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The Drone Interface: A Relational Study of U.S. Drone Violence in Afghanistan

by

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Submitted in total fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
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Abstract

This thesis examines lived experiences of military drone violence, finding out about the lives of people who live(d) in areas of drone surveillance and bombardment in Afghanistan and veterans of the U.S. Air Force's drone program. More specifically, it seeks to understand the relations between these two groups of people and the effects of these relations. To this end, it draws on interviews undertaken in Afghanistan, refugee camps in Greece and the United States in 2017, wherein interviewees were asked about the effects of drone violence on their lives and how they experience their relation to the person(s) on the other side of the drone. The project is informed by Feminist and Postcolonial International Relations/Security Studies and these fields' insights on war and violence. As such, it not only recognises that ordinary people are significant actors in war, it also approaches the global North and global South as internally related to each other.

Developing the concept of the 'drone interface', this thesis firstly argues for the necessity of a relational approach to the study of drone violence. The drone interface refers to the conduits – both technological and non-technological – that shape social relations between people on either side of the drone (and in turn are shaped by them). Applying the concept of the drone interface allows researchers to begin with the premise that U.S. Air Force drone personnel and people living under drones in Afghanistan have the power to affect each other. Analytically, this relational approach is necessary to better understand drone violence and its effects and implications in international relations. Politically, a relational approach uncovers a far wider range of harms inflicted in drone violence than is currently acknowledged in most academic and civil society scholarship on drones. These harms are produced in the relations between people operating and targeted by drones and are therefore missed in non-

relational accounts. A relational account thus provokes a more persuasive normative critique of the use of U.S. drone surveillance and attacks than has been as-yet articulated.

Second the thesis contends that the social relations between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people experiencing drone violence need to be understood as relations of domination. These relations of domination I argue, produce and reproduce harms such as racism, sexism, poverty and alienation at the level of the domestic and the international. That is, drone violence not only (re)produces racism, sexism, poverty and alienation in international relations, it also compounds racist, patriarchal and capitalist relations within Afghanistan and the United States.

Declaration

This thesis comprises only my original work towards the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, and due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used. The thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, bibliography and appendices.

Alex Edney-Browne

August 2020

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List of Acronyms

AIHRC – Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

ANA – Afghan National Army

CIA – Central Intelligence Agency

CSS – Critical Security Studies

DHS – Department of Homeland Security

EKIA – Enemies Killed in Action

FATA – Federally Administered Tribal Areas (of Pakistan)

ICRC – International Committee of the Red Cross

IDP – Internally Displaced Person

IED – Improvised Explosive Device

IHL – International Humanitarian Law

IR – International Relations

ISR – Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance

JWT – Just War Tradition

MAM – Military-Age Male

NGO – Non-Government Organisation

NSA – National Security Agency

PGM – Precision Guided Munition

PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

RAF – Royal Air Force (UK)

RMA – Revolution in Military Affairs

RPA – Remotely Piloted Aircraft

STS – Science and Technology Studies

UAV – Uninhabited/‘Unmanned’ Aerial Vehicle

UN – United Nations

UNAMA – United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

US – United States

USAF – United States Air Force

USAFA – United States Air Force Academy

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1. Introduction

Dead Bodies – On and Off the Tarmac

Reverend Chris Antal stood on the tarmac at Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan giving a solemn salute to the remains of a dead U.S. soldier whose casket was being lifted into a U.S.-bound C-17 cargo plane. As a U.S. Army Chaplain, Antal was often present on the flight line for these ceremonies, referred to as ‘dignified transfers’. There “were over a dozen of them” in just the first two months Antal was deployed in Afghanistan (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). The average age of the dead, Antal adds, “was about 20 to 22-years-old” (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017). It was on the tarmac of Kandahar Air Base, when giving dignified transfer ceremonies, that Antal witnessed the take-off and landing of the U.S. Air Force’s military drones.

The flight line is a restricted access area, and it’s fenced off, and nobody is allowed to go out there, and there is no photography. But because of the dignified transfers, I had special access to go out to the flight line multiple times to support these ceremonies. And every time I can remember standing there, I would see the drones. (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Antal considers himself different to the ‘average’ Army Chaplain. He was ordained in the Unitarian Universalist Association and endorsed by that association to serve in the military chaplaincy. Unitarian Universalism does not necessitate belief in a higher power and, despite its roots in Christian theology, “embrace[s] diverse teachings from Eastern and Western religions and

philosophies” (United Universalist Association, nd.). In 2012, Antal told the U.S. Army’s Chaplain Corp that he wanted to be deployed in-theatre. He had heard about a new initiative to engage chaplains as ‘religious leader liaisons’ in Iraq and Afghanistan. These liaisons were to partake in dialogue with sheiks and imams. Antal thought this work sounded like a promising peace-keeping mechanism and suspected he would be better equipped for inter-faith dialogue than many Army chaplains. The military chaplaincy is “by and large occupied by fundamentalist evangelical Christians”, Antal explained (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States) (see also: Goodstein 2005). Many of these evangelical Chaplains believed the language of the “crusade” that then-President Bush used when he “declared from the pulpit of the national cathedral in DC [...] that the United States was in engaged in a war against evil” (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States) (see also: Nabers and Patman 2008). Antal saw an opportunity to use his Unitarian Universalist background to bridge a divide between Christians and Muslims in the U.S. Military. By the time Antal arrived in Afghanistan, the religious leader liaisons initiative that enticed him to deploy had “basically been shelved” (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Antal was to instead spend his time preparing and delivering Sunday sermons, and giving dignified transfer ceremonies.

On the tarmac at Kandahar Air Base, Antal could see the drones launching and landing in his peripheral vision – even with his eyesight partially blocked by his hand in salute.

I mean, literally, I was standing there watching the casket go by in front of me and offering this solemn salute that’s part of this ritual ceremony and seeing on the horizon the drone launching and landing. Imagine that moment. And that was the moment that I felt this split, like I was

offering this honour and dignity to this person, but what are we doing to those people? (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

From time spent on the flight line, Antal had learnt to tell the difference between a drone that was armed with missiles and an unarmed drone on a surveillance mission. He was already curious, but his curiosity peaked when no one on base knew or wanted to talk to him about the drone program. After searching the internet, he found the report ‘Living Under Drones: Death, Injury and Trauma to Civilians in Pakistan’ – the first detailed study of drone violence’s physical and psychological effects on people living in Pakistan (Stanford Law School/NYU School of Law 2012). From then onwards, the ‘split’ that Antal experienced during dignified transfer ceremonies weighed heavily on his mind.

My faith tradition says that those people, those Pakistanis or those Afghans, are as valuable as this U.S. person in front of me – that they all have inherent worth and dignity. Yet those deaths are unacknowledged and unrecognised and secret and hidden, while there is all this pomp and ceremony over this dead person. (Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

In April 2016, Antal publicly resigned from the U.S. Army Chaplaincy, citing moral objection to the U.S. drone program. He addressed his resignation letter to the President, writing: “I resign because I refuse to support U.S. armed drone policy”. In attempt to honour the dead bodies he did not see – but had imagined – when he stood on the tarmac at Kandahar Air Base, Reverend Chris Antal and his congregation at Rock Tavern, Upstate New York, put together

the 'Drones Quilt Project' [See Figure 1]. Each square of the quilt recognises a civilian who has died in a drone strike, some named and others unnamed.

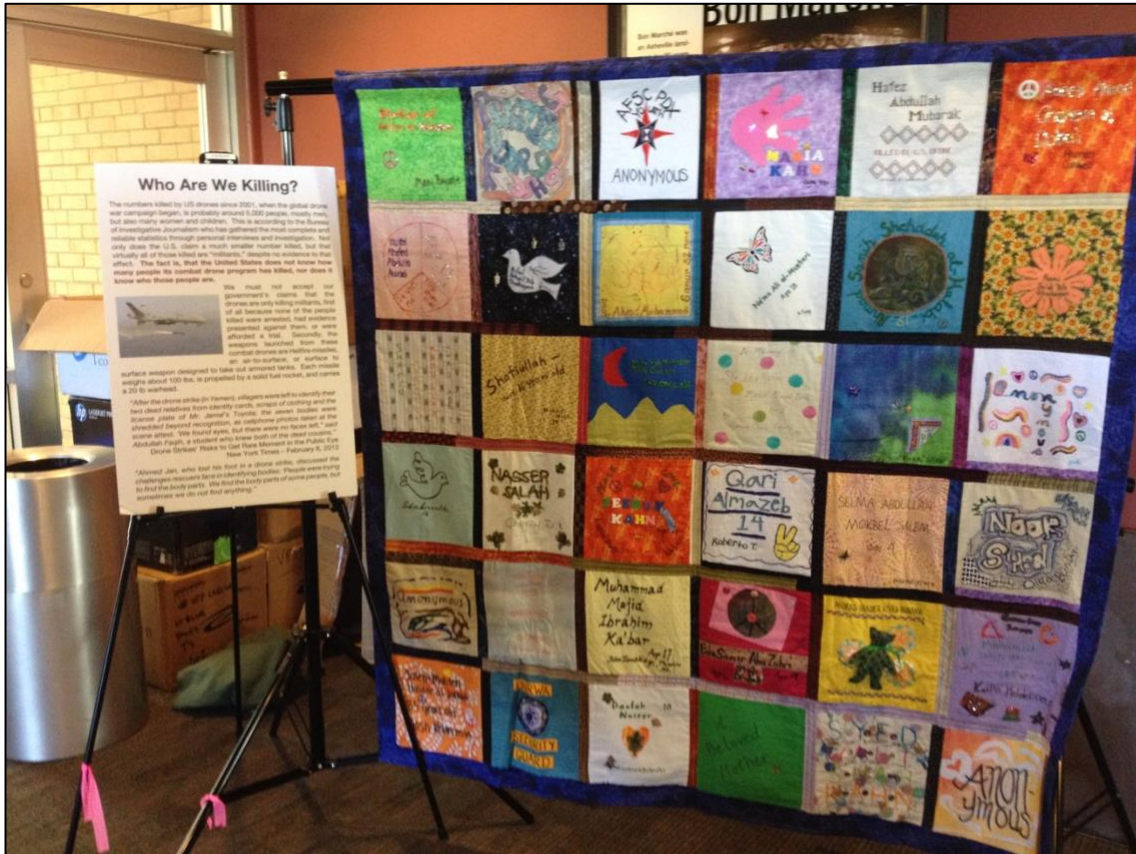


Figure 1: One of four quilts from the Drone Quilts Project on display at the Veterans for Peace annual convention in North Carolina, 2014.

Reverend Chris Antal has never surveilled, injured or killed anyone with a drone, nor has he witnessed a drone bombardment or lived amongst those suffering from the embodied, emotional or psychosocial effects of drone violence. And yet, thinking about the dead bodies on and off the tarmac at Kandahar Air Base, Antal recognised that he lived in relation with Pakistani and Afghan people. He confronted the idea that he had an equal ethical responsibility for their lives as he did for the lives of U.S. soldiers, and this led him to resist the drone program. The tarmac was an interface of these relations, prompting Antal to imagine how Afghan and Pakistani people lived, anguished, cried, survived, found strength, and died. If Antal could recognise his relations

with Afghan and Pakistani people simply by watching drones take-off and land, what about USAF drone personnel who do not have to rely solely on their imagination – who have intimate access to others’ lives through drone surveillance cameras and other technologies? And what about the people who live under drones? Do they imagine their surveyors? What do they think about their relations to U.S. Air Force drone personnel?

The Research Puzzle

Governments’ and militaries’ increasing reliance on high-technology platforms to wage war has had the effect of removing humans’ embodied, emotional and psychosocial experiences of war from public view. Dominant discourses of drone violence render invisible the people most affected – both military personnel and people in areas subjected to drone attacks and surveillance. Whether intentional or not, it has been expedient for the U.S. government and its allies to use technical and legal language when describing military drones, as human experiences of drone violence are made unintelligible in the public sphere and questions regarding whether or how people are harmed are rarely asked. It was not until 2016, fifteen years after drones were first used in the ‘War on Terror’, that the Obama Administration released any civilian casualty figures from drone strikes.¹ Drones are represented in this rhetoric as a new and superior technology that has ‘fixed’ one of war’s most significant moral conundrums – the vulnerability of civilians to violent harm. As former CIA director John Brennan’s put it, military drones have “the ability, with laser-like focus, to eliminate the cancerous tumour called an Al-Qaeda terrorist while

¹ The Obama Administration stated that between 64-116 civilians were killed in drone attacks in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia between 2009 and 2015 – a number that has been criticised by independent monitoring organisations for being a woeful undercount (Ackerman 2016). The Bureau of Investigative Journalism’s figures for the same time and in the same countries are at least 1138 civilians killed, including up to 227 children (Serle 2013). However, as this introduction and later chapters go on to explain, I do not want to engage in a technical back-and-forth about civilian casualty statistics, as I wish to articulate a critique of drone violence based on a wider range of harms.

limiting damage to the tissue around it” (2012, np.). The evocation of the “surgically precise” drone works to shift attention from the bloody reality that drones drop missiles and bombs that regularly injure, kill and psychologically harm people who have nothing to do with terrorist organisations (Brennan 2012, np.). The use of legalese, described further in the next chapter, also has the effect of drawing public attention away from the harms inflicted in drone violence. In 2010, U.S. State Department Legal Advisor Harold Koh stated that “U.S. targeting practices, including lethal operations conducted with the use of unmanned aerial vehicles, comply with all applicable law, including the laws of war” (2010, np). He continued, “this Administration has carefully reviewed the rules governing targeting operations to ensure that these operations are conducted consistently with law of war principles” (Koh 2010, np). These assurances that drones are only used according to international law work to gloss over and abstract from the embodied, emotional and psychological effects of drone violence on individuals and their communities.

Notably, this rhetoric has been echoed by the political leaders of U.S.-allied nations who, following the U.S., have their own drone programs (or are in the process of acquiring military drones) for counterterrorism purposes. In the UK in 2015, then-Prime Minister David Cameron justified his government’s decision to double the amount of drones in its arsenal, stating that “drones keep us safe and give us the intelligence and information and [...] the capacity to hit people who are potentially planning to hit us” (BBC 2015). Then-Defence Secretary Phillip Hammond told journalists that drones are a “useful tool that protects and defends UK forces and civilian populations” (Hammond 2013). In Australia, where the government is in the process of a \$4-6 billion acquisition of armed and unarmed drones (Australian Department of Defence 2016), former Defence Minister Darren Chester said that “the technology has proven its value in the Middle East where armed drones had conducted numerous

attacks against insurgent targets” (McPhedran 2015). Only “in rare cases”, he claimed, are innocent civilians “accidentally targeted” by drones (McPhedran 2015). Former Royal Australian Air Force Chief Air Marshall Geoff Brown, who led the RAAF’s unmanned aircraft unit until his retirement in 2015, stated that “opponents of the armed drone concept are emotional and don’t know what they are talking about” (McPhedran 2015). Former Minister of Defence Marise Payne defended Australia’s acquisition of armed drones on national news, stating they will only be used in keeping with the laws of war (Greene 2017).

Recognising the political and ethical implications of this clinical and aseptic discourse, journalists, NGO researchers and academics have sought to humanise the drone warfare debate (Amnesty International 2013; Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Feroz 2016, 2017; Holmqvist 2013; Open Society Foundations 2015; Reprieve 2014, 2016; Shaw and Akhter 2012; Stanford Law School/NYU School of Law 2012; Wilcox 2015, 2016). This scholarship has made a positive contribution towards better understanding the effects of drone violence and articulating a strong normative critique of its use. However, more can be done to uncover and highlight the wide range of harms inflicted in drone violence and to advocate for their redress. Mainstream critiques still give minimal attention to harms inflicted against people in drone violence, continuing to focus on possible violations of state sovereignty, international law or Just War principles. When these critiques recognise human harms, measures of such harms are restricted to civilian casualty counts as per the principle of proportionality (discussed further in the next chapter). These critiques are non-relational, failing to recognise that drone personnel and people surveilled/targeted by drones are stuck in social relations with each other. A wide range of embodied, emotional and psychosocial harms produced in these social relations is therefore also missed.

In this thesis, I explore social relations in drone violence as shaped by (and shaping) the ‘drone interface’. The drone interface refers to the conduits of social relations – both technological and non-technological – that facilitate relationships between USAF drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones. These conduits are not fixed but are in turn shaped and altered by social relations. Social relations in drone violence are foregrounded in this research for two reasons. Firstly, analytically, being attentive to social relations provides a more complete picture of the realities and effects of drone violence in international relations than non-relational accounts. Secondly, politically, a relational approach is able to capture a wider range of embodied, emotional and psychosocial harms inflicted than currently understood in the literature – thereby informing a more persuasive critique of drone violence than is advanced in most drone violence scholarship. The guiding research question of this thesis therefore is, “how should we understand the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and people living under drones in Afghanistan?”. I analyse the social relations between U.S. Air Force veterans of the drone program and people who live (or have lived in) drone-targeted areas of rural Afghanistan, drawing on testimonies provided in interviews in Afghanistan, refugee squats/camps in Greece and the United States.

The ‘drone interface’ has a relational ontology, starting from the premise that U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones have the power to (emotionally, psychologically and physiologically) affect the other; and, in turn, be affected by the other. The relational ontology of the drone interface is informed by Feminist and Postcolonial IR/Security Studies – schools that argue for the value of relational ontologies, which treat ‘global North’ and ‘global South’, ‘East’ and ‘West’, ‘Self’ and ‘Other’, ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’, and ‘Mind’ and ‘Body’ as unstable and mutually constitutive

categories (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Barkawi and Brighton 2011; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bhabra 2010; Go and Lawson 2017; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012; Wilcox 2009). This study focuses on the internal relations between Afghans living under drones and U.S. Air Force drone veterans in agreement with Barkawi and Laffey (2006, p. 333) that both groups are “jointly responsible for making history” and shaping international relations.

The thesis takes inspiration from scholarship that shows concern for the embodied, emotional and psychological effects of drone violence (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Holmqvist 2013; McSorley 2014; Shaw and Akhter 2012; Stanford Law School/NYU School of Law 2012). I build on this scholarship by providing an extensive analysis of how these effects are produced in social relations across the drone interface. While I am not the first to (explicitly or implicitly) use a relational ontology to analyse drone violence (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Holmqvist 2013; Grayson 2016; Wilcox 2016), it has been the human-technology relationship that has received most scholarly attention to date – and almost exclusively drone operators’ relationship to drone technology. As I explain in greater depth in the next chapter, this scholarship is sometimes fascinated by the agentic capacities of drone technology (particularly its visual sensors) and as such can miss important non-technological conduits of social relations in drone violence as well as instances of human agency (Bousquet 2018; Hall 2017; Schwarz 2016; Shaw 2016a). I am careful not to flatten out, or equalise, agency between humans and technology. To follow this kind of posthuman ontology would be counterproductive to the goal of highlighting the harms inflicted against people through drone violence and pushing for the redress of these harms.

I have a clear normative motivation for this project. With war increasingly carried out through secretive high-technology drone programs, the

violences of war have largely disappeared from the imagination of Western publics. I am not suggesting that the public has simply been duped. Indeed, official claims that drones are a precise and humane counter-terrorism method are often uncritically latched onto by the publics of drone-using countries because they are “seductive” (Zehfuss 2010, p. 547). The seduction of ‘precision bombing’ narratives is that they provide a simple fix to the ethical problem of harming civilians in war. In the context of the ‘War on Terror’, this has meant that damage and destruction to the lives of people in areas targeted by U.S.-led counterterrorism measures have gone largely ignored or unrecognised, and there has been little effort to prevent this violence or seek redress for injustices outside the peace activism community. The normative impetus of this project is to extend understandings of harm in drone violence, broadening the definition of harm to include a range of embodied, emotional and psychosocial harms that are not often recognised among Western publics of drone-using countries. In recognising this wide range of harms, I contend that drone violence is so harmful that it ought to be resisted and dismantled. I therefore put forward a bolder critique than those advanced by most NGOs (which ask for only minor changes to the governance of drones).

In analysing social relations, I argue that drone violence perpetuates relations of domination at the international and domestic level. One of the initial sources of inspiration for undertaking this project was the phenomenon of USAF drone personnel quitting their work and the consequent low retention rate of staff in the drone program (Chatterjee 2015; Majumdar 2017). This phenomenon prompted questioning over whether social relations across the drone interface strengthened individual USAF drone personnel’s sense of interdependence with, and ethical responsibility for, the people surveilled and targeted. If true, I hypothesised the drone interface could be the drone program’s undoing. While I find that small acts of resistance are carried out

within the U.S. Air Force by some drone personnel, these alone are not enough to prevent the unnecessary suffering of people in targeted areas at the hands of U.S. drones. This challenge must come externally in the form of a human-centred critique of the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Military, which can then shape concrete political actions.

A study on the human relations of drone violence – and their harmful effects – is urgent. There is still inadequate acknowledgement of the damage to lives and livelihoods already caused by drone surveillance and bombardment in the ongoing ‘War on Terror’. Additionally, a project of this kind is necessary because the use and proliferation of military drones is rapidly increasing worldwide. More people are participating in drone violence, and more are on the receiving end of that violence. The United States, the U.K. and Israel regularly use ‘hunter-killer’ drones.² Since 2015, these countries have been joined by Pakistan, Nigeria, Turkey and Iran, who have each carried out a small number of drone attacks (Hennigan 2016; Sabbagh 2019). Many other countries have already acquired, or are in the process of acquiring, armed and/or unarmed military drones, but are yet to use them (at least 72 countries own military drones, with a minimum of 29 of those countries owning armed drones) (United States Government Accountability Office 2012). A handful of countries that do not yet have armed drone programs still actively contribute to the U.S.’s drone program through the collection and live relay of Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) data at intelligence bases, such as Ramstein Air Base in Germany and Pine Gap Joint Military Facility in Australia (Dworkin 2015; Manjikian 2015; Zappalà 2015). The number of drone missions flown and munitions dropped has increased with each successive U.S. Administration, with drone strikes in Afghanistan soaring under the Trump Administration (Harpoolitan 2020; Purkiss 2019; UNAMA 2019). As explained

² ‘Hunter-killer’ drones refer to those that have both surveillance and lethal strike capabilities.

in greater depth in the next chapter, criticisms of drone violence voiced by the NGO community and international lawyers have been tempered in their response to this and make only moderate demands to tighten the governance of drones – largely maintaining the status quo of drone violence and relations of domination in world politics (see also: Edney-Browne 2019a, pp. 1344-1346). While any new restrictions on drone violence are welcome and important, I put forward a more human-centred critique than currently advanced – providing an extensive account of the adverse effects of drone violence on people living in targeted areas and USAF drone personnel.

The Personal is Political (and International): Feminist and Postcolonial Methodology

In seeking to answer the research question “how should we understand the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones?”, I spent six months conducting multi-sited fieldwork in Afghanistan, Greece and the United States from February to July 2017. This fieldwork involved open-ended, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with people who were living in or had lived in areas subjected to military drone surveillance and bombing, or who had worked for the U.S. Air Force’s drone program. All Afghan interviewees had lived in provinces currently or previously subjected to U.S. drone surveillance and bombardment: Kabul, Wardak, Khost, Nangarhar, Paktia, Kandahar, Logar and Daikundi. In the United States, interviewees comprised not only of drone pilots and sensor operators (two positions that are commonly known in the public sphere), but also intelligence analysts and communications technicians. Like many feminist field researchers, I opted against using structured interviews with a formal questionnaire; instead, I allowed interviewees to talk freely about their lived experiences of drone violence, only asking a handful of follow-up questions in a conversational style

(D’Costa 2006, p. 139). The reasons for this were two-fold. Firstly, contrary to positivist social science methods, I did not want to constrain or direct the content of interviews (D’Costa 2006, p. 146). Secondly, in line with trauma-informed research methods, I aimed to respect the autonomy and decision-making of research participants to take control of the research process and to choose not to disclose certain experiences – particularly if these would be too distressing to share (Campbell et al. 2019). Pre-interview planning with Pashto and Dari interpreters in Afghanistan and Greece ensured that we were consistent with our interview method and trauma-informed approach.

I also undertook more structured and formal interviews with people peripheral to the U.S. drone program – former U.S. Army Chaplain Reverend Chris Antal, whose testimony featured above, and national security defence lawyers Jesselyn Radack and Kathleen McClellan. Radack and McClellan run ‘WHISPeR’, the Whistleblower and Source Protection Program at the organisation ExposeFacts and have provided legal defence for drone program whistleblowers. These interviews provided additional context to the drone program and the legal risks faced by former military personnel and national security employees when they talk to external researchers and journalists. With their knowledge and consent, Chris Antal, Jesselyn Radack and Kathleen McClellan are the only interviewees whose real names are used in this thesis, as their experiences of, and thoughts regarding, drone violence are already on public record and no risks to them could be identified by them or me. Every other interview participant goes by a pseudonym, chosen by them, to protect their identities. Their personal information (such as loved ones’ names, the names of their hometowns/villages, specific locations worked, etc.) are not used when this information could be used to deductively identify them (Kaiser 2009).

The durations of fieldwork in each location differed, with effects on the length of the interview process and participant recruitment. In Greece, I worked in Athens for four months as an independent volunteer with asylum seekers and refugees, using wider connections to identify people who had lived in areas of Afghanistan subjected to drone surveillance and bombardment. It was hoped that this extended stay in Athens would help build trusting relationships with interviewees, allowing for second and third interviews. However, there were times when interviewees were uncontactable for further interviews, given the transitory nature of seeking asylum and safe refuge in Europe (particularly for people awaiting family reunification elsewhere). In Afghanistan, I stayed in Kabul for two weeks where I met and interviewed individuals and families who had been personally injured and/or had lost friends or family members in drone attacks. Some of these participants now lived in Kabul. Those who were still living in drone-targeted rural provinces of Afghanistan travelled to meet me in Kabul and I covered their travel and accommodation costs. The short stay in Afghanistan, decided on for security reasons, meant that it was difficult to meet with interview participants more than once. In the United States, I travelled to many different towns and cities over a two-month period to meet with U.S. Air Force veterans and, in most cases, spent several days with each participant in their homes, workplaces and favourite parts of their hometowns in order to build familiarity and rapport before undertaking interviews.

The research methods had some limitations, particularly with regard to recruiting a diversity of people. In total I interviewed 29 Afghan people in Afghanistan and Greece, all between the ages of 18 and 70-years-old, primarily men, the majority of whom identified as Pashtuns and as being of Muslim faith. For a purportedly feminist project, regrettably only two Afghan women were interviewed. This runs counter to the aim of feminist research to give voice to

women, given their historic and ongoing marginalisation in knowledge production and political dialogue (D’Costa 2006; Hutchings 2005; Robinson 2008, 2011). The project ostensibly seeks to centre people’s lived experiences, but those people are primarily men. This reinforces men’s dominant position in knowledge production, wherein “men are the standards of normality, equated with what it is to be human, while this is not spelled out” (Kronsell 2006, p. 109). The difficulties of participant recruitment and diversity extended to fieldwork in the United States. U.S. Air Force personnel and veterans have serious and justifiable concerns about how the American state treats ‘whistleblowers’, and fear that external researchers and journalists may not have the communication- and data retention skills to protect their anonymity from outsiders. Because of this, I also faced considerable difficulty recruiting participants who had worked in the U.S. Air Force drone program (despite assurances that I had learned these skills and would not ask for classified information) (Committee to Protect Journalists 2019; Kirchner 2013; Sieber and Tolich 2015). As such the testimonies of only five drone program veterans (four men and one woman) are documented in this thesis, which limits the ability to generalise findings to speak for a larger group of USAF drone program personnel. However, the detailed testimonies of these interviewees provide five different windows on the drone program that are valuable and give new insights into drone violence that are undocumented elsewhere. As Carol Cohn (2006, p. 93) writes on her similarly small interviewee sample size, “I think there is a lot of power in the fact that there are ten windows open [to me] and, among them, I have found these continuities”. Further, the project is still a feminist one, in that its approach to methodology and ontology is otherwise feminist. As Linda Åhäll (2018, p. 7) argues, “what makes research feminist is not limited to analyses of ‘women’ or perhaps even gender”. Instead, she continues, “what makes research feminist is that it asks feminist research questions [...] questions about power and how the world works through power structures” (Åhäll 2018,

p. 7). Although few women were interviewed, the research asks questions about relations of power in international politics, highlighting hegemonic masculinity, sexism and patriarchal relations as integral to drone violence.

Methodologies of Affect and Emotion

There is much discussion about how to best study emotions and affect in IR and other disciplines (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; MacKenzie 2011; Mattern 2014). Feminist IR theory has convincingly argued for “growing research and discussion on emotion within IR”; however, “much of it is fixated on the lack of methods available to study the emotions” (MacKenzie 2011, p. 691). Social scientific methods are often ill-equipped to make sense of something as immaterial and relational as emotions. As Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison write (2008, p. 117), “emotions are too ephemeral to be understood exhaustively by the type of systematic inquiries that characterise the social sciences”. They are difficult to categorise, to quantify and to measure, and sometimes are not well-understood by participants themselves let alone the researcher(s) (Crawford 2000, p. 118; Mercer 1996, p. 1). Some IR researchers working on the emotions are turning to more positivist disciplines and methodologies. Psychology and neuroscience have become increasingly attractive to social science researchers studying emotions, particularly now that the latter field has discovered neuroplasticity (scientific evidence for the link between rationality and emotions, and the influence of social behaviour on brain structure) (Jeffery 2014; Mattern 2014; Mercer 2014). It is easy to see why some emotions researchers are tempted to employ the positivist methodologies of psychology and neuroscience, particularly when these fields often enjoy greater legitimacy in the eyes of both the government and the wider public. Much is missed, however, in these positivist modes of inquiry. As Renee Jeffery (2014, p. 585) warns, while psychology and neuroscience offer some useful insights into individual and, to an extent, collective emotions, “it does not

follow that we all need to become neuroscientists, or that neurological findings are a substitute for social research”. Jeffery (2014, p. 587) argues that, despite their usefulness in generating data on emotions, physical sciences give us very few tools for analysing emotions. Social science’s interpretivist approach, on the other hand, is analytical at its core and as such can better identify and analyse emotions and their political implications.

Many emotions researchers in IR have turned to the humanities, seemingly the antithesis of positivist disciplines, searching for the most appropriate and effective methodologies (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Clément and Sangar 2018). Humanities approaches often require participants to communicate through “art-making practices and creative experimentations” (Perry and Medina 2015, p. xvi). These methods are considered helpful for researchers to understand “phenomena external to their own experience” (Perry and Medina 2015, p. xvi). Participants’ use of art, literature, photography and performance can give researchers unique insights into their lived experiences and emotions. These humanities methodologies could be criticised for a failure to collect hard evidence of participants’ affectivity and emotions, in the way that a neuroscientist might do so with Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI). Such a criticism, however, would fail to acknowledge that often “representations are all we have to understand emotions” (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, p. 129). Because “emotions are inherently internal”, Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchison argue, “we can only know them through practices of representation, through narratives [and] gestures” (2008, p. 129). Bleiker and Hutchison warn against “relying on social science methods alone” in studies of IR and emotions, stating that the representative nature of emotions calls for humanities approaches such as “phenomenology, hermeneutics and semiotics or methods applied in ethnography, architecture, art history, musicology and media studies” (2008, p. 132). The use of these sources for rigorous study is, outside of poststructuralist approaches, not commonplace in International

Relations; although, that is slowly changing as visual analysis gains traction (Bleiker 2018; Möller 2007, 2017; Tidy 2016).

The methodology I used to collect and analyse my interview findings is one motivated by post-positivist approaches in social science. One of the biggest challenges faced by methodologists of emotions, affectivity and embodiment is the “effort to render three-dimensional sensory experiences onto the two-dimensional page” when “our language misses the ineffable and the slippery” (Perry and Medina 2015, p. xiv). The verbal responses participants provide in qualitative social science research can be considered “representations” similar to the sources analysed by humanities researchers, in that the language used to describe experiences is reflective of participants’ unique personhoods and is not a form of ‘objective’ communication (Bleiker and Hutchison 2008, p. 129). In attempt to let the interviewees speak for and represent their own individual experiences, I chose not to undertake electronic coding in the analysis of interview material. Coding software was avoided so as to resist the quantification of interviewees’ lived experiences and the imposition of neat categories that do not reflect the messy realities of individuals’ lives. Interview material was transcribed and read in full and excerpts were chosen based on their relevance to understanding embodied, emotional and psychosocial effects of drone violence and the social relations between USAF drone personnel and Afghan people living in drone-targeted areas. Excerpts were then grouped as pertaining to race, gender or labour relations after identifying these as common themes across the interview material. Each of these kinds of social relations forms the subject of a body chapter.

The Ethics of Feminist and Postcolonial Methodologies

Feminist and postcolonial methodologies were used to draw attention to social relations in drone violence and thereby identify a wider range of drone

violence's effects than is currently recognised and discussed in mainstream and non-relational literature. Feminist methodologies take people's embodied and emotional experiences seriously, drawing attention to the ways that "the personal is political (and international)" (Åhäll 2018, p. 6). Feminist scholars advocate working with marginalised peoples whose perspectives and experiences are excluded in dominant discourse and who face discrimination and oppression in international society (D'Costa 2006, p. 130; Hutchings 2005; Robinson 2008, 2011). Moreover, they demand that these communities are listened to by researchers. Feminist IR theorist Fiona Robinson's (2011) work on the ethics of care is directive here, as this listening is not straightforward or easily achieved. Robinson (2011, p. 856) argues that care ethics requires awareness of and sensitivity to the power inequalities of political dialogue and, most crucially, *effective listening*.³ She writes that while many critical IR researchers advocate that everyone has a voice in political dialogue, "it is assumed that [people] will know how to, and be inclined to, listen to those voices" (Robinson 2011, p. 856). Her arguments about the ethics of political dialogue, although made in reference to the international political dialogic community, can be applied to methodologies of academic research. A researcher does not fulfil their ethical commitments just by doing research that gives voice to people who are excluded or marginalised in dominant discourse. They must also *effectively listen* to their participants' testimonies and seek to understand what participants want and expect from the research – including their motivations for participation. In the case of the Afghan people I interviewed, these motivations ranged from the macro-political (motivations to stop U.S.-led violence in Afghanistan and draw attention to unresolved grievances on an international stage) to the micro-political (a desire to engage in catharsis by talking about difficult and, often, traumatic experiences). U.S. Air Force drone veterans

³ Care ethics is a model of discourse that Robinson (2011) develops in response to the Habermasian model (which abstracts from power inequalities by representing people as equal parties in dialogue).

sought to flesh out details about secretive drone killings, beyond those already documented in journalistic accounts, and to convey the ongoing emotional, psychological and embodied effects their participation in the drone program has had on their lives.

Postcolonial theorists similarly argue against paternalism in the research process, wherein academic researchers speak for marginalised peoples, or assume they know what is best for them (Hutchings 2011; Sabaratnam 2011; Spivak 1988). Howitt and Stevens (2005, p. 37) write that even researchers with the best intentions to conduct postcolonial research can still be “exploitative, paternalistic and ethnocentric in practice”. It is not enough, they continue, to “*intend* to carry out advocacy and activism-directed research if [...] our preconceived notions of what needs to be studied and what needs to be done are considered patronising, irrelevant or threatening to the people we wish to work with and for” (Howitt and Stevens 2005, p. 37). Deborah Bird Rose (1996, p. 6) refers to this as “deep colonising”, wherein practices of colonisation are “embedded within institutions and practices which are aimed at reversing the effects of colonisation”. Researchers who lack respect and care for their participants and who do not actively listen to their participants during the research process can, intentionally or not, reproduce the very colonial and racist power dynamics that they set out to challenge. While Afghan participants were in disagreement about whether any U.S. Military presence was acceptable in Afghanistan, it was agreed that the act of documenting oral testimonies of living under U.S. drone surveillance and attack was worthwhile and could bring much-needed international attention to unresolved injustices. All Afghan participants also agreed that civilians should not be subjected to drone surveillance and bombardment.

Both Feminist and Postcolonial theory (in International Relations and more broadly) have a strong normative commitment, seeking to challenge relations of domination – particularly colonial, racist and sexist relations. Feminist IR scholar Annick Wibben (2011, p. 591) writes that amongst feminists “there are some basic commitments that are not negotiable [...] chief among them that feminism is a political project committed to emancipation and broader social justice”. This push for emancipation, however, must be intersectional. Feminists (particularly liberal feminists) unfortunately have still demonstrated a “tendency to exhibit an awkward do-goodism in the imperialist tradition of ‘saving-natives’” (Wibben 2011, p. 593; see also: Abu-Lughod 2002; Mahmood 2009; Puar 2006). As the next chapter details, this thesis employs a relational ontology to recognise the agency of both Afghan people and U.S. Air Force drone veterans in their efforts to survive and resist drone violence. Interviews with Afghan people in drone-affected areas not only demonstrate the harms produced in social relations of drone violence, they also document Afghan people’s survival and resistance in this subjugated relationship. By following a relational ontology, this thesis is committed to avoiding what Postcolonial IR scholars John Hobson and Alina Sajed (2017, p. 548) have identified as an exclusive focus on Western agency in IR’s critical paradigms, one that effectively portrays the “non-West [...] as a silent victim, unable to escape the overwhelming hyper-agential power of the West”. Interviews with U.S. Air Force drone veterans reveal that Afghan people they watched through drone surveillance imagery, imagined and sometimes even dreamed, have had long-lasting effect on their thoughts, feelings and actions.

Structure of the Thesis

The structure of the thesis is as follows. The next chapter, **chapter two**, reviews mainstream and critical approaches to drone violence and their non-relational and relational ontologies. I briefly consider and critique the arguments of drone proponents – both state/military officials and academic supporters of the use of military drones (Strawser 2010; Mir and Moore 2019). However, most attention is given to drone violence criticism, seeking to improve its analytical and political value. I identify drone violence criticism as either ‘mainstream’ or ‘critical’. Mainstream critiques are taken to be those with non-relational ontologies, articulated within the frameworks of nation-state sovereignty, international law, and the Just War Tradition (JWT), and/or those that measure drone violence’s harm by exclusively using quantitative data (such as civilian casualty counts). Critical accounts are understood as those that have sought to humanise the drone violence debate, focusing on people and social relations. I examine critical scholarship that has analysed power relations in drone violence (particularly gender and race relations), including the power of the drone’s ‘scopic regime’ (Daggett 2015; Espinoza 2018; Grayson 2016; Holmqvist 2013; Wilcox 2015).

