 46]). Indeed, argues Chandler, even if the “drone and the field of war to which it is tied are contradictory and error-prone”, they “nonetheless mediate and organize politics” (p.11). This suggests a need to ask deeper questions about the overall consequences of drone warfare and its capacity to subject entire peoples to the imminent and omnipresent potential of sudden, violent death. The arbitrariness of action and generalised dissemination of terror here reproduce important features of earlier US-backed counterinsurgency practices in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and beyond,

characterised by the activities of death squads, torture and disappearance whose aim was never so much to silence those immediately targeted but to cultivate fear, despair, and paralysis across an entire population (see Blum 2014; Chomsky 2021; Williams 2006). It is worth emphasising that such technologies of violence have accompanied the US occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, and many other theatres of covert intervention where the use of armed drones also has proven prominent.

Key to enabling these drone operations are complex geopolitical arrangements – first to allow for the real-time transcontinental communication of surveillance data and navigational and targeting instructions; and second to allow the US Air Force and the CIA access to foreign airspace. Simultaneously, they also require a legal architecture that ensures impunity for the actors involved. We might consider the Trump administration’s 2020 imposition of sanctions against members of the International Criminal Court for their investigation of US war crimes in Afghanistan. But here there are also direct links to domestic Homeland Security operations. For example, following a series of cross-border shootings by Border Patrol agents in Arizona and Texas, the US Department of Justice has argued against allowing families to bring wrongful death cases before US courts, because this could allow for similar claims to be filed against drone pilots operating remotely from US territory (DoJ 2019). Yet even as the government has undertaken to shield drone operators from civil or criminal liability, it has prosecuted whistleblowers like Daniel Hale who have courageously chosen to speak publicly the truth about the US drone program. At stake in all of this are broader patterns of obfuscation, secrecy, and denial – another process of “disavowal” that essentially involves gaslighting the public (which is to say, an affirmative performance of psychological and epistemic violence separate from but complementary to the harms it would conceal).

Just as *Unmanning* connects contemporary drone operations to a much longer genealogy of military experimentation, the observations offered above (provisional as they may be) hedge against any claim to novelty in relation to the kinds of social, psychological, and political effects

with which these operations are entangled. But they also point to the fragility of some of the key networks and conditions required to sustain them. Given how prominently drone technology has come to feature in both the imaginary and the implementation of US military power (as reflected in the Department of Defense’s publicly-announced pivot toward “over-the-horizon” capabilities), the interpretive framework and theoretical insights advanced in Chandler’s book could not be more urgent or welcome, and will be of interest to any student or scholar concerned with the intersections of military technology, cybernetics, and the contemporary “war on terror”.

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