5,000 FEET IS THE BEST: RE-VIEWING THE POLITICS OF UNMANNED AERIAL SYSTEMS

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Less than six months into the American-declared Global War on Terror, military officials announced an unprecedented success: "[A]ll major U.S. television networks reported that an unmanned Predator drone operated by the Central Intelligence Agency fired a missile […] at a group of people believed to be senior al-Qaeda leaders meeting near a cave complex known as Zawar Khili near the border with Pakistan" (National Post News Services, 2002: A10). The events were described as a "tactical innovation of the highest order" and marked the first time that a MQ-1 Predator unmanned aerial system (UAS) killed suspected militants (Sisk, 2002: 20). The reports indicated that the men attacked were wearing traditional Arab garments and one man was taller than the others; consequently, analysts claimed the strike may have killed Osama bin Laden, known for his height (National Post News Services, 2002: A10). Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld used the opportunity to testify before Congress, promoting the new weapon. "If you have an unarmed Predator that's out there gathering intelligence information and you replace it with an armed Predator, that not only can gather intelligence information, but then can actually fire a Hellfire […] you've got different lethality" (in Shanker & Risen, 2002:12).

Operators far from the battlefield in Afghanistan used a satellite data-link to remotely fly and control the MQ-1 Predator, which struck the targets in an isolated mountain location. As a result of difficult weather conditions and other issues of accessibility, United States soldiers did not arrive to survey the aftermath of the drone strike until several days after the attack. In Senate testimony, Army Gen. Tommy Franks, commander of United States forces in Afghanistan, commented, "We know we have [killed] some bad guys, but we just don't know who they are yet" (in Sisk, 2002: 20). News reports described how DNA samples from the site would be used to determine if bin Laden had been killed, noting that soldiers on the scene "[p]icked up communications gear, weapons, documents and the remains of people killed in the strike, any of which might help determine who those people were" (Shanker & Risen, 2002:12). Yet, while the military team sought genetic proof of the MQ-1 Predator's success, another account emerged. Daraz Khan, a villager from Lalazha about ten miles from the attack site, was nicknamed "Tall Man." On 4

February 2002, the date of the MQ-1 Predator strike, he and two other villagers, Munir Ahmed and Jehangir Khan, went to collect scrap metal, sold for fifty cents a camel load across the border in Pakistan. Former battlegrounds, like the site near Zawar Khili where they went, contained metal remnants from the Soviet invasion and more recent fighting between the Americans and the Taliban (Singer, 2009: 397). While President George Bush announced he was "fully satisfied" that members of al-Qaeda were killed by the strike (Scarborough, 2002: A01), Gurbuz tribal elders from the village insisted the men who were killed collecting scrap metal were not al-Qaeda. Khan's sixteen-year-old niece protested, "Why did you Americans kill Daraz? We have nothing, nothing, and you have taken from us our Daraz" (in Herold, 2003).

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The so-called success associated with the 4 February 2002 attack faded from headlines and, like thousands of other Afghan civilians, Daraz Khan, Munir Ahmed, and Jehangir Khan became what the United States Military terms "collateral damage," forgotten deaths of local people killed in a battlefield beyond their control. Eight months later, on 5 November 2002, a MQ-1 Predator killed al-Qaeda operative Abu Ali al-Harithi in Yemen, along with five men in a vehicle with him. This attack is now recorded by the Pentagon as the MQ-1 Predator's first successful targeted strike in the Global War on Terror (Zaloga, 2008: 35). Ten years and hundreds of UAS missile strikes later, I return to the 4 February 2002 MQ-1 Predator attack because the tragedy it foregrounds persists. The account asks one to question who is taken as an enemy and how this is framed through the circuit of intelligence information and lethality that is the basis of the MQ-1 Predator. A man's height and use of a traditional garment allowed for three men's deaths, while American leaders' conviction that they killed a bad guy silenced the voices of local tribal leaders and victims' relatives. Officials had complete confidence in images captured by a camera on a remotely controlled drone, flying over the region at 7000 feet in the air. Side-by-side, DNA testing and the MQ-1 Predator were poised as conquerors of the mountainous areas of southern Afghanistan, littered with the metal from the history of war in the region. Yet, even while the attack revealed the limits of these technologies and by extension, what United States officials could claim to know, it nonetheless served to promote UAS. Donald Rumsfeld's testimony points to the powerful equation of intelligence and targeting enabled by the MQ-1 Predator. Notably, in this formulation, the question of whether the intelligence obtained through the system was accurate or the men's deaths were just is not raised.