I argue that mainstream criticisms are insufficient at analysing drone violence, and identifying the harms inflicted, because their non-relational ontologies do not allow consideration of social relations and the harms produced within those relations. Mainstream approaches treat war as made up of discrete events of state sovereignty or international law violations, or lethal strikes that cause another tally on the civilian casualty count but seemingly no other form of harm. Sovereignty-based critiques, which posit that military drones violate nation-state sovereignty, are inattentive to numerous instances where the targeted state has (explicitly or tacitly) supported or failed to

condemn U.S. drone attacks in their territory (Ahmad 2014; Amnesty International 2013; Woods 2011). While sovereignty-based criticisms have some merit, I argue that they give inadequate consideration to the neo-colonial nature of the relationship between the U.S. and countries such as Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the state violences that Afghanistan and Pakistani governments commit against ‘their’ own peoples (Barkawi 2016; Mahmud 2011; Munro 2014; Shaw and Akhter 2012). Criticisms couched in the framework of international law and JWI are problematic because they reify ethically troublesome practices such as the use of the ‘principle of proportionality’ to regulate the conduct of militaries and to measure harms suffered by civilians (Aslam 2011; Brunstetter and Braun 2011; Buchanan and Keohane 2015; Brooks 2013; Welch 2007). Further, the use of technical and legal language works to abstract the drone violence debate from the local realities of drone violence, including its embodied and psychosocial effects (Gregory, D. 2011a; Gregory, T. 2015). Normatively, I argue that these critiques of drone violence are too tempered and, for the most part, reinforce the status quo of international relations. Lastly, mainstream criticisms that draw exclusively upon quantitative data to demonstrate the adverse effects of drone violence neglect to consider a far larger range of embodied, emotional and psychosocial harms that extend beyond the moment of a lethal strike, causing disability, emotional and psychological distress, social isolation, poverty, loss of privacy and dignity, amongst other adverse effects on people’s lives and livelihoods. In reviewing the limitations of mainstream, non-relational literature on drone violence, I identify that a relational ontology is needed (Jackson and Nexon 2013).

I also explain in chapter two how this project builds on contributions of Critical IR and CSS scholars to the study of drone violence, particularly existing work on people’s lived experiences and social relations that are racialised and

gendered (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Espinoza 2018; Grayson 2016; Holmqvist 2013; Wilcox 2015). These contributions have relational ontologies that centre humans and their social relations, recognising the harms of drone violence to be ongoing in their production rather than discrete. I contend that relational approaches are an analytical and political improvement on non-relational approaches, as they improve analysis of drone violence (by accounting for ordinary people as important actors) and identify a range of harms for which there has been little or no advocacy around nor calls for redress. Not all relational approaches adequately highlight humans and human harms, however; some Critical IR and CSS scholarship has focussed too much on the human-technology relationship and the agentic capacities of the drone, minimising humans' agency and subjectivity in the process (Bousquet 2018; Chamayou 2013; Hall 2017; Schwarz 2016). I argue that it is important not to erase or flatten out human agency if one is to pay much needed attention to humans' experiences of drone violence and the harms inflicted against them.

In **chapter three** I develop this relational ontology further, introducing and building on the concept of the drone interface. Kyle Grayson (2016, p. 138) was the first to use the term 'interface' to refer to social relations in drone violence as mediated by the drone. I employ Grayson's original definition of the drone as an interface of social/power relations but extend it to refer to various conduits that shape (and are shaped by) social relations between people who operate drones and people who live under them. The drone interface's conduits are, among others, visual/technological, discursive, ideological and imaginative. While the drone interface is applied to the study of U.S. drone violence in Afghanistan, the concept could be applied to other cases of drone violence in efforts to centre people's lived experiences of drone violence and the effects of social relations across the drone (such as Israeli drone operators and Palestinians living under drones).

Further, I explain why Feminist and Postcolonial IR/Security Studies inform ontological bases of the concept the drone interface. Feminist and Postcolonial IR argue that the categories we use to understand the world should not be seen as fixed nor derive their meaning from binary opposition to other categories. ‘Self’/‘Other’, ‘East’/‘West’, ‘global North’/‘global South’, ‘Mind’/‘Body’ are only a handful of binary categorisations that Feminist and Postcolonial IR theorists take issue with, seeking to show that each of these categories is not discrete but internally related to the other (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Barkawi 2015, 2016; Barkawi and Brighton 2011; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bhabra 2010; Go and Lawson 2017; Hobson and Sajed 2017; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012; Wilcox 2009). Mainstream and non-relational IR only recognises a limited number of actors (i.e. the state and international institutions) to be important and powerful in international relations, and they treat these actors as “autonomous decision-makers at the moment of interaction” (Jackson and Nexon 2013, p. 555). Feminist and Postcolonial IR, on the hand, argue that everyday people are powerful actors in world politics and posit that actors are continually co-constituted by each other. People are not engaged in “billiard-ball interactions”, as mainstream IR contends, and nor for that matter are states (Brincat 2010, p. 10).

In chapter three, I also provide definitions of three specific conduits of the drone interface that play a significant role in shaping social relations in drone violence and will regularly come up across the thesis. These are: 1) (in)visibility and the gaze, 2) the ‘civilian’ category, and 3) the fetishisation of the drone. These are visual/technological, discursive and ideological conduits of social relations, respectively.

Chapters four to six form the main body of the thesis, where the drone interface concept is applied to analyse participants' testimonies and draw out social relations in drone violence. The main body of the thesis is divided as such: race relations (chapter four), gender relations (chapter five) and labour relations (chapter six). Race-, gender- and labour relations have been selected as structuring categories to reflect themes that came up repeatedly in interviews. In commitment to intersectionality, each of these body chapters identifies links to the others. As V. Spike Peterson explains clearly, intersectional analysis "attempts to more adequately theorise how social divisions (of ethnicity/race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc.) interact and affect each other without reducing one to another" (2007, p. 10). Race/racism, gender/sexism and class/exploitation are always closely interlinked, and drone violence is no exception to this (Chowdhry and Nair 2004; Inayatullah and Riley 2006; Kirby and Henry 2012; Peterson 2007; Peterson and Runyan 1993). The main body of the thesis argues that the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and people living in drone-targeted areas of Afghanistan needs to be understood as one of domination. U.S. Air Force drone personnel dominate Afghan people and perpetrate violence against them, with myriad adverse effects on Afghan people's emotional, psychosocial and physical wellbeing. This international relation of domination frequently (re)produces domestic relations of domination within the United States and Afghanistan, along the lines of race, gender and labour – such as racism, Islamophobia, sexism, poverty and alienation.

Chapter four argues that the drone interface is shaped by already existing racism and Islamophobia in the United States and racialised ideas about who constitutes a civilian. However, drone technology is not neutral in the (re)production of racism and Islamophobia in social relations across the interface. The visual/technological conduits of the drone afford USAF drone

personnel the ability to zoom-in on and uncover racialised differences between Afghan people and (white) Americans. These visual/technological conduits embolden U.S. Air Force's knowledge claims about the Afghan other, providing 'evidence' of differences between Afghan people and the American Self that are racialised and essentialising (Nayak and Malone 2009). In the last section of the chapter, I argue that the invasive gaze of U.S. Air Force drone surveillance – coupled with racialised constructions of the civilian category – causes psychological distress for people living under drones. This asymmetric relation of invasive surveillance instigates a process of objectification and self-objectification between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones. In a present-day manifestation of Orientalism, Afghan people are objectified by their American watchers as “actual or potential terrorists” who are “always on the verge of becoming dangerous” (Anderson 2011, p. 224; see also Browne 2015; Fanon 2007; Nayak 2006; Nayak and Malone 2009; Said 2003). Discursive conduits shaping who is seen as a civilian interact with visual/technological conduits, as the figure of the civilian has always been racialised to exclude people of colour and Indigenous peoples from civilian protections or, at the very least, to question their inclusion (Gregory, D. 2006; Neocleous 2014; Satia 2014; Wilke 2017, 2018). As a result of the objectification, Afghan people are made to change their behaviours in order to avoid partaking in any activity that may be deemed a marker of 'terrorist' activity from a U.S. Air Force perspective (such as night-time travel, irrigating land at night, meeting in a group, or walking up a mountainside). Internalising this objectification by adopting the perspective of their watchers, some Afghan people therefore 'self-objectify' (Fanon 2007; Zurbriggen 2013). Self-objectification denies people their complex subjectivities, isolating them from previously celebrated aspects of their personalities and/or cultures.

I explore the role that gender, masculinity and femininity play in shaping social relations across the drone interface in **Chapter five**. The first section of the chapter analyses gendered social pressures on U.S. Air Force drone personnel to react in particular ways to their relation with Afghan people. I identify hegemonic masculinity and “fratriarchy” within two interviewees’ units as restricting their outward expressions of resistant thoughts and feelings they held about drone violence, delaying this expression until after they left the drone program (Higate 2012). I consider arguments put forward by Cara Daggett (2015) that the drone has ‘queered’ warfare by complicating traditional masculinity/femininity and home-front/war-front binaries in the U.S. Military. I find that while some avenues for political resistance to drone violence are opened up by this queering, ultimately drone violence still reproduces hegemonic masculinity and sexist social relations. In the second section, I look at the role sex and gender play in drone targeting, finding that binary and essentialising notions of sex- and gender- are relied upon to make targeting decisions. The ‘civilian’ category is not only racialised it is also highly gendered – with ‘Military-Age Males’ (MAMs) made especially vulnerable to violence, women painted as always innocent and gender ambiguous identities deemed threatening (Carpenter 2006; Enloe 2014; Gregory, T. 2019; Kinsella 2005; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012). The visual/technological conduits of the drone interface (re)produce the gendered construction of the civilian, as visual shortcuts are used to identify sex and gender markers – such as body temperature, type of clothing and social behaviours. The fetishised belief in the drone to uncover the ‘true’ sex and gender identities of people surveilled also plays into perpetuating these essentialising sex- and gender-based targeting categories. In the third and final section, I consider the effects of drone surveillance on Afghan women. Drawing on interview testimonies, I contend that the gaze of USAF drone surveillance curtails Afghan women’s freedom of

movement and thus reinforces sexist and patriarchal relations within the context of rural Afghanistan.

Chapter six examines labour relations in drone violence. Analysing interview material, I contend that drone violence injures Afghan people's bodies and psyches and estranges them from their land and natural resources thereby exacerbating poverty and causing psychological distress. Afghan interviewees were resilient to these adverse circumstances, but drone strikes are still unexpected "idiosyncratic shocks" that have pushed Afghan families into poverty or worsened existing poverty (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 75). This relation of domination continues a history of dominant North-South relations enforced through aerial bombing, as seen in U.S. 'Cold War' counterinsurgency campaigns and European aerial policing in the colonial era (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Neocleous 2014; Nguyen 2009). The relation of domination harms Afghan lives and livelihoods, as the U.S. Air Force weakens Afghan people's ability to be self-reliant and economically prosperous. The injuries and deaths of male family members in drone attacks also increases Afghan women's vulnerability to poverty and violence, reproducing sexist social relations within Afghanistan. On the U.S. side of the drone interface, USAF drone personnel work in exploitative and (psychologically) dangerous employment. They experience a variety of harms that go under- or unacknowledged in studies undertaken by military psychologists. One of these unacknowledged psychological harms is the unique form of social alienation USAF drone personnel face, wherein their experiences of the drone program are not believed by their family members and friends due to societal fetishisation of the drone (Beier 2006; Ellen 1988; Shaw and Akhter 2012; Zehfuss 2010). This widespread fetishisation of the drone in U.S. society has led to a greater belief in the capacities of drone technology to conduct war precisely and ethically than in the experiences of drone personnel who develop, use and fix the technology.

Chapter seven summarises the main arguments of the thesis and discusses the implications of each chapter's findings. I propose future avenues of drone violence research that are hinted to, but not fully fleshed out, in the thesis. Finally, I conclude by considering what the thesis's findings mean for resisting and protesting drone violence, and identify cracks and fissures in the U.S. Air Force drone program that can be exploited to dismantle and prevent drone violence.

2. Drone Violence and Non-Relational Ontologies in IR

Introduction

In this chapter, I review International Relations' and Security Studies' mainstream and critical approaches to drone violence criticism. I identify mainstream criticisms as those united by their non-relational ontologies. These non-relational ontologies do not recognise U.S. drone personnel and people living under drones to be entities that are mutually constitutive and internally related to each other. I argue that, because of this, mainstream criticism gives a restricted account of the harms inflicted in drone violence. Non-relational critiques consider only a limited range of actors in drone violence (often neglecting consideration of drone violence's effects of people living under drones); and/or they view the effects of drone violence as limited to discrete interactions between actors. The interactions that non-relational approaches recognise are moments when a state infringes upon the sovereignty of another state, violates the institution of international law, or kills a civilian in a lethal strike.⁴ Non-relational drone violence criticism therefore misses the ongoing harms produced through social relations between drone personnel and people living under drones.

The approaches Critical IR and Critical Security Studies (CSS) take to drone violence scholarship are a significant improvement on mainstream

⁴ As Jackson and Nexon (2019, p. 593) point out, non-relational IR scholarship tends to either emphasise the "ways that behaviour arises from 'internal' properties [of actors] [...] in isolation providing a 'self-action' account" or emphasise "the strategic 'inter-action' of constitutively autonomous units". 'Interaction' is used to describe the infrequent and time-constrained instances of autonomous actors coming into contact with each other (Jackson and Nexon 2013, p. 553).

criticism, with many critical scholars advocating the need to focus on drone violence's harmful effects on the people operating and living under drones (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Grayson 2016; Grayson and Mawdsley 2018; Holmqvist 2013; Shaw and Akhter 2014; Wilcox 2015, 2016). Critical scholars advocate for the necessity of relational ontology; however, their application of this ontology is often limited to the human-technology relationship – in particular, the relationship between drone personnel and drone technology (Bousquet 2017, 2018; Hall 2017; Schwarz 2016). This reflects their posthuman stance that humans and technology are intrinsically interlinked and, as such, human agency cannot be separated out from technological agency (Edney-Browne 2019b). This project builds on the contributions of Critical IR and CSS scholars but goes further – providing a much thicker and more detailed account of human actors in drone violence, their social relations and the harms produced in those relations. The motivation to take drone violence criticism to task may seem unclear given this project too is critical of drone violence; however, there are analytical and political problems with existing critiques that must be identified and addressed. Addressing these problems is both an issue of improving the quality of analysis of drone violence and a political/normative issue of providing a more compelling challenge to the use of military drones – one that advocates strongly for the lives of people living in targeted areas (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 344).

The chapter proceeds as follows. In the first section of this chapter, I explain the role of ontology and ontological assumptions in International Relations and Security Studies, particularly in the discipline's treatment of war. The differences between relational and non-relational ontologies in IR and Security Studies will be made clear. The second section of this chapter briefly critiques the ontological assumptions underlying scholarship that is supportive of military drone violence, before identifying the non-relational ontologies

behind common approaches in mainstream drone violence criticism. Common approaches focus on state sovereignty violations, international law/Just War Tradition (JWT) violations and proportionality calculations, which are based on civilian casualty statistics. I argue that these mainstream critiques are often Eurocentric and can even be harmful to people living under drones in the global South. In the third section, I examine the ontologies of critical scholars' approaches to the study of drone violence. I explain how my project contributes to, and diverges from, their work. As a whole, this chapter establishes the need for a different concept – the drone interface – to be applied to the study of drone violence. The term interface was first used in reference to drone violence by Kyle Grayson (2016, p. 138), who describes the drone as an “interface through which particular aesthetic, affective and power relations are linked”. I build on Grayson's idea of the drone interface, drawing out its relational ontology to analyse race, gender and labour relations in drone violence. In the next chapter, I develop the concept of the drone interface and unpack its relational ontology.

A couple of notes on terminology: I use the term ‘drone violence’ rather than ‘drone warfare’ in acknowledgement that drones complicate the war/policing binary, regardless of whether they are used in states with which the U.S. is ‘formally’ at war in or not. Throughout this thesis, drone *surveillance* is argued to be violent. ‘Drone warfare’ does not adequately draw attention to surveillance as a form of violence, as surveillance is often outside the purview of studies and measurements of war and war's damage. Secondly, while military institutions have voiced a preference for the terms ‘Remotely Piloted Aircraft’ (‘RPA’) and, before this, ‘Unmanned Aerial Vehicle’ (‘UAV’),⁵ I take no issue

⁵ Women are drone pilots and sensor operators also, but the descriptor ‘Unmanned Aerial Vehicle’ is a male-gendered term, confirming Sylvia Wynter's contention that “Man [...] overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself” (2003, p. 260). The U.S. Military moved to using the term ‘RPA’ not out of concern about gender bias but to clarify that the aircraft is controlled by a pilot (albeit remotely) and thus is not fully autonomous (McCancey 2014). The gendered dimensions of drone violence are analysed at length in chapter five.

with using the term ‘drone’ (Bennett-Jones 2014; Clark 2019, pp. 12-13). Drone is an onomatopoeia for the whirring sound of drones – a persistent and unpleasant noise. It is a word that interview participants in this project revealed has correlates in both Pashto and Dari (the two main languages of Afghanistan): ‘Bngina’ and ‘Bongak’. The word ‘drone’ conveys a sensory and embodied experience, while RPA and UAV are sterile military acronyms that obfuscate human experience. It is thus in keeping with the feminist and postcolonial goals of this project (analytical and normative) to use the term ‘drone’.

Non-Relational and Relational Ontologies in IR and Security Studies

It is important to first define ontology and what is meant by non-relational and relational ontologies in International Relations before we can identify the ontological assumptions in drone violence criticism. Ontology in IR refers to “the basic substances and processes that constitute world politics” (Jackson and Nexon 2013, p. 545). As Cox (1996, p. 144) puts it, ontology “lies at the beginning of any inquiry”; it is the set of assumptions scholars hold about what constitutes international relations. Ontologies have political implications, but these implications are missed when scholars do not interrogate the ontological premises of their research (an exercise that is irregularly undertaken outside of theoretical contributions to IR). Jackson and Nexon (1999) identify two broad ontologies in International Relations: substantialist ontologies and relational ontologies. They write that a “substantialist” ontology “maintains that the ontological primitives of analysis are ‘things’ or entities [that] exist before interaction” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 291). As Go and Lawson (2017, p. 22) put it, “substances are treated as static agents; they do the acting and reacting, while retaining a finite set of core attributes”. Jackson and Nexon (1999, p. 293) argue that “the majority of IR theories are substantialist – they

presume that entities precede interaction”. The most obvious and frequent of these “presupposed entities is ‘the state’”, which is assumed to have internal properties that are stable and unchanged by the presence or actions of other states (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 293). However, substantialism underlies any IR scholarship that views entities as stable and pre-existing, whether these entities are states, individuals or groups.

Substantialist ontologies are non-relational because, to the extent that substantialist accounts consider entities to have any influence over each other,⁶ entities still “remain fixed and unchanging throughout [...] inter-action, each independent of the existence of the others, much like billiard balls or the particles of Newtonian mechanics” (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 293). Non-relational ontologies hold true the “putatively stable attributes of entities, whether individuals, corporate actors, or ‘big structures’ that exist, for all intents and purposes, independently of the relations among social sites” (Jackson and Nexon 2019, p. 584). Relational ontologies, on the other hand, hold that it is “processes and mechanisms” that “give rise to both actors and the environments in which they find themselves” (Jackson and Nexon 2019, pp. 584-585). Relationalism “insists that transactions between units are themselves constitutive”, rather than “presuming an abstract essence or substance in which agency and identity are located” (Go and Lawson 2017, p. 22). Relational ontologies therefore never assume that entities are “static”, and they do not hold that entities have “predetermined identities and interests” (Go and Lawson 2017, p. 23). Instead, in relationalism, entities are always “in motion”; their properties exist only in relation to other entities’ properties and are therefore constantly undergoing change (Go and Lawson 2017, p. 23).

⁶ ‘Self-action’ accounts, which Jackson and Nexon identify as one of two types of non-relational thinking in IR (the other being ‘inter-action’), view entities as having “essential substances which guide them through self-motivated, goal-realising behaviour” (1999, p. 293). Entities “act under their own powers” and are not in any way influenced by other entities (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 293).

Jackson and Nexon (2013, p. 553) have elsewhere referred to substantialist and non-relational IR scholarship as “choice-theoretic approaches”, adding that choice-theoretic approaches view actors in world politics as separate from their social, cultural and material contexts. They define choice-theoretic approaches as those that “specify a limited number of actors, their dispositions and their decision-making logics” (Jackson and Nexon 2013, p. 553). Choice-theoretic approaches view actors as “autonomous from their social, cultural and material environments” and therefore provide a thin account of the wider context of actors (if an account is provided at all) (Jackson and Nexon 2013, p. 553). “Social, cultural and material contexts supply dispositions [to actors] and may even explain variation in decision-making logics”, but, beyond this, choice-theoretic approaches do not consider or analyse context; “the theories *themselves* treat actors as autonomous decision-makers” (Jackson and Nexon 2013, pp. 553, emphasis in original). While Jackson and Nexon aim to move beyond debating the ‘isms’ in IR (2013, pp. 546-547),⁷ it is clear that some of IR’s major ‘isms’ have substantialist and choice-theoretic ontologies, and some do not. Realism, for instance, is substantialist because it ascribes “pre-existing interests to states and permanent logics to the international system” (Go and Lawson 2017, p. 22). Liberal institutionalism, like Realism, similarly posits that the international is a ‘system’ with consistent characteristics across time and space (anarchy, self-interest and competition between states) that generate the behaviours of actors (Lawson 2012, p. 206). On the other hand, feminism and postcolonialism, as will be argued in-depth in the next chapter, have long advocated the necessity and validity of relational ontologies (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bhabra 2010; Doty 1996; Ling 2013). It is worthwhile noting that substantialism and relationality

⁷ Jackson and Nexon (2013, p. 546) argue that the ‘isms’ of IR “provide (and, arguably, always provided) a poor way of mapping different kinds of theories in the field”, as distinctions between ‘isms’ tend to be based on “preferred causal factor[s] or process[es] [...] the kinds of things that a group of scholars like to focus on, or wagers about important aspects of international politics” rather than foundational ontological differences. They contend that relational and non-relational ontologies are “social-theoretic commitments” that are not confined to particular ‘isms’ within IR (Jackson and Nexon 2019, p. 591).

are not binary categories and most IR scholarship is influenced by a range of ontologies and ontological assumptions, whether consciously or not. However, it is worthwhile paying greater attention to how exactly these ontologies are at work in different IR paradigms and with what effect on the political implications of research.

IR and Security Studies' treatment of war has typically followed a substantialist and non-relational ontology. Postcolonial scholars Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey (2006) argue that IR and Security Studies has systematically understated and misrepresented the role and experiences of the global South in security relations and war. This Eurocentrism in IR and Security Studies is the product of a non-relational ontology, as Europe is taken to be a "separate and self-producing" entity, rendering invisible "the mutual constitution of core and periphery characteristics of world politics" (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 346). Barkawi and Laffey (2006) illustrate three common ways that IR and Security Studies have continually produced Eurocentric, non-relational scholarship on war and violence, using the examples of World War II, the Holocaust and the Cuban Missile Crisis. Firstly, wars are typically named and memorialised through a Western lens. World War II has been widely interpreted in the discipline as "the 'good war'", even though "for many in the colonised world, the meaning and significance of [World War II] appeared starkly different" (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, pp. 338-339). From "these points of view" in the global South, "World War II was an inter-imperial war", where control over global South territories was fought between imperial powers (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 339).⁸ Secondly, IR and Security Studies have failed to critically reflect on the West's history of violence and its relevance to international

⁸ In India, for instance, Indian nationalists were not in favour of either a Japanese or British victory, as either victory would mean continued colonial control and lack of independence (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 339). In Southeast Asia, the end of World War II "saw the reimposition or the attempted reimposition – sometimes with U.S. support – of Dutch, British and French colonial rule, with catastrophic results in Vietnam" (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 339).

politics today. Barkawi and Laffey use the example of how the Holocaust has been treated by IR and Security Studies as an outlier in Western history, “ignoring previous Western imperial genocides in the colonies” and the ways this colonial history made the Holocaust possible (2006, pp. 340-341). The desire to sustain belief in the ‘humanitarian’ character of the West, Barkawi and Laffey argue, has thus prevented accurate scholarly engagement with the West’s violent history. In the case of drone violence, we see this in Eurocentric IR’s lack of engagement with the U.S.’s history of racism and Islamophobia, in addition to how drone violence emerged out of colonial air policing in Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria and other global South countries in the early-mid 20th century (Neocleous 2014; Satia 2014). Failing to see the connections between past and present, mainstream and Eurocentric IR therefore cannot identify the continuing relation of domination between the global North and South, enacted through air power. It also cannot grasp how people in formerly colonised countries will react to and be affected by neo-colonial violence. Thirdly, Eurocentrism in IR and Security Studies’ treatment of war has meant that the agency of people in the global South is ignored. The Cuban Missile Crisis is a key example of global South actors being written out of IR and Security Studies. Cuba has been “conceived either as a client state of the Soviet Union [...] or simply the location of a dispute between the U.S. and the USSR”, but the agency of Cuban peoples and their thoughts and wishes with regard to U.S.-Cuba relations is overlooked (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, pp. 336-337). This denial of global South agency is also clearly visible in Eurocentric, non-relational drone violence scholarship.

Barkawi and Laffey contend that Eurocentric, non-relational accounts of war and violence in IR and Security Studies are both a “social science problem and a political problem” (2006, p. 344). Eurocentric IR and Security Studies’ social science, or analytical, problem is that it “produces basic difficulties in

understanding the course and the nature of events” in international- and security relations (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, pp. 343-344). Crucially, the constitutive relationship of North and South is neglected; if one entity is understood as separate from the other, then important information about how North-South relations shape various phenomena in international relations is missed. North and South ought to be approached as a “single analytic field” (Cooper and Stoler 1997, p. 4 quoted in Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 346). As Barkawi and Laffey write, “failing to study the weak and strong together, as jointly responsible for making history, hamstrings IR and Security Studies’ ability to make sense of world politics generally and North-South relations in particular” (2006, p. 333).

There is also a political problem with Eurocentric IR and Security Studies. Eurocentric analysis “winds up expressing a taken-for-granted politics that sides with the rulers, with the powerful, with the imperialists” (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 344). The problem-solving dimensions of IR and Security Studies are only helpful to the most powerful actors in international relations, instead of helping “the downtrodden, the weak, the colonised or the post-colonised” (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 344). In failing to recognise the agency of the global South in its analysis, Eurocentric IR and Security Studies politically reproduces the global North as the most powerful agents, providing problem-solving tools to the ‘strong’. This is why Barkawi and Laffey (2006, p. 344) refer to the analytical and political problems of Eurocentric IR and Security Studies as “intimately connected”. As will be argued below, analytical and political problems are likewise evident (and connected) in mainstream drone violence criticism, which is non-relational and often Eurocentric.

Elsewhere Barkawi and Brighton, have argued that IR and Security Studies has a non-relational ontology in its study of war because it treats war as

autonomous from society (Barkawi and Brighton 2011). This kind of non-relational thinking is also evident in drone violence scholarship and criticism. Barkawi and Brighton (2011, p. 134) argue that studies of war are reduced to examinations of fighting because fighting “thematically unifies war in general and in particular – ‘war’ with ‘wars’”. However, the reduction of ‘war’ to ‘fighting’ has meant that IR and Security Studies has neglected consideration of the social relations that shape and are shaped by fighting:

War is shaped by, and shapes, social context. The implication is that war cannot be studied only as the conduct of military operations, much less as a history of decisive battles. War, as it were, exceeds ‘war’ as the clash of arms and is related to a whole range of social phenomena on and off the battlefield. (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, p. 132)

Barkawi and Brighton (2011, p. 136) argue that fighting’s “excess” – that war is more than kinetic exchange between parties – “is at the core of the ontology of war”. A relational study of war is one that does not reduce its focus to fighting and fighting’s first order effects, but considers the wider social, political and economic processes that shape and are shaped by war – including the ways people are changed through the “making and unmaking” of their social worlds (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, p. 136). As will be discussed below, accounts of drone violence’s effects that are based solely on casualty statistics reduce the wider context of drone violence to the discrete moments of lethal strikes and therefore similarly reduce ‘war’ and its complex and messy social relations to ‘fighting’.

Non-Relational Ontologies in Mainstream Drone Violence Criticism

Mainstream criticisms of drone violence have non-relational ontologies, either neglecting consideration of drone personnel and people living under drones or treating them as largely autonomous entities who have minimal effect over each other. Mainstream accounts of drone violence's effects are limited to discrete, time-restricted interactions between entities, and these entities are approached as stable and autonomous. Drone personnel and people living under drones, when considered, are “much like billiard balls or the particles of Newtonian mechanics”, which violently bash into each other on occasion but are otherwise separate (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 293). A minimalist account of harms in drone violence emerges in mainstream criticism – one which recognises death by lethal drone strike, but fails to recognise ongoing adverse emotional, psychological and social effects produced through the relations between drone personnel and people surveilled and targeted by drones. Before illustrating the non-relational ontologies of mainstream drone violence, I will briefly analyse two examples of scholarship that is supportive of military drones and their underlying non-relational ontologies. I do so to demonstrate similarities between non-relational accounts of drone violence (whether supportive or critical) and to show that, normatively-speaking, mainstream criticism conserves the status quo of international relations when it works with the same frameworks and forms of evidence as scholarship that justifies the use of drone violence.⁹

⁹ ‘Normative’ theory refers to theory that makes ethical commitments. In comparison to ‘explanatory’ theory, which approaches international relations as made up of facts (whether ‘brute facts’ or ‘social facts’) to investigate and explain, normative theory seeks to offer answers about how international relations *ought* to be based on ethical values and the belief that some values (i.e. egalitarianism) are more justifiable than others (i.e. competition) (Frost 1986, pp. 1-2). Molly Cochran (1999, p. 1) writes that all IR theory is normative because even scholars who aim to engage in explanatory theorising “cannot avoid normative assumptions in the selection of what data is important, in interpreting that data, and in articulating why such research is significant”.

One oft-cited proponent of the use of military drones is Bradley Strawser (2010), an academic and former instructor at the U.S. Air Force Academy, who argues that military leaders have a moral obligation to use drones in warfare to protect their soldiers against unnecessary risk. Strawser refers to this as “the principle of unnecessary risk”, stating that “unnecessarily risking an agent performing a morally justified act” is unethical (Strawser 2010, p. 344). Strawser’s argument is convincing when one considers that soldiers are risking their lives at the direction of the state; they are instrumentalised and then so frequently neglected by the state if they return home physically wounded (Gallagher 2016; Glantz 2009).¹⁰ However, Strawser’s argument neglects to consider some important factors.

Strawser (2010) never defines ‘risk’ but evokes it in reference to the physical risk of death in combat. The non-relational ontology underlying Strawser’s framework is evident here. In viewing military drone personnel as an autonomous entity whose lives are separate from people surveilled and targeted through drones, Strawser analytically cannot recognise the ways drone personnel experience ongoing emotional, psychological and embodied effects as a result of surveilling and killing other people.¹¹ Indeed, when Strawser gives

¹⁰ Glantz (2009, p. 61) writes, “it is possible for wounded soldiers to get both quality and prompt care from the Pentagon and Department of Veteran Affairs’ medical systems, but getting that care usually means a fight [...] Families who have received proper care for their sons and daughters report that forcing the government health care bureaucracies to give proper care can be a full time job”. Glantz (2009, pp. 62-68) tells the story of a father of an Iraqi veteran who was severely wounded in an IED blast – this father quit his job so that “he could work full-time as his son’s caretaker and advocate” navigating through a “labyrinth of bureaucracy” in attempt to find support for his son (Glantz 2009, p. 63). Veterans and their families who are unable to put in this time and effort often receive inadequate care.

¹¹ Many of these emotional and psychosocial harms are documented and analysed in this thesis, but it is important to note embodied/physical harms also. Separating psychological injury from physiological injury reinforces a false and misleading mind/body dualism that is also non-relational. PTSD, anxiety and depression have many physical symptoms. PTSD involves the re-experiencing of trauma, which itself produces muscle tension and pain. Research shows that the hyper-aroused state of many PTSD sufferers leads to lower feelings of energy and vitality, thus lowering their proclivity to exercise. Anxiety disorders are correlated with the physical symptoms of fatigue and sleep difficulties, gastrointestinal problems, rapid heartbeat, increased blood pressure, tightness of the chest, feelings of breathlessness, muscular tension and body shaking. Depression has been linked to restlessness, fatigue and sleep difficulties, lower proclivity to exercise; eat healthily; and avoid substance abuse, and feelings of numbness. For more information on the physical symptoms of psychological conditions, see: Aldao et al. (2010), Craske (2012), McFarlane et al. (1994), Stahl (2002).

a brief consideration of what he calls “psychological conflicts causing cognitive dissonance”, he treats this as a hypothetical phenomenon and states that “there is significant empirical work yet to be done” on the issue (2010, p. 353). This is a dismissive treatment of the widely documented phenomenon of psychological distress amongst U.S. drone personnel (Asaro 2013; Chamayou 2013; Der Derian 2009a; Gusterson 2016; Holmqvist 2013; Press 2018; Singer 2009). Many have suggested that drone personnel suffer from ‘moral injury’, as their psychological distress often differs from typical experiences or symptoms of psychological diagnoses such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Bryan et al. 2016; Enemark 2019; Litz et al. 2009; Maguen et al. 2009; Press 2018). Moral injury occurs when one has “betrayed a deep-seated belief about how a good person should behave” (Enemark 2019, p. 151). It is “rooted in the feelings (shame and guilt) one has about harm one has done to others” and therefore, in drone violence, it is an injury produced in the ongoing relations between drone personnel and people living under drones – potentially lasting months and years after carrying out the shameful or regretful actions (Enemark 2019, p. 157). Strawser’s conceptualisation of risk as “lethal risk” cannot analytically capture ongoing harms produced in the relation between drone personnel and people surveilled and targeted, including moral injury (2010, p. 344). Strawser adds that “even if there is some psychological harm done to UAV pilots that we cannot overcome, it certainly seems that such harm would be less damaging than the expected harm that could come about via inhabited flights” (2010, p. 353). He does not elaborate on why that “certainly seems” the case; however, this appears to be reflective of his evaluation of possible lethal risk as more serious than psychological risk (Strawser 2010, p. 353). Strawser also gives no account of the ethical duties owed to people on the receiving end of drone violence, assuming that the employment of drones “is done as part of a fully justified war effort” meeting all Just War principles and international laws (2010, p. 348). This is Eurocentric social science for and about “the strong”, as the

people subjected to drone violence in the global South do not get a say as to the validity of Just War principles or whether they think it is possible drone violence could ever be carried out in-line with such principles (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 349).

More recently, Mir and Moore (2019) have defended U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan, arguing that their aggregate impact has reduced insurgent violence and therefore civilian casualties from that violence. They posit that the “anticipatory effects” of drone surveillance have caused a reduction in insurgent activity:

Under a drone deployment [...] we believe insurgents are likely to anticipate being targeted and adjust their behaviours accordingly. [...] a drone program’s sustained surveillance and swiftly executed strikes may produce especially high levels of perceived risk of targeting. [...] If insurgents feel that their movements may produce detectable patterns that precipitate strikes, they may reduce activities such as patrolling, picketing, or organising sabotage in the open in a bid to avoid detection. (Mir and Moore 2019, pp. 847-848)

Mir and Moore’s (2019, pp. 849-850) analysis is based on comparing numbers of insurgent attacks and resultant casualties pre-2008 (when the U.S. began its drone bombing campaign in Pakistan) with numbers of attacks and casualties during the period 2008 to 2011. Mir and Moore’s (2019) article raises many questions about the value of deriving causality from correlation, the reliability of their data (particularly information gleaned in interviews with U.S. and Pakistani officials), and whether their findings could be repeated in any other area or country targeted by drones. Moreover, as will be argued in greater detail below, the measure of drone violence’s adverse effects purely in terms of

civilian casualties restricts consideration of other civilian harms – including how civilians are psychosocially affected by the “anticipatory” threat of drone surveillance that Mir and Moore detail so well (2019, p. 847). While the authors’ interest in civilian casualty counts ostensibly suggests they are concerned about negative effects on people living in targeted areas, the non-relational ontology of their research does a disservice to these people by considering only the fact of their lives rather than the quality of their lives. Mir and Moore (2019) reduce the violence of drones to ‘fighting’, focussing exclusively on kinetic strikes as the only measure of civilian harm, and therefore do not consider the myriad ways the social worlds of people living under drones are adversely affected (Barkawi and Brighton 2011). Moreover, by only interviewing state officials, their research is for and about the strong. The people caught in ongoing relations of domination (those living under drones) are not represented. This is also Eurocentric, I argue below, and thus non-relational because it reifies Westphalian sovereignty and renders invisible the struggles of Indigenous peoples and peoples living in contested territories or border areas (Adamson 2016; Anghie 2005; Beier 2005; Urt 2016).¹²

Non-Relational Thinking in Sovereignty-Based Critiques of Drone Violence

Many academic and civil society critiques of drone violence express concern over the risks that military drones pose to state sovereignty (Ahmad 2014;

¹² ‘Westphalian’ sovereignty refers to the peace treaties of Westphalia, signed in 1648 to end the Thirty Years’ War, and the belief that they were the first to enshrine a notion of territorial sovereignty into law. Benno Teschke (2003, p. 2) writes that American political science, British IR, German social philosophy, amongst other European traditions, all share the conviction that “the Westphalian settlement organized the European order on the basis of sovereign states” for the first time and therefore signalled the birth of modern international relations. While the Westphalian thesis has been met with much criticism for historical inaccuracy and Eurocentrism, ‘Westphalian sovereignty’ refers to international relations comprised of Europeanised states exercising their alleged right to territorial sovereignty (Anghie 2005; Buzan and Little 2000; Kayaoglu 2010; Ling 2013; Osiander 2001; Teschke 2003).

