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## Drones, Vertical Mediation, and the Targeted Class

AS THE UNITED STATES HAS WAGED DRONE WARS in places around the world over the past decade, a new consumer market for drones has emerged. Drones suddenly have a softer, neoliberal side. No longer only used solely for military reconnaissance and targeted killing, drones are increasingly being used by disaster relief specialists, real estate agents, Hollywood production crews, fire fighters, police units, and journalists. Given the expanding array of potential drone applications, how are we to think about this military technology from a poststructuralist feminist perspective? Does the drone import militarization into everyday life by virtue of its seepage into so many different sectors (policing, reporting, property speculation, public safety, media culture)? Or, do the multifarious uses of drones destabilize its militaristic origins and open up the technology to new kinds of contestations and experiences?

Despite decades of feminist research on science, technology, and militarization, only a handful of recently published drone-related articles explicitly engage with feminist epistemologies.<sup>1</sup> Crucially, some of this

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1. For example, Lucy Suchman and Jutta Weber, "Human-Machine Autonomies," in *Autonomous Weapon Systems: Law, Ethics, Policy*, ed. Nehal Bhuta, Susanne Beck, Robin Geiss, and Hin-Yan Liu (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming); Mary Manjikian, "Becoming Unmanned: The Gendering of Lethal Autonomous Warfare Technology," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 16, no. 1 (2014): 48–65; Cara Daggett, "Drone

research builds on the theoretical work of Donna Haraway, foregrounding the gendered dynamics of unmanned systems and the agential capacities of drone interfaces.<sup>2</sup> Mary Manjikian argues that drones are changing the gendered constructs of war as US military planners position them as “subordinate, as a new type of nature which is dominated or feminized, while ‘cyborg soldiers’ with technological implants are constructed as hypermasculine.”<sup>3</sup> Other feminist scholars have zeroed in on the cracks and fissures that drone technologies have created within military institutions. Emphasizing the phrase “unmanned,” Lorraine Bayard de Volo suggests that the “revolution in military affairs” brought about by drones may recalibrate the gendered labor dynamics of the US military and readjust masculine hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> And Cara Daggett argues that “killing with drones produces queer moments of disorientation,” as it ruptures the spatiotemporal dynamics that make war intelligible, and, in the process, disrupts militarized masculine claims to position and orientation.<sup>5</sup> Finally, feminist work in the forthcoming collection *Life in the Age of Drones* highlights the racializing logics of drone technology and war through analyses of juridical, cultural, and biopolitical formations.<sup>6</sup>

While the feminist research mentioned above makes important interventions, most scholarly drone research averts feminist perspectives

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Disorientations: How ‘Unmanned’ Weapons Queer the Experience of Killing in War,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 3 (2015): 361–79; Lorraine Bayard de Volo, “Unmanned? Gender Recalibrations and the Rise of Drone Warfare,” *Politics and Gender*, published online September 6, 2015, doi:10.1017/S1743923X15000252; Susanne Krasmann, “Targeted Killing and Its Law: On a Mutually Constitutive Relationship,” *Leiden Journal of International Law* 25, no. 3 (2012): 665–82; Caroline Holmqvist, “Undoing War: War Ontologies and the Materiality of Drone Warfare,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41, no. 3 (2013): 535–52.

2. Donna Haraway, “A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the 1980s,” *Socialist Review*, 15, no. 2, 1983, 65–107; Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Holmqvist, “Undoing War”; Anna Fiegenbaum, “From Cyborg Feminism to Drone Feminism: Remembering Women’s Anti-Nuclear Activisms,” *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (2015): 265–88.
3. Manjikian, “Becoming Unmanned,” 48.
4. Bayard de Volo, “Unmanned? Gender Recalibrations.”
5. Daggett, “Drone Disorientations,” 361.
6. Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Life in the Age of Drones* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, forthcoming). See especially chapters by Lisa Hajjar, Anjali Nath, Madiha Tahir, Inderpal Grewal, and Andrea Miller.