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In the first part of this essay, I examine the knowledge politics of UAS, drawing on frameworks from post-colonial studies, bio-politics and science and technology studies. These approaches offer insight into the circuit of intelligence and targeting enabled by the MQ-1 Predator, complicating the connection between the two terms. In the second part of the essay, I turn to *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011), a video installation about a UAS pilot by Omer Fast from which this piece takes its title. The figures the video screens cannot be framed as predictable images or through simple equations; rather, the video is fraught with impossibility and error. Through this work, I argue that by attending to the failures of UAS, i.e. what cannot be seen or sensed, possibilities for transformation may be opened up. I ask how impossibility, failure, and unpredictability elide the equation of knowledge and dominance, and examine these interstices.

Impossibility, failure, and unpredictability elide the equation of knowledge and dominance, and examine these interstices

Intelligent targeting: Knowledge politics of Unmanned Aerial Systems

Potentials found in intercultural dynamics, many discussed in this volume, open possibilities for rich and productive forms of exchange by intertwining multiple, varying groups of people. However, these relations operate alongside cultural encounters that challenge such possibilities. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) emphasizes how knowledge of others has been systematically linked to colonial and post-colonial relations, prioritizing Western dominance and control. More recently, *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (2006) by Rey Chow examines knowledge production and worldwide targeting in the aftermath of World War II. She argues that the development of Area Studies, employing social scientists and linguists to study different world regions, was linked to an array of Cold War projects aiming for systematic world control, most notably, American nuclear missile programs (Chow, 2006: 12-15). Chow's insights provide an apt framework for thinking about the cultural encounter enacted by the MQ-1 Predator, which both collects intelligence and targets.

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Based on unmanned vehicles developed for reconnaissance during the Cold War, MQ-1 Predators provide real-time, continuous video and infrared imagery of the areas where they are flown. Often, they are used in combination with surveillance that captures mobile or satellite phone communications. Most MQ-1 Predators are flown from bases in the United States, where the operator monitors the system through information relayed on a computer screen and manipulates the UAS through satellite. Armed with Hellfire missiles and a laser designator, MQ-1 Predator operators can laser pinpoint a target to which a missile is directed. Soldiers on the ground can also use laser pointers to guide missile attacks (Singer, 2009: 34-37). The precision and success that has been attributed to the MQ-1 Predator (Department of Defense, 2005; Drew, 2009: A1+) relies on the connection between ongoing, real-time collection of intelligence information and being able to use the laser system to target. Significantly, the tragedy of misinformation also becomes apparent in this circuit. While UAS are promoted by the United States Military as an all-powerful seeing eye, they are simultaneously limited, relying primarily on images and intercepted communication. Though the United States Military and CIA operators are technologically extended through UAS, they are circumscribed in their modes of seeing and listening. These modes of interaction, watching and eavesdropping, not only diminish possible relations to the targeted other, they also give form to a "we" contradistinguished from the target.

This movement from others to operators suggests how such cultural encounters are enmeshed with knowledge politics. To explore this further, I turn to the concept of bio-power. In *Security, Territory, Population* (2009), Michel Foucault defines bio-power as "the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became object of a political strategy, a general strategy of power …" (Foucault, 2009: 1). This understanding maps onto contemporary forms of power enabled by UAS. Foucault claims techniques of surveying, analysis, and reflection employed during the modern period came to define humans both biologically and as a surface for calculated and reflected governance. Notably a particular conception of the human

emerges through these techniques, one that reflects not only on those surveyed but also the surveyors (Foucault, 2009: 71-80). This complicates the strategic circuit of intelligence and targeting, indicating how it is not just enemy targets that are impacted by the system but also the humans who develop and use UAS. Below, I examine the human and nonhuman mechanisms and procedures the MQ-1 Predator mobilizes, indicating how technological strategies are layered into bio-power in its most recent iterations and how this leads to particular formulations of who is human.

MQ-1 Predators both fly lower to the ground and slower than a piloted plane could and some models can operate continuously for up to 22 hours, more than double the length of time a human pilot could fly (Drew, 2009: A1+). These aspects of the UAS highlight how the system is more-than-human and can enact previously impossible strategies through its technologies. UAS are potent reminders of the ways humans extend themselves through technologies and the consequences of this. Yet, that the system is unmanned is a misnomer; there are always humans linked to them. A ground crew, located at an air base near to where the UAS is deployed, oversees the aircraft's take-off and landing. Once the UAS is in the air, operations are taken over by pilots and sensor operators based in control trailers in the United States. Data and images transmitted through UAS can be displayed on computer screens not only in the control trailer, but also in the battlefield, at the Pentagon and in the White House, while military orders are typically relayed back to operators through chat boxes (Singer, 2009: 35, 337). So, while UAS are designated as unmanned, at the same time, they are a prosthesis that defines the context of the American solder and the commands he or she is given, opposing them to others, who are targets outside the system.