Amnesty International 2013; Brunstetter and Braun 2011; Buchanan and Keohane 2015; Human Rights Watch 2013; Zenko 2013). This section argues that sovereignty-based criticisms are non-relational, as they reify states as autonomous actors in drone violence and reinforce a Eurocentric conception of international relations (Jackson and Nexon 1999, pp. 299-301; Barkawi and Laffey 2006). Further, sovereignty-based critiques reduce relations in drone violence to discrete interactions between autonomous states (Jackson and Nexon 2013). Analytically this is problematic, as a wide range of harms to people living under and operating drones is unaccounted for when the focus is on states and the discrete moments of state sovereignty violations. Politically, state sovereignty critiques can work in drone advocates favour, as advocates rightfully point out that states have given tacit and sometimes explicit consent to U.S. drone strikes within their borders (Holder 2012). The normative conclusion drawn from these critiques is that drone strikes are acceptable if they have the consent of the “host state” (Qureshi 2017; Zenko 2013). However, these sovereignty-based critiques under-theorise the relationship between so-called host states and the U.S., neglecting to consider how Western imperialism has strengthened relationships between the U.S. and host states to the detriment of some people’s lives within those states. Sovereignty-based critiques are therefore Eurocentric in that they reinforce a Westphalian notion of sovereignty that ignores and undermines the lives and livelihoods of peoples who live in contested territories and those seeking indigenous sovereignty (Anghie 2005; Beier 2005; Urt 2016). They express the “taken-for-granted politics that sides with the rulers, with the powerful, with the imperialists” that Barkawi and Laffey identify in Eurocentric IR and Security Studies scholarship (2006, p. 344).

Buchanan and Keohane (2015) are concerned with state sovereignty violations by military drone operations. They propose a ‘Drone Accountability

Regime’ as a way to overcome three major risks they identify with drone warfare (Buchanan and Keohane 2015). They state their agreement with former President Barack Obama’s defence of lethal drones, “particularly in seeing drone strikes as less bad with respect to civilian casualties than the alternatives” (Buchanan and Keohane 2015, p. 20). However, they argue that Obama’s “thoughtful defence of U.S. drone policy is not sufficient” in responding to the three risks of lethal drones that they outline (2015, p. 20). These risks are: “(1) violations of sovereignty by unauthorized incursions into another state’s territory; (2) overuse of the military option, encouraged by lower costs [...], (3) less easily detected violations of the discrimination principle” (Buchanan and Keohane 2015, pp. 18-19). Buchanan and Keohane (2015) argue that the first risk, violating sovereignty, can be overcome by obtaining the consent of the state in which the lethal drone strike will occur (2015, p. 20).¹³ Any state that plans to “deploy drones within another state’s territory is obligated to seek its consent”; deploying drones without consent “violates the norm of territorial sovereignty” (Buchanan and Keohane 2015, p. 20). Buchanan and Keohane (2015, pp. 20-21) write that it may not be possible to attain state consent in the case of “failed states”; however, they argue that striking without consent is “permissible within the territory of failed states when transnational violence is being organized within their borders and valid state consent is impossible to attain”. The ‘Drone Accountability Regime’ they propose would ensure “*ex post* accountability” for drone strikes undertaken in “failed states or other states that cannot feasibly give their explicit consent in advance to drone strikes” (Buchanan and Keohane 2015, pp. 21-22). Buchanan and Keohane’s proposed ‘Drone Accountability Regime’ has one promising feature that would give power to some of the least powerful actors in international politics – the election of an Ombudsperson who would be “directly accessible to individuals

¹³ The other two risks pertain to the principles of last resort, proportionality and distinction. These will be discussed in the next section on international law and Just War critiques of drone violence.

who claim that they or their associates have been wrongly targeted” (2015, p. 28). However, the responsibility the Regime gives to states in judging the acceptability of drone strikes ignores the ways that these states may benefit from drone violence, while everyday people suffer. Drone violence constitutes and enforces sovereignty, including by violently punishing peoples who seemingly challenge or undermine the nation’s borders.

Brunstetter and Braun (2011) are similarly concerned about state sovereignty violations. In response to drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen, they write,

Drones violate the territorial sovereignty of these states, but for the moment the foreign countries in which U.S. drones are currently operating do not interpret this as an act of war. This, however, could quickly change. [...] In short, the tacit consent given by allied governments could be revoked if, for example, civilian casualties rise, or the United States is no longer seen as welcome, or the government changes. Without such consent, U.S. drone strikes could be interpreted as an act of war and lead to military escalation with Pakistan. (Brunstetter and Braun 2011, p. 346)

The possibility of future inter-state wars as a result of drone strikes may be worrisome; however, violence that is already inflicted upon people living in drone-targeted areas – with the tacit or express consent of their state governments – is glossed over here. By approaching violence as that which takes place between or within states, the “essential violence at the heart of state sovereignty” is missed (Bishara 2017, p. 350). The creation and maintenance of the state is based on ongoing exclusions of certain (groups of) people and this exclusion is often carried out violently. Likewise, Ahmad (2014, p. 66) argues

that U.S. drone attacks in Pakistan are unlawful because Pakistan cannot give consent or receive military assistance “by other states unless it itself is engaged in an armed conflict with individuals or groups that are being targeted by U.S. drones”. However, Ahmad (2014, p. 66) also concedes that Pakistan is in a state of armed conflict with the Tehrik-e-Taliban (TTP) and so could legally receive U.S. Military assistance in the form of drone strikes in this armed conflict. The TTP is active on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border in an area that, I will argue below, has historically been subjected to violence from the Pakistan government. It is home to an indigenous sovereignty movement that challenged the creation of the sovereign state of Pakistan and, as such, has been met with state violence. These sovereignty-based critiques turn a blind eye to such state sanctioned violence, therein siding with the strong.

Sovereignty-based critiques of drone violence reify the state as an autonomous actor in international relations and reduce relations in drone violence to discrete interactions between states. Jackson and Nexon (1999, pp. 299-301) argue that substantialism – the above-mentioned non-relational ontology wherein entities are assumed to have stable properties – requires the reification of substances. Reification occurs when the complex processes and relations that comprise a state are abstracted from and the substance is naturalised as a stable entity. The reification of the state “makes it easy to conceive of social life occurring within bounded containers” of states (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 300). Reification can “skew social analysis” by abstracting important social processes and relations (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 301). Jackson and Nexon argue that, when ‘state’, ‘society’ and ‘culture’ are applied as ‘common sense’ categories of analysis, “we risk doing violence to the empirical data we examine” (1999, p. 301). This is because an abundance of complex processes and relations, which complicate these neat categories, go unexamined. Fiona Adamson (2016, p. 21) writes that “the reification of the

nation-state as a sociological form” has led to “methodological nationalism” in Security Studies, whereby “security scholars and others [...] think of a world of nation-states as the starting point for analysis”. Adamson (2016) contends that methodological nationalism prevents Security Studies scholars from understanding modes of violence and different security practices that fall outside the state-centric categories of ‘national security’, ‘interstate war’ and ‘civil war’. Moreover, when states are assumed to be concrete entities, “questions of spatiality, identity and the construction and maintenance of collective ‘actorhood’ (stateness) fall by the wayside” (Adamson 2016, p. 22). The violences committed in efforts to maintain state-based international relations therefore go under-theorised by state-centric Security Studies. Further, by reducing relations to interactions between bounded states (Jackson and Nexon 1999, p. 293), sovereignty-based critiques present the temporality of drone violence as a series of discrete instances where one state violates the sovereignty of another. The ongoing relations between people in drone violence and the harms produced in those ongoing relations are therefore not captured.

Reification of the state and resultant methodological nationalism in drone violence criticism means that the experiences of people living in drone-targeted areas have been neglected – including what state sovereignty has entailed for them in the post-1945 world.¹⁴ Sovereignty-based critiques are Eurocentric in failing to consider the lives and experiences of peoples who face violence in the maintenance of Westphalian state sovereignty, including Indigenous peoples and peoples who live on borders and in contested

¹⁴ The ‘post-1945 world’ refers to international relations after the United Nations was created in 1945 and the principle of self-determination was enshrined in Article I of its Charter. It is often posited that, post-1945, European colonies and mandated territories could make legal claims to state sovereignty and that this paved the way for decolonisation movements across the global South – thus territorial sovereignty was “extended to the non-European peripheries” (Anghie 2005, p. 6). However, as Antony Anghie (2005, p. 6) argues, “the application of sovereignty doctrine to the colonies cannot be properly understood as the simple extension of sovereignty as it developed in Europe, into the peripheral colonies”. Anghie contends (2005, p. 6) that sovereignty “was improvised out of the colonial encounter” and that European attempts to retain control over sovereignty and its application have led to a Third World sovereignty that, even today, is “distinctive” and “rendered uniquely vulnerable and dependent by international law”.

territories (Barkawi and Laffey 2006). This is typical of choice-theoretic accounts of international relations which view actors (frequently states) as autonomous from their social and cultural contexts (Jackson and Nexon 2013), as well as non-relational accounts of war that treat ‘fighting’ as separate from wider social phenomena that shape and are shaped by war (Barkawi and Brighton 2011).

Campbell Munro (2014) argues that the areas of Yemen, Somalia and Pakistan most frequently bombarded by drones (the Aden Protectorate, Somali Jubaland and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, respectively) are areas with histories of imperialism where sovereignty remains disputed today. The Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan are a clear example of this: the region sits on the Eastern border of Afghanistan and the Western border of Pakistan. Neither the drawing of the Durand Line in 1893 nor the creation of Pakistan after Partition in 1947 were recognised by Pashtun people on either side of the now Afghan-Pakistan border (Gregory, D. 2011a, p. 240; Munro 2014, pp. 246-248). The border area – including the province now known as FATA – protested for self-determination as Pashtunistan, the home of Pashtun people (Mahmud 2011, pp. 39-40). Tayyab Mahmud (2011, p. 55) writes that, since 1901, the Afghanistan-Pakistan border has been “governed by a unique colonial era administrative and judicial order – an indirect rule that combines modern technologies of power with instrumental use of customary norms”. The Frontier Crimes Regulations Act of 1901 remains in place: colonial era legislation that allows the Islamabad government to carry out actions in the FATA that are illegal in all other parts of Pakistan (Shaw and Akhter 2012, p. 1498). In the FATA, the Islamabad government can legally carry out “pre-emptory imprisonment, expulsion of individuals and groups, destruction of buildings, imprisonment of children, collective punishment, strict regulation of housing, economic blockades, and even execution” (Shaw and Akhter 2012, pp.

1498). For people living under drones in these areas, it is indigenous sovereignty that is desired, given violences committed against them in the pursuit and maintenance of Westphalian state sovereignty.

The complexity of relations within and between states is therefore missed in sovereignty-based drone violence critiques. The Pakistan government – given the historical support it has received from the U.S. and its abovementioned history of quashing indigenous sovereignty movements in the FATA region – has rarely and inconsistently voiced condemnation of U.S. drone strikes in the FATA (Amnesty International 2013, pp. 37-38). Likewise, in Afghanistan, the U.S.-backed Afghan government has seldom condemned U.S. drone attacks, at least publicly – even remaining silent about several drone attacks that have killed Afghan police and Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers (Bearak and Gibbons-Neff 2017; Gibbons-Neff 2019; Gul 2019; Lawrence 2019; Rasmussen 2016; Shah 2019; TOLO News 2019). This is unsurprising given Afghanistan is a ‘weak state’ and compliant with U.S. foreign policy in exchange for national security and international legitimacy. Indeed, the United States funds and trains the newly established Afghan Air Force, who are also carrying out airstrikes in Afghanistan that have killed and otherwise harmed civilians. Tarak Barkawi (2016) argues that colonial and present-day ‘advice and support’ programmes require people in the global South to inflict violence on each other with the help of global North states. Barkawi writes, “today and for over a decade now, U.S. Military trainers cycle through cohort after cohort of Iraqi and Afghan infantry, while its allies as well as Russia and others operate extensive programmes of military training and assistance around the world” (2016, p. 209). Barkawi adds:

Arraying brown and black men in warlike order to kill and violently repress other brown and black people has been central to the making of

the modern world. We do not ordinarily [...] appreciate the world-historical significance of something like a colonial army or military ‘advice and support’ programme in the global South. (Barkawi 2016, p. 211)

To criticise drone violence only, or primarily, for the risk it poses to state sovereignty is both analytically and politically problematic. Analytically, drone violence inflicted against Indigenous peoples, peoples living in contested territories or inhabitants of border areas, goes unexamined because it is considered unimportant if the host state has consented. Presenting states as containers of social relations, rather than as sites of complex histories and social relations within and across contested national borders, means that a minimalist account of harms has emerged in drone violence scholarship. The only adverse effects of drone violence recognised by sovereignty-based critiques is the violation of one state’s sovereignty by another state and what ensues after this initial sovereignty violation. The wide range of embodied, emotional and psychosocial harms produced in the social relations between drone personnel and people living under drones – not the ostensibly bounded containers of states – are therefore missed. Politically, sovereignty-based critiques conserve the status quo of international relations, suggesting that drone strikes are acceptable when they have the host state’s consent. However, this simply reinforces the Westphalian model of international relations wherein states have a monopoly of violence and violently quashing independence movements within and on borders is deemed acceptable.

Non-Relational Thinking in International Law and Just War Tradition Critiques

International Humanitarian Law (IHL) prohibits military attacks that “may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof” *if* the loss, injury or damage is “excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated” (ICRC 2010). Codified in Article 51(5)(b) of Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions, the ‘principle of proportionality’ legally allows lethal and injurious attacks on civilians, but only when the anticipated military advantage outweighs these civilian deaths and injuries. IHL is derived from the Just War Tradition (JWT), specifically the ‘jus in bello’ principles of proportionality and discrimination (ICRC 2015). ‘Jus ad bellum’ principles, on the other hand, determine when states can legally go to war, according to the U.N’s Prohibition on the Use of Force. These are: just cause, right intention, legitimate authority, last resort and probability of success (Lang, O’Driscoll and Williams 2013).

Many critiques of drone violence are voiced within the frameworks of international law and the Just War Tradition (Ahmad 2014; Aslam 2011; Brunstetter and Braun 2011; Brooks 2013; Enemark 2014; Welch 2007). While these critiques have some merit, they are minimally relational in that they only recognise civilian deaths as a form of harm. As with sovereignty-based critiques, people and social relations in drone violence are largely missing in international law and JWT critiques of drone violence. The relations that are given attention are those between states (and their militaries), as overseen by international institutions. People are spoken of as if collateral – an externality to fighting – rather than agents with whole social worlds that are made and unmade by war (Barkawi and Brighton 2011).

In evaluating drone strikes' adherence to Just War principles, Brunstetter and Braun (2011, p. 339) express concern that drones could be considered a "level of force short of war" and therefore states may ignore or not apply the jus ad bellum principle of 'last resort'. They argue that drones "may encourage countries to act on just cause with an ease that is potentially worrisome" (Brunstetter and Braun 2011, p. 339). This argument is likewise voiced by Buchanan and Keohane for whom "overuse of [drone strikes] encouraged by lower costs" is the second 'risk' they listed after sovereignty violations. Interestingly, the potential for states to breach the principle of last resort is considered by Brunstetter and Braun (2011) and Buchanan and Keohane (2015) to be a hypothetical future concern; whether the U.S. has already breached the principle of last resort is not analysed by these authors. However, when assessing adherence to the proportionality principle, Brunstetter and Braun (2011) and Buchanan and Keohane (2015) engage with existing data to argue that drone strikes can be used to adhere to the proportionality requirements of international law and JWT. Indeed, proportionality is deemed calculable whereas measuring adherence to other Just War principles, such as last resort, is far more difficult.¹⁵ For example, Brunstetter and Braun posit that drone strikes are more 'proportional' than large-scale bombing campaigns, so are perhaps more ethical in this regard (2011, p. 348). Drawing on civilian casualty figures from the New America Foundation, they write that "this downward trend marks a considerable improvement of discrimination, especially if one compares these statistics to those of civilians who have perished in the large-scale campaign in Iraq in 2010 (2,405) and even more impressive if one

¹⁵ As Brunstetter and Braun (2011) reveal, whether a state has followed the principle of 'last resort' is difficult to ascertain. They write, "traditionally, the threshold of last resort does not mean that everything has to be tried before resorting to war because, as Walzer remarks, there is always something else to try [...] Rather it is a marker that all reasonable alternatives – such as mediation, diplomacy and sanctions – have been tried and failed" (Brunstetter and Braun 2011, p. 343). However, this is not a straightforward process because reasonable alternatives are weighed against "perceptions of imminence" and the "nature of the threat and the potential of other means to quell it" (Brunstetter and Braun 2011, p. 344).

compares them to the height of civilian casualties during the war in Iraq (34,500 in 2006 alone)” (Brunstetter and Braun 2011, p. 348). Recall that the comparative proportionality of drone strikes is also an argument articulated by Buchanan and Keohane, who voice their support for Obama’s justification that drones are less bad compared with alternative methods of bombing.

Critical IR and critical IHL scholars have convincingly argued that we need to be more attentive to how drone violence is enabled by the law rather than constrained by it (Grayson 2012, pp. 121-122; Grayson 2016, pp. 29; Gregory, D. 2011a; Gregory, T. 2015; Kennedy 2004; Morrissey 2011; Weizman 2010). These scholars argue that the law and lawyers have been mobilised in a variety of ways to legitimise the use of military drones in war, including the use of terms that have ample room for legal interpretation, such as ‘imminent threat’ and ‘infeasible capture’.¹⁶ John Morrissey writes that “after the September 11 attacks [...] a renewed focus on juridical warfare has occurred, with the Judge Advocate General Corps playing a central role in reforming, prioritising and mobilising the law” (2011, p. 292). Judge Advocate General Corps officers are embedded within the so-called ‘kill chain’ of the drone program, to offer their legal advice prior to drone attacks. Derek Gregory argues that the “U.S. accentuates the involvement of legal advisors in targeting decisions by the USAF and the CIA” (2011a, p. 247). This idea that drone warfare closely resembles ‘lawfare’ – because of the extensive involvement of lawyers and reliance on legal justifications – is further supported by Kyle Grayson (2016). Grayson (2016, p. 29) powerfully argues that “in the case of targeted killing – and drone strikes – permissibility is not made possible by the sovereign exception in which the symbolic normativity of the law is suspended”. In other words, it is not an absence of the law or of law-abiding

¹⁶ The invocation of ‘imminent threat’ allows the United States to argue that, under Article 51 of the UN Charter, they can act in self-defence to assassinate a target (Ahmad 2014, pp. 67-68; Brennan 2012; Gregory, T. 2015, p. 204; Ramsden 2011). Claims of ‘imminence’ can also be used to get around the principle of last resort, by claiming that there is not time to try other alternatives before using force.

behaviour that allows drone strikes to occur; drone strikes are routinely justified through the law. Grayson (2016, p. 29) contends that the “normative suspension argument can be both politically naïve and unhelpful”:

It can be naïve insofar as it accepts liberalism’s own self-legitimizing discourse regarding the limited coercive power of the liberal state and adherence to the principles of humanitarian warfare as the baseline for determining the extraordinariness of acts of violence; it is an acceptance that the law is separate from violence and that the law instantiates justice. It can also be unhelpful insofar as this naivety then misdirects criticism away from a considerable source of power for the commissioning of violence by liberal states: the law. (Grayson 2016, p. 29)

Drone critics must be wary that international legal argument is “rhetorical” and thus interpretive, and that militaries and nation-states are well-practiced at using legal armature to defend their violent actions (Reus-Smit 2004, p. 41). Any critique of drone violence couched in terms of international law can be met by state officials’ interpretations of existing international laws in ways favourable to their state’s position. Further, these discussions quickly abstract the debate from local context and the lived experiences of the people most affected by drone violence. Social relations in drone violence are once again reduced to discrete interactions between states (as governed by international institutions). Derek Gregory contends that “the invocation of legality works to marginalise ethics and politics by making available a seemingly neutral, objective language” (2011a, p. 247). Legal debates about drone violence morph political and ethical disagreement into “purely technical issues that involve matters of opinion, certainly, but not values” (Gregory, D. 2011a, p. 247). This technical back-and-forth, wherein varied interpretations of different laws are provided by drone advocates and critics, has the effect of “push[ing]

to the margins of the debate” the “lived experiences of those affected by drones” (Gregory, T. 2015, p. 206). Maya Zehfuss (2018, p. 51) argues similarly that the Just War Tradition (and, consequently, IHL), divorces politics from ethics; “ethics is considered in some way prior to – or at least separate from – politics”. Western militaries have embraced Just War principles, and some have even developed a virtue ethics curriculum for training their soldiers, allowing them to contend that they do take ethics seriously (Zehfuss 2018). What has ensued, Zehfuss contends, is the operationalisation of ethics in military institutions, whereby Just War principles are “produced as technical requirements that are indifferent to their (political) context” (2018, p. 51).

Returning to Jackson and Nexon’s (2013, p. 553) description of non-relational or ‘choice-theoretic’ approaches in IR, it is clear that international law and JWT critiques “specify a limited number of actors, their dispositions and their decision-making logics” and view actors as “autonomous from their social, cultural and material environments”. International law and JWT critiques are based on the assumption that international law is universally applied and that it provides universal protections (Anghie 2005, p. 197). The alleged universality of international law has come under scrutiny by postcolonial scholars, who argue that international law has retained its “Eurocentric character” (Anghie 2005, p. 199).¹⁷ Abstracting from context, IHL and JWT critiques omit consideration of how international law is variously interpreted – including in ways that are racialised and gendered. Given drone violence in the ‘War on Terror’ is enacted by (mostly) Western nations and peoples against global South

¹⁷ Anghie contends that the “formal acquisition of sovereignty and [legal] equality did not translate into the real power that the Third World states had hoped for” after 1945 and that it is the “continuing effect of the *colonial encounter* [...] that creates this discrepancy (2005, p. 199, emphasis in original). As an example, Anghie considers failed attempts by global South states during the second half of the 20th century to win back control over their natural resources from foreign companies. They were told by Western states that, under international law, they had to “comply with the doctrines of state succession [...] which stipulate that a new state must respect the obligations undertaken by a predecessor state” (2005, p. 213). In the ‘War on Terror’, Angie (2005, p. 275) argues that the laws of war have been interpreted so as to allow the U.S. to militarily act according to “pre-emptive self-defence”, thus disqualifying people in Iraq and Afghanistan from ‘universal’ civilian protections.

nations and peoples, it is necessary to consider how social relations between North and South (including histories of colonisation and intervention) shape the interpretation and application of international law and the Just War Tradition today.

Proportionality, Civilian Casualties and Broadening the Conception of Harm

So far, I have argued that international law and JWT critiques of drone violence are non-relational in that they focus on discrete interactions between actors (usually states and international institutions) rather than ongoing relations – particularly between people. However, there is another significant limitation to international law and JWT critiques – one that also reveals an underlying non-relational ontology. Criticisms of drone violence coming from International Humanitarian Law and the Just War Tradition only recognise civilian deaths as harm. Other harms inflicted in drone violence, such as embodied, emotional or psychosocial harms, are not recognised or considered within these frameworks. The proportionality principle requires weighing up numbers of civilian deaths in ‘proportion’ to military gain anticipated. Civilian casualty monitoring organisations, and the academics and NGOs that use civilian casualty statistics, aim to hold militaries accountable by giving evidence of ‘disproportionate’ killing. For example, a report by the Human Rights Law organisation Reprieve found that U.S. drone strikes in Pakistan and Yemen killed “as many as 1147 people [...] during attempt to kill just 41 [high value targets]” (Reprieve 2014, p. 6). The underlying argument here is that a ratio of 28:1 is clearly disproportionate. While NGOs operate within the framework of IHL and can be forgiven for needing to use this language and metric to hold militaries to account, the use of civilian casualty statistics in this way may reinforce the idea that a lower number of civilian deaths would be legally and

ethically permissible. The normative argument that emerges from this conserves the status quo of international relations: if the U.S. Air Force killed fewer civilians, a more ‘proportionate’ number, then their acts would be ethical and legal. As already mentioned, this argument of comparative proportionality is explicitly made by Brunstetter and Braun (2011) and Buchanan and Keohane (2015) in their Just War assessments of drone violence.

Other harms inflicted in war – such as embodied, emotional and psychosocial harms – are not recognised by the principle of proportionality. As such, militaries do not account for such harms when calculating the proportionality of an attack – nor do NGOs pay attention to these harms when critiquing military actions. Legal scholar Eliav Lieblich (2014) argues for the inclusion of psychological harms within IHL’s proportionality calculus, noting that its exclusion from the principle undermines the integrity and legitimacy of IHL. Analysing the report ‘Living Under Drones’ – the first report to detail the psychosocial effects of drone violence in Pakistan¹⁸ – Lieblich writes that the “psychological trauma so thoroughly discussed earlier in the Report was simply set aside when push came to legal shove” (2014, p. 186). Instead, the report’s normative analysis outlines “a set of rather conservative concerns [...] such as the possible violation of Pakistani sovereignty; questions regarding the legality of targeted killings; issues of transparency and accountability and problems relating to domestic U.S. law” (Lieblich 2014, p. 186). Lieblich writes that the “blind spot regarding mental harm” is not unique to military lawyers, national courts, or NGO reports; fact-finding missions also neglect to undertake “a normative analysis of incidental mental harm” (2014, p. 199). This means that even field researchers – who speak directly to people who experience war and violence – limit their research on war’s effects to civilian deaths.

¹⁸ This is the report Reverend Chris Antal read while on base in Kandahar in attempt to find out more about the drones he witnessed on the tarmac – mentioned in the introduction chapter.

Critiques of drone violence that draw on the proportionality principle, and therefore use civilian casualty statistics, are minimally relational. Civilians are recognised as actors in drone violence only in the discrete moments that they are killed by lethal drone strikes. They are conceived as if collateral; their deaths are recognised as negative externalities of interactions between other more important and powerful entities in international relations, namely states and the international institutions that oversee their behaviour. However, the myriad other ways in which civilian lives are made and unmade by drone violence is not considered. Thomas Gregory (2014) argues that civilian casualty recording “ends up producing a strangely disembodied account of war”. “Bodies are counted”, he continues, “yet we rarely hear what actually happens to the body in war” (Gregory, T. 2014).¹⁹ Many scholars have written convincingly on the limitations of language (Scarry 1985) and imagery (Sontag 2008) to adequately communicate the horrors of war; however, these modes can convey much more information about the ongoing harms inflicted in war than civilian casualty figures. I am not suggesting that efforts to count civilian deaths from drone attacks be stopped. These measures are still important for holding militaries and governments to account within the status quo frameworks we have for accountability in international relations. However, it must also be recognised that operating within this status quo framework normalises a “cold calculus” whereby the lives of victims and survivors of violence are reduced to numerical figures (Weizman interviewed in Davis 2013, p. 146). Eyal Weizman refers to the calculations required of the proportionality principle as “gruesome” (2011, p. 13). While not engaging explicitly with

¹⁹ Black and anti-colonial feminist scholar Katherine McKittrick (2014) similarly warns scholars to be careful of the sources they use about black peoples’ lives. Writing on the use of archival resources about black people who died on transatlantic slave ships, McKittrick argues that these resources “enumerate the dead and dying”, who are represented as “breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving” (McKittrick 2014, p. 17). People of colour have been systematically oppressed and brutalised in international relations and McKittrick (2014) contends that enumerating their lives is a form of epistemic violence because it continues to deny humanity and dignity to the Other.

Barkawi and Brighton's (2011) work on war's excess, Weizman states that "diminishing" the excesses of war – making it seem cleaner than it is – "could be abused by militaries and states" (Weizman interviewed in Davis 2013, p. 146). The principle of proportionality, Weizman argues, is an example of diminishing war's excess; it is "about the 'too much' of war, without ever saying how much is too much" (Weizman interviewed in Davis 2013, p. 146). The bodies, minds, emotions and complex personhoods of people in the global South who are targeted by drones are denied recognition and representation within the frameworks of proportionality and civilian casualty counts. Typical to Eurocentric IR and Security Studies, the "location of agency" is in the West with the Western actors who get to decide how many civilian deaths are 'too many' (Barkawi and Laffey 2006, p. 336). Postcolonial IR scholar Himadeep Muppidi (2012, p. 42), reacting to the civilian casualty counts of the First Gulf War, was similarly provoked to ask: Is "there a way to improve the quality of our thinking about mass destruction: some more meaningfully, qualitatively more humane way, perhaps?". Proportionality and civilian casualty counts offer a very limited understanding of how people's lives are affected and harmed by war.

Building on Barkawi and Laffey's (2006) argument regarding Eurocentric IR/Security Studies, I find that the analytical and political problems of non-relational drone violence criticism are interlinked. Analytically, the non-relational ontology of drone violence criticism means that the agency and experiences of people in drone violence – crucially those being surveilled and harmed by them in the global South – are not captured or analysed. This "produces basic difficulties in understanding the course and nature of events" in drone violence, as Barkawi and Laffey contend (2006, p. 344). By viewing states and institutions as autonomous from people and their social relations, we fail to understand how people are affected by drone violence in ways significant to international politics – including damage to individuals and communities and

the (re)production of international power dynamics along the lines of race, gender and class. This analytical problem has political consequences. Given that civilian deaths are the only harm to people in drone violence recognised by Eurocentric legal frameworks and scholarship, attempts to prevent and seek redress for other harms are not advocated. Normatively, mainstream drone violence criticism conserves the status quo of international relations. The U.S. government can respond to mainstream critiques levelled against the use of drones simply by stating that efforts are taken to seek state consent, follow International Humanitarian Law and limit the ‘disproportional’ killing of civilians. These are all assurances that U.S. officials, including Presidents, have given.²⁰ Tellingly, mainstream critiques share much in common with scholarship that is supportive of drones – drawing on the same frameworks (IHL and Just War principles) and limited conception of harm (physical and lethal harm), showing the ease with which they can be used and interpreted in ways favourable to the use of drones.

Critical IR and CSS Literature on Drone Violence

Gender, Race and Visuality

This thesis takes up from where Critical IR and CSS scholars have left the drone violence debate, contributing to a collective project that seeks to understand the complexity of drone violence and its harms beyond its

²⁰ In his 2012 speech at Northwestern University School of Law, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder stated that the “use of force in foreign territory would be consistent with international legal principles if conducted for example, with the consent of the nation involved – or after a determination has been made that the nation is unable or unwilling to deal effectively with a threat to the United States”. As described in the introduction chapter, U.S. State Department Legal Advisor Harold Koh has also defended the legal basis for drone strikes. In a 2010 speech, Koh stated that members of enemy forces are “belligerents and, therefore, lawful targets under international law” and that “targeting particular individuals serves to narrow the focus when force is employed and to avoid broader harm to civilians and civilian objects”. In his State of the Union address in 2012, then-President Barack Obama stated that his Administration had “worked tirelessly to forge a durable legal and policy framework to guide counterterrorism operations”, adding that “drone have not caused a huge amount of civilian casualties”.

implications for states or liberal institutions (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Grayson 2016; Grayson and Mawdsley 2018; Holmqvist 2013; Shaw and Akhter 2014; Wilcox 2015, 2016). The work of Critical IR and CSS scholars has complicated the notion that technologically-mediated warfare is straightforwardly ‘easier’, less embodied or less harmful than other means of war for drone personnel.²¹ The ‘videogame war’ analogy, depending on the exact beliefs of the person who employs it, conveys some (or all) of the following ideas: that technologically-mediated violence lowers the risk for states to go to war and increases the likelihood that they will do so; that these mediated acts of violence are psychologically easier for drone personnel to commit; and, taken further, that using drone technology to surveil and kill is divorced from the reality of killing akin to playing a video game. Caroline Holmqvist (2013) challenges this analogy, for instance, referring to the “fleshy bodies” of drone operators and their relations to the “steely bodies” of drones. Pointing to the phenomenon of high rates of PTSD among drone operators, Holmqvist (2013, p. 541) writes that “drone warfare is ‘real’ also for those staring at a screen and, as such, the reference to video games is open simplistic”. Holmqvist (2013, p. 542) conceives of drone operators’ bodies as “fleshy” because they are vulnerable to being affected by their work and affecting their communities as a result of their work; she asks, “if drone operators are not as shielded from the realities of war as is generally assumed, what might they be bringing into the wider communities of which they are a part?”. Holmqvist (2013, p. 548) warns against thinking of technological warfare/violence as ‘non-human’, advocating instead that we “rethink the human in war”:

²¹ The number of academic, journalistic and NGO sources evoking the ‘videogame war’ analogy is extensive. See: Alston (2010), Alston and Chamsi (2010), Benjamin (2012, pp. 86-87), Brandon (2012), Breakwell (2014), Brooks (2012), Brown (2013), Chamayou (2013, p. 107), Cole; Dobbins and Hailwood (2010), Drone Campaign Network (2016), Gonzalez (2015), Hastings (2012), Kaplan (2006, p. 397), Moore (2012), Pugliese (2011, pp. 937-943), Royakkers and van Est (2011, p. 289), Shaban (2013), Shalev (2016), and Singer (2009, p. 329).

What we need to do then, it seems, is to integrate accounts of the *human*, both a material, fleshy body and a sentient being in ethical and political relation with others, with accounts of matter in ways that do not reify or essentialise materialities of war... (Holmqvist 2013, p. 548, emphasis in original).

Holmqvist draws on phenomenology, particularly the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, to make sense of the relation between drone operators' 'fleshy' bodies and their work of drone surveillance and targeting, which is "ideational/discursive *and* material" (2013, p. 548, emphasis added). While Holmqvist's article is focussed on the relations between drone personnel and the military drone, she stresses that people living under bombardment suffer a variety of harms: "the impact on human lives, on individual psyches, thoughts and emotions, on hopes for the future on the part of those whose homes or livelihoods have been destroyed" (2013, p. 537). In distinction to mainstream critiques, which approach drone violence as comprised of discrete 'moments' of state sovereignty violations, IHL breaches or lethal strikes; Holmqvist writes that "events in war are never 'simply' events" (2013, p. 537). Instead, they "seep out in a wider social corpus" (Holmqvist 2013, p. 542). While scholarly and NGO frameworks approach war and drone violence as if made up of disparate and disconnected events, this does not reflect everyday people's experiences; the effects of this violence and the harms inflicted are often experienced in interconnected ways and persist for months and years into the future.

Following Holmqvist, Cara Daggett (2015), Lindsay Clark (2019) and Lauren Wilcox (2015, 2016) conceive of the effects of drone violence much more broadly. All three scholars are interested in the ways gender shapes and is shaped by drone operators' experiences.²² Their point of interest is primarily,

²² See chapter five on gender relations.

but not exclusively, the relation between drone operators and drone technology. Like Holmqvist, Daggett (2015, p. 362) also takes inspiration from phenomenology (this time queer phenomenology) to think about the ways drone warfare is “disorienting”. Daggett (2015, p. 362) argues that military drones disorient by rendering “strange” traditional “waypoints” in war, such as masculinity, femininity, enemy, courage, home and combat. One of these important disoriented waypoints she identifies is the home-combat separation. Drone operators are neither deployed-in-theatre or not deployed; instead, they are deployed-on-station. Drone violence occupies a space of in-betweenness between the home-front, coded as feminine, and the warfront (coded as masculine) with dizzying effects for drone operators who “feel themselves switch and slide and float around from the ‘kill-box’ to soccer practice” (Daggett 2015, p. 366). Daggett states (2015, p. 370) that she wishes to “take seriously the remarkably consistent expressions of discomfort, intimacy and sometimes trauma in operator narratives”, adding that: “the uncertainty of killing, and the mess and gore of fading heat signatures (if not the smell and splatter and taste) seep through” (Daggett 2015, p. 370). Like Holmqvist (2013), Daggett (2015, p. 371) draws attention the “new kind of intimacy” drone operators experience through a “network of humans, satellite connections, cameras, algorithms and steely bodies”. This is a phenomenon that Lindsay C. Clark analyses in her (2019) book *Gender and Drone Warfare: A Hauntological Perspective*, based on interviews she conducted with Royal Air Force drone operators in the UK. Clark (2019, pp. 68-74) uses the framework of ‘haunting’ to understand drone operators’ “complex personhoods” and their “disturbed temporality”; she considers how their pasts and imagined futures, as well as their lives outside the drone program, shape their (gendered and gendering) experiences of drone operations. Unlike mainstream critiques, which focus on discrete moments of interaction between otherwise autonomous actors, Clark’s ‘haunting’ framework approaches the temporality of drone violence as non-

linear and elastic (2018, pp. 610-611). This elastic temporality reflects Clark's findings that drone operators' past experiences of drone violence (and how they remember and forget certain experiences) change their subjectivities over time (2019, p. 70). This encourages an understanding of the harms suffered by drone personnel – whether conceptualised as trauma, moral injury or something else – as non-linear, as one's present is disturbed or dislocated by one's past.

In her book *Bodies of Violence*, Lauren Wilcox (2015, p. 8) confronts the “disembodiment” of theorising about international security” but seeks to do so differently to feminist and other Critical IR scholars before her. Wilcox (2015, p. 2) argues that bodies in IR and Security Studies exist only as “inert objects [...] to be manipulated” and that they are considered to “possess no agency”. She adds, however, that critical and feminist attempts to “centre the broken, bleeding and starving body produced by political violence” do little to change IR and Security Studies’ “underlying conceptualisation of the body as an object of manipulation” (Wilcox 2015, p. 8). In attempt to change this, Wilcox therefore takes interest in the “generative” aspects of war and political violence, writing that “violence can be re-thought as something that is productive and not only destructive; vulnerability is not just a condition to be overcome, but a constituent feature of the embodied subject” (2015, p. 8). In other words, Wilcox (2015) is interested in not just the embodied effects of war, but also people's agency. Her chapter on drone violence emphasises a relational ontology: “the bodies of precision warfare”, she writes, “are not isolated – they exist together” (Wilcox 2015, p. 136). The figures of drone violence, Wilcox contends, “exist in relation to one other as the result of the intra-action between discursive practices and the materiality of posthuman bodies” (2015, p. 136). Wilcox's dedicates less attention to the lives of people in drone targeted areas and how they experience these relations than she does to drone operators (2015, pp. 151-164). However, she does criticise the use of civilian casualty statistics

for being “incomprehensible” in their attempt to communicate human suffering (2015, p. 163). Here Wilcox advocates for embodied accounts of the subjects who live under drone violence and their agency.

