Book Review

Review of Parks, Lisa, and Caren Kaplan, eds. 2017 *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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During the last few years, there has been increasing popular interest in the emerging phenomenon of commercial and military drone use. In what Kaplan aptly names “drone-o-rama,” drones become embedded in the public imagination as they are fed through constant news cycles and branding campaigns that maintain drone devices as “always exceptional” (161). Drone-o-rama has been present in Amazon’s attempts to set up drone deliveries and in the selling of toy predator drones in children’s sections at department stores. These emerging technologies come to represent a shift in how we engage in play, surveillance, security, and militarization. From multiple disciplinary and methodological perspectives, *Life in the Age of Drone Warfare* covers a range of accounts of the lifeworlds shaped by the presence and practice of drone warfare. This collection of essays emerged out of the vibrant dialogues of the *Drones at Home* conference at the University of California, San Diego in 2012 and was further developed during exchanges at a symposium called *Life in the Age of Drones* in 2013.

Editors Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan curate a comprehensive feminist and critical intervention into current research on drone and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) technology that has tended to romanticize or mischaracterize its social composition and impact. The compiled essays center the perspectives of the critical humanities and post-structuralist thinking that advance discussions around the impacts of empire, racialized surveillance and violence, and the affectual consequences of drones on human operators and targets. One of the main challenges that this collection faces is the de-mystification of military drone strikes as precise, efficient, effective, and humane modes of warfare. Its fifteen contributors accomplish this intervention, providing viable analytic alternatives to how we understand the impacts of drone technologies.

As many of the contributors illustrate, there is a messiness at play in the complex human and nonhuman socio-technical networks that make drone warfare possible. This messiness has consequences that are often ignored: mistakes that lead to the deaths of innocent civilians who are brushed aside as “collateral damage”; the consequences of US imperialism and its subsequent racialized surveillance and militaristic interventionism; and the trauma experienced by operators who direct drones to engage in targeted assassinations. Parks and Kaplan have organized this collection across three main parts: *Juridical, Genealogical, and Geopolitical Imaginaries*; *Perception and Perspective*; and *Biopolitics, Automation, and Robotics*. Below, I explore some notable contributions from these three parts to provide an overview of some of the major tensions and issues that the collection attempts to address.

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In part one, *Juridical, Genealogical, and Geopolitical Imaginaries*, contributors explore how international legal regimes and the deployment of UAVs challenge and disrupt notions of sovereignty, territory, and borders as US imperialism seeks pre-emptive action in the War on Terror. Derek Gregory, in his chapter titled “Dirty Dancing: Drones and Death in the Borderlands,” meticulously explores the emergence of targeted killings that have come from advancements in security intelligence and UAV military technologies. Gregory primarily explores how the United States, through the War on Terror, has ravaged the Pakistani Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) through “precision” strikes that assassinate Taliban targets while also unceremoniously killing innocent civilians. As he observes, life in the age of drone warfare is characterized by “dispersed spaces of exception” at a global level that recategorizes civilian casualties as collateral damage (28). Furthermore, because FATA is by-and-large inaccessible to media and human rights persons, many of these casualties are unaccounted for. Gregory sardonically titles this dynamic of targeted killings the “drone dance” (32) and highlights how surveillance and UAV technologies become a weaponized tool for the exertion of US imperialism on the international stage.

In part two, authors explore how UAV technologies produce and shape new ontological formations, perceptions, and perspectives. Anjali Nath, in their chapter titled “Stoners, Stones, and Drones: Transnational South Asian Visuality from Above and Below,” explores the production of diasporic cultures through a “politics from below” (242) that is shaped in opposition to the visual and psychological landscapes produced by weaponized UAVs. This chapter illustrates how everyday life in South Asia is impacted by the constant presence of military drones and the potential of death from above that emerges out of the globalized criminalization of “orientalised” bodies. Nath uses a YouTube music video, “Soup Boys (Pretty Drones),” made by rapper Himanshu “Heems” Suri, as an object for studying diasporic refusals to US imperialism. In this way, those negatively impacted by the presence of drone strikes and targeted assassinations can turn “a satirical gaze back at the imprecise violence of the drones” (256).

In part three, *Biopolitics, Automation, and Robotics*, authors explore the biopolitical character of UAV technologies and the social systems that constitute their deployments, as well as the sociotechnical relations of human and nonhuman actors. Peter Asaro, in their chapter “The Labor of Surveillance and Bureaucratized Killing: New Subjectivities of Military Drone Operators,” argues that UAV strikes are comprised of complex and mundane socio-technical systems that emerge through the labor of employees involved in “bureaucratized killing.” The combination of interfacing with UAV technology and dealing with the presence of bugs and malfunctions, as well as the procedures and practices of a strict military bureaucracy, lead to an unsavory combination of occupational burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). And through this, these warrior bureaucrats have become defined by a new form of “human-machine subjectivity” (303) that takes a glaring toll on human actors.

One of the most impactful pieces in this volume was a letter from a former drone operator detailing his experiences with bureaucratized killing and human-machine subjectivity. Brandon Bryant, an ex-sensor operator and whistle-blower, gives a first-hand, narrative account of his job which he described as: “dark, mostly boring, quiet, while suffocating the soul, body, and mind” (315). The work of a sensor operator is comprised of controlling the multispectral targeting system (MTS), providing valuable information to the intelligence analyst and the drone pilot, as well as dropping explosives and making sure they hit their target. Bryant was deeply affected by his involvement in targeted assassinations, of killing people who would never get judged by trial for crimes they may or may not have committed. He explains, “I had killed with the push of a button—four clicks to be precise. Life became cheap, worthless” (320). Bryant’s narrative provides us with a unique and rare glimpse inside the actual mundane and extraordinary world of drone operators and sheds light into the psychic consequences of killing strangers from afar.

This collection is a decisive feminist and anti-racist contribution to security and surveillance studies that provides a diverse range of interdisciplinary lenses that interrogate critical issues surrounding drone warfare, its practice, and mainstream scholarship on drones and drone operators. Despite these necessary

interventions, I found myself perplexed at the wide variations in methodological approaches. Some contributions relied heavily on investigative and empirical accounts to explore life in the age of drone warfare, while others relied on creative, analytic, and speculative interpretation. While this mix of approaches was refreshing, it also added a layer of confusion in trying to sort out fact from speculation. With this said, it is an especially important contribution as it sheds a light on one of the most pressing human rights issues facing international politics. Such work challenges the thick veils of secrecy that obscure human rights abuses and war crimes under an iron cage bureaucracy protected by national security privileges.