Political ecologies: UAS between Nevada and Waziristan

Unmanned Aerial Systems incorporate complex relations between humans and nonhumans. The previous discussion showed how UAS are deployed against others, distinguishing populations through technologies of bio-power. Science and technology studies (STS) contribute to this analysis by offering ways to re-think how humans act alongside complicated physical, technical and biological processes. In *States of Knowledge* (2004), STS theorist Sheila Jasanoff proposes the concept of co-production to consider the states produced through interactions between humans and nonhumans. She writes, "Knowledge and its material embodiments are at once products of social work and constitutive of forms of social life" (Jasanoff, 2004: 2). The twinning of materiality and knowledge captures how UAS gives form to both the United States and its soldiers, while the system is simultaneously formed by them. Jasanoff examines, "[H]ow knowledge-making is incorporated into practices of state-making, or of governance more broadly, and, in reverse, how practices of governance influence the making and use of knowledge" (Jasanoff, 2004: 3). At the same time, Jasanoff writes that the term plays on the multiple layers of the word 'state', which refers not just to a governed body, but also to various organizational, material and embodied forms (ibid). UAS are a technology deployed by the United States to collect intelligence and enact its politics. Yet, co-production between the technology and state not only occurs at a national level, rather, UAS

technologies have multiple aspects co-produced between physical geographies, technical infrastructure, government officials, industry representatives, media spokespeople, and counter-movements.

Developed as a reaction to technological determinism, STS emphasizes the multiple and varying technical and material relations that connect humans and nonhumans (Bijker, 2006). In this way, I want to highlight how techniques of bio-power enacted by UAS are not pre-given; rather, they are continuously co-produced through shifting relations between humans and nonhumans. In *Cosmopolitics* (2010), Isabelle Stengers elaborates the concept of political ecology to consider these interconnections. To make something intelligible, she argues, is never merely a matter of representing reality. It is also a practice of giving value. She writes, "Ecology is, then, the science of multiplicities, disparate causalities, and unintentional creations of meaning" (Stengers, 2010: 34). I use the plural, political ecologies, in this account to emphasize how UAS variously move between and beyond military, economic, political, and scientific terrains. While I am wary of how UAS are deployed by the United States, I also want to show how they do not align with a single field of power. Below, I suggest how UAS both link and divide two geographically distinct regions and analyze the multiple relations co-produced by these interconnections and disjuncture.

UAS industry advocates promote a growing market for unmanned systems and analysts argue that robotics will become increasingly important for the United States Military in the 21st century

In control trailers at Creech Air Force Base in Indian Springs Nevada, UAS operators fly MQ-1 Predators in war zones and beyond. The base is located at the site of a World War II auxiliary air field, adjacent to the Nevada Nuclear Test Site, about forty-five minutes northwest of Las Vegas (United States Air Force, 2012). The UAS are manufactured by General Atomics, a private defense contracting company in San Diego, California, founded in 1955. As the name suggests, the company began by developing weaponry for nuclear missiles and its UAS programs emerged from its guided weapons projects and early reconnaissance drones (General Atomics and Affiliated Companies, 2012). Drones, as they were called during the Cold War, were deployed for various missions, serving as practice targets, measuring the effects of atomic tests and to collect still images with film cameras (Zaloga, 2008). The MQ-1 Predator was first fielded in 1995 for surveillance during the Bosnia War (Defense Airborne Reconnaissance Office, 1996). In 2001, the system was armed with missiles and by October 2004, after its widespread use during the Iraq invasion, the MQ-1 Predator reached 100,000 flight hours (Department of Defense, 2005). In 2012, the Department of Defense announced thirty-one percent of all aerial systems in the military were now designated as unmanned, five times more than in 2005 (Ackerman & Shachtman, 2012). UAS industry advocates promote a growing market for unmanned systems and analysts argue that robotics will become increasingly important for the United States Military in the 21st century (Singer, 2009).