The relational ontologies of Postcolonial IR and CSS also allow consideration, and analysis, of racism and Orientalism in drone violence – something that Eurocentric and non-relational scholarship cannot conceptually grasp. Postcolonial scholars have highlighted the racist and Orientalist ideas that shape targeting practices as well as the colonial legacy of drone warfare, arguing that drone violence cannot be understood separately from North-South race relations (Espinoza 2018; Satia 2014). Maria Espinoza (2018) argues that “racism, inherited from colonialism, is what informs the gaze of surveillance as to who is targetable”. She contends that drone surveillance should be “considered not as neutral, but as part of a long history of imperial looking that divides the world into those who are rightful subjects and those who are mere objects of the coloniser’s gaze” (Espinoza 2018, p. 380). According to Espinoza (2018), the civilian/combatant distinction is political, racialised and cultural; and attention ought to be paid to the subjectivities of drone operators to find out the beliefs and attitudes that shape their decisions when choosing targets. Espinoza (2018, p. 385) contends that people “under the drone’s gaze are not perceived as fully human due to Orientalism” and are therefore “not provided non-combatant immunity despite the language of just war”. This thesis builds on Espinoza’s work, and the work of many other postcolonial scholars, to stress the relationship between Orientalism, the racialisation of civilians and the subjectivities of drone personnel.²³

In addition (and relation) to gender and race, vision/visuality has been another means through which relations in drone violence have been explored

²³ See chapter four on race relations.

by Critical IR and CSS scholars (Bousquet 2017, 2018; Grayson 2016, 2017, 2018; Gregory, D. 2011b, 2013; Hall 2017; Kaplan 2006; Maurer 2017; Schwarz 2016). These scholars have published extensively on the visuality, or ‘scopic regime’, of drone violence, in ways that complicate atomistic and non-relational accounts. They seek to explain the relationship between drone operators and drone technology (in particular, its visual sensors), accounting for who or what has agency in that relation. Kyle Grayson’s (2016) book *Cultural Politics of Targeted Killing: On Drones, Counterinsurgency and Violence* posits that the “interface between the RPA and its human interlocutors constructs a cyborg assemblage of seeing that surveys, targets and exterminates” (p. 154). This interface “produces pleasure and anxiety that can be in excess of what is (or even can be) officially acknowledged”, and, moreover, these pleasures and anxieties are “embodied” (Grayson 2016, p. 147). Grayson writes that the production of pleasures and anxieties is “facilitated by interactions (and non-interactions) between the RPA, RPA operators, and other actors within the operational environment” (2016, p. 147). While Grayson uses the term interface to describe the drone, the focus of his analysis is not so much the relations between drone operators and people in targeted areas – but more on drone operators’ relations with drone technology. Grayson’s (2016, p. 138) claim that the drone is an “interface through which particular aesthetic, affective and power- relations are linked” acts as a prompt for this thesis project; however, the thesis furthers Grayson’s work in that it devotes greater attention to uncovering and analysing human relations in drone violence.

Antoine Bousquet (2017, 2018), Elke Schwarz (2016) and Katharine Hall (2017) are similarly interested in the agency of drone technology – particularly its visual sensors. Katharine Hall (2017, pp. 32-33) refers to the “technological rationality” of the drone, arguing that drone operators consider the drone to authoritatively ‘know’ the people surveilled because of its visual surveillance

capabilities. She writes, “the epistemological violence of technological rationality reveals itself [...] in shaping the lens through which potential targets are interpreted through the visual regime of the drone” (Hall 2017, p. 34). Hall (2017) considers the drone to have significant agency in shaping the thoughts and behaviours of drone personnel. As Hall (2017, p. 34) puts it, the “thinking subject” (the drone operator) is “unhinged from the human body and its untrustworthy senses and connected directly to its transformative (and destructive) potential”. Hall’s (2017) position shares much in common with Bousquet’s (2017, 2018) work on the martial gaze. Bousquet (2017, 2018) argues that human vision has been augmented and enveloped by visual military technologies, writing that in modern warfare “it is less the weapon that has come to serve as a prosthetic extension of the eye than perception itself which has been caught up in an unrelenting process of becoming weapon” (2017, p. 63). The human eye is “disciplined into a visual regime of calculability and control” (Bousquet 2017, p. 69). Elke Schwarz (2016, p. 65) also expresses concern over the agentic capacities of the drone, seeing the drone “as a peer, if not a guide, to the human and his or her own conduct in warfare”. Schwarz (2016, p. 63) argues that “lethal drone technologies involve the human in an ethical universe that is wired into them”. The drone “appears as able to ‘act’ not only better than humans, but also more ethically”, due to its visual and algorithmic ability to identify ‘terrorists’ from civilians (Schwarz 2016, p. 66).

A commonality between Bousquet (2017, 2018), Schwarz (2016) and Hall (2017) is that the agentic qualities of the drone are the focus of their work, while human experiences and agency in drone violence are neglected. In a (2017) special issue of *Critical Studies on Security*, Antoine Bousquet, Jairus Grove and Nisha Shah argue that Critical IR and CSS scholars researching war ought to develop weapons expertise. It is necessary, they argue, to consider weapons not as “static material objects”, but as specific “socio-technical assemblages” of

“objects, ideologies, practices, bodies and affects” (2017, pp. 1-2). There is, however, a delicate balance involved when writing about the agency of humans and non-humans, one which Critical IR and CSS scholars have rarely pulled off without depicting drones as an all-powerful technology. The kind of relational ontology in this work – common to network analysis and ‘assemblage’ thinking – flattens out the agency of human actors in the assemblage or network:

It either neglects or inadequately conceptualises the crucial dimension of subjective meaning and motivation – including the *normative commitments* of actors – and thereby fails to show exactly how it is that intentional, creative human actions serve in part to constitute those very social networks that so powerfully constrain actors in turn. (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994, p. 1413)

Such a relational ontology is politically problematic not only because of its negligence of human agency, but also because it closes down future avenues of political resistance. Hardt and Negri write that “apocalyptic visions of power [...] close down political engagement with power” such that we are left with “no hope of transforming such a power along a democratic course” (2009, p. 5). While it may not be the intention of the authors, much Critical IR and CSS scholarship on the capacities of drone technology presents the drone apparatus as so overwhelmingly powerful it is near impossible to imagine ways of effectively protesting and preventing drone violence. This thesis is careful to treat the people who live under or operate drones as fully fleshed out humans with their own agency. At times this is a difficult task – military drones are a powerful weapon, used by a powerful institution. As the chapters on race and gender relations illustrate, the drone is not ‘neutral’ either. However, political resistance is only a possibility when cracks and fissures in this powerful

apparatus are exposed, and this requires paying greater attention to the relations between, and agency of, humans in drone violence.²⁴

Conclusion

This chapter identified limitations in mainstream critiques of drone violence. I argued that all of these mainstream criticisms of drone violence are united by their non-relational ontologies, which do not see drone personnel and people living under drones as internally related and thus do not understand that harms produced in drone violence are ongoing rather than restricted to discrete moments. Mainstream criticisms centre on risks to nation-state sovereignty, and violations of international law and Just War principles. Further, they tend to use civilian casualty statistics as their only measure of harm to people in drone violence. Critical IR and CSS scholars' approaches to drone violence are a significant improvement on mainstream criticism, with many centering human experiences and relations in their research. However, for some critical scholars, their work focuses primarily or solely on the human-technology relationship between drone operators and drone technology. Too often in these accounts the agentic capacities of drone technology overshadow human relations and agency, resultantly closing down possible avenues for political resistance to the drone program.

This thesis puts forwards a relational ontology of drone violence because a relational ontology allows us to recognise a wider range of harms than is currently discussed in drone violence criticism – these harms are produced in the relations between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and people are surveilled

²⁴ In a *The Disorder of Things* symposia on Bousquet's (2018) book *The Eye of War: Military Perception from the Telescope to the Drone*, Katharine Hall (2019, np.) similarly argues that "we risk placing too much faith – and devoting too much of our analysis – in the displacement of human agency by machine that we do not see how we are actively participating in the creation of this world of the martial gaze and the potential then for it to be made otherwise".

and targeted by drones. The next chapter introduces and develops the concept of the drone interface, explaining how its relational ontology takes inspiration from many Critical IR and CSS scholars – particularly those in Feminist and Postcolonial IR and Security Studies (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Barkawi 2016; Bhambra 2010; Go and Lawson 2017). I also introduce three conduits of social relations in drone violence 1) (in)visibility and the gaze, 2) the ‘civilian’ category and 3) the fetishisation of drone technology. I describe these as visual, discursive and ideological conduits respectively. The relational ontology of the drone interface concept allows us to see that people living under drones are already harmed prior to the moment of a lethal attack; or that, a bombardment (whether it kills civilians or not) can adversely affect individuals and communities for weeks, months and years afterwards. Likewise, drone personnel are emotionally, physiologically and psychologically affected by drone violence – and this goes beyond the discrete moment they carry out and/or witness a lethal attack. In other words, the harms inflicted in drone violence are produced in an ongoing manner through the relation between U.S. Air Force drone operators and people surveilled and targeted in Afghanistan. Drone violence’s harms are not restricted to the moment state sovereignty is violated, international law is contravened, or a lethal drone strike kills a person. Politically, the relational ontology of the drone interface means that the experiences of people in the global South are given (over)due recognition. Advocacy and action for the redress of injustices they have faced can therefore be much more inclusive and exhaustive.

3. The ‘Drone Interface’: A Relational Ontology of Drone Violence

Introduction

In the last chapter, I identified and discussed the analytical and political limitations of mainstream, non-relational scholarship on drone violence. It is rare to find acknowledgement of the relations between drone personnel and people living in areas targeted by drone surveillance and bombardment in this existing literature, let alone sustained analysis of these relations. Instead, non-relational scholarship often focuses on possible violations of state sovereignty, international law and Just War principles (Ahmad 2014; Brunstetter and Braun 2011; Brooks 2013; Buchanan and Keohane 2015; Keene 2015; Ramsden 2011; Schweiger 2015; Sharkey 2010; Welch 2007). When harms to civilians are discussed, this is limited to civilian casualty statistics and calculations of ‘proportionality’ (Brunstetter and Braun 2011; Buchanan and Keohane 2015). Civilians are recognised in this discourse not as actors with their own complex lives, but as an externality or collateral to interactions between states, militaries and international institutions. In contrast, Critical IR and CSS scholars have taken a relational approach to the study of drone violence – an analytical and political improvement on mainstream drone violence criticism (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Espinoza 2018; Grayson 2016; Holmqvist 2013; Wilcox 2015, 2016). However, critical scholarship has sometimes given inadequate attention to social relations and human agency in drone violence, focusing instead on the agential capacities of drone technology (Bousquet 2017, 2018; Hall 2017; Schwarz 2016).

In this chapter, I move on from critiquing non-relational approaches, turning attention to social relations in drone violence and the relational ontology needed to identify and analyse those relations. I began this research with the premise that drone personnel and people living under drones are entangled in relations with each other, asking: “how should we understand the relationship between U.S. drone personnel and people living under drones in Afghanistan?”. I approach drone violence as violence inflicted through an interface. This interface shapes and is shaped by social relations between individuals and their societies and cultures. Through hours of surveillance, U.S. Air Force drone personnel come to ‘know’ Afghan people; however, this ‘knowledge’ is gendered, racialised and classed. Importantly, these relations are not only shaped by visual practices like video surveillance. U.S. Air Force drone personnel’s relations with people living under drones are also shaped by/shape other forms of surveillance information, discourse, ideology and imagination. For Afghan people living under drones, who cannot look back at their surveyors, discourse, ideology and imagination play a large role in shaping relations between them and U.S. Air Force drone personnel. The ‘drone interface’ therefore does not refer only to the visual sensors of the drone, but to all conduits in drone violence that facilitate (and are further shaped by) social relations – whether these are technological or non-technological, material or immaterial.

This chapter fleshes out the concept of the ‘drone interface’ and its feminist and postcolonial relational ontology. The term ‘interface’ was first used by Kyle Grayson (2016, p. 138), who describes the drone as an “interface through which particular aesthetic, affective and power- relations are linked”. In this thesis I seek to identify the characteristics of these aesthetic, affective and power- relations in greater depth, taking Grayson’s original insight further by giving details of these relations as described by U.S. Air Force drone

personnel and people who live(d) in drone- surveilled or targeted areas of Afghanistan. I have structured this chapter as follows. The first section lays out the feminist and postcolonial bases of this project's relational ontology. The second section identifies and explains three key conduits of the drone interface that shape human relations in drone violence. These are 1) (in)visibility and the gaze, 2) the 'civilian' category and 3) the fetishisation of drone technology. I describe these three significant factors shaping human relations as visual, discursive and ideological conduits, respectively. The third section discusses the ethical implications of the drone interface's relational ontology. It contends that the drone interface not only shapes social relations in drone violence, it can also be shaped by them – and is therefore vulnerable to being changed and resisted. That is, human actors have some agency in shaping their social relations in drone violence, including Afghan people living under drones who have the power to emotionally and psychologically affect U.S. Air Force drone personnel.

Relational Ontologies of Feminist and Postcolonial IR/Security Studies

Foregrounding Bodies and Emotions

A relational ontology is required to account for social relations and human agency in world politics, as non-relational approaches over-emphasise fixed attributes and structure – seeing the international system as immutable. Brincat (2010, p. 10) argues that neorealism – the most prominent non-relational strand of IR – sees people as “determined automatons structured by the systemic features of international anarchy”. These non-relational or determinist ontologies have a “fatal contradiction”, Brincat contends, because they cannot “explain the genesis of the system without first appealing to

historical factors that existed before the system arose”, therein acknowledging that human agency shaped the structure of said system (2010, p. 10). Postcolonial theorists Barkawi and Brighton (2011) argue that the same is true of war: war is not an inevitable product of an international system comprised of competitive and potentially aggressive states. War is contextually dependent, shaped by and shaping humans’ social relations. As discussed in the previous chapter, Barkawi and Brighton (2011) argue that a common reduction of ‘war’ to ‘fighting’ in IR has meant that war has largely been studied separately from social, cultural and economic contexts:

If war’s excess is taken seriously, that is, the idea that war shapes the social relations in which it is embedded, then war is present beyond the war front and beyond wartime, in and among apparently pacific social, cultural and economic relations. Any concept of war limited to the clash of arms, such as measures of battle deaths extensively used to identify incidences of war in quantitative analyses, necessarily misses this crucial and intrinsic dimension of war. (Barkawi and Brighton 2011, p. 132)

Barkawi and Brighton (2011, p. 136) add that “people are not only, or even primarily, brute facts, strategic datum”, like calculations of proportionality suggest. Instead, they are “bearers of meaning and manifestations of contemporary truths [...] the authors and outcomes of social, political and economic processes”. A study of war that fails to account for relations between the humans involved is one that also fails to account for human agency, as it is through these relations that human agents can change structures in ways big and small. People, like states, are not billiard balls.

Feminist and Postcolonial IR and Security Studies share a relational ontology that centres people’s lived experiences and their agency in

international relations. IR's marginalisation of lived experiences and human agency is particularly visible in its study of war and conflict. The emotional, psychosocial and bodily damage inflicted in war is one of its most defining features – indeed, it is war's destruction that gives it political power. IR's long-lasting neglect of emotional and embodied experiences of people in war is thus a significant shortcoming of the discipline – one that feminist and postcolonial theorists have sought to address. As Christine Sylvester – drawing on Elaine Scarry's work – notes, “everything about war aims to injure people” and yet mainstream IR so readily renders people, and their psychological and physical injuries, invisible (2013, p. 3). Bodies in war “get shot, raped, mutilated, beaten and killed”, yet IR research on war is aseptic and impersonal (Sylvester 2012, p. 497). Thomas Gregory (2016, p. 949) similarly contends the IR discipline is “strangely ill-equipped to deal with the destruction of the body”. He writes (2016, p. 949) that “pages upon pages of text have been written about the delicate balance of power” and “the reasons why states go to war” but that “little has been written about the human beings that live and die on the battlefield”. Kevin McSorley (2012, p. 1) likewise argues “the reality of war is not just politics by other means”, as commonly assumed in mainstream IR, “but politics incarnate, written on and experienced through the thinking, feeling bodies of men and women”. Postcolonial IR scholar Himadeep Muppidi vividly puts the failures of mainstream IR as follows:

But corpses do stink, don't they? Bodies putrefy in death. Living tissue turns rotten. And when such things happen on a mass scale in international relations, shouldn't our theories catch, convey and account for that stench? How have we managed to avoid that? (Muppidi 2012, p. 5)

If International Relations in general, and IR's study of war more specifically, neglects people's bodies, emotions and psychosociality, it will come as no surprise that this neglect also persists in IR research on 'technological' warfare. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have moved to counter the technological fetishisation becoming commonplace in drone violence research, arguing that researchers "must reinsert a disavowed corporeality" into this research (Shaw and Akhter 2012, p. 1502).

Feminist and Postcolonial IR researchers approach war in ways that bring lived experiences and human agency to the fore of analysis. Feminist analyses of war have centred the body and bodily experiences, challenging a long-held Cartesian bias in IR that sees only 'rational' theorising on "military strategy, battlefield tactics, foreign policy or the causes and consequences of war" as worthy social science (Sylvester 2010, p. 3).²⁵ Christine Sylvester (2012, p. 497) writes that, in order to centre bodies in IR, we need to be "studying up from people". Sylvester adds that "interviewing in situ" allows the IR researcher "to cross the boundaries of IR and methodology so as to focus on [the] less abstract and more people-centred elements of war" (2012, p. 502). Carrying out interviews and documenting oral histories are common methodologies in feminist and postcolonial research, giving "'subjugated' standpoints" the power and legitimacy that have been denied to them by white- and male-dominated knowledge production (Haraway 1988, p. 584). Swati Parashar, for instance, retells the war stories of Sri Lankan women fighters, contending that it is "important to probe the nature of 'knowledge' already available about wars" and to search for "non-conventional sources of knowledge to support deeper and richer analyses" (2013, p. 625).²⁶ Parashar (2013; 2014) is one of several

²⁵ Sylvester (2012, p. 485) adds that "human rationality features time and again across the discipline, mostly drained of body-mind and body-emotion elements and made parsimoniously logical".

²⁶ In addition to interviews, postcolonial theory draws on memoirs, novels, poetry, artwork, oral storytelling, among other creative resources (Chakrabarty 2000). It does so in recognition that people of colour and Indigenous people have documented their thoughts, experiences and histories elsewhere because they have long-been (and still are) excluded from the Euro-American academy.

Feminist and Postcolonial IR researchers who draw on testimonies of war experiences through fieldwork interviews and autobiographical sources (Al-Ali 2007; Baaz and Stern 2009; Bouka 2013; Dietrich Ortega 2012; Mackenzie 2012).

As part of its commitment to foreground lived experiences and bodies in IR, Feminist IR has also taken considerable interest in the political significance of emotions and affect (Åhäll 2016, 2018; Åhäll 2016 and Gregory, T. 2013; Gregory, T. 2012; Holland and Solomon 2014; Hutchison 2016; Partis-Jennings 2017; Solomon 2012).²⁷ This ‘turn’ towards emotions and affect in IR is part of a broader movement in the social sciences to rethink basic ontological categories. Feminist IR has drawn from feminist scholarship outside the discipline, arguing that our bodies, emotions and affect are continually in motion – shaped by and through our relations with other people. Feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, who has been influential in IR, argues that “emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’ but that they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds” (2004, p. 117). Ahmed adds that “while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure” in a fixed or attributional sense, “they still work to bind subjects together” (2004, p. 119). The significance of this relational ontology to understanding actors and processes in international relations has been noted (and championed) by Feminist IR scholars. Emma Hutchison (2013, p. 128), for instance, argues that we cannot understand the identities and actions of political communities without paying attention to the emotions that bind them together and mobilise them; she argues, “emotions are a mechanism through which political

²⁷ It is important to note that emotions and affect are not exclusively the domain of Feminist IR theory, as constructivists also take interest in the political significance of the emotions (Fierke 2014, Lebow 2005, Ross 2006). However, discussions about which methodologies should be used to study the emotions (in IR) have seen a return to positivism, with neuroscientific experimentation proposed as a problematic yet promising solution (Jeffery 2014; Mattern 2014). Feminist IR scholars, on the other hand, maintain that emotions are “too ephemeral to be understood exhaustively by the type of systematic inquiries that characterise the [...] sciences” (Hutchison and Bleiker 2008, p. 117).

communities are shaped and sustained”. Exclusion of, and violence against, people deemed outside the political community is also shaped and sustained through emotional resonances and intensities. Emotions are “complicit in a normative violence that circumscribes who or what can appear as a recognisable human subject” and are therefore a crucial site of inquiry for studies of war and political violence (Åhäll and Gregory 2013, p. 117).

In the case of drone violence, Feminist IR scholars have advocated for a relational approach foregrounding bodies, emotions and affect; and they have made preliminary moves in this direction (Clark 2019; Daggett 2015; Holmqvist 2013; Wilcox 2015, 2016). Feminist sociologist of war Kevin McSorley (2019, p. 4) writes of the “lifeworlds” of people affected by drone violence – a term that refers not only to the biological fact of being alive but also to a person’s rich tapestry of memories, relationships, sensory and embodied experiences, emotions, rituals and routines, connections to places, and future ambitions. McSorley (2019, p. 14) states that the “atmosphere” under drones – a shared affective, emotional and embodied environment – is one of “ubiquitous threat and torturous uncertainty”. The whirring sound of drones, he writes, “functions directly as a form of [...] paranoia, inducing widespread feelings of predation, anxiety and ontological insecurity that at any given moment death might be instantaneously dealt from above” (McSorley 2019, p. 12). Drone personnel, who inflict this fear and death, are themselves emotionally affected, experiencing “ambivalence, projection, guilt and haunting” that is “heightened by this peculiarly invasive voyeurism and ruinous following unto death of the lives of others” (McSorley 2019, p. 11). These harmful effects of drone violence – inflicted by and through social relations between drone personnel and people living under drones – cannot be captured by mainstream, non-relational accounts. Indeed, only a relational ontology can recognise that U.S. drone personnel have the power to affect, in many ways, the rich lifeworlds of people

living in drone-surveilled and targeted areas; and that, in turn, their lifeworlds are also affected by the people they surveil and target.

Taking Global History and 'East'/'West' Relations Seriously in Drone Violence Research

The relational ontology of this project is one also shared by Postcolonial IR and its contestation of the long-standing Eurocentrism of mainstream International Relations. Postcolonial IR's relational ontology challenges the "curiously unhistorical" approach of the mainstream, particularly how this ahistoricism abstracts global relations today from centuries of interaction between 'East' and 'West' (Lawson 2007, p. 346). Gurminder Bhambra (2010, p. 128) writes that "the connections most frequently omitted are those 'connecting' Europe and the West to much of the rest of the world". These connections, she contends, are "rendered exogenous to the processes abstracted from them", diminishing IR's ability to understand these important global processes (2010, p. 128). Global political processes do not exist in a vacuum but are shaped by interactions between 'East' and 'West' – both in the present and the past – that International Relations so often fails to take seriously. IR theory, particularly Realism and Liberalism, view the conditions underlying the international 'system' as timeless (Seth 2011, pp. 168-169). In response to this alleged timelessness, Postcolonial IR contends that our assumptions about the world are conditioned by socio-political and historical contextual factors that ought to be given adequate attention (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bhambra 2010; Go and Lawson 2017; Seth 2011).

Postcolonial IR theorists have advanced conceptual and methodological approaches that challenge the ahistoricism central to most mainstream IR theorising. Postcolonial approaches thicken the conception of global relations beyond that of nation-states competing in an anarchic world. Tarak Barkawi

writes of the “imperial turn” in academic scholarship over the last two decades, that has “shaped the work of historians, sociologists and anthropologists” (2015, p. 42). Barkawi observes that “implicit in this work is a rich conception of the international as a ‘thick’ social space of interaction and co-constitution” (2015, p. 42). While celebrating this “imperial turn”, Barkawi criticises the scholarship’s lack of interest in war in conflict, arguing that its critique of the ‘West’ (or global North’s) domination and exploitation of the ‘East’ (or ‘global South’) occurs “seemingly entirely in the realm of culture and political economy” (2015, p. 42). In ‘Decolonising War’ (2016), Barkawi argues that approaches to the study of war have been Eurocentric and reinforced problematic binaries, especially in International Relations. Mainstream IR treats war as a break in “order”, as its opposite. This binary and non-relational kind of thinking ignores the ways in which war is fundamental to order – “it sustains orders” – in the same way that policing is fundamental to the law (2016, p. 206). There is good reason, Barkawi (2016) argues, for Eurocentric IR to construct a non-relational (and false) order/disorder binary in its accounts of war, as it has the politically expedient outcome of rendering invisible the (neo-)colonial wars that sustain Western supremacy in world politics. A periodisation of wars from a global South perspective, Barkawi (2016, p. 204) contends, would undercut this Eurocentric binary “placing war at the centre of the encounter between the West and the non-European world” rather than as a “break” from order.

The relational ontologies underlying Postcolonial IR therefore pose a challenge to the attributional thinking at the core of non-relational theory. Postcolonial theorists argue that ‘West’/‘East’ and ‘North’/‘South’ identities are unfixed and internally related to each other (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Go and Lawson 2017). Agathangelou and Ling’s (2004, p. 22) theoretical framework ‘Worldism’ is based on acknowledgement of “the existence of multiple worlds while registering, at the same time, their constant, mutual

‘reverberation’ and (re)construction”. ‘Worldism’ asks questions such as, “how can we understand each other, especially our relationally produced, differentially experienced positions, locations, interests, and privileges?”, and “how does my identity or self-understanding emerge from interactions with others?” (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, p. 42). Go and Lawson’s ‘Global Historical Sociology’ project “joins attempts to ‘world’ [...] IR” (2017, p. 25). Global Historical Sociology (GHS) is a conceptual framework that seeks to investigate the co-constitutive relations of ‘East’ and ‘West’ across time and space. Go and Lawson (2017, p. 6) argue that “mainstream IR has assumed an asocial and ahistorical character [...] precluding analysis of key features of international relations”. The GHS framework requires a commitment to historicism and ‘relationalism’. It rejects mainstream IR’s tendency towards “attributional thinking”: that is, approaching “historically specific social categories – the balance of power, sovereignty and anarchy – [...] as stable, fixed entities that can be deployed without regard for time and space specificity” (2017, p. 17). GHS rejects the ‘stability’ of these categories, encouraging us to think instead of their internal relations. Go and Lawson (2017, p. 25) argue that GHS is the most useful conceptual approach to understanding International Relations as it is “oriented around the multifaceted, multilinear character of historical development”, including the “co-constitutive relationship between north-south, colony-metropole, and core-periphery”. This allows analysis of a wide range of processes and relations in international politics that are omitted in the acts of attribution and categorisation.

Postcolonial scholar and historian Priya Satia (2014) has applied this relational thinking to drone violence, challenging Eurocentric scholarship and its ahistorical and asocial accounts. Satia analyses the “long history of imperial looking” prior to the emergence of drones, tracing the “history of the tactical imagination behind drone surveillance” back to British colonial aerial policing

in Iraq (2014, p. 1). Satia contends that the recent attention given to drones (as a new and ground-breaking technology) is ahistorical and neglects to consider “critical continuities with earlier uses of air power” (2014, p. 1). She points to remarkable similarities between what colonial aerial policing was thought capable of doing in early-mid 20th century Britain and the kind of capabilities drone technology is imbued with in U.S. society today (Satia 2014). Of the British aerial policy strategy, Satia writes that the Iraqi desert was an “ideal space for abstracting war from politics and repackaging it as a technical affair” (2014, p. 5). Iraq was considered the perfect testing ground for British aerial weapons, where claims of civilian injury and deaths caused by these weapons were doubted by officials and the British public; in their eyes, Iraq was an unknowable and mystical land (Satia 2014). It was “not usual for aircraft to bomb the wrong town [...] but the British understanding of Iraq as an essentially deceptive place made such errors tolerable and acceptable” (Satia 2014, p. 5). Satia compares this to present-day public reception to drone violence:

...the air control experiment was pronounced entirely successful [...] In its Iraqi cocoon, the RAF was safe from criticism of its inaccuracy. The notion that unreliable tribal observers make casualty counts futile endures today. Even critics of drones argue that unreliable local reports corrupt casualty counts. (Satia 2014, p. 5)

These insights, informed by a relational ontology, allow us to understand how today’s reactions to drone violence in U.S. society and by U.S. drone personnel have been shaped through many years of ‘Western’ relations with the ‘Middle East’ and South Asia. As the next chapter on race relations details, the experiences of USAF drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones are likewise significantly shaped by a long history of social relations between

‘East’ and ‘West’. The ongoing harms produced in and by these racist and Orientalist relations can only be captured by relational accounts of drone violence.

Feminist and Anti-Colonial Emancipation

While otherwise committed to Critical Feminisms in IR, the thesis departs from Feminist Poststructuralist IR in that it makes its emancipatory potential explicit. In other words, it does not stop at deconstruction; instead, it attempts to articulate a normative argument about what a more just international relations would look like and how following a relational ontology can help us achieve that alternative. This is not to say that deconstruction has no normative power, as sometimes suggested by the Welsh school of Security Studies (Åhäll 2016, p. 156). One must first deconstruct the political status quo before alternatives can be imagined and worked towards.²⁸ Richard Wyn Jones, a key theorist in the Welsh School, similarly finds that the gap between Frankfurt School critical theory and poststructuralist conceptualisations of emancipation is often exaggerated (2005, p. 184). Wyn Jones (2005, p. 216) argues that a notion of emancipation is implicit within poststructuralist critiques; “some concept of emancipation is a *necessary* element of *any* form of analysis that attempts to problematise and criticise the status quo”.²⁹ Feminist Poststructuralist IR scholar Annick Wibben (2011) argues that the entire impetus of Feminist IR research is to dismantle the status quo of international relations. Wibben (2011, p. 591) writes that “feminist scholarship, in close

²⁸ Indeed, the concept of ‘emancipation’ and its coupling with security (particularly as put forward by Welsh School scholar Ken Booth [1991]) has itself been subject to poststructuralist deconstruction – with concerns raised that security-as-emancipation could reinforce global power relations and dangerously misrecognise the ways state and inter-state violence is justified by evoking security (Åhäll 2016; Neocleous 2000, 2007).

²⁹ Wyn Jones (cited in Booth 2005, pp. 219-220) further adds that “far from being the point of division between the two versions of [Critical Security Studies], emancipation may become a common concern that unites them”. Alker (2005, p. 202) similarly finds that the contributions of poststructuralist and feminist scholars have helped to reveal the imperialist and sexist power dynamics at the heart of “great, global, emancipatory, and cosmopolitan movements” in ways that improve Critical Security Studies scholars’ ability to better ascertain what ‘emancipation’ ought to entail.

collaboration with feminist activism, has the task of articulating grievances emerging as a result of that [political] order and ways to promote change within it”. Articulating grievances is a necessary first step to promoting change. As a first step, I undertake deconstruction across the thesis to demonstrate racialised and gendered discourse that shapes relations between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people.

It is, however, often the case that Poststructuralist IR theorists undertake deconstruction without stopping to articulate an alternative vision or what political resistance to the status quo entails (Selby 2007, p. 332). While emancipation is implied in this work, it is not often made explicit.³⁰ As James Der Derian (2009b, p. 193) puts it, “if there is a practicoethical injunction to poststructuralism, it is to identify and to assess the dangers of systems of thought (like universal rationalism) and systems of politics (like Pax Americana)”. However, the same political impulse that provokes one to identify dangers in systems of thought and politics, must also give one ideas about how systems of thought and politics could be better.³¹ This thesis argues that drone violence perpetuates relations of domination both at the international and domestic level and therefore ought to be dismantled. Chapters four to six contend that drone violence (re)produces ongoing harms, such as racism, sexism, poverty and alienation. These harms persist beyond the moment of the attack and its immediate aftermath, and they cannot be identified or accounted for within the popular rubrics of state sovereignty, international law or the Just War Tradition, as detailed in the previous chapter. Employing a relational ontology allows us to understand that drone violence is significantly more

³⁰ See also normative IR theorist Mervyn Frost (1994, p. 118), who argues that “all social theorists start out with [a] rather thick normative engagement with the subject under investigation, but almost always the normative position is implicit; it does not get spelled out or rationally defended”. He continues: “It is high time that [...] International Relations theorists be required to spell out and defend their normative positions” (Frost 1994, p. 118).

³¹ With the caveat that “all is questionable” and that alternatives proposed should also be subject to critique to ensure they do not become metanarratives that dangerously discourage the continued process of learning and societal change (Der Derian 2009b, p. 194).

harmful than depicted in these other frameworks. Small tweaks to the governance of military drones, as suggested by scholars working with these frameworks, are therefore not sufficient to prevent the inflictions of these harms – drone violence ought to be prevented outright.

This strong normative drive is one motivated by Postcolonial Feminism, which is explicitly anti-racist, anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial. Poststructuralist approaches are politically limited by their continual deconstruction, as no one is allowed an authoritative role in knowledge production – including people of colour and formerly colonised peoples. Postcolonial feminist Lila Abu-Lughod (1990, p. 17) states that most feminist scholars in her discipline (Anthropology) avoid poststructuralist approaches. Abu-Lughod quotes feminist political theorist Nancy Hartsock (1987, p. 196), who asks: “Why is it that just when subject or marginalised peoples like blacks, the colonised and women have begun to have and demand a voice, they are told by the white boys that there can be no authoritative speaker or subject?”.³² This is a concern shared by Agathangelou and Ling (2004, p. 29), who argue that “despite its critical revolutionary appeal, postmodernism ends up as static and reformist as realism and liberalism”. They contend that, “in setting up local practices as independent of the global logic of exploitation, postmodernism ultimately paralyses those very forces (local, multiple, marginal) that it claims to recognise and support” (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, p. 29). In contrast, Agathangelou and Ling’s postcolonial feminist framework ‘Worldism’ “aims to redress structural and material asymmetries” by centering “the perspectives, interests and actions of those who are usually marginalised, exploited or exiled by the House of IR” (Agathangelou and Ling 2004, p. 45). Agathangelou and Ling’s analogy of

³² Abu-Lughod adds that, “this is an important critique that needs to be considered, but we must also grant that what might be being offered instead [by poststructuralism] is an end to the myth of objectivity and the always hierarchised dualisms that have fuelled such myths” (1990, p. 17). I wager, however, that International Relations as a discipline has engaged more in poststructuralist critique than it has argued normatively to improve the social, economic and political conditions of people of colour, indigenous peoples, queer and trans people and women.

mainstream IR as a “colonial, patriarchal household”, which ought to be dismantled, shares much in common with Audre Lorde’s call to dismantle the master’s house (Ling 2007, p. 137). Lorde addresses a conference room of majority white, heterosexual feminists, arguing that black women, queer women, poor women and third world women need to have their different experiences and positions recognised and fought for in feminist theory and praxis (2003, pp. 25-28). She states that “the failure of academic feminists to recognise difference as a crucial strength” indicates that they have learnt and followed the “first patriarchal lesson” – to “divide and conquer” (Lorde 2003, p. 27). Lorde argues that white feminism therefore conserves the political status quo because “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house [...] they may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will not enable us to bring about genuine change” (Lorde 2003, p. 27). Postcolonial feminism is therefore explicitly normative; by approaching and valuing marginalised lived experiences as knowledge, the groundwork is laid for a radical politics that seeks to transform racist, patriarchal and colonial power relations.

Doing Intersectional Research

Lastly, and relatedly, Feminist and Postcolonial IR form the ontological bases of this thesis because these schools contend that an intersectional approach is necessary if we are to understand world politics and push for the redress of the most serious inequalities and injustices worldwide (Chowdhry and Nair 2004; Inayatullah and Riley 2006; Kirby and Henry 2012; Peterson 2007; Peterson and Runyan 1993). This commitment to intersectionality follows from a relational ontology because race, gender, class, and sexuality (among others) are not approached as fixed categories that can be understood separately from the others. As Sara Ahmed (2017, p. 230) puts it, “I am not a lesbian one moment and a person of colour the next and a feminist at another

[...] I am all of these at every moment”. Relationalism recognises the intersecting identities and experiences of each person in our (global) society, finding that the entanglement of these identities prevents us from locating one superlative identifier (for example ‘gender’ as being the greatest determining factor in world politics, as opposed to ‘race’). Research on war and its social relations necessitates an intersectional approach, as “war and violence have always been gendered, classed and racialised” not only in how they are fought “but also in the longer term or quotidian manner that they shape social relations (and are shaped by them)” (Khalili 2011, p. 1743). The study of drone violence likewise requires an intersectional approach; it is not possible to understand the relations between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people, and the effects of these relations on individuals and communities, without being attentive to the intersections of race, religion, gender, sexuality and class. As such, chapters four to six, on race-, gender- and labour relations, each focus on one of these socially experienced categories while highlighting significant ties to the others.

The Drone Interface

The drone interface is a concept employed and developed in this thesis to draw attention to the conduits of social relations between drone personnel and people living under drones – many, but not all, of these conduits are technological. Kyle Grayson (2016, p. 135) approaches the drone as “an interface and conduit” that produces the subjects of “RPA operators [and] those upon whom RPA strikes are initiated”. The drone, he argues, is a “key nodal point for producing affective, emotional and subjective dynamics that are felt” (Grayson 2016, p. 136). Grayson contends that the U.S. Air Force portrays the ideal subject of the drone operator as one who is “caring, courteous, conscientious and resilient”; however,

Pilots themselves while trying to live up to this ideal subjectivity find that there are competing affective experiences that are enabled through the RPA, its sensor technologies and the ways in which these are deployed in battle-spaces. These produce forms of pleasure and anxiety that can be in excess of what is (or even can be) officially acknowledged. (Grayson 2016, p. 147)

These pleasures and anxieties and “embodied” and their “production is facilitated by interactions (and non-interactions) between the RPA, RPA operators, and other actors within the operational environment” – including on-the-ground U.S. soldiers, civilians and ‘insurgents’ (Grayson 2016, p. 147). Grayson views the drone as having some agency in these interactions, referring to the “material properties of RPAs and how these contribute to forms of affective embedding through the transmission of flows of information and sensations” (2016, p. 137). While he does not specifically identify or list the conduits of interaction between drone personnel and people on-the-ground, he dedicates most space to discussing visual technology – particularly drone surveillance cameras and their “scopic regime” (Grayson 2016, p. 154).

