
Reviewed by Rimona Afana

Over the past two decades drone warfare has been normalized as an effective and necessary mode of military engagement; violence delivered remotely is now pervasive, routine, seemingly irreversible. The normalization of drone warfare seems congruent with the expansion, in many other sectors, of state–corporate crime. The sinister necropolitics agendas of states and corporations coalesce to intensify violence and enhance distance. This expansion of violence has been accompanied by efforts to understand and resist it: critical studies on the crimes of drone warfare and activism against the military–industrial complex.

Remote Warfare explores how people have imagined, experienced, and resisted remote warfare. The content is structured in three sections: “Visions” (conceptualizing remote warfare), “Intimacies” (ties created or redefined by remote warfare), and “Reconfigurations” (reframing and resisting remote warfare). Each part includes four chapters navigating emerging forms of violence, the ideologies and technologies creating or facilitating violence, and nascent forms of popular resistance. Editors Rebecca A. Adelman and David Kieran note that remote warfare has become “central to modern state-sponsored violence” (p. 3) and its ramifications continue to be debated by politicians, policymakers, scholars, and activists.

These debates, we are shown, have primarily revolved around three areas: the strategic and tactical efficacy of remote warfare; the experience of remote warfare for combatants and civilians; the ethics of remote warfare. While within each category some have legitimized drone warfare, Grégoire Chamayou and other scholars and activists find drones indefensible on all grounds: strategically, politically, ethically (p. 8). To transcend reductionist pro/con debates, the book’s contributors unveil “the cultural entanglements, imprints and consequences of remote warfare” (p. 10). The book seeks a more nuanced contextualization of remote warfare, zooming both in and out to understand not just the phenomenon as it currently unfolds, but its precursors, the bidirectional influences between culture and warfare, its embodied (rather than disembodied) nature, its nonlinearities technically and ethically, and its potential future ramifications.

Remote warfare is not a new phenomenon. Various modes of remote warfare have been developed and perfected over time: from archery in the medieval times to pilotless vehicles developed during the First World War or reconnaissance
unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) deployed in the Vietnam War. Today’s debates mostly focus on the (ab)use of advanced computerized technologies of killing. Adelman and Kieran show us that the boundaries of remoteness are continuously stretched: the air, land, and sea are no longer the only terrains for warfare. Now defence and offence could be executed even from (outer) space, as illustrated by policy debates during the Trump presidency on creating a Space Force, ideas which go back to the Eisenhower era (pp. 1–3).

Dispensing lethal force from a distance numbs perpetrators to the consequences of their actions, suggests Dave Grossman, US Army officer and psychologist (p. 6); many other authors have attested (and some challenged) this psychological effect of today’s weaponry and warfare. As I show in my discussion of industrial animal farming and wildlife trade as embodiments of the genocide–ecocide continuum, “advanced technologies of violence allow the colossal scale and efficiency of killing, and distance physically and psychologically the killer from the killed” (Afana 2022). While the tragedy of non-humans is far worse in scale and brutality than what humans endure, in both cases technology facilitates crime and distance (oblivion). Yet, as we are shown in the book, distance coexists with closeness, as operators/perpetrators and targets/victims become intimately tied by these technologies of violence and their identities are reshaped in the process of killing. This also challenges the verticality conventionally defining drone warfare; instead, the book’s contributors evince it as multidirectional and nonlinear (p. 13).