either by ignoring them completely or absorbing their basic arguments and precepts without acknowledgement. This is an unfortunate oversight given that US drones have been used to surveil, bomb, injure, and kill thousands of people in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, and Syria during the past decade, affecting racialized communities, women, and youth in these countries.<sup>7</sup> As I have written about elsewhere, people in these targeted countries have documented and protested US drone strikes, and their voices have circulated on the Internet and in the international press.<sup>8</sup> US drone wars also prompted the women's activist organization CODEPINK to adopt a strong antidrone stance and to found their Ground the Drones campaign in 2009. Arguing that there is a direct relationship between US drone manufacturing, global militarization, and the killing of innocent civilians, CODEPINK activists have demonstrated at the headquarters of drone manufacturers General Atomic, Northrup Grumman, Raytheon, and Prioria Robotics, as well as at the consumer-oriented exhibition of the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International. As these activist interventions imply, it would be problematic to neatly separate the critical analysis of consumer drones from their more violent military counterparts. Both originated in a US military-industrial complex that is notorious for spinning military technologies off into consumer-friendly forms, the sales of which not only support drone futures, both military and civilian, but also intensify militarization in everyday life.

Caren Kaplan and Rey Chow have made this point in relation to other military-turned-consumer technologies. In her analysis of the emergence of geographic information system (GIS) and global positioning satellite (GPS) technologies, Kaplan suggests, "Regardless of whether or not we serve in the military or have the means to afford the latest electronics, residents of the United States are mobilized into militarized ways of being" (by virtue of their participation in a society that is increasingly

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7. Bureau of Investigative Journalism, "Get the Data: Drone Wars," <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/drones-graphs>. See complete datasets for Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia under "Casualty Estimates."

8. Lisa Parks, "Drone Media: Grounded Dimensions of the US Drone War in Pakistan," in *Context Collapse: Reassembling the Spatial*, ed., Carolyn Marvin (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

structured by GIS and GPS).<sup>9</sup> Chow echoes this sentiment when she observes, “As a condition that is no longer separable from civilian life, war is thoroughly absorbed into the fabric of our daily communications — our information channels, our entertainment media, our machinery for speech and expression. We participate in war’s virtualization of the world as we use — without thinking — television monitors, remote controls, mobile phones, digital cameras, PalmPilots, and other electronic devices that fill the spaces of everyday life.”<sup>10</sup>

For Kaplan and Chow, militarization persists in the consumer electronics and communication technologies historically shaped by military organizations, paradigms, and contexts. When these same technologies are packaged for and purchased by billions of consumers, the military mandates that subtly (or not so subtly) undergirded their design begin to permeate everyday life and atmospherics. Such technologies structure the ways people communicate, how and with whom they interact, what and where they hear and see, and how they position themselves and understand their location. The mediated everyday is punctuated in innumerable ways by military logics and agendas, so much so that it is increasingly difficult to distinguish media and communication from militarization.

Building on these observations, I want to briefly explore how US military drone use has (re)organized everyday life in some parts of the world by producing a new, disenfranchised, targeted class through practices of what I term “vertical mediation.” In the process, I argue that the critical analysis of drone technology and warfare needs to extend beyond Paul Virilio’s important recognition of the technological fusion of the airplane, the camera, and the gun to include more careful consideration

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9. Caren Kaplan, “Precision Targets: GPS and the Militarization of US Consumer Identity,” *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2006): 708.

10. Rey Chow, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 34. Chow also writes, “Our daily uses of the light switch, the television, the computer, the cell phone, and other types of devices are all examples of . . . [a] paradoxical situation of scientific advancement, in which the portentous . . . disappears into the mundane, the effortless, and the intangible. We perform these daily operations with ease, in forgetfulness of the theories and experiments that made them possible. Seldom do we need to think of the affinity between these daily operations and a disaster such as the atomic holocaust. To confront that affinity is to confront the terror that is the basis of our everyday life” (30).

of the vertical fields — material resources (fuel, labor, lands, hardware, networks, data, sky, orbit) and hierarchies of command — that enable aerial restructuring of life on earth.<sup>11</sup> Just as it is important to recognize how drone warfare is organized through systems of remote control, simulation, and gaming, it is equally important to acknowledge its grounded and embodied dimensions, the landscapes and autotopographies that register and archive the drone's uses and effects.<sup>12</sup>