This thesis builds on these insights of Grayson’s, but seeks to expand the concept of the interface to not only describe the drone’s visual sensors.³³ The interface is used in this thesis as a catch-all term to refer to the visual, auditory, emotive, imaginative, discursive, ideological, among other, conduits of social relations in drone violence [see Figure 2]. In doing so, it is indebted to

³³ This thesis also builds on Grayson’s theorising of the interface simply by uncovering more empirical information for analysis. As Grayson writes, his account – of the production of subjects across the drone interface – is “necessarily incomplete” given the “need for intensive research in locations and amongst communities that have been relatively closed to outside investigation” or that are deemed “unimportant” in international relations (2016, p. 138). This thesis by no means offers a complete account of the people most affected by drone violence and their social relations; however, it does provide some new information and analysis gleaned from interviews with Afghan people and USAF drone veterans.

scholarship from Cultural Studies and Science and Technology Studies (STS), which has broadened conceptualisations of the interface beyond the physical boundary of visual technologies (such as the screen or camera lens). Branden Hookway breaks down the word interface, calling it the “embodiment of a contradiction” (2014, p. 9). Hookway argues that the word is a paradox, simultaneously communicating a “between faces” and a “facing between” (2014, p. 9). As a “between faces”, the interface physically confines “activities within a circumscribed field or an enclosure” (2014, p. 9). As a “facing between”, the interface functions as “a boundary or zone of encounter that actively extends into and conditions that which it separates” (2014, p. 9). This latter conceptualisation – with its relational ontology – posits that the interface has a role in conditioning, and being conditioned by, human actors. Hookway refers to this process as a “mutual defining” of actors in interactions (2014, p. 12). Alexander Galloway likewise describes the interface as a “state of ‘being on the boundary’” (2012, p. 33). He discourages approaching the interface as a physical boundary separating two distinct entities, arguing that “an interface is not a thing; an interface is an effect” (2012, p. 36). The interface is always in the process of making and unmaking the entities with which it interacts. Hookway and Galloway’s conceptions of the interface in broad terms – as ‘being on the boundary’ between actors – informs my view that the drone interface is not solely a visual conduit of social relations, but is a set of sensory, imaginative, discursive and ideological conduits.

Conduits of the Drone Interface

This thesis identifies three main conduits of the drone interface that shape, and are shaped, by social relations in drone violence [see Figure 2]. These conduits are the focus of most analysis in chapters four to six, reflecting information shared in interviews. However, other conduits are occasionally

discussed (such as imagination). These main conduits are: 1) (in)visibility and the gaze, 2) the ‘civilian’ category, and 3) the ‘fetishisation’ of the drone. I describe these as visual/technological, discursive and ideological conduits, respectively.

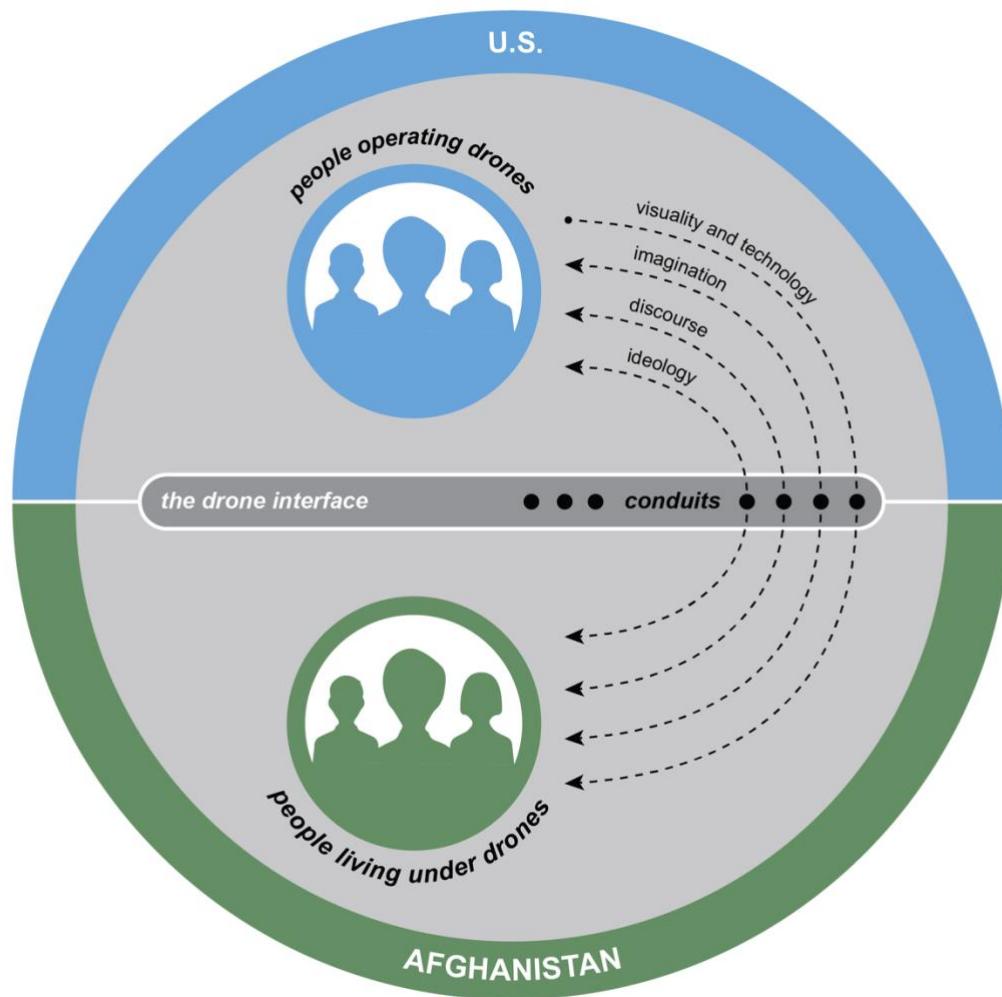


Figure 2: Diagram illustrating the ‘drone interface’ concept (design by Gaby Miègeville-Little).

Visual and Technological Conduits: (In)Visibility and the Gaze

Relations in drone violence are, to a significant degree, visual. They are not solely visual – to claim they were would be to ignore the auditory, haptic, emotive, imaginative, discursive, ideological, among other, conduits of social relations in drone violence (Edney-Browne 2019b, pp. 102-107). However, to a large extent, U.S. Air Force drone personnel’s relations with Afghan people are shaped *visually* by the information recorded by the drones’ cameras. Especially for drone personnel who work directly in the drone cockpit (the drone pilots and sensor operators), drone surveillance imagery is primarily used to make “knowledge claims” about the people surveilled – whether these people are purposefully targeted for surveillance or are observed in an area of interest (Nayak and Malone 2009, p. 256). As other IR and CSS scholars writing on the “scopic regime” of aerial warfare have also noted, this surveillance is racialised and gendered (though less has been said of how it is classed) (Coward 2014; Grayson 2012; Grayson and Mawdsley 2018; Gregory, D. 2014; Maurer 2017). The drone interface normalises Afghan people as worthy targets of invasive surveillance. The repeated activity of watching Afghan people without their permission, awareness or control, including in their private moments, turns an ethically objectionable action into something mundane. As will be developed further in chapter four on drone violence and race relations, this strengthens Orientalist ideas that people in the ‘East’ are a strange, mysterious and dangerous peoples deserving of invasive study and monitoring by the ‘West’ (Said 2003; see also Beydoun 2018; Gregory, D. 2014; Nayak and Malone 2009; Satia 2014).

Photography, and video imagery even more so, is believed to accurately capture the real world. Kyle Grayson refers to this as “aesthetic realism”: the assumption that “vision – through technological enhancement can become an infallible sense which captures *the* physical world that exists independently of

any objective perceptions that we may have of it” (2012, p. 123)³⁴. Because of this, drone surveillance imagery acts to embolden U.S. Air Force drone personnel’s beliefs that the Other is distinct and fundamentally different from the Self. As Randolph B. Persaud (2002, p. 63) argues, “race is always subject to mediations” because biological markers “do not themselves have any meaning; there is no logically necessary link between the morphological and the social”. In other words, this link between the morphological and the social has to be created, and the drone’s visual sensors do exactly this by pinpointing (or zooming-in on) behavioural and cultural differences – differences, that I argue in chapter four, are over-determined in the intelligence process of finding ‘suspicious’ and ‘guilty’ persons. In chapter five, on drone violence and gender relations, I contend it is perceived sex and gender differences that are visually identified and over-determined. This takes place not only through the electro-optical drone surveillance imagery, but also through the drone’s thermal imagery wherein body heat signatures are used as visual shortcuts to differentiate men and women. This process further solidifies what are false binaries (male/female and men/women) and essentialising assumptions, wherein men (particularly ‘Military-Age Males’)³⁵ are seen as more capable of and inclined towards violence than women.

There is a clear power asymmetry in this relation of looking; Afghan people surveilled cannot look back at their surveyors and attackers. As Nasser Hussain puts it, “with the overhead shot, there is no possibility of returning the gaze. The overhead shot neither invites nor permits participation in its visual economy. It is the filmic cognate of asymmetric war” (2013, np.). Not only does the drone prevent Afghan people from looking back at their surveyors, they

³⁴ See also: Jay (1993) and Crary (1998) on Cartesian Perspectivalism and the camera obscura – a technological apparatus that was claimed could geometrically model the function of eye, providing evidence of the alleged objectivity and universality of sight.

³⁵ The U.S. Air Force does not differentiate between sex and gender (i.e. they consider a ‘male’ to be the same as a ‘man’).

also cannot retaliate or protest against the harms inflicted on them. (In)visibility has important implications for race relations in drone violence and the kinds of ethical implications that emerge from these relations. The U.S. has a history of asymmetrical, racialised relations of looking, wherein white people have the power to look at people of colour, but people of colour cannot look back or defend themselves. Cultural theorist bell hooks writes of “white slave owners (men, women, and children) [who] punished enslaved black people for looking” (1992, p. 115). Black slaves and servants “could be brutally punished for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or see” (hooks 2014, p. 168). hooks continues:

Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labour, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. (hooks 2014, p. 168)

The agency that comes in looking back, in cementing oneself as a subject not an object, is the basis of Steve Mann’s concept of *sousveillance* – or ‘surveillance from below’ (Mann, Nolan and Wellman 2003). Simone Browne (2015, p. 21) coins the term ‘dark *sousveillance*’ to describe “modes of responding to, challenging and confronting a surveillance that [is] almost all-encompassing”. In the context of drone violence, Afghan people’s inability to look back at their watchers means that an important avenue of resistance and protest is foreclosed – those with power and authority cannot be observed or retaliated against.

Visual conduits of relations in drone violence are thus violent, (re)producing racist and Orientalist ways of looking while preventing people of colour from looking back at their (most often) white surveyors. The racist

power dynamic of these visual relations, as argued further in the next chapter, changes the behaviours of Afghan people who worry that they will be seen doing something that is mistaken for a signature ‘terrorist’ behaviour. I refer to this as self-objectification. To develop this argument, I draw on Frantz Fanon’s (2007) concept of epidermalisation. Epidermalisation refers to the moment when an indigenous person or person of colour is subjected to the scrutinising gaze of a white person, and, as such is reduced to the racist connotations the white viewer ascribes to their skin colour. It is the “moment of contact with the white gaze”; the moment of “fracture of the body from its humanness, refracted into a new subject position” (Browne 2015, p. 98). In describing the concept, Fanon gives a personal anecdote about sitting on a train in colonial Algeria surrounded by white people looking at him and refusing to sit next to him (“instead of one seat, they left me two or three”) (2007, p. 91). He writes that his relationship with his body is made pathological because of these encounters; that underneath a normal “body schema” (wherein one has good bodily awareness and control) is a “historical racial schema”, in which “the Other, the white man, [...] had woven [him] out of a thousand details, anecdotes, and stories” (Fanon 2007, p. 91). In other words, Fanon’s body is not his to know or to be in control of; he is made to rethink what he knows about his body each time he is subjected to the white gaze. As he explains, “the body schema, attacked in several places, collapsed, giving way to an epidermal racial schema” (Fanon 2007, p. 92). He writes of his experience on the train: “I transported myself on that particular day far, very far, from myself, and gave myself up as an object” (Fanon 2007, p. 92). It is this “giving [oneself] up as an object” that ‘self-objectification’ describes. Afghan people living under drones are frequently made to think about how they are perceived by U.S. Air Force drone personnel and internalise this objectification in order to survive.

There is also a gendered power dynamic in the act of looking that makes women more visible than their male counterparts – this dynamic is explored further in chapter five. Gendered surveillance intersects with racialised surveillance, rendering women of colour simultaneously vulnerable to racialisation and sexualisation. Men have long been positioned as the ones who have the ‘right to look’ while women have been the ‘objects’ to be looked at. Feminist psychologists Riley, Evans and Mackiewicz (2016) detail three different theories that explain how women are looked at in patriarchal or sexist relations: objectification theory (feminist psychology), disciplinary power (Foucault) and male gaze theory (psychoanalysis and film studies). Objectification theory describes the process by which a range of social practices (including unwanted looks and stares, sexual harassment and media portrayals of women) interact to the point that: “women come to understand that their value is in how their bodies or body parts are used or consumed by others, in particular men” (Riley et al. 2016, p. 95; see also Zurbriggen 2010; 2013). From repeated objectification, women “learn to understand their bodies as objects, subsequently engaging in self-monitoring in anticipation of how men will judge their appearance” (Riley et al. 2016, p. 95). Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power describes the process by which citizens come to self-monitor and self-discipline because they are under the assumption (but do not know for certain) that they are being watched by those in power. Foucault has been understandably criticised for his lack of engagement with women’s experiences of patriarchal power; however, disciplinary power has informed feminist work, including analyses of why women may talk and behave with the idea of a male audience in mind “rather than their own embodied desires” (Riley et al. 2016, p. 96). Lastly, male gaze theory comes from psychoanalytic film theory and describes the way that women in film are constructed as passive objects to-be-looked-at for men’s sexual pleasure (Mulvey 1999). While the theory cannot be cleanly transplanted out of film studies and applied to International Relations

or the study of drone violence, male gaze theory is useful in the sense that it describes how a technological apparatus (through camera angles, shot types and “invisible editing”), rooted within a patriarchal society, creates a masculinist and objectifying gaze rather than the gaze being organically an “individual possession” (Riley et al. 2016, p. 96). In the same vein, we can think of how the top-down perspective of the drone’s electro-optical camera (connoting power over the person/s watched), as well as the ability of thermal imaging camera to see information about the body invisible to the naked eye, might encourage a male gaze rather than individual drone operators already possessing such a gaze. Approaching analysis of drone violence from the visual conduits of the drone interface can illustrate little-known effects of drone surveillance on people living under drones, as well as recognising the harms (re)produced in these relations. Chapter five argues that Afghan women feel the effects of drone surveillance acutely, as the sexist relation between U.S. Air Force personnel and Afghan women across the drone interface perpetuates sexist and patriarchal relations in Afghanistan.

Interestingly, while U.S. Air Force drone pilots and sensor operators remain invisible to the Afghan people they watch, they are hyper-visible to their employer (see also: Clark 2019, pp. 155-157). The same record that drone sensors provide of Afghan people is also a record of drone pilots’ and sensor operators’ work – the decisions they made, actions they took, and how ‘well’ they performed. This surveillance is felt even as a veteran, as the classified nature of the work undertaken in the drone program marks drone program veterans out for increased state surveillance. This surveillance can prevent drone personnel and veterans from openly protesting the U.S. drone program. The psychological distress some drone personnel face as a result of their relations across the drone interface is therefore internalised and kept quiet rather than acted upon. Peter Asaro (2013, p. 202) argues that U.S. Air Force

commissioned psychological studies on drone operators are a “contemporary form of Taylorism, which seeks to identify inefficiencies in the labour production of drone operators and potentially reconfigure their work practices to reduce or eliminate these inefficiencies”. These studies are more a form of workplace surveillance than a genuine attempt to understand U.S. Air Force drone personnel’s psychological distress.

Discursive Conduits: The ‘Civilian’ Category

The drone interface is also comprised of discursive conduits of relations, and here the distinction between ‘civilian’ and ‘combatant’ plays an important role. The ‘civilian’ category is not a universal category, but a racialised one that has historically excluded people of colour and Indigenous peoples from protection in war time (Gregory, D. 2006; Wilke 2017; 2018). Derek Gregory (2006) and Christiane Wilke (2017; 2018) explain that the first uses of the term ‘civilian’ were in attempt to protect (or advocate for the protection of) white Europeans. Derek Gregory (2006, p. 633) writes that the first use of the term civilian in the 18th century “referred to European servants” employed by the East India Company. Wilke (2018, p. 32) demonstrates that international law was coded, at least until 1945, to protect Europeans from bombardment, but not colonised and semi-colonised peoples. In World War I, for example, Wilke (2018, p. 33) argues that there were two types of civilian in this period: “the colonising civilian” and the “civilian under occupation”. The “colonising civilian” refers to European and North American administrators living in colonised or semi-colonised territories (the “non-military elite personnel of the occupying powers”), while the “civilian under occupation” refers to Europeans living under German occupation (Wilke 2018, p. 33). Colonised and semi-colonised peoples were excluded from the category of civilian, referred to only as “natives” or “inhabitants” (Wilke 2018, p. 32). Similarly, the legal prohibition on the British’s ‘dumdum bullet’ in the early-mid 20th century, a bullet with

explosive casing that caused cruel wounds, applied only to wars “between ‘civilised’ states” (Lindqvist 2007, p. 52). Sven Lindqvist (2007, p. 53) writes that dum dum bullets “were reserved for big game hunting and colonial wars”.³⁶

Wilke explains that international law and international lawyers confined their efforts to protect civilians, and ban aerial bombardments, to Western states, even though the main targets of bombardment at the time “were colonised and semi-colonised peoples in Ethiopia, Afghanistan, Syria, Namibia, Iraq and northern Africa” (2018, p. 36). This racist exclusion of people of colour and Indigenous peoples from the civilian category persisted after World War I, during the inter-war period (1919-1939), as European colonial powers began to subject people living in their colonies and mandated territories in Africa, the Middle East and Asia to aerial surveillance and bombardment. From 1919, Britain’s Royal Air Force (RAF) relied heavily on aerial surveillance and bombardment to control ‘rebels’ and suppress uprisings in Egypt, Punjab, Yemen, Palestine, Somaliland, Afghanistan and Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) (Neocleous 2014). The RAF’s air-policing was carried out most extensively in Mesopotamia where bombardment was used to “crush any rebellion against colonial rule”, “deny tribesmen subsistence outside the political economy being imposed” on them, and to “ensure that tribes either paid their taxes or as punishment for failing to do so” (Neocleous 2014, pp. 144-145). As chapter six details, drone violence has similar effects on Afghan people’s ability to work and to access nearby natural resources as well as their land – access that is required for subsistence. Semi-colonised and colonised peoples were assumed to be ‘guilty’; they were seen primarily as a threat to

³⁶ Nisha Shah (2017, p. 96) argues that the use of dum dum bullets exclusively in colonial wars may have been “more of a consequence than an intended objective”, as the Dutch Government intervened to prevent the British from using dum dum bullets against the (white, Dutch descendant) Boers in South Africa; however, this still points to the asymmetry of political representation between Europeans/European descendants and colonised peoples – the latter could not formally advocate against the use of dum dum bullets.

colonial power through rebellion or insurgency. As Priya Satia (2014, p. 10) puts it, “in short, there were no civilians in Arabia”.

The civilian category has not only been racialised, but also gendered – once again, the two must be considered in tandem. At a world disarmament conference in Geneva in 1932, the head of the British colonial administration in Iraq argued the RAF’s aerial bombardment of Iraq was justified because “the term ‘civilian population’ has a very different meaning in Iraq from what it has in Europe [...] the whole of its male population are potential fighters as the tribes are heavily armed” (cited in Satia 2014, p. 10). This historical construction of the civilian category has continued relevance in drone violence. Chapter five details the same heightened risk ‘Military-Age Males’ face in drone-targeted areas today because of gendered assumptions that characterise men as more willing and able to fight (Barrett 1996; Carpenter 2006; Elshtain 1995; Enloe 2006, 2014; MacKenzie 2015; Shoker 2018). Women, on the other hand – because men and women are considered two opposites with ‘fixed’ attributes – are assigned civilian status. They are perceived as naturally peaceful and are grouped in with children – an essentialising and infantilising move that has been critiqued by Feminist IR and Security Studies scholars (Åhäll 2012; Enloe 2006, 2014; Kinsella 2005; MacKenzie 2012; Wilcox 2009). This infantilisation of women is all the more extreme in the discourse on the War in Afghanistan, given its framing as a war that would rescue oppressed Afghan women from Afghan men (Daulatzai 2008; Eisenstein 2007; Hunt and Rygiel 2007; Mahmood 2009). Cristina Masters (2009) writes that Afghan women have been represented as “victims of brutal regimes [...] covered from head to toe, veiled, burqa-clad”:

They are powerless, helpless and hopeless. They are oppressed, dominated and subjugated, unlike women in the West, liberated and free.

These are the women in whose name war has been waged, the women we claim to have saved in the act of war. (Masters 2009, p. 41)

Keally McBride and Annick Wibben (2012) explain that this construction of Muslim women has a colonial history. They argue that narratives of saving brown women date back at least to the late nineteenth century when British imperialists “pointed to the abuse of Indian women [...] as one of the desperate conditions that required their civilising presence” (McBride and Wibben 2012, p. 202). The War in Afghanistan’s racialised rescue narrative ensures that Afghan women are assigned the ‘civilian’ category.

The ‘civilian’ category and its racialised and gendered dimensions discursively shape relations between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people. The civilian/combatant distinction shapes how U.S. Air Force drone personnel make targeting decisions. Awareness of how U.S. Air Force drone personnel distinguish between civilians and combatants also changes the emotions and social behaviours of Afghan people. As chapters four to six all demonstrate, Afghan people are aware that certain behaviours are, from a U.S. Air Force perspective, deemed ‘suspicious’ and indicative of combatant identity. As such, Afghan people either avoid these behaviours or carry them out in fear. The drone interface, in drawing attention to these discursive conduits of relations, allows researchers to identify these myriad emotional, embodied and psychosocial effects of drone violence that result from the discursive construction of the ‘civilian’ category and the racialised and gender assumptions underlying the category.

Ideological Conduits: The Fetishisation of the Drone

The last significant conduit of the drone interface that shapes, and is shaped by, social relations is the fetishisation of the drone. I argue that technological fetishisation is an ideological conduit. The dominant understanding of the military drone in the United States is one that views it as a high-technology weapon, capable of providing unfettered access to the people and places under its watch and giving drone operators the ability to perfectly identify and accurately kill known terrorists (leaving civilians unscathed). This vision of the drone is so deeply believed because it confirms dominant beliefs in the U.S. that the U.S. is both a superior military force (with the most impressive weaponry) *and* a beacon of progress worldwide (and thus committed to rescuing people from human rights abuses internationally) (Asad 2003a, pp. 35-36; Hixson 2009, p. 11). This fetishisation of the drone has significant power in shaping drone personnel's experiences of human relations across the interface. It also explains the alienation drone personnel face in society when their experiences of their work are misunderstood by their friends and families (discussed further in chapter six).

Throughout the thesis I posit that the drone is a fetish object. I use the term 'fetish' primarily in the anthropological sense, not how it is used in Marxism or psychoanalysis (for a discussion on the differences, see: Ellen 1988, pp. 213-218). Anthropologists define fetishes as material objects imbued with spiritual, religious or fantastical properties, such as totems and relics (Ellen 1988; Graeber 2005). Ellen (1988, p. 227) uses the example of The Black Madonna paintings in Spain, which are worshipped as images themselves *not* because they act as a substitute for the religious figure the Virgin Mary – “the spiritual essence is intrinsic to [the] particular object”.³⁷ The use and study of

³⁷ Ellen (1988, p. 227) explains that the “image is nowadays usually protected by a glass screen, though a hole has been cut to allow physical contact (usually kissing) with the orb which she holds in her left hand”. He

fetishism in Anthropology has been controversial, as it has almost exclusively been fetish objects in ‘global South’ countries that have attracted anthropologists’ attention (Graeber 2005, pp. 411-412). As Graeber (2005, p. 412) writes on the perceptions of 15th Century European merchants in Africa, “so Africans were evidently like small children, always picking up little objects because they look odd or gross or brightly coloured, and then becoming attached to them, treating them as if they had personalities”. These caricatured depictions of African people as ‘fetishists’ reified the false binary between ‘Europeans’ as rational and scientific and ‘non-Europeans’ as spiritual and incapable of scientific reasoning. Graeber explains that this was ironic, as European merchants were in Africa seeking gold, risking their lives for the sake of “a soft yellow metal, one which isn’t even useful for anything except to look pretty” (2005, p. 412). Graeber (2005, p. 412) argues that Europeans depicted Africans as irrational ‘fetishists’ in order to distance themselves and their remarkably similar preoccupation with material objects from fetishism. In analysing the military drone as a fetish object, I wish to turn our attention to how the drone has been imbued with fantastical qualities in the ‘West’, specifically the U.S.³⁸, that are not reflective of its actual capabilities. Indeed, as will be discussed further in the following chapters, some Afghan people have only come to believe that the military drone is capable of performing certain functions because on-the-ground U.S. Military personnel have spread this misinformation in Afghanistan.

A particularly important aspect of fetishisation for this study of drone violence is what Ellen (1988, p. 215) refers to as “ambivalence” regarding how

continues, “for many supplicants this physical contact is vital, as is the physicality of the spiritual presence” (Ellen 1988, p. 227). The paintings are not simply representations of an important religious figure but are themselves believed to have spiritual properties.

³⁸ Although the drone has been fetishised in other Western countries, particularly allies of the U.S. who currently use military drones or are in the process of acquiring them (such as the U.K., Canada and Australia), this thesis focuses on the United States. While fetishisation of the military drone is similar between these Western nations, it is not exactly the same given the different historical, social and political contexts of these national communities.

the fetish object works. Ellen writes that there was much disagreement between early anthropologists about which objects counted as fetishes, but:

...they were missing one of the main features of objects described in this way, namely that there tends to be an inner ambivalence as to whether it is the objects themselves which effect material changes in some mysterious way, or whether it is some spiritual force which is either represented by or located in (but separate from) those objects. (Ellen 1988, p. 215)

The ambivalence of the ‘fetish’ is crucial because it reflects an unwillingness to understand how the object functions, suggesting that the continuation of superstitious belief in the object is more important. As a *technological* fetish, the military drone is easily depicted as too difficult to understand for those without technical expertise, and few attempts have been made to find out and explain how military drone technology works to a general audience.³⁹ This is often the case with technological fetishes, David Harvey (2003, pp. 8-9) explains, because of the easy “solution” they are purported to provide to difficult economic, social and geopolitical ills. Knowing how the technological fetish works complicates and undermines the allure of technological solutionism, and thus such knowledge is not actively sought. In many ways, Critical IR and CSS scholars writing on drone violence have fed into the fetishisation of military drones by not doing the work of finding out and communicating its mechanics – the unintended outcome of which is the reproduction of the U.S. Air Force’s embellishments about the drone’s capabilities.⁴⁰

³⁹ A notable exception to this trend is a (2017) report by Pratap Chatterjee and Christian Stork from the organisation CorpWatch, which carefully details the various software and hardware that allows the U.S. Air Force to collect and relay drone surveillance imagery, identify ‘suspicious’ persons, and undertake strikes.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Edney-Browne (2019b) for a critique of Bousquet’s (2017) argument that sight is being ‘weaponised’ through visual military technologies.

U.S. Air Force drone personnel work directly with military drone technology and, as such, they have rare insight into its machinations. The ways in which drone personnel negotiate fetishisation of the military drone in U.S. society with their own experiences of how the fetish object works has significant influence over their relations with Afghan people – including their proclivity to empathise with and feel concern for the people they surveil/target. As argued in chapter six, this ideological conduit of the drone interface can also cause a unique sense of alienation and isolation amongst drone personnel whose experiences of drone work are disbelieved in wider society, including by the people closest to them.

Relationalism and Ethics

Agency is rarely distributed equally in a relational encounter, and this is certainly true of relations across the various conduits of the drone interface wherein U.S. drone operators have greater power. However, that is not to say that Afghan people living under drones have no agency at all. Taking social relations as the central subject of analysis allows us to explore these complex power dynamics and differences in agency more closely. Postcolonial theorist Roxanne Lynn Doty's (1996) theorising of the "imperial encounter" leads the way in analysing global relations and agency. Doty (1996) argues that IR has tended to ignore the ways in which Western encounters with cultural Others have constituted, and continue to constitute, the West. International Relations, she writes, "has taken as a given the identity of the West and its subjects/agents ignoring the historical experiences and encounters with 'Others' against which the identities of those subjects/agents have been constituted" (Doty 1996, p. 24). Similarly to Barkawi and Laffey (2006), Bhabra (2010) and Go and Lawson (2017), Roxanne Lynn Doty (1996, p. 24) argues that the "other entity has been denied equal degrees or kinds of agency".

John M. Hobson and Alina Sajed (2017) refer to this denial and marginalisation of non-Western agency as ‘Eurofetishism’. They argue that the majority of critical IR is Eurofetishist because it “fetishizes Western agency and marginalises or dismisses non-Western agency” (Hobson and Sajed 2017, p. 548). This is because, in focusing their critique on the “power asymmetries and ongoing domination by Western structures”, the non-West is frequently depicted as “a silent victim, unable to escape the overwhelmingly hyper-agential power of the West” (Hobson and Sajed 2017, p. 548). Hobson and Sajed (2017, pp. 548-9) argue that part of the problem is that the non-Western agential bar has been raised so high, particularly through (implicit or explicit) comparisons to Western agency, that nothing short of “romantic, dramatic and heroic notions of defiance-resistance” are considered agential. Avoiding Eurofetishism requires thinking about agency on “an individual, everyday level, sometimes performed merely as a means of navigating oppressive structures as well as simply coping and surviving” (Hobson and Sajed 2017, p. 549). The drone interface as a concept allows researchers to acknowledge the asymmetry of drone violence’s encounter (there is no mistaking that this is a relation of domination) without denying that people living under drones still have some agency – including the power to affect the lives of U.S. Air Force drone personnel.

The drone interface allows us to consider not only how relations of domination are enacted in drone violence, but also how resistance to domination might be possible. This is similar to Lauren Wilcox’s (2016, p. 8) observation that violence “can be re-thought as something that is productive”. While it is not ostensibly clear that there is *any* resistant potential in the militarised, violent context of the U.S. Air Force’s drone program, social relations across the interface do allow for resistance. As previously mentioned,

the conduits of the drone interface do not only shape relations, they are also shaped by them. This means that there is the possibility to change the drone interface, as well as the domination it enacts. For instance, in terms of ideological conduits of the interface, the fetishised understanding of the drone widely believed in U.S. society is often disbelieved by drone personnel. These personnel resultantly come to question their country's mission in Afghanistan and the ethical implications of U.S. actions. There are cracks and fissures in the drone interface – its visual/technological, discursive and ideological conduits are not all-powerful and thus can be challenged.

The agency of people living under drones to emotionally and psychologically affect drone personnel is another one these cracks and fissures that can lead to resistance to drone violence. Feminist ethicist Fiona Robinson (2006, p. 222) writes that once we “understand human existence in the context of social and personal relations” then our “view [of] morality is grounded in those relations”. Once drone personnel notice they are being affected by the people they surveil/target, they morally ‘recognise’ those people. Recognition is the acknowledgment and understanding that we have ethical responsibility for the continued livelihood and flourishing of the ‘Other’, and is thus integral to the undoing of violence (Honneth 2001, pp. 49-50; Holmqvist 2013).⁴¹ Through their emotional connections to people they surveil, and their psychological reactions (of distress, sadness, guilt, etc.) in these relations, some drone personnel come to take ethical responsibility for the people they surveil

⁴¹ It has been argued that, in the context of neo-colonialism, moral recognition of the ‘Other’ has been advocated by Liberal Interventionists and Neoliberals to justify military humanitarian interventions and self-interested economic programs. Critical and postcolonial scholars (Asad 2000; 2003b, Badiou 2001, Brown 2002, Ranciere 2010, Weizman 2011) have questioned human rights discourses, especially their mobilisation for justifying military interventions, with some also arguing that a Western liberal notion of both the ‘human’ and of ‘rights’ is advanced that is not always shared by indigenous peoples and people of colour who are ‘receiving’ recognition. Resurgent interest in Hannah Arendt’s (1951) concept of “the right to have rights”, for example, has brought to the fore many of the paradoxes in the human rights framework and what it ostensibly sets out to achieve (DeGooyer et al. 2017). However, there is a significant difference in evoking moral recognition to justify neo-colonial military inventions and encouraging recognition in order to resist and prevent the infliction of neo-colonial violence. This thesis is committed to the latter.

by attempting to prevent harm to those people. These resistant thoughts and actions within the U.S. Air Force are, on their own, insufficient to dismantle the relation of domination between the U.S. Air Force and Afghan people. Recognition is, however, a necessary first step for political action that disrupts or prevents drone violence. It is well worth considering, as Rosemary Shinko (2010, p. 730) puts it, how the reconfiguration of individual autonomy “along the lines of relationality gives rise to individual enactments that resist conformist and disciplinary pressures”. Indeed, this thesis documents the testimonies of several U.S. Air Force drone veterans who experienced serious distress about the violence they inflicted on people while in the drone program and later went on to partake in anti-drone activism (some to a large extent and at significant risk to themselves).

Conclusion

In this chapter I built on chapter two’s identification of problems within non-relational approaches to drone violence in IR and Security Studies by developing the concept of the drone interface. This concept and its relational ontology is informed by Feminist and Postcolonial IR and its concerns that the discipline is too often ‘rational’, ahistorical, asocial and normatively unambitious (if not conservative). The concept of the drone interface brings humans and their social relations to the fore of the analysis, starting with the premise that Afghan people and U.S. Air Force drone personnel have the power to affect and be affected by each other. The drone interface, I explained, is a set of visual, discursive and ideological (and other) conduits that shape and are in turn shaped by these relations. The conduits of social relations that receive most attention in this thesis are (in)visibility and the gaze, the ‘civilian’ category and the fetishisation of the drone, though others are occasionally discussed. The normative critique of military drones that emerges from this relational approach

is more politically transformative than objections to drone violence voiced through the frameworks of sovereignty, international law and the Just War Tradition. It allows for the identification of a far broader range of harms than these other frameworks – harms that are produced in social relations and are emotional, embodied and psychosocial – and therefore mounts a more persuasive challenge to the use of drones.

Having set out the analytical and political necessity of a relational approach to the study of drone violence, in the next chapter I begin to answer the research question “how should we understand the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and people living under drones in Afghanistan?” by focussing on race relations. I argue that the drone interface establishes asymmetric relations of visibility/invisibility and reproduces the racist and Orientalist formulation of the ‘suspicious’ Afghan whose civilian status must always be questioned. The adverse emotional and psychosocial effects of this are such that Afghan people come to internalise their objectification as ‘suspicious’ persons and change their social behaviours to avoid being targeted. The chapter marks the first of the thesis body (chapters four to six), which draws on interview material to argue that drone violence needs to be understood as an international relation of domination. This international relation of domination also compounds domestic relations of domination in Afghanistan and the United States along the lines of race, gender and class.

4. Drone Violence and Race Relations: Racism, Racialisation and Psychosocial Harms

Introduction

Critical IR and CSS scholars have argued that racism, Orientalism and Islamophobia are crucial to the operation of, and justifications for, the ‘War on Terror’ (Gregory, D. 2004, 2014; Prinz and Schetter 2016; Richter-Monpetit 2007; Turner 2017). Dating back to the colonial period, the West has behaved according to a racist and Islamophobic suspicion of, and desire to control, the brown and Muslim Other. Since 9/11, these existing attitudes have been exploited and purposefully exacerbated to justify invasive counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism programs of surveillance and policing. By starting investigation and analysis from the ‘drone interface’, it becomes clear that race and racism are an integral factor of social relations in drone violence. It is important to make the (hopefully) obvious point that military drones are used by Western nations to surveil and kill people of colour in South Asia, the ‘Middle East’ and North Africa. These deaths are not grieved by Western publics, especially compared to how Western deaths from drone attacks are grieved.⁴² However, in this chapter I focus on less obvious ways in which the

⁴² The deaths of Western aid workers Warren Weinstein (American) and Giovanni Lo Porto (Italian), to a U.S. drone attack in Pakistan in 2015, prompted full-length feature articles in major publications including the *BBC*, *NBC*, *ABC*, *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *The Guardian*, among many others. Several publications wrote obituaries of the two men, celebrating their good character traits and successful careers (i.e.: “Warren Weinstein in Death and Life” in *The New Yorker* and “Giovanni Lo Porto, killed in U.S. drone strike, was ‘incredibly loyal’ friend” in *The Guardian*). It is very rare for air attacks on Afghan people to be reported in the Western media, unless a large number of people are killed – particularly children. Drone attacks that kill ‘only’ two Afghan individuals are not reported, much less their positive character traits written about at length. (This differentiation in grieving according to the geographic location of violence – and, as such, the victims’ race and ethnicity – is a central theme in Judith Butler’s (2009) book *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*)

social relations of drone violence are race-based and racialised. While some theorists and political leaders maintain that new surveillance and biometric technologies are value-neutral and ‘erase’ race,⁴³ I draw upon interview responses to argue that the conduits of the drone interface – including its visual/technological conduits – (re)produce racism. Racism and Orientalism influence how U.S. Air Force drone personnel conceive of themselves and Afghan people before they even begin their interactions with and through the drone interface. However, the drone interface is not neutral in these relations; it racialises people under its surveillance and (re)produces racism and Orientalism. By focussing on social relations, and race relations more specifically, a range of harms inflicted in drone violence can be identified that are missed by the aforementioned non-relational frameworks of state sovereignty, international law and civilian casualty counts. The racism and Orientalism of drone violence has harmful psychosocial effects for Afghan people living under drones, as I will discuss in this chapter.