While the space here is insufficient to do justice to all chapters, I will share a few thoughts on each. “Visions”, the book’s first part, starts with “‘An Entirely New Method of Conducting War at a Distance’: The First World War and the Air War of the Future”, where Michael Zeitlin examines the early history of drone warfare in the writings of aviation practitioners and theorists Giulio Douhet and William Mitchell, who anticipated almost a century ago some of today’s challenges that come with remote warfare. Chapter 2, “Warrior Woundings, Warrior Culture: An Ethos for Post-9/11 American War Culture” by David Buchanan, looks at narratives (re)defining contemporary American warfare and warriors. In the next chapter, “From Hermeneutics to Archives: Parasites and Predators in Homeland”, Jens Borrebye Bjering and Andreas Immanuel Graae examine espionage thriller Homeland to identify tropes in popular culture defining remote warfare and anti-terrorism. Here, drones become an anti-hermeneutic tool obliterating archives, products of mass surveillance conventionally meant for interpretation. The final chapter, “Eye in the Sky: Persistent Surveillance Technology and the Age of Global War” by Nike Nivar Ortiz, tracks the use of military surveillance for non-military purposes; these technologies are deployed in urban areas and their algorithms employed to calculate criminality seem to worse impact marginalized groups.
“Intimacies”, the book’s second section, begins with Michael Richardson’s “Of Games and Drones: Mediating Traumatic Affect in the Age of Remote Warfare”, which explores the affective ties generated between operators (perpetrators) and targets (victims) by looking at the similarities and differences between video games and drone warfare. In the next chapter, “Over There? War Writing, Lethal Technology, and Democracy in America”, Tim Jelfs interprets representations of violence and remoteness in American war literature. Chapter 7, “Wanted Dead or Alive: The Hunt for Osama bin Laden” by Annika Brunck, examines dimensions of remoteness (spatial, cultural, psychological) involved in deploying and legitimizing the war on terror. In this section’s last chapter, “Home, Away, Home: Remoteness and Intimacy in Contemporary Danish Veteran Literature”, Ann-Katrine S. Nielsen analyzes the construction of the “veteran” identity in Denmark, as the country shifted towards remilitarization in the 1990s–2000s.

“Reconfigurations”, the book’s third part, commences with “Necrospace, Media, and Remote War: Ethnographic Notes from Lebanon and Pakistan, 2006–2008”. Syed Irfan Ashraf and Kristin Shamas examine the killing, death, and impunity which have come to define necrospace subjected to remote warfare (such as aerial bombardment and cluster munitions in Lebanon and killer drones in Pakistan), as well as the mixed outcomes of resistance efforts by those victimized. Next, “Drones vs. Drones: Ambient and Ambivalent Sounds against Remote Warfare” by Owen Coggins explores initiatives by artists and activists to protest/resist drone surveillance and warfare using drone music; here, noise is mobilized to create/replicate unease. In the following chapter, “Bombs and Black Humor: Aerial Warfare and the Absurd”, Brittany Hirth examines the use of techniques common in absurd literature, such as black humour and parody, by veterans subverting in their writings the reductionist media portrayals of the wars they experienced. The book’s closing chapter, “An Architecture Against Dacoits: On Drones, Mosquitos, and the Smart City” by Sajdeep Soomal, examines two texts offering anti-drone, post-colonial imaginaries. The first is a cartoon in Urdu tracking the exploits of a dengue-carrying mosquito and an American Predator drone, enjoying together the terror inflicted on Pakistanis; the second one is Shura City, a concept for a drone-proof smart city. Both texts unveil the contradictions accompanying both violence and nonviolence.

Remote Warfare mostly focuses on cultural responses and sensemaking processes surrounding drone warfare. Contributors come from diverse disciplines, including communication, journalism, comparative literature, media, religious studies, history, American studies, and fine arts. My work and interests focus on the legal, political, economic, and psychological aspects of criminality. Though these areas are mostly absent from the book and thus my curiosities on drone warfare were not covered, I mostly resonated with two chapters. One is Michael
Zeitlin’s analysis of the prescient writings of aviation pioneers Giulio Douhet and William Mitchell, which allow us a finer contextualization of today’s technologies, doctrines, and crimes. The other is Syed Irfan Ashraf’s and Kristin Shamas’ analysis of (resistance to) drone warfare in Lebanon and Pakistan, which reminds us how states, the arms industry, and the media create and reinforce hierarchies of lives and deaths.

These hierarchies feel jarring as we witness the massive military, political, and diplomatic support received by Ukraine while the ongoing killing, terror, displacement, and theft inflicted on Palestinians for decades have been met with impunity. Palestinians are of course not alone in today’s “let them die” category. Drone warfare attests not only how some people’s lives and their sovereignty are treated as worthless, but it also shows how murderous technologies are used on some to increase their potential to be next used on others. I am referring here to Israel selling some of its combat drones as field tested (Mack 2022) on perpetually terrorized Palestinians in Gaza. These include my own relatives in Gaza. Here, drone warfare creates both remoteness and a sinister kind of closeness between people on whom these weapons were “tested” and peoples thousands of miles away who are next victimized by these advanced technologies of killing and surveillance. This rising sophistication of domination, extraction, murder, maiming—whether inflicted on humans or non-humans—can only rest on our continuously degraded compassion and valour.

References