As drone use supplements the “dark side” of the war on terror — the profiling, capturing, transporting, detention, and torturing of terror suspects — with practices of targeted killing, it has also generated a new, disenfranchised class of “targeted” people. Derek Gregory has pointed out that the permissible scope of “the target” has been widened in the context of late-modern warfare, leading to a displacement of the concept of “the civilian.” I would suggest that these conditions have also led to the emergence of a targeted class.<sup>13</sup> Particular inhabitants of Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia, for instance, have become part of a targeted class simply because they live and move in areas in which terror suspects *may* operate. In such areas, anyone and everyone is at risk, and daily life is haunted by the specter of aerial monitoring and bombardment. Drones may sidestep the dirty work of torture, but they advance other kinds of psychological operations, using the sky to delineate and administer zones of surveillance and fear, death and destruction. Within this context, asymmetric warfare creates new forms of disenfranchisement for some and greater precariousness for all. A 2009 Brookings Institution study estimated that for every “militant” killed by a drone, there were ten civilian casualties.<sup>14</sup> A 2010 report from the New America Founda-

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11. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989).

12. Jennifer Gonzalez, “Autotopographies,” in *Prosthetic Territories: Politics and Hypertechnologies*, ed., Gabriel Brahm, Jr., and Mark Driscoll (Boulder, CO: Westview Press: 1995), 134–150.

13. Derek Gregory, “In Another Time-Zone the Bombs Fall Unsafely . . . : Targets, Civilians, and Late Modern War,” *Arab World Geographer* 9, no. 2 (July 2006): 88–111. See also Derek Gregory, “The Everywhere War,” *Geographical Journal* 177, no. 3 (Sept. 2011): 238–250.

14. Daniel L. Byman, “Do Targeted Killings Work?” *Brookings Institution*, July 14, 2009, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2009/07/14-targeted-killings-byman>.

tion indicated that, since 2004, 32 percent (approximately one in three) of those killed in drone attacks were civilians.<sup>15</sup>

This new disenfranchised targeted class is produced in part through practices of vertical mediation. By mediation, I am referring not only to the capacity of drone sensors to detect phenomena on the earth's surface so that it can be rendered as live-video feeds at terminal interfaces, but also to the potential to materially alter or affect the phenomena of the air, spectrum, and/or ground. Like Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, I understand mediation as a process that far exceeds the screen and involves the capacity to register the dynamism of occurrences within, on, or in relation to myriad materials, objects, sites, surfaces, or bodies on earth.<sup>16</sup> As a drone flies through the sky, it alters the chemical composition of the air. As it hovers above the earth, it can change movements on the ground. As it projects announcements through loudspeakers, it can affect thought and behavior. And as it shoots hellfire missiles, it can turn homes into holes and the living into the dead. Irreducible to the screen's visual display, the drone's mediating work happens extensively and dynamically through the vertical field — through a vast expanse that extends from the earth's surface, including the geological layers below and built environments above, through the domains of the spectrum and the air to the outer limits of orbit. The point here is that drones do not simply float above the surface of the earth — they rewrite and reform life on earth in a most material way. Drone operations shape where people move and how they communicate, which buildings stand and which are destroyed, who shall live and who shall die. The drone is as much a technology of inscription as it is a technology of sensing or representation.

To think about drones as technologies of vertical mediation also involves recognizing that decisions to target and kill from the air are often based on logics of suspicion, speculation, and uncertainty. Drone

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15. Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, "The Year of the Drone: An Analysis of U.S. Drone Strikes in Pakistan, 2004–2010," *New America Foundation*, February 24, 2010, <https://perma-archives.org/media/2014/8/16/18/22/XSE6-SWPR/cap.pdf>. See also, Dean Nelson, "One in Three Killed by US Drones in Pakistan Is a Civilian, Report Claims," *Telegraph*, March 4, 2010, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/pakistan/7361630/One-in-three-killed-by-US-drones-in-Pakistan-is-a-civilian-report-claims.html>.
  16. Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska, *Life After New Media: Mediation as a Vital Process* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

pilots make decisions to strike targets based on close readings of distant views, in conversation with parties situated within and beyond the designated mission area. Although targets are typically confirmed by intelligence on the ground, it is often difficult for remote decision makers to differentiate “enemies” from “friendlies,” to discern a weapon from a piece of farming equipment, or to distinguish a boy from a man, and there have been numerous civilian casualties and injuries resulting from such confusions. What this suggests is the need to investigate further the perceptual dimensions of drone warfare — to explore and evaluate how remote pilots see, what they know, and when they strike. Even though drones are automated systems, the aerial views they acquire and the bombs they drop are received by humans at both ends. A critique of vertical mediation involves explicating the kinds of capacities and power relations that aerial and orbital machines are used to enact or mobilize, while also remaining attentive to the limitations or failures of these technologies.<sup>17</sup>