Firstly, I consider how U.S. national identity and foreign policy are together built upon white supremacy and the notion that America is a beacon of human progress across the globe (Campbell 1998; Fermor 2016; Hixson 2009). Drawing on the testimonies of two USAF drone personnel – one intelligence analyst and one Air Force technician – it contends that U.S. Military and U.S. Air Force narratives resonate with these dominant understandings in U.S. society of people in the ‘Middle East’ and South Asia as backwards and in need of civilising through American intervention (Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Fermor 2016; Nayak and Malone 2009). USAF drone personnel also experience peer pressure within the institution to think in racist and Orientalist ways about the people they surveil. Afghan people are always already under suspicion as

⁴³ See Maguire (2012, pp. 601-602) and Skinner (2020) for further discussion and critiques of these arguments regarding technical neutrality and ‘race-blind’ surveillance.

‘potential’ terrorists whose civilian status needs to be questioned (Anderson 2011). To this extent, drone personnel’s relations with Afghan people are already shaped by the USAF’s institutional culture and a wider culture of racism in the U.S before they even begin their interactions with and across the drone interface.

However, this does not mean that the drone interface straightforwardly reflects dominant beliefs in USAF and U.S. society or that it plays no part in racialisation. Racialisation is a process produced *between* two or more groups of people wherein race is considered a morally significant or non-arbitrary marker of difference. Racialisation is therefore an active and ongoing process in social relations. Focussing on (in)visibility and the gaze, I argue in the second section of the chapter that the visual conduits of social relations in drone violence prompt drone personnel to identify ‘differences’ between themselves and Afghans that are racialised and essentialising. Habituated use of drone surveillance technology constructs Afghan people as appropriate or deserving targets of abnormally high levels of surveillance. This sustains the long-standing Orientalist belief in the West, and reflected in U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine (Gregory, D. 2008), that ‘Eastern’ peoples are strange and exotic objects who are open to Western study (and can become fully knowable through such study) (Said 2003, p. 44). The ability to invasively scrutinise Afghan people, afforded by the drone’s visual/technological conduits, reinforces the racist formulation of the ‘suspicious’ Afghan whose civilian status should always be questioned. The testimonies of two U.S. Air Force drone personnel are analysed to develop this argument. In these testimonies the visual/technological conduits of the drone interface interact with discursive conduits, particularly the construction of the ‘civilian’ category. This interaction between conduits has the effect of continuing the colonial practice of excluding Indigenous peoples and people of

colour from civilian protections (Gregory, D. 2006; Mégret 2006; Wilke 2017; 2018).

I argue in the third and last section that these visual and discursive conduits of the drone interface (re)produce racism in international relations and enact a racist relation of domination with harmful psychosocial effects for Afghan people. I contend that the relationship of invasive surveillance instigates a process of objectification and self-objectification between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghans living under drones. U.S. drone personnel objectify Afghan people as suspicious, as “actual or potential enemies” who are “always on the verge of becoming dangerous” (Anderson 2011, p. 224), and Afghan people internalise this objectification to avoid injury or death by drone bombardment. Internalisation, or “self-objectification”, leads to surveilled individuals devaluing and becoming alienated from traits and activities previously important to themselves, their communities and their cultures (Zurbriggen 2013). The testimonies of six people who live(d) in drone-targeted areas of Afghanistan are drawn upon to make this argument. I conclude the chapter with a discussion on human agency and avenues for resistance to drone violence, including resistance that emerges from social relations across the drone interface.

Racism and Orientalism in U.S. Culture and the U.S. Air Force Drone Program

Critical IR and CSS scholars writing on the ‘War on Terror’ have shown that many of the racist and Orientalist beliefs common in the colonial era persist in the post-9/11 era, and have motivated and/or justified U.S.-led Coalition actions in Iraq and Afghanistan (Barkawi and Stanski 2014; Espinoza 2018; Gregory, D. 2004, 2013; Nayak 2006; Prinz and Schetter 2016; Richter-

Monpetit 2007; Stanski 2009; Turner 2017). In the ‘War on Terror’, people of colour (especially Muslim people) are regularly positioned by the United States as potential terrorists, “always tensed on the verge of becoming dangerous” (Anderson 2011, p. 224). Joe Turner (2017, p. 17) writes that counterinsurgency’s logic “racialise[s] certain bodies and communities as ‘monstrous dangers’” and draws on “orientalist concepts of the colonised and Muslim ‘other’, who is made to seem ‘out of place and time’”. Dag Tuastad (2003, p. 595) argues that people living in countries targeted by counterinsurgency operations are constructed as “backward”. Political violence in these countries “is seen as rooted in local culture”; it is considered “a resurgence of tribalism, as cultural backwardness among peripheral, non-civilised groups” (Tuastad 2003, p. 594; 596). Within the United States, legal scholar Khaled A. Beydoun writes that “Muslim American households, communities and mosques were closely monitored” after 9/11 and “religious organisations, political groups, student associations, and more, were surveilled by the DHS, federal agents, and informants” (2018, p. 102). In the National Security Entry and Exit Registration System (NSEERS), which the U.S. government implemented at the nation’s borders after 9/11, “twenty-four of the twenty-five countries of interest listed [...] were Muslim-majority nations” and the “vast majority” of people entered into the registry are Muslims (Beydoun 2018, p. 101). Beydoun (2018, p. 99) contends that “‘guilty until proven innocent’ forms the fundamental definition of Islamophobia” in the post 9/11- era.

It is important to remember that this is the wider social context shaping the beliefs that U.S. Air Force drone personnel bring to their social relations across the drone interface, even those drone personnel who lived substantial years of their lives prior to 9/11. Indeed, Islamophobia has been a part of U.S. culture and foreign policy long before 9/11. Historian Walter L. Hixson writes

that Orientalism was a feature of U.S. national identity and foreign policy for the entire duration of the 20th century, with Americans frequently expressing “Orientalist prejudices by establishing binaries between Islam and Christianity” from the early 20th century onward (2009, p. 225). The terms ‘Turk’ and ‘Mohammedanism’ were popularised and used as a way of othering Middle Easterners, he argues, “in opposition to the civilised, modern Christian culture of the West” (2009, p. 225).⁴⁴ Hixson (2009, p. 227) further contends that U.S. support for the establishment and longevity of Israel from 1948 onwards flowed from this existing Islamophobia.⁴⁵ Religious affinity between Christians and Jews was commonly evoked from the mid-20th century onwards as a way of uniting Christian Americans to support Israel’s claim to Holy Land, the underside of which involved the othering of Muslim people (particularly Palestinian Muslims) as “unruly”, “treacherous” and “backward” (Hixson 2009, pp. 226-229). Islamophobia was a strong element of American history and culture before the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. Beydoun (2018, p. 95) contends that 9/11 simply brought about changes in the American legal system that ushered in an “era of structural Islamophobia” and “institutionalised prejudice”. Further, despite the U.S. governments surface attempts to distance itself from the colonial tactics of European powers, U.S. foreign policy has been heavily interventionist in the global South – particularly in Latin America and the Philippines (Hixson 2009, pp. 214-244; Nieto 2003; Zinn 2003, pp. 297-320).

⁴⁴ In 1907, then-President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) even stated that it “was impossible to expect moral, intellectual wellbeing where Mohammedanism is supreme” (cited in Hixson 2009, p. 225).

⁴⁵ Historian Douglas Little (2008, p. 94) also explains that the “special relationship” between the U.S. and Israel strengthened in the late 1950s when the U.S. joined with Israel to “erect effective sandbags’ against the rising tide of radical Arab nationalism” and began selling American-made weapons to the Israelis. It was at this time, also, that Zionist lobbying groups such as the American Israel Public Affairs Committee began their success using political finance to powerfully shape U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East against Pan-Arabism and Palestinian self-determination (Hixson 2009; Davidson 2009, pp. 111-114).

Growing Up with Islamophobia

Dauwood is a former U.S. Air Force language and culture analyst who was contracted to the drone program for two years and left as a conscientious objector. During an interview with Dauwood, I asked whether he thought drone video imagery de-humanised people. He replied that “drone programs may make it easier to kill, but that de-humanisation begins much, much earlier with U.S. culture” (Dauwood, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). From a young age, he said, children in the United States learn to de-humanise racial others. Born in the early 1990s, he told me that throughout his life this de-humanisation had been directed towards brown Muslim people in/from the Middle East, South Asia and North Africa. Dauwood explained that he “grew up around rhetoric that all Muslims are terrorists [and] that everything that is terror is Islam” (Dauwood, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Dauwood’s story is particularly upsetting because he is a person of colour, raised Muslim, whose parents emigrated to the United States from Pakistan. He described renouncing his Muslim faith as a teenager, becoming Christian and Republican, and being actively Islamophobic. He used to keep company with friends who held pro-war views and when, post-9/11, major league baseball instituted the ritual of singing ‘God Bless America’ at the seventh inning, Dauwood “was so patriotic that if people didn’t take their hats off when the national anthem was sung then I would yell at them” (Dauwood, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Dauwood attributed his racism and Islamophobia partly to internalised discrimination – he was bullied at school because of his racial and religious identity. His desire to remove himself physically, spiritually and psychologically from his abusive parents also fuelled this racism and Islamophobia – he stated that he “actually joined the military to escape them” (Dauwood, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Dauwood was surrounded by the mainstreaming of fear and hatred towards Muslim people, particularly Muslims of colour, throughout his adolescence and

military training in the 2000s. It is thus unsurprising that racist and Islamophobic ideas held such power over him, despite his upbringing in a Muslim family. As Salatia (2006, p. 249) points out, in order to construct oneself as part of the American community (the ‘us’ in contrast to the ‘them’), immigrants to the U.S. have engaged in the Othering of new immigrant groups and overseas Others throughout history.

Dauwood began his military career in the Marines and completed intelligence training. From there, he was contracted to the U.S. Air Force drone program. As a culture and language analyst, Dauwood was required to learn Pashto for a year. His newly acquired language skills allowed him to read *BBC Pashto* as well as local Afghan and Pakistani news articles about drone attacks, and he describes this as the starting point for when his Islamophobic attitudes and support for U.S. Military actions began to change. He was able to read Afghan and Pakistani news sources that were critical of the USAF drone program and that documented experiences of Afghan people who had been wrongly targeted by drone attacks, rather than only hearing American dominant narratives. Becoming increasingly distressed about drone attacks, Dauwood decided to quit the drone program as a conscientious objector and wrote an impassioned letter of resignation. Dauwood is now an anti-war activist and says that he will “do all it takes to show the effects of using armed drones” (Dauwood, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). He is currently training to become a nurse and wants to work in Pakistan, helping to treat drone strike victims.

Complicity in Racist Foreign Policy

Before she began working in the drone program, Wendy, a U.S. Air Force technician, was deployed to Panama in 1991 and Iraq in 2002 “just before it all [the invasion of Iraq] started”. She also served during the First Gulf War

(1990-1991) but did not deploy. Wendy describes a very slow and gradual process of confronting the harm the U.S. Military inflicts on people of colour in the 'global South', culminating a couple of years into her work in the U.S. Air Force drone program. Her previous experiences in the U.S. Military, and the cultural messages she received around her in U.S. society, had kept her from confronting difficult feelings she had about her early participation in the drone program.

During the U.S. invasion of Panama, Wendy remembers seeing Panamanian resistance to the United States. She heard Panamanians saying that Americans were “step[ping] on their culture”. This surprised her at the time, as she wondered: “why would you tell someone who is trying to do good things in your country ‘don’t mess with us?’” (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States).⁴⁶ During the First Gulf War, Wendy watched colleagues returning from their deployment as smokers when they had left as non-smokers – an indication, she said, that they had taken up this vice as a form of stress relief to cope with what they had seen or experienced. She found the increased rate of smoking suspicious but thought there had been an administrative error with the records. Her understanding of the First Gulf War was that there was not much bloodshed and it could not have been a horrendous war to fight in. Wendy did not reflect on what the war had actually entailed outside of depictions of high-technology weaponry on the television news. This sterile version of events was supported internally within the U.S. Military institution.

⁴⁶ Despite the use of overwhelming force, including large scale aerial bombardment, newspaper- and television coverage in the U.S. claimed that the Invasion of Panama was quick and clean with few civilians killed (Nieto 2003, p. 444; Allen et al. 1994, pp. 277-281). In actuality, the invasion of Panama involved the deployment of 22,000-27,000 U.S. soldiers to occupy Panama on the night of December 20th, 1989 (Nieto 2003, p. 399). Aerial bombardments were conducted using B-52 bombers, Stealth F-117A bombers and AC-130 helicopters armed with rockets. According to seismographs at the Institute of Earth Sciences at the University of Panama, a total of 422 bombs were dropped on the night of the invasion – one every two minutes (Nieto 2003, p. 440). Bodies of Panamanians were hurriedly buried by U.S. soldiers, and the newly installed Endara government, in mass graves. These mass grave sites were then closely guarded – with NGO requests to exhume and identify the bodies largely declined (Human Rights Watch 1991a). Calculating civilian casualties was made very difficult for this reason; however, Human Rights Watch estimates that 300 civilians were killed (Human Rights Watch 1991a). The UN places the figure at 500 civilians killed (Human Rights Watch 1991a).

“We came back straight away; it was a quick, almost like a slap-on-the-wrist kind of war, I think”, she said, adding: “though I probably wouldn’t have felt that way if I lived over there” (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States).⁴⁷

Wendy insisted that her ignorance about the effects of U.S.-led occupations and wars on people in the global South was a “coping reflex”, not a “coping strategy”, as “there was nothing strategic about it, it was all unconscious” (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Wendy explained that her coping reflex allowed her to continue with her work in the U.S. Military. She only began to engage with her underlying (or unconscious) unease with her military career when she was in the USAF drone program. Wendy caught herself too often trying to avoid troubling aspects of her work. She was first awarded a certificate that explicitly stated her contribution to the USAF drone program had resulted in “121,000 deaths”, and later a second certificate that spelled out that she had assisted in “400,000 people impacted” including “450 insurgent deaths” (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). She hid these certificates away in a box and tried not think about what the term ‘impacted’ meant or who the ‘insurgent’ deaths were. As a U.S. Air Force technician, Wendy was not required to be in the drone cockpit; however, she was sometimes needed on the ground operations floor to assist on missions, which required watching drone footage. She tried to avoid the ground operations floor when she could:

...it was callous, and it was just bad. There were people who would look at videos [of drone strikes] and be like “let me show you this”, “let me

⁴⁷ The First Gulf War was also not a “quick [...] slap-on-the-wrist kind of war”. According to Human Rights Watch (1991b), between 2500 and 3000 Iraqi civilians were killed in direct U.S. bombing and millions more adversely affected by the bombings and UN-imposed economic sanctions.

show you that’’. [...] I was actually teary-eyed at work. It was just awful. [...] And to be in this thing where everybody thought they were doing the right thing... I mean there is so much I can’t tell you that I would love to tell you, but it was just callous, like inhumane, and you’d see these young people just talking about breaking things like they’re Ken and Barbie dolls, but they were human beings over there. (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Wendy testified to a racist and Islamophobic culture within the USAF drone program that contributed to this ‘callousness’ on the ground operations floor. I asked Wendy how U.S. Air Force personnel who do not join in with racist remarks get treated, to which she responded:

...they get treated like shit. Because they are not in the culture, in the boys’ club. And I hated that. I would not participate in that. I’m just not like that, that’s not how I’m built [...] I talked to this one guy who was not like that, either. He was trying to get money so he could go to college and get out. So, you’d find some who weren’t like that, but for the most part there was like major peer pressure to be hateful against the culture [in Afghanistan and Iraq]. (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

While distancing herself from acts of explicit racism and Islamophobia, Wendy does recognise her complicity in racist foreign policy during her years in the U.S. Military. By the time she served in the drone program, Wendy already had a long personal history of disengaging from the realities of U.S. Military actions and their effects on people in the global South. She described a tremendous sense of guilt about this complicity – her ‘coping reflex’ – and is now a tireless anti-war and anti-surveillance campaigner.

In Wendy and Dauwood's interviews, the technological conduits of the drone interface seem to be neutral with regards to racialisation – i.e. they do not 'do' anything to racialise people surveilled and targeted. Wider cultures of racism and Islamophobia in the United States and USAF as an institution (and the peer pressure felt within that institution) are identified as primarily responsible for racist and Islamophobic beliefs of individual drone personnel. In fact, both Wendy and Dauwood testify to having their pre-existing racist and Orientalist views challenged and changed through visual, auditory and even discursive conduits of the drone interface – for Dauwood it was reading and listening to Afghan perspectives on the war through learning Pashto and Dari, while for Wendy it was being horrified by drone strike footage. This raises important questions regarding the potential for resistance to emerge from the drone interface. However, before getting to resistance and issues of agency, it is important to first consider the ways the drone interface can and does racialise people who are surveilled and targeted by drones.

Racialisation, (In)Visibility and the 'Civilian' Category

A wider culture in the U.S. of racism and Islamophobia may be solely or primarily to blame for racism in drone violence in line with Dauwood and Wendy's experiences; however, other U.S. Air Force drone veterans' testimonies suggest that the drone interface enables the racialisation of Afghan people and facilitates racist exclusions of Afghans from the 'civilian' category. The drone interface is comprised of both technological and non-technological conduits and so the insights of Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars on technological interfaces are informative here. STS theorist Johanna Drucker (2011, p. 8) contends that it is necessary for theories of the interface to "take into account the user/viewer as a situated embodied subject" *as well as* "the affordance of a graphical environment that mediates intellectual and cognate

activities”. Andrew Feenberg (2002, p. 14) similarly writes that the technical order “is more than a sum of tools”; it, in fact, “structures the world regardless of users’ intentions”. At the same time, “the choice of civilisation is not decided by autonomous technology but can be affected by human action” (Feenberg 2002, p. 14). Therefore, in order to best understand social relations across the drone interface, it is necessary to account for both wider cultural factors shaping U.S. Air Force drone personnel’s subjectivities *in addition to* the ways the drone interface “structures the world regardless of users’ intentions” (Feenberg 2002, p. 14).

The drone interface’s visual/technological conduits sustain racist and Orientalist beliefs about Afghan people by supporting American drone personnel to make “knowledge claims about the Other” (Nayak and Malone 2009, p. 256). These knowledge claims are often based on perceived (and over-determined) differences between constitutive ‘Others’ and the American ‘Self’ – therein racialising the people surveilled. Nayak (2006, pp. 44) writes that the U.S. state “must act as if a predestined, static, always already enlightened ‘America’ exists ontologically prior to any event” even though “the production of state identity is an ongoing, constant production”. He contends that the United States has attempted to use the “post-traumatic space” created by 9/11 “to resurrect a stronger, more defiant United States” (Nayak 2006, p. 44). Because the ‘Self’ is constructed as ‘not-Other’, attempts to strengthen the identity of the ‘Self’ are often based on an aggressive Othering process. As Nayak (2006, p. 45) puts it, the ‘Orient’ must be “produced with the same force, persistence, consistency, urgency and domestic consent as during colonialism if the saving of the Self is to succeed”. The drone interface’s visual conduits, in affording invasive surveillance, allow the U.S. to make knowledge claims about the behaviours of Others against which it can position itself. Through drone

surveillance cameras, drone personnel are able and encouraged to monitor and identify ‘differences’ that are essentialising and over-determined.

Making Knowledge Claims About Afghan People

Richard, a former U.S. Air Force and CIA drone sensor operator, has spent thousands of hours in the drone cockpit surveilling people in Afghanistan. Richard explained that U.S. Air Force drone program trainees are required to fly mock missions over Nevada before they can fly on ‘legitimate’ missions:

They’d circle you around Creech Air Force base and you’d do touch and gos, and fire-runs, and you’d do vehicle tracking for the folks out there on the 95 – tracking vehicles while they were driving down the road, following people through towns, just about anything. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

I was surprised to hear that training was conducted over Nevada, surveilling American civilians,⁴⁸ so I asked Richard whether flying drones over Americans was different to flying them over people in Afghanistan. He replied that it was:

Quite different, yes. It’s a completely different culture. Americans move differently than Afghans [*sic*], Iraqis move differently than Afghans [*sic*]. Brits move differently. Canadians move differently. Everybody moves differently. After a while you can start to pick out nationalities based on the way people move and walk and smoke and talk and everything. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

⁴⁸ I clarified this with Richard, asking: “Were the people you were watching in the towns in Nevada Air Force people?”, to which Richard replied: “No, civilians, probably”.

Trying to ascertain whether these assessments of difference were nationality-based, as Richard seemed to be suggesting, or centred on ideas about race, I asked Richard how an Afghan person walks differently to an American.

Because [Afghans] spend most of their time sitting like this [squats], which is really uncomfortable for us. This is how they mostly sit because it's comfortable for them. You don't see a Brit sitting like that. You don't see anyone else doing that, so people from Afghanistan and the South Asia area... they have a different walk and their walk is more casual. They don't have the same concept of time that we do, so their walk and the way that they conduct themselves...they don't worry about being in time. They do it in their own time. So that translates as a walk with great big long arm movements and exaggerated steps. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

On the difference between an Iraqi person's walk and an Afghan person's walk, Richard had less to say: "Honestly, it's almost, almost identical. The thing is... they just move different. It's hard to explain. You can tell the difference... it's just an intuitive thing" (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States).

Most of Richard's working hours were spent surveilling an area where "nothing would ever happen" (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). The boredom of drone operations has been documented many times by journalists and was corroborated by drone veterans interviewed for this project (Chu 2012; Hurwitz 2013; Subbaraman 2013). Richard was asked what the U.S. Air Force did with the intelligence (including video imagery) of "nothing" happening:

Well, no intelligence is still good intelligence. It means nothing is going on at that site. It means it doesn't need to be looked at anymore. So, it tightens the noose. [...] That's how the intelligence process works. You rule out the implausible and look for the plausible. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

In Richard's interview, he claims that Afghans walk differently from Americans because they sit in a squat position and do not have the same concept of time. While he says that these differences derive from nationality, he is not able to articulate the difference between an Afghan and an Iraqi walk nor does he elaborate on how Brits, Canadians and Americans walk differently from one another. David Skinner (2020, p. 82), writing on various techno-security regimes in the United States and United Kingdom, states that "in many contexts there appears to be sensitivity to the niceties of identity politics whilst in others, minorities are subject to the crudest of racialised identifications". He goes on to argue that "focusing on all and only cases of explicit naming of races and/or attribution of race characteristics [...] obscures structures of power and disadvantage" (Skinner 2020, p. 83). In other words, focusing only on obvious cases of racialisation and racism ignores the less obvious (but perhaps more frequent) ways in which people of colour are racialised and targeted. Richard is to some extent sensitive to racism, seeking to tie his claims to nationality. However, he evokes a centuries-old "Orientalist gesture of rendering 'the Orient' timeless" (Gregory, D. 2008, p. 18). Usually this 'timelessness' refers to the region's 'unchanged' character as a "tribal society" (Gregory, D. 2014, p. 156; see also: Said 2003, p. 72), but in monitoring individuals across the drone interface, it is Afghan people who are seen to embody this timelessness. An individual's gait is one of the most unique markers of their identity, yet Richard draws on the 'knowledge' he has gleaned from drone surveillance to confidently

state that Afghan people walk in a slow and exaggerated manner (Pataky et al. 2011). The kind of knowledge that drone personnel think they are gaining from observing Afghan people, the racialised generalisations about Afghans' conceptions of time for instance, is also dangerous because it affects how the civilian/combatant distinction is made – providing the bases from which drone personnel judge normal from suspicious behaviour. If Afghan people are deemed to normally walk slowly, then walking quickly becomes a suspicious behaviour.

In making claims about the characteristics of Afghans, Richard is not only generalising the 'Other', but is necessarily reifying the American 'Self'; it is not that Afghan people are slow and do not work hard, it is that they are *slower and less hardworking than Americans*. Unlike their counterparts in modern capitalist societies – who work hard, attend meetings and have other important obligations that must be met in a timely fashion – Orientalism constructs people in the 'Orient' as "lazy" and inefficient workers (Khalid 2011, p. 17). The Othering process in drone violence positions Americans "as privileged and superior" to those they watch (Nayak and Malone 2009, p. 256). Another example of these implicitly racialised claims is Richard's statement that "no intelligence is good intelligence [because] it tightens the noose" (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017). Ostensibly this is an objective claim about the intelligence process as one of narrowing down possibilities, communicating no explicitly racist ideas about Afghan people (although, it is unclear how coincidentally the 'noose' metaphor is employed). However, the claim implies that there is always something going on elsewhere – that more looking is required. Ben Anderson (2011, p. 222) writes that in U.S. counterinsurgency, insurgents are seen to "appear from within the population and disappear back into the population". The population, he argues, is "addressed as an unstable collective of actual and potential enemies and actual and potential friends"

(Anderson 2011, p. 222). Counterinsurgency is therefore “anticipatory”, viewing the population as “always tensed on the verge of becoming dangerous” (Anderson 2011, p. 224). Richard’s explanation, that the intelligence process is valuable because it is a process of continual looking, reflects the conviction that there is always something suspicious to be found amongst Afghanistan’s population.

Richard can feel confident when making racialised knowledge claims about the Other to the extent that he believes drone surveillance imagery accurately documents the truth. Kyle Grayson (2016, p. 153) writes that the “scopic regime” of drone violence “is one shaped by epistemological and aesthetic realism”. He states that the scopic regime “operates under the assumption that vision – through technological enhancement – can become an infallible sense that captures *the* physical world independently of any subjective perceptions that we may have of it” (Grayson 2016, p. 153). Drone technology’s visual sensors enabled Richard to make “authoritative epistemological claims and representations about Others’ bodies, habits, feelings, and political sensibilities” – claims that he still seems to believe after several years out of the U.S. drone program (Nayak and Malone 2009, p. 256). It was from “time and observation” that Richard said he gained knowledge about Afghan people (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Visual ‘evidence’, whether photography or moving images, has long-been used in law enforcement and war, particularly colonial wars (Neocleous 2014; Satia 2014). As Lyndsey Beutin puts it, “optical empiricism” has long been “applied to practices of policing” (2017, p. 11). Photography has been used since the 19th century to “document the attributes of criminals” and “as a predictive technology for who, based on physical characteristics might become a criminal” (Beutin 2017, p. 6). Beutin (2017, p. 11) argues that “the discourse of photography’s indexicality [...] gained power because the mechanical means of

the camera were understood as more objective than portraiture” and because it was endowed with the power to stand as evidence in court by state bureaucratic apparatuses. The origins of policing in the United States are “intimately tied”, Beutin argues, with racism and slavery (2017, p. 11). Policing tactics – including the use of photography to document criminals and criminality – were developed alongside racist and colonial violence within the United States. Together, they “constructed criminal deviance as biological and visible” (Beutin 2017, p. 11). The purported objectivity of the drone cameras’ imagery, in turn, masks racist ideas informing how the imagery is interpreted.

I told Richard about an interview I had conducted in Afghanistan with Saifullah, Nabi and Hassan – three men from Daikundi province who were injured in a drone attack in 2011. The attack (discussed at length in the next chapter) killed 21 civilians and injured 14 people. Children were amongst the dead and the injured. It was one of very few drone strikes to prompt an internal investigation within the U.S. Air Force, and, even rarer still, a transcript of the attack was published in the *LA Times* (Transcripts of a U.S Drone Attack 2014). I asked Richard how a drone strike on civilians happens, to which he replied: “How does it happen? Negligence. Gross negligence. Or, or, it was a high-profile target and they got approval from higher up to deal with it” (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Interestingly, throughout the interview Richard oscillated between saying human error was responsible for civilian deaths in drone strikes and attributing responsibility to the drone interface’s visual/technological conduits. At times, Richard had firm belief in the capabilities of the drone’s visual sensors and the intelligence process, implying that civilian injury and death was avoidable if drone operators were more skilled at their jobs or if they did not hold racist views. Again, in reference to the above-mentioned attack where children were killed, Richard said:

There's a big difference between a full-grown person and a kid. A very large difference, actually. I used to work with a guy, and I quote, he used to describe his kids as "psychotic little balls of energy that never stop moving". You can always tell a kid on a camera. Always. Always. [...] You can immediately tell the difference, it's night and day. Not to mention there is a huge height difference. Your shadows will tell you that. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

When I asked whether attacks that kill civilians happen frequently, Richard became vexed. His anger appeared to be directed at drone crews – particularly young USAF drone personnel who had trigger-happy excitement for their first drone kill:

It's not that I think. It's that I know. Based on my experiences, on where I've worked and the things that I've seen, yes. Absolutely. It happens all the time. It happens more often than you see. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

All the new guys are always talking about "well I want to do a strike. I can't wait for my first strike". Yes, you can. You can wait an eternity for it. You don't want that kind of dirt on your hands. You don't want that blood. But some people do. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

At other times, however, Richard voiced disbelief in the fetishised capacities of the drone. He stated that the drone's visual sensors were significantly limited in providing the kind of omniscient intelligence expected of them, regardless of drone personnel's subjectivities and skill (I detail and analyse these parts of his interview in chapter six). "There's always gaps in knowledge", he said:

...you can make educated guesses, you can try to analyse every single bit of data that possibly comes across your mind when you are watching this person, but in the end all you are left with is an honest to goodness 80% probability that that's who they are. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

The Ambiguity of Drone Surveillance Imagery

Two and a half months into his time in the drone program, John, a former U.S. Air Force drone sensor operator, said that he struck and killed a child with a missile. When he asked his battle captain, an intelligence officer, for confirmation that he had hit a child, he was told “that was just a dog” despite strong indications otherwise.

They told me that the kid I killed was a dog. That doesn't leave you. All of a sudden, it's like how many of those [Enemies Killed in Action] were considered 'dogs'? (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

On another occasion he was tasked with surveilling five men and a camel crossing the border into Afghanistan from Pakistan. He had received on-the-ground intelligence, of accuracy he doubted, that the men were carrying weapons. Taliban fighters are known to cross the Afghan-Pakistan border “fleeing hot pursuit from Afghanistan [and] returning from Pakistan when fighting resumes in the spring” (Gregory, D. 2011a, p. 240); however, people who have nothing to do with the Taliban insurgency also regularly cross the border to visit friends and relatives, and to work. A UNHCR commissioned study on cross border populations movements between Afghanistan and Pakistan found that as many as “43.3% of travellers have a home and friends

on both sides of the border” (2009, pp. 2-3). Thousands of men aged 18 and over cross on a daily basis to look for casual labour opportunities (UNHCR 2009, p. 2). With so many people (particularly ‘Military-Age Males’)⁴⁹ crossing the Afghanistan-Pakistan border every day, there is increased likelihood that civilians will be misidentified as Taliban fighters. John and his drone pilot suggested that they capture the men instead of firing on them, but this option was refused and they were cleared to fire. The attack still haunts John because he has significant doubts as to whether the men were Taliban militants or civilians.

Then we get a call from the JTAC [Joint Terminal Attack Controller] that’s like “we’re going to drop a missile on these guys”. [...] So, we aim at the centre mass of the camel and we ended up killing these guys when they were sleeping. They were supposedly carrying bombs and things, but there were no secondary explosions. It was just five guys and a camel. And I don’t know how to think about that... I felt like I had just murdered five guys in their sleep. We don’t know who they were. We just had two sources of intel. Our video feed and what we got on the ground, and that was enough for us to kill these people. I don’t know how justified we were in that action. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

In John’s testimony of killing five men and a camel after they had crossed the border into Afghanistan, the most compelling evidence of the men’s civilian status came *after* they had been killed by the drone’s missile. The lack of secondary explosions indicated that the men had not been carrying explosives, as suspected, but were unarmed. They had lost their civilian protection,

⁴⁹ The ‘Military-Age Male’ category will be discussed in greater depth in the next chapter on drone violence and gender relations.

however, because their behaviours were identified as insurgent behaviour – crossing the Pakistan-Afghanistan border at night-time as a group of men rendered them more insurgent than civilian to American eyes. Racist and Orientalist ideas that position Afghan and Pakistani men as always potentially dangerous were not recognised as subjective judgments due to the alleged objectivity of the visual evidence provided by the drone’s visual sensors. In this case, the ambiguity of the surveillance imagery collected and transmitted by the drone interface’s visual conduits allowed for malintent to be read into the behaviours of the group of people surveilled.

In both Richard and John’s testimonies, the visual and discursive conduits of the drone interface interact, shaping how drone personnel think about (and relate to) the people they surveil across the drone interface. The historical racialisation of the ‘civilian’ category, discussed in the last chapter, continues in today’s U.S. counterinsurgency campaigns with Afghan people’s inclusion in that category always already under question. In looking for insurgents and insurgent activity, drone personnel’s role is to gather visual evidence that distinguishes insurgents from civilians. This is a distinction that can never be made objectively, but the imagery provided by the drone’s visual sensors empowers drone personnel to make civilian/combatant distinctions by cloaking their subjective judgements in a veneer of objectivity. The interaction of visual and discursive conduits, wherein what is observed across the drone interface is used to ‘objectively’ identify who gets civilian protections and who does not, has significant effects on Afghan people’s lives and wellbeing and their relation with U.S. Air Force drone personnel – I will now discuss these effects in the next section.

Objectification and Self-Objectification

This chapter has argued so far that racism and Islamophobia in wider U.S. society, and the institutional culture of the USAF, is partly responsible for racist social relations in drone violence. Some USAF drone personnel bring racist and Orientalist views to the drone interface before they even begin interacting with and through its conduits. However, this does not mean that the drone interface is ‘neutral’ in the racialisation of Afghan people living under drones. The visual ‘evidence’ provided by the drone’s visual sensors affords U.S. Air Force drone personnel the ability to identify the normal ‘characteristics’ of Afghan people, so that they can then spot insurgent behaviours and activity. In identifying these characteristics, drone personnel feel justified in making essentialising and generalised claims about Afghan people – therein reifying the ‘Self’/‘Other’ dichotomy. The purported objectivity of drone surveillance imagery diverts attention from the subjective character of drone personnel’s judgements, allowing them to feel justified by evidence in their assessments of who is a civilian and who is not. These visual conduits interact with discursive conduits – particularly the construction of the ‘civilian’ category and the exclusions upon which it is based – with significant effect over who is given civilian protections. Continuing with our focus on the drone interface’s conduits, I contend in this third and final section that drone violence subjects Afghan people to prolonged and invasive surveillance and institutes a stark visibility/invisibility divide wherein Afghan people are not considered worthy of privacy or dignity. At times the invasiveness of this surveillance is felt even more acutely because of the fetishisation of the drone. I illustrate that U.S. Air Force drone personnel are in a dominant position in the social relations of drone violence, and this has a profound impact on the psychosocial wellbeing of Afghan people – harms that are missed in non-relational accounts of drone violence. These relations of domination entail U.S. Air Force drone personnel

objectifying Afghan people and Afghan people internalising this objectification (therein self-objectifying) in order to survive.

The Visibility/Invisibility Divide

Drone surveillance shares much in common with colonial European forms of watching and documenting people living in the ‘East’. The visibility/invisibility divide is not new but has persisted since the growth of Orientalism during the first and second waves of European colonisation (early 15th to early 20th century). Edward Said (2003, pp. 44-45) describes how Orientalists (regional ‘specialists’) were integral to the West’s colonisation of the East, and Critical IR scholars and anthropologists have demonstrated that this continues today in the ‘War on Terror’ through military programs seeking to obtain “cultural knowledge” of Afghan and Iraqi people – such as the Human Terrain System (Gilmore 2011, Gonzalez 2009; Gregory, D. 2008).⁵⁰ Crucially, this perceived right to examine, scrutinise and control goes only one way. It is Western governments and their employees that feel justified in subjecting the East to invasive study. As Edward Said puts it, “no one is likely to imagine a field symmetrical to [Orientalism] called Occidentalism” (2003, p. 50). Similarly, people living under drone surveillance cannot look back at their surveyors – they can only imagine them. Marina Espinoza (2018, p. 380) refers to the “colonial gaze” of drone violence, arguing that:

Drone vision must be considered not as neutral, but as part of a long history of imperial looking that divides the world into those who are rightful subjects and those who are mere objects of the coloniser’s gaze. (Espinoza 2018, p. 380)

⁵⁰ The U.S. Army’s Human Terrain System (HTS) “embeds social scientists with combat troops” in order to “obtain sociocultural data” from the civilian population (Ray 2011, p. 921).

Drawing from British Royal Air Force archives, historian Priya Satia (2014) has identified many similarities between drone violence and colonial aerial policing in the early-mid 20th century, arguing that air control was believed by the RAF to allow “power to ‘radiate’ untrammelled ‘in every part of the protectorate”” (p. 4). Colonial aerial policing too was intended for both disciplinary surveillance and bombardment, and according to Satia (2014, p. 6) the RAF thought “constant surveillance would simply awe tribes into submission”.