UAS were significant in the American occupation of Iraq and continue to play an important role in Afghanistan. As a weapon, the MQ-1 Predator has also been used outside of declared war zones, including Yemen, Pakistan, and Somalia. Investigations by the United Nations and Amnesty International have raised significant legal concerns about the use of UAS in targeted killings outside war zones, calling them extrajudicial executions (Horton, 2010; Reuters, 2002: A21). Of these

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locations, Pakistan has had the most UAS strikes. As of February 15, 2012, the United States had carried out 314 reported drone attacks in Pakistan, the majority in the Northern Waziristan region, along the border with Afghanistan. Starting in 2004 and growing substantially in scope beginning 2007, the strikes have killed between 1,741 and 2,712 people. The large discrepancy in these numbers indicates the difficulty of obtaining information about the attacks. While the United States does not officially acknowledge the UAS strikes in Pakistan, they have, at the same time, highlighted the program's success. Officials maintain civilian deaths account for fewer than 20% of the total killed and as few as 5% of the deaths in 2010-2012 (New America Foundation, 2012). These reports differ significantly from those of the Pakistani government, Pakistani press and reports by independent observers, which claim as many as 90% of those killed by the strikes are civilians (Rogers, 2010).

Waziristan is known as a Federally Administered Tribal Area in Pakistan and policies that guide the region's governance emerge from the Frontier Crimes Regulation established by the British Raj in 1901. Part of the formation of Pakistan in 1947, the area was of strategic importance during the Afghanistan War against the Soviets during the 1980s. Constitutionally, the area is not bounded to decisions made by Parliament, and the President of Pakistan exercises considerable, direct control over the region. Access is limited (Rakisits, 2008). Nonetheless, furor caused by the drone attacks has not been contained. Reports in 2011 describe thousands protesting against these strikes and they are an increasingly potent political issue for Pakistan and the United States (Al Jazeera, 2011). While American soldiers watch the region, locals have become wary of the ubiquitous presence of the drone. The MQ-1 Predator is made with an engine akin to those used in snowmobiles. Similarly, the vehicle has an unmistakable hum, which can be heard when it flies closer to the ground (American Forces Information Service, 2011). The ubiquitous buzzing sound of the drone, flying overhead, often, in groups of four or five, marks the air system in Waziristan. The hum is a persistent reminder that "they" might strike, at any time. *Bangana*, a Pashto onamonapia, variously translated as meaning a thunderclap or wasp, is used by locals to describe the UAS (Rogers, 2010: 20).

The fragmentary scenes above suggest a series of incompatible, yet, deeply interconnected frames. Linguistic differences, found in the space between UAS, drone and *bangana*, gesture to technological, economic, political, and social patterns that give rise to these two unequal, yet, linked ecologies. Operating from control trailers in the Nevada Desert, soldiers watch and listen through a drone system, which emerged from military-industrial relations that coalesced during the Cold War. Their attacks are cloaked in a vocabulary of protection against terrorists. Americans are invited to see the weapons systems and the soldiers who operate them as justified, mimicking logics developed during the Cold War. Yet, the surveillance network and extrajudicial attacks enabled by UAS largely failed to control the historically contested border regions between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Rather, the hum of the system produces critique, discontent, and widespread outcry. As a number of analysts have suggested, drones may work to undermine American power (Bishara, 2009; Horton, 2010; Swift, 2011).

I am deeply concerned about the legal and political consequences that are a result of the United States UAS attacks and support continued efforts to question drone strikes through these means. However, the final part of my paper turns to a video artwork to examine the questions raised by drones. I use this onscreen account to think about the critical work that can be done visually and affectively to address UAS. The images transmitted through UAS are described by the United States Military as intelligence. Yet, the above political ecologies suggest this imagery should instead be viewed as conveying values, enabling the United States to systematically order attacks of targeted groups in certain geographical regions. Both extending from and responding to the political ecologies described above, my analysis of *5,000 Feet is the Best* does not offer a simple answer to UAS lethality. Instead, I highlight the role disjuncture, impossibility, and failure to suggest that these gaps open multiple spaces to re-view and, simultaneously, to reconsider and re-imagine the use of UAS.

5,000 Feet is the Best

Omer Fast's video, *5,000 Feet is the Best* (2011), provides a subtle and insightful critique of the United States MQ-1 Predator program. I use this piece to elaborate on tensions developed in the previous sections. Intertwining what is known and unknown, the concepts of fact, fiction, success, failure, imagery, and communication are all problematized through the video. In this way, Fast indicates the challenge of drones might be countered by attending to their multiple impacts, thus, shifting the singular equation of knowledge and power they unsuccessfully enact. The video is drawn from an account given by a MQ-1 Predator operator with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yet, this is not immediately apparent and, rather, appears to be a series of staged interviews between two characters, one who portrays a drone pilot and the other who acts the role of a journalist. The scene of their interview is a non-descript, yet, vividly filmed hotel room. Their encounter is repeated three times. Between each repetition, the MQ-1 Predator operator tells a part of his story. His account, voice and affect contrast with the actor's performance. The duplicity between the operator and the actor is significant, signaling the difficulty of separating the individual from the roles he or she is expected to perform, while at the same time, highlighting the distinction.