In an effort to publicize the drone’s vertical mediations — the way the technology uses the vertical field in efforts to materially reform life on earth — I collaborated with a group of Lebanese and Slovenian artists (Marc Abou Farhat, Tadej Fius, Elie Mouhanna, and Miha Vipotnik) to create a multimedia installation titled *Spectral Configuration*.<sup>18</sup> The installation was part of the *Vertical Collisions* exhibition at the Station Art Gallery in Beirut in May 2015. The installation’s centerpiece is a massive, elevated, four-meter-long, supine human body, hand-crocheted out of thin aluminum wire (Fig. 1). As it soars in mid-air, the wiry surface of this colossal corpse turns translucent as multiple media projections, made from video footage leaked from the US military-industrial complex, flicker around and upon it. These electromagnetic projections envelop the silvery drone-like body within the luminous footprint of world history and militarization, cycling through a series of spectral suspects, framed targets, and aerial strikes that appear in visible light and infrared.

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17. Lisa Parks, “Vertical Mediation: Geospatial Imagery and the US Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq,” in *Mediated Geographies and Geographies of Media*, ed., Susan Mains, Julie Cupples, and Chris Lukinbeal (New York: Springer, 2015), 159–175.

18. For a short video demonstration of the *Spectral Configuration* installation, see <https://www.facebook.com/inmediasresproject/videos/1622527631314958/?fref=nfmore>.



FIGURE 1 Marc About Farhat, Tadej Fius, Elie Mouhanna, Lisa Parks, and Miha Vipotnik, *Spectral Configuration*, May 2015. Multi-media installation at the *Vertical Collisions* exhibition, Station Art Gallery, Beirut.

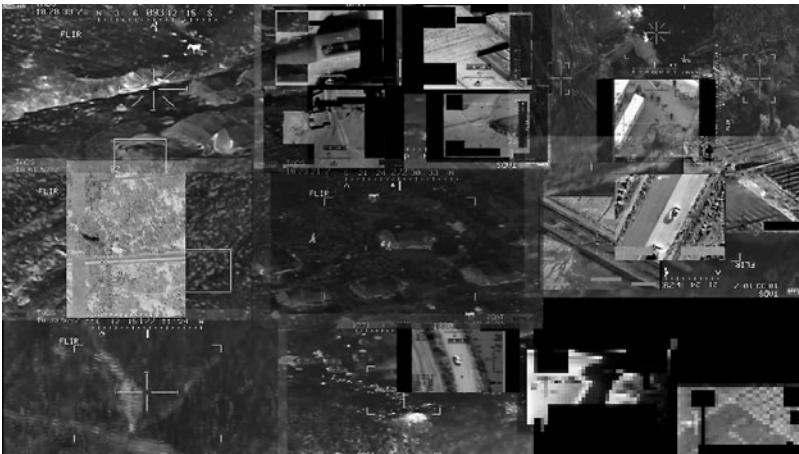


FIGURE 2 Visual composite of leaked imagery revealing aerial views of monitored and targeted peoples and sites, used as part of the projection loop in the installation.



Circumnavigating the earth on an endless flight path, this “spectral configuration” not only captures and reflects light and heat waves, it remediates life on earth, altering one’s disposition to the sky, the ground, and the skin.

If, as Caplan and Chow suggest, mapping and media technologies extend militarization into everyday life, then it is vital for feminist critics not only to expose this militarization, but also to reverse engineer it, even if symbolically. To make *Spectral Configuration*, we used the same global information networks, geospatial images, and video-capture technologies utilized each day by US drone operators. The difference, however, was that we commandeered these devices to conceptualize and produce a form and an event that would question the militarization of the vertical field by enacting it on a micro-scale and trying to make its effects intelligible and palpable to publics beyond drone war. By staging the militarization of the vertical field in a country adjacent to, yet not subject to drone war (Lebanon), *Spectral Configuration* also spoke to the exploitation of borders and associative relations by US drone operators and aroused concerns about the usage of the technology in the region. Given the rapid expansion of drone war over the past decade as a favored method in the war on terror, and the resulting emergence of a targeted class, feminist research and interventions on these issues are more crucial than ever.