The visual conduits of the drone interface are, however, different to colonial forms of scrutinising (even colonial aerial policing) in that technological developments have increased the pervasiveness of Orientalist surveillance. Drones can stay airborne for up to 20 hours, and the drone interface’s visual conduits can collect and transmit aerial surveillance footage for far longer than piloted aircraft because human pilots become fatigued – this increase in surveillance capacity opens up Afghan people to having weeks and months of their lives tracked and analysed. Moreover, fetishisation of the drone means that drone surveillance is experienced as even more invasive (whether this invasiveness is real or imagined does not matter). According to interviewees in Afghanistan, on-the-ground U.S. Military personnel have given exaggerated accounts of how clearly and extensively drone cameras can see, providing the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan police with information about the drone’s technical capacities that has then been spread amongst Afghan people. This (real and imagined) surveillance limits Afghan people’s control over their behaviours and movements, psychosocially harming them. As Wahab, a 21-year-old from Nangarhar province, put it:

We were ashamed that those airplanes could come and record our private moments, but we can’t do anything about it. We would have the curtains and the doors of our house closed to try to prevent their recording

because we didn't want the military to see our wives, our sisters, and our mothers, but this is useless because still we had to walk outside our houses – and when we did, we didn't feel relaxed. Every individual action of ours they were recording. (Wahab, interview with Author, May 2017, Greece)

Saifullah, a 39-year-old pharmacy assistant from Daikundi province, heard a U.S. Military spokesperson in the media say “that [drones] can see down to one inch” (Saifullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). Mohammed, a 40-year-old farmer from Wardak province, similarly stated:

I heard, but I don't know exactly, that it can see down and spot very small things. It can see a Talib or a gun or a civilian and know what they are doing. But we don't know how much they can see, and our request is: don't watch civilian families. (Mohammed, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

From the perspective of U.S. Air Force drone personnel, this invasion of privacy might seem unremarkable:

...there were times when we'd watch people go out in the middle of a field in the middle of night-time and they'd take a shit, and you'd see the hot spot that they left. These things stop being awkward and they become kind of normal. Like, someone is taking a shit. Someone is pissing. Someone is fucking. Someone is drinking. Or like, watching people mourn at funerals, or people celebrating weddings or birthdays or sitting at a café with friends. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

It's just like sitting in a mall watching people walk by. Same concept, different platform. Different medium. That's it. You can get a little more personal with a Predator than you do sitting on a park bench, but, you know, in the end it's still the same thing. You're observing the qualities of that person. You're observing the behaviours of that person. When you equate it to that, you can justify it in your mind that it's nothing different. That's how I justified it. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

The visual conduits of the drone interface enact a stark visibility/invisibility divide, (re)producing the view that Afghan people are not considered worthy of privacy and dignity. As such, they can be uncontroversially subjected to the gaze of U.S. Air Force drone personnel. As Kathleen McClellan, a defence lawyer specialising in national security whistleblowers, puts it:

I don't think the surveillance aspect is lost on [drone program] whistleblowers, but I also think that U.S. law doesn't really recognise the privacy rights of international citizens [...] Except for the occasional Five Eyes agreement, it is generally accepted that the U.S. will spy on the world. Even international human rights norms on privacy – the U.S. rejects them, which is really problematic but is kind of another area. To raise concerns about drone surveillance is important, but you're going to bump up against that mentality that foreign nationals have no privacy rights from the U.S. (Kathleen McClellan, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

However, the 'world' the U.S. spies on with military drones is mostly the global South. The drone interface is not race-blind or neutral, but instead its technological conduits (visual and otherwise) necessitate a global information

grid that has the capacity to process the huge amount of surveillance information drones collect in/from the global South. This grid is almost entirely built and maintained by the U.S. and its global North allies, such as the U.K., Germany and Australia. Intelligence bases on non-U.S. soil such as Pine Gap Joint Military Facility in Australia and Ramstein Air Base in Germany have been recruited into the drone apparatus, collecting intelligence and surveillance imagery gathered by drones and sifting through it for potential targets. These joint/allied facilities provide the United States with more storage, greater capacity for intelligence analysis and wider satellite coverage (Dworkin 2015; Manjikian 2015; Zappalà 2015). Meanwhile, journalistic investigations have revealed that the U.S. has installed a large network of drone bases across Africa and the 'Middle East' to solve the need to have the aircraft stored closer to the places surveilled and targeted (therein maximising on flight hours) (Penney 2018; Raghavan and Whitlock 2017). These drone bases were built without community consultation and have had serious social, environmental and economic effects on local communities (Penney 2018; Raghavan and Whitlock 2017). Thus, the visual conduits of the drone interface enforce a racist relationship of domination internationally. Not only are people of colour subjected to drone surveillance and denied their privacy and dignity, but the large technological apparatus needed to sustain these visual conduits is built and controlled by global North actors with damaging effects on people and communities in the global South.

Objectification, Self-Objectification and Psychosocial Harms

I will now focus on the psychosocial harms of drone violence, contending that the visibility/invisibility divide established by the drone interface leads Afghan people to internalise their objectification and self-objectify. For some Afghans, awareness of how they are viewed (as 'suspicious', 'devious', 'criminal', etc.) causes self-policing of their behaviours and social

activities in attempt to not be perceived in this way and targeted in a drone strike. This affects one's freedom of movement and leads to the denigration of personal and cultural traits previously valued in the community, causing psychosocial harm that needs to be more widely recognised in drone violence criticism. As Abdul Qodus, a 45-year-old farmer from Wardak province who lost his brother in a drone attack in 2015, puts it:

With the drone coming [...] we visit each other less, and in the night – if something happens to a family – we cannot go to visit them. It has taken away our comfort from us. If we go to visit a friend, we cannot stay to spend a night. [...] we cannot do proper empathy – sharing our sadness – because we cannot stay. [...] From the point of view of our culture, staying the night is very good as it gives comfort to the family, especially if something sad has happened. But we cannot stay anymore because we feel uncomfortable. We are afraid of this “bnngina”.⁵¹ (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Ahmad, a 21-year-old volunteer primary school teacher, also from Wardak province (but a different village), explains that young men his age used to hang out in the evenings, especially in the summer, to “discuss, make fun and tell jokes till very late at night”, but that they do not do this anymore because of “fear and worry” (Ahmad, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). He describes his life as “living in a prison”. Despite ostensibly having freedom of movement, he feels that he is imprisoned; he is seen as a criminal and unable to move freely because he is always already ‘guilty’:

Life is like being in a prison. But the prison is big. You cannot meet at night, go for dinners, you cannot move easily and without fear – you

⁵¹ “Bnngina” is a slang-term used for drones; it is an onomatopoeia because of the “bnng” noise drones make.

cannot continue to perform your culture and your celebrations. What kind of life is this? (Ahmad, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Mohammed and Amidullah are two men who live in a Wardak village where the economy is primarily based on agriculture. Most of the families own farms, and all share a water irrigation pipe; the families take turns throughout the day and night to ensure everyone's farms are irrigated and that the water is not wasted, and this is organised through a randomised ballot system. Since the U.S. began flying drones over their village, Mohammed and Amidullah feel (along with friends in their community) frustrated and afraid when they draw a night-shift from the ballot. Mohammed said that if he hears a drone while irrigating his land at night he will "switch off the flashlight and leave the irrigation to go home" (Mohammed, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). He described the toll this takes on his family's income:

If I miss the water on my turn to leave and go home, then my wheat dries out because I then have to wait till my next turn. The water comes out without control because I am not there to control it and I lose that water. It is wasted. (Mohammed, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Amidullah similarly stated that if he irrigates his farm at night, he is "afraid [he] will be attacked". "The military think that flashlights are used only by the opposition", he said, "but they should understand that normal people use them also – for their irrigation or if they are going somewhere" (Amidullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan).

Marginalised and oppressed groups – including colonised peoples – who have been subjected to the scrutiny and objectifying gaze of the dominant, oppressive group are at much higher risk of internalising this gaze. This is because seeing as the dominant group can help keep them safe from the dominant group’s violence. Self-objectification, feminist psychologist Elaine Zurbriggen (2013, p. 196) argues, involves the person “internalising the perspective of the other, of an external observer” to the point that “his or her own perspective, and even reality, is lost”. Psychologists most often apply the concept of self-objectification in regard to women internalising sexist and racist evaluations of their body/physical appearance and judging themselves on those standards (Calogero et al. 2011; Hebl et al. 2004; Spencer 1984). This includes judgements women make regarding the safety of spaces, particularly spaces where men may have greater power and control. However, the concept has also been explored by postcolonial scholars to make sense of how people of colour’s self-understanding is affected by white people’s objectifying and stereotyping gazes. W.E.B Du Bois (2007, p. 3) similarly described the “double-consciousness” that African American people experience in the United States – the “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity”. While Frantz Fanon (2007, pp. 91-92) never explicitly used the term self-objectification, his concept of epidermalisation shares much in common. As described in chapter three, epidermalisation refers to the moment that a person of colour is subjected to the white gaze and the appearance of their skin becomes the definition of their character. It describes people of colour’s loss of control over their own subjectivities and the inability to communicate their individual personalities to white viewers who have already made up their minds. For instance, Fanon (2007, p. 92) refers to “giving [himself] up as an object” to the white gaze while on a train carriage filled with white passengers; his

understanding of Self was denied at the moment they saw, and moved away from, him.

A process of objectification and self-objectification is in operation between the U.S. and drone-surveilled people in Afghanistan. The U.S. Air Force objectifies Afghan people by seeing them primarily as potential threats, poised on the verge of becoming dangerous. Objectified as potential threats, Afghan people living under drone surveillance are “denied the full and complex range of their humanity [...] their personality, intellect, sense of humour, creativity, athleticism, nurturance, generosity, hopes and dreams” (Zurbriggen 2013, p. 196). An Afghan villager leaving his home at night-time to comfort a grieving neighbour as Abdul previously did, or to converse and joke with a group of friends like Ahmad, is not caring and compassionate, or affable and funny; they are assumed to be suspicious. Mohammed and Amidullah pleaded with the Afghan National Army to tell the U.S. Military and USAF that civilians are out at night irrigating their land; however, drone attacks on civilians have continued since then, further confirming the view that all Afghans out at night-time are seen as suspicious. Albert Memmi (1974, p. 85) refers to this as “the mark of the plural”, arguing that “the colonised is never characterised in an individual manner; he is entitled only to drown in an anonymous collectivity”. By this stage, the colonised person “tends rapidly towards becoming an object”; they are “hardly a human being” (Memmi 1974, p. 86).

The drone interface not only objectifies Afghan people living under drones, it also begins to shape their attitudes towards themselves. Afghan people are aware of, and frequently made to think about, how they are perceived by U.S. Air Force drone personnel – changing their behaviours to avoid being characterised as ‘suspicious’, ‘devious’ or ‘criminal’. Like many oppressed groups subjected to frequent scrutiny by dominant groups, Afghan people are

habituated into second-guessing their thoughts and movements, asking ‘what would an American watching me from above think of this?’. Self-objectification is in operation when these corrective thoughts overpower the immediate thoughts one has about themselves and how they should act. If corrective thoughts are regular and come to direct one’s actions then self-objectification is occurring, as the individual is no longer living for themselves but is instead living according to how the dominant group sees them. Moreover, the United States Air Force’s technological superiority in comparison to civilians in Afghanistan increases the likelihood that corrective thoughts will overcome instinctual thoughts about how one wants to act. The fetishised version of the drone’s capabilities compounds this, as the drone is believed to be able to see into homes and down to an inch. It therefore seems impossible to resist domination by acting autonomously. It is at this point, when a person of colour resigns themselves to acting according to how white people want them to, that, as Fanon puts it, they have given themselves up as an object.

This effect of drone violence is clearly harmful to both individuals and their communities. Not only are individuals alienated from their sense of self, they are alienated from previously celebrated aspects of their communities and cultures. For instance, Abdul refrains from visiting friends and family who are grieving the deaths of loved ones because he knows how this will be perceived by American drone personnel watching from above. He understands that it will be marked as suspicious that he is travelling in the night-time and that he is not present in his own home. He is also aware that it might be noted that more bodies than normal are counted in his friend or family member’s household. His immediate thought to act empathetically by travelling to the grieving person’s house and offering comfort by staying the night, is now followed by the corrective thought that doing so is suspicious behaviour that can result in his and others’ injuries and deaths. Likewise, Mohammed and Amidullah know

that they are not viewed as skilled, hard-working and committed farmers, or as loving fathers and husbands; that Americans watching through drone cameras could simply assume they are Taliban if they are out irrigating their farms in the night-time.

Despite this significant violation of their privacy and dignity, there are times when Afghan people refuse to give themselves up as objects. Many interviewees have carved out agency in the most subjugated of positions, seeking to resist drone violence in the ways they can. Gul Mohammed, a 35-year-old driver from Wardak province, drove down to Kabul city to momentarily escape drone violence and catch up on lost sleep:

There was a time when there were helicopters and drones flying over my house constantly and I could not sleep for several nights, to the point where one evening I came down to Kabul where I have relatives living and I tried to sleep at theirs because I had not slept for so long. I then had a headache for many days because of the sleeplessness. (Gul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Many Afghan interviewees testified to continuing to attend funerals and weddings because these events are highly valued and prioritised. Holding onto this important part of personal and communal life requires bravery:

If it is a gathering we cannot leave, like a funeral – we still do the funeral, but we are frightened. It's not like a normal funeral. Same with the wedding – we do the wedding party but in a hurry, with fear. We try to respect and feed the guests, but we do it quickly so we can get it finished. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Afghan people are agentic each time they refuse to change their behaviours in response to drone surveillance. The bravery of these acts of refusal cannot be underestimated given the possibility of injury and death from drone attacks. As Hobson and Sajed (2017, p. 33) argue, it is necessary to recognise agency on “an individual, everyday level, sometimes performed merely as a means of navigating oppressive structures as well as simply surviving”.

It is also the case that, while racialising people surveilled, the drone interface also has the potential for U.S. drone personnel to challenge and change racist social relations. Recall that it was through their interactions with and across the drone interface that Wendy and Dauwood had their implicit and explicit racism challenged. Social relations are in motion and open to change, as are the conduits of these relations. This is no different in drone violence, despite the power of the U.S. Air Force as an institution and the asymmetrical distribution of power across the drone interface. As chapters five and six also discuss, drone personnel can develop a sense of ethical obligation towards the people they surveil and experience emotional and psychological distress when inflicting violence on them. This has prompted some to stop their involvement in drone violence. Indeed, at significant legal and personal risk to themselves, some USAF drone personnel have quit their work out of moral objection to the U.S. drone program and ‘blown the whistle’ on the realities of drone targeting and civilian deaths in attempt to grow resistance in the U.S. and internationally.⁵²

⁵² U.S. Air Force drone personnel sign Non-Disclosure Agreements and have varying levels of security clearances, including the highest clearance level – ‘classified’. Many have held dual contracts for USAF and the CIA. Military and national security whistleblowers face significant legal risk even when they avoid discussing classified issues (Jesselyn Radack, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Military and national security whistleblowers in the U.S. have become fearful examples of what can happen as a result of an unauthorised disclosure. In May 2019, Daniel Hale, a 31-year-old retired National Security Agency analyst and U.S. Air Force Airman, was charged with five counts under the Espionage Act (1917) for obtaining and disclosing ‘national defence information’ (each with a sentence of 10 years). These charges were brought against him by the United States of America for disclosing classified information about drone operations – documents that featured in *The Intercept’s* (2015) series ‘The Drone Papers’.

Conclusion

In this chapter I analysed social relations in drone violence and the conduits of the drone interface that shape and are shaped by these relations – focussing specifically on how racism is (re)produced and the psychosocial effects of this. In answer to the thesis’s research question, I argued that the relation between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living in drone targeted areas must be understood as a relation of domination – one that reproduces the Orientalist tradition of subjecting people in the global South to invasive surveillance. While the wider culture of racism and Islamophobia in the U.S. is partly to blame for racism and Orientalism in drone violence, the drone interface and its visual/technological conduits are not neutral in these racist social relations. The drone interface’s visual conduits afford drone personnel the ability to closely observe people’s behaviours, prompting the identification of characteristics of the Afghan Other that are racialised, essentialising and over-determined in the intelligence process. Moreover, the purported objectivity of the drone’s visual sensors gives drone personnel the confidence to make these racialised claims, masking the subjective nature of racist and Orientalist judgements. I argued that the drone interface’s visual/technological conduits interact with discursive conduits – specifically the construction of the ‘civilian’ category – with the effect of excluding Afghan people from civilian protections. Moreover, the fetishisation of the drone, an ideological conduit of social relations, has led U.S. Military personnel on-the-ground in Afghanistan to spread misinformation about the drone cameras’ capabilities. This has exacerbated Afghans’ feelings of and reactions to being surveilled.

This invasive surveillance relationship is psychosocially harmful for Afghan people living under drone surveillance, who are not considered worthy

of privacy or dignity even in their most private moments. Fear of being falsely identified as an insurgent has led some Afghan people to think about their behaviours as if they were American drone personnel and refrain from any activity that may be considered suspicious from a U.S. Air Force perspective. This has led to the discontinuation of participation in social and communal life, with negative effects on individuals' wellbeing, their communities and cultures. In this chapter I have sought to further illustrate the analytical and political value of a relational approach to the study of drone violence, documenting and analysing the experiences of human actors and their social relations, as well as illustrating a set of psychosocial harms inflicted in drone violence that are regularly missed in drone violence criticism. The political implication of these findings is that calls for limiting and preventing violence against civilians must consider the harms that arise from drone surveillance – a much stronger position than many drone critics hold.

In the next chapter, I continue to develop the argument that the relationship between the U.S. Air Force and Afghan people needs to be understood as one of domination – moving from a focus on racism and Islamophobia to hegemonic masculinity, sexism and patriarchal relations. This relation of domination has emotional, psychological and physiological effects on both sides of the interface – most of which adversely affect people's lives and wellbeing. Often, domestic relations of domination are compounded by this international relation of domination – as will be explored through the cases of military masculinities in the U.S. and Afghan women's freedom of movement in drone targeted areas. Once again, the drone interface's conduits and wider cultural influences in the United States and Afghanistan are considered responsible for (re)producing this relation of domination.

5. Drone Violence and Gender Relations: Drone Targeting and the (Re)Production of Sexism

Introduction

Social relations in drone violence are significantly shaped by constructions of gender, masculinity and femininity. It is therefore not possible to understand the relationship between USAF drone personnel and people living under drones in Afghanistan without paying attention to gender, as well as its intersections with race and class. Further, emotional and psychosocial harms inflicted in drone violence include the (re)production of sexist and patriarchal relations both internationally and domestically (within Afghanistan and the United States). I put forward three arguments in this chapter to develop this overall argument. The first section focuses on the emotional and psychological reactions of USAF drone personnel to drone violence. I contend that hegemonic masculinity and competing masculinities and femininities within the U.S. Air Force shape drone personnel's experiences of social relations in drone violence. Contrary to suggestions that drone operations could be seen as a more feminised or queer method of warfighting (Daggett 2015), I argue that hegemonic masculinity and "fratriarchal" culture within the Air Force encourages rational, prideful or pleasurable reactions to drone surveillance and killing (Higate 2012). With these reactions to surveillance and killing constructed as the most masculine, other responses such as feeling or speaking about sadness, doubt, or guilt is deemed weak and thus discouraged. This reproduces sexist social relations within the United States by denigrating femininity and discouraging men from speaking openly about emotional and

psychological distress. It is, however, true that hegemonic masculinity is not fixed and exists only in relation to other masculinities and femininities. While hegemonic masculinity is the most celebrated, it is not the only expression of masculinity in the U.S Air Force. Drone personnel who align more closely with competing non-hegemonic masculinities or femininities tend to have social relations across the drone interface that recognise ethical responsibility for causing harm to people in Afghanistan (and Iraq) and are troubled by this. In this way, some avenues for political resistance are opened up by the “queering” of warfare (Daggett 2015, p. 36), as this recognition and care can motivate political action among drone program veterans.

I focus on drone targeting and the interacting visual, discursive and ideological conduits of the drone interface in the second section. The drone interface is not neutral in the (re)production of sexist and patriarchal relations. The interface’s visual/technological conduits afford drone personnel the ability to read details about people’s bodies that would otherwise be inaccessible – not just from a distance but also in face-to-face interactions. Because of the drone interface’s technological capacities, body temperature has emerged as one visual shortcut to differentiate sexes – with dangerous effect. These visual conduits of relations interact with discursive and ideological conduits, reinforcing binary and essentialising notions of sex and gender. Gendered constructions of the ‘civilian’ category exert significant power over U.S. Air Force drone personnel when they are visually identifying people for drone strikes. The normalisation of the (unofficial) ‘Military-Age Male’ (MAM) category classes all fighting-aged adolescent boys and men as legitimate targets, while women are assigned civilian status. Understanding these gendered categorisations to be natural rather than constructed, the U.S. Air Force strives to accurately distinguish between men and women using drones – which in turn are believed to be capable of providing the biological and social information needed for this distinction. I argue that

sex- and gender-based targeting is dangerous, as gender is socially constructed and biological sex is more diverse than depicted by the male/female binary. Gendered targeting practices therefore result in violence towards men and people whose gender identities are (interpreted as) ambiguous, putting civilians in harm's way.

Lastly, in the third section I explore Afghan people's experiences of social relations across the drone interface and the harms (re)produced in these relations. I argue that drone violence has both gendered and gendering effects on Afghan people living in targeted areas. I contend that girls and women in Afghanistan experience the effects of drone surveillance acutely. Drone surveillance further restricts girls' and women's freedom of movement in a patriarchal society that already places substantial limits on such freedoms. While drone *surveillance* is rarely regarded as harmful in mainstream and non-relational critiques of military drones, I build on arguments made in the previous chapter illustrating the emotional and psychosocial harms of surveillance for people who are subjected to it. Overall, I argue that the relationship in drone violence needs to be understood as one of domination internationally (with U.S. drone personnel in a dominant position of power), but one that also interacts with and compounds existing patriarchal social relations within Afghanistan to the detriment of girls' and women's power, freedom and wellbeing.

In this last section, I tread into controversial territory for critical and conventional IR and Security Studies scholars alike. The uses and abuses of feminism in the study of the war in Afghanistan has garnered the attention of many Feminist IR and Security Studies scholars, liberal and postcolonial (Dyvik 2014; Eisenstein 2007; Hunt and Rygiel 2007; Mahmood 2009; Pratt 2013). In the early years of the war in Afghanistan, many liberal feminist organisations (such as the Feminist Majority and Amnesty International) advocated for the

overthrow of the Taliban, claiming that democratisation of the country would be good for women's rights and participation (Perugini and Gordon 2015, pp. 1-7; Young 2003, p. 18). Underlying these liberal feminist ideas, Saba Mahmood argues, is a colonialist assumption that Muslim women are trapped within the culture and religion of their societies and need rescuing by modern and secular Euro-Americans (2009, p. 207). Daulatzai (2008) contends that liberal feminist accounts of how Afghan women lived prior to U.S. occupation are overly simplistic and full of Orientalist and racist stereotypes – failing to represent the multiplicity of Afghan women's experiences. None of these postcolonial feminist scholars deny that many Afghan women face myriad forms of oppression and violence, including curtailment of movement and speech, forced marriage and sexual assault (Mahmood 2009, p. 203); however, they contend that these are not the only experiences of being a woman in Afghanistan and that this diversity must be represented (Daulatzai 2008, p. 425). I have attempted to learn from these important invocations by postcolonial feminist scholars, being attentive to the complexities of gender relations in Afghanistan during the interview process. It is my hope that in so doing I have avoided simplistic and broad-brush portrayals of Afghan men as violent oppressors and Afghan women as helpless victims in the analysis of interview material. Instead, I posit that the effects of U.S. drone violence have worsened Afghan women's wellbeing in the rural provinces affected by drone surveillance and attack.⁵³ I argue that drone violence has been independently harmful to women and that it also interacts with and compounds existing harms against women in Afghanistan.

⁵³ This is likely an unsurprising conclusion for feminist scholars who have studied women's experiences of war, but still a phenomenon missed by early advocates of the war in Afghanistan. This gendered set of harms is also rarely identified in drone violence criticism, nor is there any advocacy around it.

Gendered Reactions to Drone Violence in the USAF Drone Program

Steve is a former U.S. Air Force communications technician who worked building and repairing drone communication equipment and satellite stations in Afghanistan. Steve is one of many drone personnel who do not work in the drone cockpit but fulfil one of the myriad supporting roles in drone operations. While deployed, his unit's "shop chief" took the unit to visit a friend of higher rank in order to access drone strike footage and show it to the unit. This, Steve assumes, was done with the aim of building morale amongst the men by showing them the bigger picture of what their work contributed to achieving:

...it was our shop chief who was talking to someone who was working in the [REMOVED]⁵⁴, so they had access to all the links and were looking through all the videos. They were just drinking Red Bulls and were like "hey look at this stuff!" and were kicking back watching... we're all watching videos of people getting bombed and it was like "oh it's cool!". And some of it was to heavy metal music. When you're in the military, it's as though you're with the guys watching boxing or something. Like, "here's us kicking the bad guy's ass". (Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Recounting this anecdote, Steve deepened his tone and adopted a stereotypical 'macho' voice when emulating the shop chief and his colleagues' reactions ("oh it's cool!"). He explained that he was able to identify and reflect on cultures of masculinity while he was still in the U.S. Air Force and that this critical perspective was not just one he had developed since leaving the military. Riding

⁵⁴ The name of this location has been removed for privacy reasons in efforts to ensure Steve's confidentiality.

back from the base with his unit after seeing the footage, Steve felt very uncertain about what he was involved in through his work:

When the bomb goes off, you're all like "Ahhhh! Ohhhhh!". You're not thinking that deeply over it. But we watched it, and then we were riding back in the vehicle and my thoughts were lingering on it. It's like, "oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck, what am I a part of? What did I sign up for?".

(Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Steve said that this uncertainty began while watching the drone videos, but the masculinist culture in his unit prevented him from looking away from the footage or showing any form of disapproval or adverse reaction:

I thought it was fucked up. I thought that I had to watch it, and that I wasn't meant to react because I didn't want to seem like a pussy. Sorry for that, but you know – that's what I was thinking. I don't want to look like a pussy, so I'm not gonna react. (Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Steve's repression of thoughts and emotions that could be deemed feminine (or, in more vulgar terms, would make him a "pussy") continued after he returned from service, with damaging effects on his relationship with his partner, and pushed him towards risky coping mechanisms such as binge drinking and drink driving:

Then when we got back from Afghanistan, my girlfriend at the time she came to stay with me, and I would wake up in the middle of the night screaming or I'd roll onto the ground or I'd punch walls. I didn't know

how to express my feelings to her, express what was going on. (Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

...she just wanted to connect, and she had a kind of romantic idea about someone coming back from war and all this other stuff. Like how everything was going to be okay, and [how] I didn't have much of a capacity to be there for anybody else. I drank a lot coming back. I think we all did. I went to the bar... Before [deployment], I used to travel around and see the sites and stuff, but when I got back all I ever wanted to do was go back to the bar and get drunk. And I know I drank and drove. (Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Steve stated that even the awarding of 'enemy kills' certificates to himself and colleagues in his unit did not prompt an honest discussion amongst the men about their participation in drone violence and how they felt about it:

Then we got the report saying that we had assisted in 200+ enemy kills. You know, our shop chief had gone around asking what we thought about it. You kind of wanted to put on the whole tough guy thing because everyone else is, and you're just like "well if that's what we did, then just put it on there". I don't know if anyone else felt good about it. No one was really happy about it. We were all just kind of like, "okay then". [...] It was really hard to talk about [the certificate] with my girlfriend at the time. (Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Steve's experiences share commonalities with former U.S. Air Force drone sensor operator, John. Unlike Steve, John did not deploy to Afghanistan or Iraq, spending all of his time as a sensor operator in various U.S. Air Force

bases across the United States. Drone personnel who do not deploy have been gendered as more feminine by others in the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Military more broadly who consider it a comparatively risk-free position (Chamayou 2013, p. 100) – evoking long-standing associations between women on the “homeland” who are “the protected” and men as “the protectors” who fight for the country on the frontline (Wilcox 2009, pp. 234-238). This is part of what makes drone warfare “queer” for Cara Daggett (2015, p. 363) who argues that drone operators “find themselves uncomfortable along the home/combat binary, as they are ‘deployed-at-station’”. John’s experiences suggest that despite being deployed-at-station, or perhaps because of this, the culture amongst USAF personnel on American soil is no less masculinist than USAF units or other branches of the U.S. Military who deploy to theatre. For instance, John recounts his early months in the drone program and the pressures he felt to hide the sensitivity he developed towards people across the drone interface:

...Then after that month – it was almost two months – I had my first kill. I was horrified. I remember sitting there afterwards, and everyone’s – the safety observer is telling me stuff like “Haha, you popped your cherry. Congratulations”, and people were celebrating like high-fiving each other. People who had nothing to do with the kill, they were just observing it, were celebrating it. And I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t bring myself to participate in that. And I left. I remember leaving in a hurry. I dropped my hat and lost it. And I get to my car and try to drive off base, and I’m at this stop light and I keep watching the lights turn green on every other light but my own and I am feeling trapped. Like, the universe was telling me that I was trapped. So I called my mother and I started crying. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

John was unable to protest the infliction of drone violence, and faced pressure from superiors on future instances when he tried to avoid harming people with drones:

The [REMOVED]⁵⁵-line basically shot people every day. So I come in and I'm sitting there – and I usually flew [a different line] because shooting was rare, so the instances when I shot were rare – so I sit down and they are getting ready to fire and I say, “Sir, can I fly another line? I just don't feel comfortable today” and he goes “get your fucking shit together and do your job. Just get in there and do it”. And I'm like, “alright, if I have to do it then I will”. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

John said that he felt excluded and disliked by people in his unit because he stopped participating in the institutionalised culture of hyper-masculinity. His colleagues and superiors knew he felt regretful and carried sadness about inflicting drone violence:

And I think that was a detriment to me, because people knew I was a bleeding heart. I cried in front of a gunnery sergeant once. He didn't like that. That was the last time I cried in the Military. Well, in front of someone – actually. Any time else, I did it alone. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

After leaving the U.S. Air Force, John continued to experience pressure from former colleagues over how he spoke about his experiences and this also affected how he processed them.

⁵⁵ The name of this flight line has been removed for privacy reasons in efforts to ensure John's confidentiality.

I was isolated a lot. I had lost a lot of my friends. I was quiet with my thoughts. It'd almost kill me. I flew into fits of rage. I'd throw my Xbox, I'd throw the controllers, I'd break them. I punched through a computer monitor. I was in so much physical pain. I ended up joining a gym just so I could punch a bag, and I'd be there for hours just punching and screaming at this thing. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

On the U.S. side of the interface, then, it appears USAF drone personnel are under myriad pressures to react in a hyper-masculine way to their work in the drone program, yet their interactions with and across the various conduits of the drone interface can pull them in a different direction – encouraging them to feel emotions that do not sit well with this performance of hegemonic masculinity. The hegemonic norms of the USAF as an institution, and the drone program within, limit criticism of drone violence and prevent transformation of violent social relations. Refusal to inflict violence and to celebrate its infliction is either denied by superiors or ostracised by peers. Further, these hyper-masculine responses to drone violence reproduce sexist relations within the United States, denigrating notions of femininity and discouraging men from speaking openly about their emotions and psychological wellbeing.

Military Masculinities and Fratriarchal Culture

Hegemonic masculinity was a term coined by sociologist Raewyn Connell (1995), who argues that there is a multiplicity of masculinities in operation in any historical time period, but hegemonic masculinity is the one most valued and celebrated in society. As Carol Cohn (1999, p. 461) puts it, “it is constructed not only in relation to femininity, but in relation to the other, subordinated masculinities as well”. Hegemonic masculinity comes to attain its hegemonic position in comparison to femininities and alternative masculinities

“not through force, but through consent” (Duncanson 2015, p. 232). Connell’s (1995) work has prompted much discussion in IR and Security Studies, particularly amongst Feminist IR and CSS theorists who have long-studied the military as a cultural site where hegemonic masculinity is produced and reproduced (Cohn and Enloe 2003; Enloe 1983; Tickner 2001). More recently, Feminist IR and CSS scholars have sought to problematise and “trouble the ease with which we might be tempted to synonymise militaries, war, and a neat ‘hegemonic’ masculinity” (Chisholm and Tidy 2017, p. 99). Amanda Chisholm and Joanna Tidy (2017, p. 101) argue that too often hegemonic masculinity and the military are brought together in lazy association, forming “a comfortable story, the ending of which we already know”. This comfortable story involves military men performing aggressive, unemotional, rational, heterosexual, athletic – among other hegemonic and stereotypically masculine – traits.

For Claire Duncanson (2015), it is not the comfortable story of hegemonic masculinity in the military that is most irksome, but that key aspects of Connell’s work have been neglected. Greater attention needs to be paid to the processes by which, as Connell and Messerschmidt (following Gramsci) put it: “hegemony may fail” (2005, p. 853). Duncanson is interested in how “a softer, more feminised form of hybrid masculinity [...] can become hegemonic”, stating that such an outcome is “theoretically possible” (Duncanson 2015, p. 243). Like Duncanson (2015), I wish to suggest that there are multiple masculinities in the U.S. Air Force drone program – some that are hegemonic and others that have counter-hegemonic potential. Drone personnel who align more closely with alternative masculinities or femininities tend to react to social relations in drone violence in ways that show care for people across the drone interface and that recognise ethical responsibility for their lives and wellbeing.

In Steve and John's descriptions of U.S. Air Force culture, hegemonic masculinity is perhaps the type Chisholm and Tidy (2017) accuse of being too neatly synonymised with the military in the sense that it seems so well-worn and predictable. Men are encouraged to "kick back", watch videos of bombs being dropped on people and exchange celebratory cheers as if watching sports – the fear of being outed as a "pussy" if they do not participate keeps them performing masculinity in this way. Carrying out your first lethal drone attack is likened to "popping your cherry" – terminology that sounds remarkably similar to the aggressive language of sexual domination Carol Cohn (1987) heard nuclear defence strategists evoke over 30 years ago. Expressing emotions is denigrated and discouraged, with Steve punching walls in the night instead of talking to his girlfriend and John deciding to never cry in front of anyone again after being humiliated for doing so by a sergeant. Cohn (1999, p. 462) states that "becoming a man" in the U.S. Military means becoming "walled off from your feelings", beginning "a habit of compartmentalisation" that also affects men's interpersonal relationships outside of work – and this appears to be true of Steve and John's experiences (although they certainly speak more openly and emotively now).

It may take some by surprise that hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. Air Force drone program is simply a continuation of an old (now predictable) hegemonic masculinity. The use of drone violence has been attributed to a recent feminisation of combat and "emasculatation" of soldiers (Chamayou 2013, p. 100). Daggett (2015, p. 368) writes of the common equation between work in the drone program and office jobs in the military, "which are already understood to occupy the lowest status among militarised masculinities". However, awareness of outsider perceptions of USAF and the drone program can lead to reactionary attempts to 'masculinise' the institution and its personnel. Likewise, writing about hyper-masculinity and a major sexual assault

scandal at the USAF Academy, Jamie L. Callahan (2009, p. 1162) posits that “perhaps, it is this very removal from a traditional military frontline combat role that instigates a stronger push toward creating a ‘warrior spirit’ among the USAFA cadets”. Earlier Callahan explains that “male cadets are socialised to believe that ‘achieving’ sexual intercourse is a sign that they meet the standards of the combat, masculine warrior culture upheld by the USAFA” and, as such, rates of sexual assault were high at the academy (2009, p. 1160; Enloe 2014, p. 159). Callahan (2009, p. 1162) draws on a study conducted by Rosen (2007), finding that levels of rape were higher in American communities with large numbers of U.S. Air Force personnel compared to communities with similarly large numbers of Army and Marine personnel. Hyper-masculine norms within USAF may therefore be a reactionary attempt within/by the institution to (re)produce a masculinity that feels threatened by outsiders’ perceptions.

A significant factor influencing this competition of acceptable masculinities is the pressures and expectations of friends, colleagues and superiors. Drone personnel’s responses to their interactions with and through the drone interface are significantly influenced by these pressures. As described in Steve and John’s testimonies, hegemonic masculinity in the U.S. Air Force socialises drone personnel to experience or perform dispassion (lack of empathy), pride and/or pleasure in their relations across the drone interface. However, hegemonic masculinity is only so powerful in both testimonies because of the fratriarchal culture of John and Steve’s respective units. In both testimonies, fratriarchal culture is at work in bolstering hegemonic masculinity and encouraging aggressive and dispassionate relations across the drone interface. Fratriarchal formations are group relations between men that emphasise homosocial (but crucially not homosexual) “male bonding” (Higate 2012, p. 453). They are typically characterised “by close relations between men in settings devoid of caring for children, or being with loved ones” (Higate

2012, p. 453). Fratriarchies emphasise the exclusion of women as necessary for male bonding and promote the rule of men “not as fathers but as brothers, able to compete with one another but presenting a united front [against women]” (Jordan and Cowan 1995, p. 727). While fratriarchies can create meaning for and close connection between members, they are also deeply competitive formations – members compete with each other for masculine status. This is because, as described above, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed category but formed in relation to femininities and alternative masculinities. Male members of fratriarchies who “fail to demonstrate masculinity of a particular hegemonic kind” risk being ousted from the tight-knit group of “brothers” (Higate 2012, p. 459). It is this potential to be ousted from the group that keeps members fearfully under pressure to perform hegemonic masculinity. Forensic psychologist Karen Franklin (2004) argues that such fratriarchal group dynamics explain why male groups commit group rape (against women and men) and participate in anti-gay violence. In both of these kinds of group violence, young men perform “an exaggerated version of the gender-role norms expected of men in hyper-masculine social environments” (Franklin 2004, p. 26). In such environments, “fear is the overriding emotion driving men’s behaviours – fear of being dominated, of being seen as weak, of being humiliated” (Franklin 2004, p. 33).

Inflicting drone violence is similar in this respect. The group dynamics in Steve and John’s unit kept both men quiet about their emotional reactions to drone killing. Rather than challenging their units’ celebrations of drone killing, they observed this behaviour and kept their emotions hidden from the group. In John’s case, his first drone kill was met with people “celebrating [and] high-fiving each other”, and he did not protest this behaviour. Instead, he left the base to phone his mother. In Steve’s testimony, his unit sat around watching videos of drone kills, responding with “oh it’s cool!”. Steve stopped himself

from reacting with sadness or outrage at the violence because he did not want to “look like a pussy”. Even the awarding of ‘enemy kills’ certificates did not prompt an open discussion amongst Steve’s unit on how they felt about their work.