Each interview begins with the journalist asking, "Everything okay?" after the pilot comes into the room and lies down on the bed. The pilot replies, "Yeah, I'm okay." In a painful moment between them, the pilot tells the journalist, "I didn't realize you'd be filming." The journalist tells him, "We can stop, if you are uncomfortable." "Yeah, right," says the pilot. He takes some pills, asking the journalist if they can hurry up because he has a doctor's appointment. The journalist asks him, "What's the difference between you and a real pilot?" "No difference," the pilot replies. In each repetition, the explanation of why there is no distinction leads to a different vignette, apparently unrelated to his role as a UAS pilot. Filmed in neutral shots, the drone pilot first narrates a story about a young man obsessed with trains who successfully takes on the identity of a train conductor for a day. At the end of the day, he is caught by the police breaking into his own home because he left his keys in the real conductor's locker. The journalist asks what the story has to do with

being a drone pilot. He is told, "The moral of the story is […] you keep your work life and your domestic life separated." "You're not serious," replies the journalist. Yet, the vignette is also about race. A black man is portrayed the role of the conductor until the journalist asks, "Why did the man have to be black?" The pilot replies, "I didn't say he was black. Who said anything about color?" The image shifts to a white man and the pilot explains, "This has nothing to do with race."

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After the interviewee finishes the vignette, admonishing the journalist to "ask him a better question," he leaves the hotel room and seems to catch sight of himself as he lingers in the hallway. The image then cuts to the account given by the MQ-1 Predator operator. The first time the viewer sees him, his face is blurred and the only distinguishable feature is his eyes. His narrative then provides the voice-over for a series of aerial shots. These include a suburban neighborhood with a boy biking through the streets, a New England village, recognizable because of the white church steeple in the center of the shot, and a nighttime view of Las Vegas, lit up with flashing colors and lights. The MQ-1 Predator operator says, "I guess Predator is similar to playing a video game– but playing the same video game for four years straight on the same level." As the images slowly move below the viewer, he recalls, "One time, I just watched a house for a month straight, for eleven hours a day." But then, there were also moments of stress. "There are some horrible sides to working Predator. You see a lot of death […] doing this, you had to think there is so much loss of life that is a direct result of me."

These questions of race and death haunt the final vignette. The pilot tells how "Mom, Dad, Johnny, and little Zoe are going on a trip." A white, American family is pictured packing their things into a station wagon in front of their suburban house. They leave the city, passing through a military check-point as they drive into the country side. On a lonely dirt road, they see a group of men in the distance and stop the car. The men are planting an improvised explosive device. The pilot narrates, "One of the men is younger, almost a teenager, and he wears a traditional head dress." The image cuts to a white male, wearing a t-shirt and baseball cap. The narration continues, "The other two are older. They're dressed in clothes more typical to tribes from the south." These two men are wearing flannel shirts and ballcaps. One man raises his weapon as he indicates that the vehicle should pass by. The car drives slowly by the men. The viewer is told, "the crisis is averted," and the three men exchange smiles with the family. In a close-up, the driver squeezes his wife's hand. At that moment, a Hellfire missile strikes, "almost vaporizing the men on impact," and the family emerges from the car like ghosts.

Re-viewing the MQ-1 Predator's strike with a white American family in its target highlights cultural assumptions relayed through UAS' imagery. Notably, the Hellfire missile attack screened by Fast enacts key elements of the drone strike that I described at the beginning of this paper. Even while the drone pilot maintains "who said anything about race," markers like skin color, dress, and age are all factors used to visually target certain humans. *5,000 Feet is the Best* shows how the circuit of intelligence and targeting enabled by UAS takes the lives of people who are identified as others, turning the assumptions made about the tribal peoples of Afghanistan and Pakistan onto Americans. However, *5,000 Feet is the Best* unsettles this reversal by not only examining who

is targeted, but also who targets. They are not separate figures, rather, they are linked. Instead of enacting a position of dominance, in Fast's video, the MQ-1 Predator operator is figured through the condition of PTSD. Intertwining these two layers, the veneer of the MQ-1 Predator's success reveals a mode of relation that is deeply flawed, not unlike the impossible dialogue between the pilot and the journalist. Looking at UAS technology as a dense web of connected political ecologies reveals its failures, demanding a reconsideration of how humans and non-humans through UAS shape and give shape to social forms, at once, personal, political, and intercultural.

Humans and non-humans through UAS shape and give shape to social forms, at once, personal, political, and intercultural

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