

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)

Author's Response – Drone Disruptions: Performing the Failures of *Unmanning*

Unmanning: How Humans, Machines and Media Perform Drone Warfare was launched on 13 March 2020. On the same day, then-president Donald Trump declared a nationwide emergency for COVID-19. Two days later, US states began to shut down schools, restaurants, bars, and other public spaces. I struggled to reconcile the book I wrote with the pandemic. Everyday life was upended by “lockdown”. Book talks and workshops were cancelled. I washed my hands until my knuckles were raw. Classes were taught via Zoom. Essential workers laboured to provide basic services in unsafe and uncertain conditions; many people were laid off from their jobs. Hundreds of thousands of people died from COVID-19, which disproportionately affected communities of colour in the United States. The US stock market closed the year with record gains. And while drone warfare received relatively little attention, scores of US targeted killings occurred in Somalia, Afghanistan, and Yemen in 2020, ending the lives of many.

Disruption, as Williams indicates in her commentary, is a potent device – not least for an author returning to a text. I am grateful to have the opportunity to reconsider the book I published in 2020 with the insights provided by Williams, Jones, and Boyce. These authors provide original and illuminating readings of *Unmanning* that unpack its contributions and challenge me to reflect on my motivations for the project. More importantly, their intellectual engagement counteracts the ennui I felt about the book after its publication. In my response, I take up a key criticism made by Boyce and Jones – namely, that *Unmanning* does not explicitly

theorise or respond to drone warfare in the present. Let me begin by saying that they are absolutely right. As Boyce laments, I do not outline for the reader how drone missions in Vietnam, for example, presage and problematise contemporary drone strikes in Afghanistan. Rather, my methodology, as Williams explains, is to develop “frame breaks” that use historical cases to destabilise and undo official narratives about contemporary drone warfare, which the US military continues to tout as an unprecedented success. These breaks lead to the lines of questioning pursued by Jones, who writes, “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”.

I understand that this tactic may be less than satisfying for some readers, yet I am purposefully addressing the present through the ruptures charted in the book. To make better sense of why I do this, I want to reflect on the insights of feminist scholarship at the groundwork of my project. In the book’s conclusion, I point out that contemporary drone aircraft are often associated with omnipotence. A history of failure, I argue, problematises a simple overlay between vision, state power, and truth. With these observations, I am thinking with Donna Haraway’s critique: “The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity – honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy – to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power” (1988: 581). Describing this as a “god trick”, Haraway instead insists on “the particularity and embodiment of all vision” (1988: 582). Over and over again, what I show in the book is how drones are mobilised to create ways of knowing that are described as mechanical and objective but instead reproduce the situated position of their creators. Drone flight performs cultural and political relations that are, at their base, necropolitical and haunted by race, gender, and colonialism. Yet, this ideal of totalising domination also breaks itself – hence my analysis of failure, error, and corruption throughout the book.

Unmanning begins with the report made by a number of major media outlets on 6 February 2002, that Osama bin Laden may have been killed by a drone strike in Afghanistan. My introduction points out two things about this attack: first, a strike against bin Laden had been a key imaginary for mobilising the development of the Predator system (before 11 September 2001); second, the attack was an utter illusion, instead killing three local villagers collecting scrap metal. My point in doing this is to show that the fallacy of targeted killing – claiming to counter terrorism while actually killing bystanders – was present at the outset of the US war in Afghanistan. We have seen this narrative again and again. This leads me to ask: what enables this falsehood to be repeated continuously anew? And how are these failures replaced with the illusion that drone aircraft are underwritten by a continuous teleology of power and progress? I read the strike as a “script” for targeted killing, which fits the drone with a political narrative of technological optimisation. The rest of the book sets up how this disavowal of politics as technology has a much longer history that repeatedly reveals the limits of the teleology that the drone is supposed to represent.

Unmanning as such is a way of performing and reproducing all-seeing power; it imagines a field of knowledge that both knows and counters the enemy. Both Jones and Boyce noted how the strike described on 6 February 2002 echoed reporting around the 29 August 2021 drone attack that killed ten civilians, including seven children, and mistook Zemari Ahmadi, an aid worker, for an ISIS operative. Subsequently, Pentagon officials admitted that the mission was a “tragic mistake” but insisted that it did not represent a broader pattern. We know, however, that this is not true. United Nations data show that, between 2016 and 2020, more than 40% of all civilian casualties in air strikes in Afghanistan were children (Action on Armed Violence 2021). Azmat Khan’s (2021) investigative reporting, “Hidden Pentagon Records Reveal Patterns of Failure in Deadly Airstrikes”, describes years of civilian deaths, underlining the flaws built into aerial targeting by both drone and aircraft. “Error” is systemic to aerial power and the results are deeply tragic for the people attacked. Yet, this also means to me that “all-seeing power” is never

what it claims to be – nor is its teleological and technological inevitability. These breaks suggest numerous avenues for intervention, which range from foregrounding the ground in war zones to challenging the humanitarian and legal logics for drone warfare to reforming the War Powers Resolution in Congress (see Jones 2020; Moyn 2021; Tahir 2017).

The aim of my book, however, is not to produce an ethnography or advocate for policy change but rather to ask how the “drone” can claim to know anything at all. Indeed, the evidence from over 80 years of drone development is that, time and time again, this framework comes apart. In disparate geographies, against different cultures, and in distinct temporalities, US military personnel claim to use the drone to build a field of knowledge that is simultaneously grounds for violence. In so doing, they reproduce existing stereotypes and global inequalities; what the eye – either mechanical or human – can see is always situated, flawed, and limited, particularly when driven by military-industrial actors. These same observations also lead me to reflect on the claims I make through my research. I believe there are other scholars who are better positioned to theorise contemporary drone warfare, and I am excited for their work (see Daulatzai and Ghumkhor 2021). What *Unmanning* offers is a series of breaks that find today’s drone in both targeted killing in the Middle East and North Africa and in Google Maps, television, video, and real-time image transmission platforms. I am, as Williams suggests, indebted to the work of Caren Kaplan (2018) who finds militarism in the everyday and studies the seemingly ordinary remnants of war and state power.

Let me return to my first paragraph and consider anew my struggle to reconcile *Unmanning* with the pandemic. Upon re-reading, it is surprising that this would be the case. It is not just that drone warfare persisted through the pandemic, but that the pandemic is steeped in everyday militarism. After all, the term “lockdown” has its origin in prisons and psychiatric institutions. It is also associated with the closure of military bases due to a threat. In fact, one origin point for this project was an anti-war protest held on 9 April 2009 at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, where drone pilots flew war missions overseas. I witnessed 14 activists trespass

onto the military installations. For an hour or so, until police from Las Vegas could arrive to arrest the anti-drone protesters, the base was on “lockdown” and no military personnel could come or go due to the nonviolent action. Stuck in vehicles outside, the traffic lined up at the gate and, for a short time, drone warfare was visible on the highway as a traffic jam. At the base’s perimeter, I troubled over this disruption and began asking questions that led to this book.

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