It is not just because of fear that fratriarchies promote group violence against Others; the exclusion and domination of outsiders on the basis of gender, sexuality and race (or any other perceived difference) is used to fortify a strong sense of group identity in the fratriarchy. Paul Higate (2012) argues that fratriarchies will frequently challenge established boundaries, but that all boundary challenges are ultimately a ‘test’ to check members’ observance of boundaries. Insiders of the fratriarchy will participate in boundary-testing activities, while ultimately observing boundaries. Men to be excluded from the fratriarchy are either those who refuse to participate in these tests or who break crucial boundaries when participating. For instance, according to Higate (2012, p. 457) the boundary between homosociality and homosexuality is constantly pushed in fratriarchies, but undoubtedly (re)drawn – with gay and bisexual men always excluded as Others to fratriarchal groupings. This boundary (re-)drawing supports Duncanson’s point that “the insecurities brought about by a homosocial culture have at times engendered an acute homophobia” in the military (2015, p. 235). Higate (2012) goes onto argue that, in the ‘War on Terror’, boundaries are not just drawn between the fratriarchy and Others on the basis of sexuality, but also on the basis of race. He states that it is not simply that male bonding is exclusionary to women and queer men but is “productive of insiders and outsiders according to a racialised and masculinised identity” where Afghan men are perceived as inferior (Higate 2012, p. 459). The boundary-drawing, exclusionary behaviour Higate identifies in his work appears to also have been in operation amongst Steve and John’s USAF units. In both their testimonies, Afghan and Iraqi people were Othered and dehumanised –

their deaths celebrated rather than grieved – in attempt to create a strong sense of identity and close association amongst the USAF personnel. Men who openly showed tenderness or compassion towards those surveilled and killed would fail the ‘test’ and be ousted for not adequately performing hegemonic masculinity. Fratriarchies therefore limit the kinds of reactions to drone violence that are acceptable, closing down criticism and resistance in the process.

There are, however, alternative masculinities at play in the U.S. Air Force, and some USAF employees will either be excluded or choose to self-exclude from fratriarchal groups. These men and their masculinities tend to have greater potential to resist drone violence and transform social relations between American and Afghan people. Alternative masculinities allow for different responses to social relations across the drone interface – responses of sadness, grief, outrage, doubt, regret and other emotions deemed feminine (or, at least, less masculine) in a hyper-masculinised military context. Claire Duncanson argues that “for the unravelling of hegemonic masculinity, men must be encouraged not so much to *change their ways* as to *change the way in which they negotiate their identities in relation to others*” (2015, p. 223, emphasis in original). Duncanson goes on to propose that “rather than forge their identities through relations of opposition or domination, men [...] need to construct their identities through recognition of similarity, respect, interdependence, empathy and equality with others” (2015, p. 233). Steve and John’s covert emotional responses to the drone interface challenged relations of domination, instead recognising interdependence with people surveilled and targeted by drones. Although they experienced the pressure of hegemonic masculinity to not communicate their emotional responses honestly to their colleagues, both men struggled with their involvement in the drone program – thinking often, and having nightmares, about the people they have been involved in killing.

Steve recounted a nightmare he has repeatedly wherein he is responsible for pushing a button that drops a bomb on an Afghan village, and he sees its effects from the perspective of those on the ground. He runs over to a young Afghan girl with her head face down into the soil and rolls her body over to see if she is dead. Steve is aware of his responsibility for harm caused by drone attacks and experiences ongoing psychological distress arising from this responsibility:

...I know that in the Quran it says that if you destroy one innocent life then you destroy the whole world. That was sort of a quote that I dwelled on for quite a while. Like I am talking to you and you have an entire life and perspective on the world. If someone were to take your life, that's a whole perspective on the world that has disappeared prematurely. So I think about that. I think that maybe under different circumstances these people could have been doctors who saved lives, or invented something, but because of the situation they got put in, they ended up dead, exploded to bits all over their town. You know, and that's... that's quite a lot to deal with. (Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

The psychological distress Steve and John experience, even years after leaving the U.S. Air Force, is a harm produced through social relations in drone violence that non-relational accounts cannot capture. This harm is compounded by the hyper-masculine culture of the USAF drone program, as drone personnel are discouraged from speaking openly about and seeking counsel for their emotional and psychological distress. This reproduces sexist and patriarchal relations within the United States, by denigrating traits deemed feminine and ensuring that men suffer from psychological distress in silence.

Caroline Holmqvist argues that it is necessary to consider the ways that drone personnel's experiences "seep out into a wider social corpus" (2013, p. 542). For Steve and John, the hyper-masculine pressures of the USAF have seeped out in the form of reckless behaviours, including drinking excessively and drink driving, and suicidality – with knock-on psychological effects for their families and loved ones.

The responsibility Steve and John feel for harming others is also what motivates them to openly criticise drone violence and seek to transform the relations of domination that make it possible. This is another way their experiences of drone violence seep out into the wider social corpus. Since leaving the USAF drone program, Steve and John have dedicated significant time and physical and emotional energy to protesting and raising public consciousness about drone violence. They have taken part in direct actions and spoken on high-visibility platforms in efforts to prevent future violence to Afghan and Iraqi people. As quoted in the next chapter, both men have had conversations with enthusiastic young men, convincing them not to join USAF and the drone program (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States; Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). The potential these alternative masculinities hold to resist drone violence is evident here. These masculinities do not need to dominate but instead allow relations with people across the interface that recognise their equal value as humans. In this sense, Daggett (2015, p. 363) is right that there are opportunities in drone violence for drone personnel to think or feel in counterhegemonic ways; however, thoughts and emotions that resist USAF's hegemonic norms and relations of domination have little hope of transforming these relations unless they are acted on outside the institution. The agency of USAF drone personnel to resist and prevent violence is constrained by hyper-masculine norms, including expectations of

superiors and peers that hyper-masculinity will be performed in social relations with people living under drones.

Drone Targeting

So far, I have argued that there is a hyper-masculine culture within the USAF drone program – one that limits and constrains drone personnel from advocating social relations with people across the drone interface that are deemed feminine or less masculine (because they are centred around interdependence and non-violence). Drone personnel who experience social relations in ways that resist hyper-masculine norms face myriad pressures to keep quiet about these experiences – including pressures that arise from fraternal group dynamics. I argued that this (re)produces sexist and patriarchal relations in the United States, and psychologically harms USAF drone personnel and veterans. In this next section, I contend that the drone interface is not neutral in the (re)production of sexist and patriarchal relations. The visual/technological conduits of the interface interact with its discursive and ideological conduits to reinforce binary and essentialising notions of sex and gender. These binary and essentialising notions view men as naturally aggressive, while people with ambiguous gender identities are perceived as threatening.

(Mis-)Identifying Sex and Gender



Figure 3: Richard and crew use a Predator drone to capture this image on base. The words 'Merry Christmas' are written in lit candles. Crew members captured the photo to create Christmas cards for their family and friends.

Richard, the former U.S. Air Force drone sensor operator whose testimony also appeared in the last chapter, showed me this still image captured by a Predator drone [see Figure 3]. I had just asked him whether it is possible to read a number plate when zooming-in with a drone, to which he responded that “it entirely depends on the quality of the feed and the quality of the camera that is on the aircraft” (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). To demonstrate this further, he brought up this image on his phone, pointed to one of the people in the photograph and asked: “Can you tell me if that’s a man, woman or a child?” (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). I explained that I could not confidently say. “They are all quite chunky”, I replied, “and some look short”. Unable to decide, I was then

encouraged to compare the people against the Predator drone standing to their right. “Okay, well then I would say that they were men”, I said, “because I’ve seen how big a Predator drone is, and so I now think they are possibly taller than I think they looked before”. Richard, however, was not looking at height, weight, stature or any other physical characteristic that might help one to distinguish between a man, woman and child. Instead, he told me, it was often easier for drone personnel to use body heat as a visual shortcut in drone targeting:

The thing about this particular infrared sensor is that there’s this thing called ‘blooming’, so the more energy emitted the bigger the return. So, if someone had been working out, say that guy there, if he had been working out prior to this, his energy signature, his emittance, would be much larger than the rest of them. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

“Black body radiation”, Richard explained, is therefore used as a visual shortcut to determine sex and gender when the electro-optical camera is not capturing high resolution images or is otherwise unable to provide drone personnel with confidence that they have ‘correctly’ identified sex and gender (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Such physical characteristics that drone personnel look for when distinguishing between men and women include those borne from biological sex or hormone levels (such as height, stature and body shape) and gender performance (such as clothes, body language, gait, and the kinds of social activities performed). Richard explained that when these markers are unclear or are taking too long to identify, women can instead be identified by the ‘blooming’ of their heat signatures. Men, on the other hand, are identified by their lack of blooming. This blooming

occurs, Richard says, because women's clothing in Afghanistan and Iraq usually covers more of the body than men's clothing and therefore insulates more heat.

So, when you have a burqa on, your energy signature – because those things don't breathe very well from what I understand – is much higher because you have more body heat entrapped in an enclosed space, so your energy is much bigger, so it looks like a moving blob rather than a person walking. You can usually see the [person's] footsteps, whereas in a burqa you can't see those. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

In other words, in Muslim-majority countries where Islamic codes of dress are followed, drone personnel identify men by the ability to see their footsteps or their body's contours when moving, while they identify women by the inability to see these features (i.e. their 'blob'-like appearance). When I asked Richard if a man wearing a different style of clothing, or having wrapped himself in a blanket, could also look like a 'blob' and therefore throw off the conclusions drone personnel draw from thermal imagery cameras, he responded: "absolutely, absolutely" (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States).

Richard's explanation of how the drone interface's visual conduits are used to determine people's sex and gender shares interesting commonalities with a transcript of communications between a Predator drone pilot, sensor operator, safety observer and other U.S. Military personnel (including a AC-130 Gunship crew, Kiowa helicopter crew, and the ground force commander of a U.S. special operations team). As briefly mentioned in the last chapter, 'Transcripts of a U.S. Drone Attack' (hereafter *The Transcript*) was obtained by the *Los Angeles Times* through a Freedom of Information Act request. *The*

Transcript details a drone-supported helicopter attack on February 21st, 2010 on the border of Daikundi and Uruzgan, which Daikundi village elders say killed 21 innocent people (including two boys aged three and four) and injured 14 people (women, men and children). The U.S. claims that 15 or 16 men were killed, and 12 people were injured, “including a woman and three children” (Cloud 2014). *The Transcript* is the first and (to date) only public record of communications between U.S. Air Force drone personnel as they carry out surveillance and prepare for a lethal attack. For this reason, it has attracted much attention and been the subject of academic analyses before this thesis (Chamayou 2013; Gregory, D. 2011b; Wilcox 2016). There are some interesting similarities between *The Transcript* and the interview material collected for this project. Comparing these two sources illuminates some under-explored aspects of the relationship between gender and drone violence. In relation to gender and drone targeting processes, these two excerpts of *The Transcript* particularly stand out:

00:59 (Pilot): What about the guy under the north arrow, does it look like he is holding something across his chest?

00:59 (Sensor): Yeah it is kind of weird how they all have a cold spot on their chest.

00:59 (Pilot): It’s what they have been doing here lately, they wrap their (expletive deleted) up in their man dresses, so you can’t PID [positively identify] it.

~

04:22 (Pilot): Can’t tell what the (expletive deleted) they’re doing.

04:23 (Sensor): Probably wondering what happened.

04:23 (Safety Observer): There's one more to the left of the screen.

04:23 (Sensor): Yeah, I see them.

04:23 (Safety Observer): Are they wearing burqas?

04:23 (Sensor): That's what it looks like.

04:23 (Pilot): They were all PIded as males, though. No females in the group.

04:23 (Sensor): That guy looks like he is wearing jewellery and stuff like a girl, but he ain't... if he's a girl, he's a big one.

The first excerpt of dialogue is from before the helicopter attack, just after the drone crew are tasked by the ground commander with finding evidence that the men are combatants (Transcripts of a U.S. Drone Attack, p. 12). The drone crew are therefore trying to positively identify (PID) weapons. The second excerpt is from after the attack when the drone crew have been tasked with shooting down any “squirters” (people who run away from the blast) (p. 62). The drone crew are watching as the Kiowa helicopters launch Hellfire missiles, seeing if they can target the people who run away, and then finding it “weird” when no-one runs (p. 62). The crew then notices three “females” in “brighter dress garb”, one of whom is carrying a child in their arms (p. 72).

Until this moment, drone personnel did not consider the possibility that there were women amongst the group, using male pronouns (“he”) and masculine nouns (such as “dude” and “guy”), and referring to the individuals as “MAMs” all within the first hour of watching the passengers (pp. 3-14). Only after Hellfire missiles were launched were the three individuals identified as women. Their “brightly coloured clothing” was only visible to the drone personnel after sunrise (when they switched to ‘Day TV’/electra-optical imagery) and when the women stepped out of the vehicle(s). The women were not identified during the four hours of drone surveillance that preceded the attack, much of which was carried out using thermal imaging because low-light rendered the electra-optical imagery useless. Indeed, both the pilot and mission intelligence coordinator made several confident calls, which were supported by the sensor operator, that “21 MAMs, no females, and 2 possible children” were present.⁵⁶ Moreover, having interviewed Saifullah, Nabi and Hassan, three survivors of this attack, even the updated post-attack claim that three women were present is inaccurate; indeed, women had been amongst those injured and killed as well as the three survivors seen by the drone personnel as recorded in *The Transcript*.

In both Richard’s testimony and *The Transcript*, the drone interface’s visual/technological, discursive and ideological conduits interact to (re)produce binary and essentialising notions of sex and gender. Along with discursive conduits shaping who is seen as a combatant and civilian, the drone’s visual sensors are (fetishistically) imbued with the ability to identify sex and gender (along male-female and man-woman binaries). This in turn dangerously bolsters the confidence of drone personnel when using gender-based targeting

⁵⁶ Early and ongoing discussion between the pilot, the sensor operator, the Mission Intelligence Coordinator and the Joint Terminal Attack Controller throughout the surveillance mission categorised the children as adolescents who could be dangerous because they could “pick up a weapon” – thus fitting the MAM descriptor. See pages 15, 43, 55 and 69 of the transcript.

categories. As a result of these interacting conduits of social relations, attacks against ordinary people like the one detailed in *The Transcript* are more likely to occur. Far from saving civilians in Afghanistan, confidence in these problematic and Eurocentric categories of analysis often places them directly in harm's way. Men are made more vulnerable to drone violence because of the essentialising assumption that they are natural fighters. People whose gender identities come across as ambiguous also have heightened vulnerability to violence based on the 'threatening' possibility that they are men 'tricking' drone crews. At the same time, the U.S. Air Force is either unaware of the falsity of these binary and essentialising notions or is unwilling to let go of them. Admitting to the difficulties of distinguishing between genders, and relatedly between civilians and combatants, undermines gendered distinctions that enable war to be fought and justified.

Gendered Constructions of the 'Civilian': Military-Age Males ('MAMs'),
Innocent Women and Gender Ambiguity as Trickery

The construction of the civilian category is not only gendered, it is based on binary and essentialising notions of gender that view men as naturally violent, women as naturally innocent, and people whose gender identities do not sit comfortably on this binary as threatening. The term 'Military-Age Male' entered into common military parlance during the 'War on Terror'; however, it is not a 'War on Terror' invention. While much Feminist IR has explored the problem of men being essentialised as war-fighters (Carpenter 2006; Connell 1995; Enloe 2006; Goldstein 2001; Hutchings 2009; Whitworth 2004), Sarah Shoker gives the most detailed and robust account of the Military-Age Male category in U.S. Counterinsurgency. Shoker argues that the MAM is "not a new and unforeseen development that emerges from the War on Terror", but a category that has "endured as a way of making sense of war for decades" (2018, p. 46). This is because the category draws upon strong and long-lasting cultural

associations between masculinity and violence. Men have long-been assumed to be predisposed to violence, and are seen to have better access/opportunities to use violence to “transcend [their] vulnerability” because they can join the Army or militant groups whereas women either legally cannot or experience cultural difficulties in joining these institutions/groups (Shoker 2018, p. 51). The MAM category has been employed more regularly in non-conventional (guerrilla or insurgency-style) conflicts, as combatants in these conflicts do not wear military uniforms and so other identifying features are used in attempt to distinguish them from civilians. However, Shoker writes that the category has “survived both conventional and non-conventional warfare”, as conscripted men were considered equally dangerous despite huge variation amongst conscripts in their willingness and capacity to fight (2018, p. 46). Military-Age Males have historically been portrayed as legitimate targets of lethal attack in war, whether conventional or non-conventional, because of gender-based assumptions that men can and will (want to) fight (Barrett 1996; Carpenter 2006; Elshtain 1995; Enloe 2006, 2014; MacKenzie 2015; Shoker 2018).

What makes the MAM category slightly different in the context of the ‘War on Terror’, however, is that it is not used straightforwardly as a shorthand for enemy combatant like it has been in previous wars (such as the Vietnam War) (Shoker 2018, p. 45). Instead, the category marks out Military-Age Males as worthy of greater monitoring and profiling and, additionally, excludes them from civilian casualty counts if they are killed in a military attack (Shoker 2018, p. 49). This is of course part of the wider shift to pre-emptive strategy in the ‘War on Terror’. MAMs are “institutionally important precisely because they identify boys and men as more likely to be involved in political violence” (Shoker 2018, p. 48). The focus is thus on a Military-Age Male’s *potential* to carry out violence, which boys and men are assumed to possess, rather than on the actuality of the person committing a militarily violent act. As Carpenter (2006,

p. 88) writes, “more often than women, young children, or the elderly, military-age men and adolescent boys are assumed to be ‘potential’ combatants and are treated by armed forces [...] as though they are legitimate targets of political violence”. While MAM may not be a shorthand for enemy combatant, the increased monitoring of MAMs still greatly increases the vulnerability of adolescent boys and men to violence. In his study of investigations into checkpoint killings in Iraq, Thomas Gregory (2019, p. 141) found that in some reports “the mere presence of military-age males was sufficient to generate a palpable sense of alarm among troops, causing them to see danger where there was none”. Additionally, the exclusion of MAMs from civilian casualty counts removes an important disincentive to carry out lethal attacks. Attacks in which MAMs are killed are not subject to the same levels of scrutiny as attacks where civilians (conceptualised as only women and young children) are killed. Soldiers in Iraq who maimed or killed military-age men at checkpoints were rarely charged with violating the rules of engagement, with investigators often finding in their favour that the presence of Military-Age Males at areas/times of increased alert was experienced as threatening (Gregory, T. 2019, pp. 141-142).

In drone violence, USAF drone personnel can kill also MAMs with impunity, as MAMs are not counted as civilians unless there is “explicit intelligence posthumously proving them innocent” (Becker and Shane 2012). Such posthumous investigations are rarely carried out, particularly when there are no on-the-ground personnel in the targeted area (Reprieve 2016). The whistleblower who provided documents to *The Intercept* stated the following about Operation Haymaker in Afghanistan:

If there is no evidence that proves a person killed in a strike was either not a MAM or was a MAM but not an unlawful enemy combatant, then

there is no question. They label them EKIA [Enemies Killed in Action]. (Devereaux 2015)

Such gender-based targeting makes dangerous assumptions about men's willingness and capacity to fight, forgetting that "in many conflicts large proportions of adult men attempt to remain in the civilian sector" – with desertion and draft avoidance/resistance so common throughout history that many governments and rebel groups have needed to create harsh penalties and punishments to force men to fight (Carpenter 2006, p. 92). The Military-Age Male category thus constructs men and adolescent boys in Afghanistan as legitimate targets, erasing the agency and individuality of boys and men who refuse to join the Taliban and other terrorist groups.

In contrast, women are deemed civilians by default because of gendered assumptions regarding innocence and weakness (i.e. inability to fight). Auchter (2012, p. 127) writes that women are generally assumed to not be involved in the fighting; an idea that has been given weight over time by scholars emphasising "the peculiar characteristic of women as especially peaceful" and men as "naturally" more violent. Such essentialising characterisations also see women as the producers and "natural" carers of children (Åhäll 2012, p. 109), and thus women are often conflated with children in wartime – an infantilising conflation that Enloe (2014) spells out by collapsing a popular phrase into one word: 'womenandchildren'. Women are depicted as needing the same protection as children, creating a "dyad wherein men are regularly positioned as combatants and protectors during war, and women as civilians and protected" (Kinsella 2005, p. 254). More recent contributions to terrorism studies recognise women as fighters, but they still posit that "the only reason these women participate is because they are being used by men, as merely passive instruments of men's agency" (Auchter 2012, p. 129). Sjoberg (2009, p.

69) similarly states that “even work which explicitly addresses women’s terrorism frequently characterises participants as *women* terrorists rather than as terrorists who happen to be women – placing their gender at the forefront of accounts of their motivation”. Terrorist fighters who are women are said to be rape victims, or otherwise victims of oppression, who use violence to attain agency that has been denied to them on the basis of their gender (Auchter 2012; Sjoberg 2009). Auchter argues that these explanations draw on underdeveloped notions of agency and fail to consider a wide range of reasons why women might choose to use violence, including their commitment to a political cause (2012, p. 130).

As made clear in the last chapter on drone violence and race relations, it is impossible to make sense of social relations in drone violence without taking account of race. Understanding how Afghan women are viewed and conceived requires an intersectional approach, paying attention to the workings of both racism and sexism. Afghan women are depicted as victims in need of protection not just because of sexist assumptions described above. Racist and Orientalist understandings about life in Muslim-majority countries generally, and life in Afghanistan more specifically, interact with gendered assumptions about women. McBride and Wibben (2012, p. 202) write that “Muslim women are presented as politically immature and under barbaric oppression, such that they require rescue through Western (imperial) intervention”. In the ‘War on Terror’, Muslim women in Iraq and Afghanistan are portrayed as victims of Muslim men, but, as Cristina Masters (2009, p. 42) argues, not of American men – even when Muslim women have made allegations of rape against U.S. soldiers.

The naturalisation of what are socially constructed beliefs about women and men (and Muslim women and men) is dangerous, as lethal targeting decisions are made according to essentialising notions of sex and gender that

have been found to be false. Critiquing the idea that “men are just naturally those who wield violence”, Cynthia Enloe (2006, p. viii) writes “‘Naturally’ is a powerful and dangerous notion” particularly when it informs “politically-motivated acts of violence aimed at civilians”. Men cannot be assumed to be violent, nor can women be assumed to be peaceful, but this deconstruction of gender inconveniently undermines USAF’s belief that distinction between civilians and combatants is possible. The surveillance practices of the ‘War on Terror’ continue to reify and reproduce binary notions of gender and sex, even ignoring institutional “lessons learned” about the dangers of making assumptions regarding combatant or civilian status on the basis of sex and gender identity (Centre for Army Lessons Learned 2012).

Not only are men made highly vulnerable to drone violence (and ‘counterterrorism’ violence more broadly), but people whose gender identities are (seen as) ambiguous are also subject to heightened suspicion and violence. Laura J. Shepherd and Laura Sjoberg (2012, p. 11) write that binary notions of sex and gender are held onto because they maintain order and have long-structured “a host of social and political events and relationships”. They state that, “for this ordering to occur, we must first commit to the categories of ‘F’ and ‘M’, just as we commit to other organisational categories that help us make sense of, and feel secure in, our worlds” (Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012, p. 12). Such binary categorisations are both encouraged by and reproduce queer- and trans-phobia, resulting in exclusion of and even violence against sex- and gender ambiguous identities, “as it discomforts us to think differently about gender/sex and to question the categories that structure our conceptual frameworks” (Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012, p. 12). Shepherd and Sjoberg argue that queer and trans- bodies are also made vulnerable to violence “through the implicit or explicit historical treatment of those bodies as incidental, or in the alternative, as trickery”; “when genderqueer bodies are recognised, it is often as

fakes, as games and as pretensions” (2012, p. 12).⁵⁷ USAF drone crews likewise view people with ambiguous gender identities as visual tricks and potential threats, fearing that insurgent men may ‘disguise’ themselves as women to evade detection. These binary and essentialising notions of sex and gender place people with ambiguous identities at greater risk of violence.

Visual Surveillance Practices and Essentialising Notions of Sex and Gender

The visual conduits of the drone interface have a significant role to play in (re)producing essentialising notions of sex, gender and the identity of the civilian. Redden and Terry write that, “most technologies can be seen as both being gendered in and of themselves” and “once in existence, they can also be used in ways that are gendered and serve to further perpetuate an existing gendered order” (2013, p. 237). The drone interface’s visual/technological conduits further perpetuate the existing (patriarchal, binary) gendered order by providing information about people’s bodies and behaviours that are believed to reveal the ‘true’ sex and gender of the persons surveilled and thus their identity as a civilian or potential combatant. As U.S. Air Force Major General James O. Poss even conceded during the in-house investigations of the Uruzgan Attack, “technology can [...] give you a false sense of security that you can see everything, that you can hear everything, that you know everything” (Cloud 2014). It is not just that “particular groups of gendered bodies” are made increasingly insecure by this interaction of the drone interface’s conduits (although particular bodies are accused of “trickery”) (Redden and Terry 2013, p. 237). In a sense, all Afghan civilians are made vulnerable by gender-based targeting and the fetishised faith in the drone’s visual sensors to accurately

⁵⁷ In the ‘War on Terror’, many academics have examined the operationalisation of full-body scanners at international airports and what this means for transgender, gender nonbinary and queer identities – these scanners were partly justified by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)’s claims that suicide bombers may present themselves as women to discourage scrutiny from airport security officers (Beauchamp 2019; Clarkson 2019; Magnet and Rodgers 2011; Redden and Terry 2013; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012).

reveal sex and gender identity. Confidence in the reliability of these gendered targeting categories, and the drone's surveillance cameras to identify according to these categories, places civilians directly in harm's way.

In both Richard's explanation of drone targeting shortcuts and *The Transcript* it is clear that drone personnel are looking for sex and gender markers and drawing conclusions about civilian status, with dangerous consequences for people across the drone interface. Ostensibly the focus is on clothing, and thus gender performance, as the heat produced from wearing a burqa is said to verify the person is a woman. Richard concedes that men's heat signatures may be mistaken for women's if they are wearing clothing that insulates heat similarly to a burqa – if they are wearing a blanket or a long coat, for example. Presumably the reverse is also true, that women who are not wearing burqas (because they observe their Islamic faith differently, are around men who are Mahram, or for any other reason) may be mistaken for men if their heat signatures appear 'abnormally' cold.⁵⁸ In *The Transcript*, attempts to identify gender by colour of clothing similarly reveal the dangers of binary and essentialising ideas of gender. Afghan women do not all wear bright colours, while Afghan men often do. Identifying women by brightly coloured clothing might explain why, even in their post-strike discussions, USAF drone personnel undercounted the number of women actually present amongst the passengers in the Uruzgan Attack – it is possible the 'unseen' women were wearing darker clothing.

Understandings of biological sex markers are also in operation in the use of black body radiation as a visual shortcut as described by Richard, as well as in the surveillance practices detailed in *The Transcript*, also with dangerous effect.

⁵⁸ As described in the next section, 'Mahram' refers to a woman's circle of male relatives and close friends around whom observing purdah is not required.

Thermal imagery provided ‘suspicious’ evidence when the sensor operator noticed that many of the people appeared to have “a cold spot on their chest”. The pilot jumped to the conclusion that this was further evidence the people were Taliban militants, stating: “It’s what they have been doing here lately, they wrap their (expletive deleted) up in their man dresses, so you can’t PID it”. Here, a cold spot on the chest is deemed evidence of trickery – as something dangerous hiding underneath men’s traditional *shalwar kameez* – and is used as (tenuous) evidence of guilt. After the attack, the sensor operator remarks: “that guy looks like he is wearing jewellery and stuff like a girl, but he ain’t...if he’s a girl, he’s a big one”. Here, gender performance and biological sex markers are being looked at simultaneously by the sensor operator, causing confusion when they do not seem to ‘match up’ as one would expect from a cis-gendered and heteronormative perspective. Wearing jewellery is assumed to be what women do, and yet males are ‘supposed to’ have big bodies – at least bigger bodies than females. The idea that non-binary or transgender identities are performing trickery is in operation in both instances, as having something unknown underneath “man dresses” or displaying ‘mismatched’ markers of sex and gender identities is considered cause for alarm and justification for violence. These attempts to ascertain the ‘true’ sex and gender of people surveilled, and to identify them according to sex- and gender-based targeting categories, ultimately put everyone at risk – the people fired at, maimed and killed in the Uruzgan Attack were not all Military-Age Males, but included ‘womenandchildren’. More importantly, however, all the passengers regardless of their sex and gender identity were ordinary citizens who had no involvement with the Taliban or any other terrorist group.

Worryingly, there is no end to the ways in which essentialising notions of gender and sex might be further integrated into visual practices of drone surveillance and targeting. If it were not people’s chests that USAF drone

personnel were observing the temperature of, or the insulation of the (assumed) burqa, the core and surface temperature of bodies is another source of information from which conclusions of gender identity are drawn – a topic that has already inspired several U.S. Army Research Institute of Environmental Medicine studies in the past (Avellini et al. 1980; Shapiro et al. 1980; Stephenson and Kolka 1993). The variables recognised in these studies to affect body temperature are, among others, oestrogen levels, surface-area-to-body-mass ratio and sweat rate. These cannot be perfectly tied to biological sex; females will *mostly* have higher oestrogen levels, a larger surface-area-to-body-mass ratio and a lower sweat rate than males, but sex and hormone diversity means that this is *not always* the case – some males will have high levels of oestrogen, a large surface-area-to-body-mass ratio (if they have a slender build) and a low sweat rate. Despite the value invested into whether drone crews can accurately distinguish between men and women, ultimately sex and gender cannot be determined, nor can it be causally linked to one's propensity for violence. However, to admit to the many dangers of sex- and gender-based targeting would undermine some of the main premises on which war is fought and justified – the distinction between combatants and civilians; the protectors and the protected.

Gendered Effects of Drone Violence in Afghanistan

As argued above, people in rural Afghanistan are all put in danger of drone violence by binary and essentialising sex- and gender-based targeting categories and the USAF's belief in the drone's visual sensors to identify the 'true' sex and gender identities of the people surveilled using biological and social information. However, drone violence is experienced in more specifically gendered ways within Afghanistan. Boys and men experience heightened fear about drone surveillance and attacks, as they are aware of the increased

possibility of being mistaken for an insurgent. Girls and women have their privacy and freedom of movement acutely affected by drone surveillance; the knowledge that American men (and women – but there is less knowledge in Afghanistan that women are drone operators) are watching them from above is distressing because of gendered power dynamics and, in Afghanistan, for reasons of religious observance. In this section, I focus on the adverse psychosocial effects of drone surveillance on Afghan women, contending that drone surveillance is a sexist and patriarchal relation that also compounds sexist and patriarchal social relations within Afghanistan.

Drone Surveillance's Effects on Women in Afghanistan

Aarif is a Kuchi women from Khost province who lost her husband, son, three brothers-in-law, father-in-law and nephews in a drone attack in 2015. Talking about U.S. drone surveillance, Aarif stated that:

It's very impolite of them to watch women. The women freely walk in my house and do different things. This is a dishonour to us and is impolite. It's bullshit, silly... [...] we have less freedom than before, since the drones and planes were coming, because we are trying to stay at home. (Aarif, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

I asked Aarif if the women in her community talk to each other about drones flying over them. She replied:

Yes, we talk about it because we are unhappy when they go on top of us. We women are afraid a lot, but we are also unhappy they hover over us. We tell each other when we hear that a drone has come again. We try to keep on our scarves. (Aarif, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Aarif's mention of women's freedom to "freely walk" in her house and "do different things" is significant. Drone surveillance threatens this freedom, as it makes women's bodies and their activities public to American men. Prior to meeting Aarif, this point had been raised by several male interviewees in Afghanistan who spoke about the effects of drones on their wives, sisters and daughters.⁵⁹ Gul Mohammed stated that drone violence "affects our privacy also because we cannot live, sit or stand as freely as before. We try to keep ourselves tight. The women, they do this even more" (Gul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). Drone surveillance disrespects both Pashtun culture and the Islamic faith. Abdul Qodus stated that "it is not Pashtun culture to watch into someone's house [...] the thing to do is to knock on someone's door" (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). USAF drone personnel show contempt for Pashtun culture and the Islamic faith in social relations across the drone interface because, Abdul said, "it is not mahram to watch women and girls, and children. It's dishonourable and disrespectful" (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). 'Mahram' means people for whom Muslim women do not need to observe purdah around:

...someone's husband, brother, father or another close relative. If someone else [outside the village] comes they will need to knock because they are not mahram. A villager could come and talk to your wife, but for a stranger (if a man is not in the house) he should not come and say to the woman "open the door, I want to enter". This is disrespectful. But a villager can say, "I need a shovel", or "can I borrow your donkey, sister?". The whole village is like a family, so if they watch down on the

⁵⁹ Gul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan; Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan; Amidullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.

village from a drone, this is very dishonourable. (Anonymous translator, communication with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Abdul stated that women in his village are aware of drone surveillance and have limited their movement and tried to cover themselves when they hear or see that drones are flying overhead. This stops them from working freely on their family's farm, as they otherwise would, and means that they cover up when visiting other villagers (who are mahram):

In the villages, the women try as much as they can, to protect themselves, to not be very visible, especially when there is a drone. It's dishonourable. The women in the village are very disappointed. They don't like it. When the drone is flying over the village, our movement is limit. If we go out with a female member of the family, then she wears hijab. (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

I asked whether female members of the family would not otherwise wear hijab around the village, to which Abdul responded: "When there is no drone around, the women go out onto the land and they help with farming, only with a simple small scarf. They will visit other villagers with no hijab" (Abdul, interview with author, April 2017, Afghanistan). An interview with Mohammed, Ahmad and Amidullah from Wardak province corroborated this, with Amidullah (a 45 year-old health clinic worker) stating that "when our family members hear the drone, they will walk around – even in their house – with their hijab; they don't like to be seen and to be watched" (Amidullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). He continued:

When there is no drone, they wear a small light scarf and they go out to the garden and out to the farm and visit people. But if they hear it, they

go back home into their rooms. (Amidullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

As explained in chapter three, there is a gendered power dynamic in the act of looking, wherein men have long been positioned as the ones who have the ‘right to look’ while women have been the ‘objects’ to be looked at (Riley et al. 2-16; Mulvey 1999; Zurbriggen 2010; 2013). The increase in surveillance technologies has provided even more opportunities for men to look at women in these objectifying and controlling ways. Visual surveillance sensors have been used in domestic security spaces in the West to look at women for voyeuristic reasons, with some (Western) studies on CCTV finding that “at least one in 10 women are watched by control room operators for voyeuristic reasons alone” (Monahan 2009, p. 287). Monahan argues that one effect of more ubiquitous surveillance is the “masculinisation of space” whereby “women in public and private spaces are increasingly scrutinised without necessarily achieving any additional protection from harassment or assault” (2009, p. 287).⁶⁰ Women worldwide do not have identical experiences of surveillance. As Chandra Mohanty (1984, p. 339) compellingly argues, “male violence must be theorised and interpreted *within* specific societies”. Gender, sexual difference or patriarchy are not terms that “can be applied universally and cross-culturally” (Mohanty 1984, p. 337). However, there are similarities between the way surveillance technologies have been used violently against women in the West and the violences of drone surveillance for Afghan women. In both cases, there is a relation of domination between men and women where men are in the

⁶⁰ Indeed, surveillance technologies can actually provide tools with which perpetrators can be violent towards women. For instance, domestic- and family violence perpetrators (most often, but not exclusively, men) are using surveillance technologies (such as smartphone spyware, screen recorders, GPS trackers and services like ‘Wife Spy’) as well as home sensor technologies (such as Google Home) to monitor their intimate partners’ movements and prevent them from leaving or seeking help (Bowles 2018; Maher and Fitz-Gibbon 2007; Mason and Magnet 2012). Rather than increasing women’s safety, then, surveillance technologies can be used to engage in unwanted looking and surveillance, and to enact violence – preventing women from leaving their homes, for example.

dominant position, although the effects of this relation for women may play out differently in localised contexts.

Based on extensive interviews with Afghan women, Schutte (2014, pp. 1179) writes that patriarchy is the “dominant social relation [that] keeps women subordinate in many ways” in Afghan society with “male control over women’s labour power, reproduction, sexuality, mobility and household economic resources” evident in interviews. Schutte states that male control within the household is, however, dependent on individual household situations and personalities (2014, p. 1180). As seen in Aarif’s interview, her and other women in her village had the freedom to work for the family, they were involved economically, and visited villagers (regardless of gender), carrying out these activities wearing either a “small scarf” or no scarf. Interviews with men suggested that this was true of the women in their lives, too. However, women’s bodily autonomy and their personal choices regarding their observance of Islam are compromised by U.S. drone surveillance. Aarif stated that the women in her village will stop their activities outside, come inside and cover themselves completely (even in their family homes where veiling is uncommon) if a drone is heard in the area. Their observance of Islam will be broken if they are seen unveiled by American men (who are not mahram). American drone operators, by seeing unveiled Muslim women, are adopting a relation of the same intimacy as the women’s husbands and they are doing so without women’s consent. As Sehlkoglou (2016, p. 239) puts it, in Muslim cultures “gazing penetrates when it trespasses the *mahram* borders, therefore violating the privacy of the seen”. She writes, “once [the gaze] trespasses these set borders, the gaze becomes penetration and is therefore sexually active” (Sehlkoglou 2016, p. 239). Given drone surveillance is thus synonymous with unwanted sexual attention, it is no surprise that Aarif angrily commented that it is “very impolite”, “bullshit” and “silly”. For many Muslim women, wearing the veil is a choice that is an

“expression of and a means to [...] submission to God’s will” (Mahmood 2009, pp. 208-209). Drone surveillance therefore effectively restricts women’s choices, making them decide between either observing their religion as they wish or being active outside on their farms and in their communities.

Drone surveillance is also particularly damaging in the way that it interacts with, and compounds, the limits placed on other Afghan women’s freedoms. While interviewees for this project reported that women in their villages were involved in farming activities, had economic responsibilities, and could visit villagers without being accompanied by a male relative, this is not the case for many Afghan women who are subjected to domestic abuse and have significant limits placed on their activities and interactions both inside and outside the home (Stokes et al. 2009, p. 826). Regardless of the passage of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law in 2009, Afghan women continue to face high rates of domestic abuse and, like their women counterparts in the West, face myriad pressures not to report it (Stokes et al. 2016, p. 818). Domestic abuse sufferers frequently have “access outside the home [...] restricted by requiring male supervision” or are completely imprisoned within their houses (Stokes et al. 2009, p. 826). It is entirely possible, then, that Afghan women who are not permitted by abusive or controlling husbands to leave the house or cannot leave the house without accompaniment from a male relative, may miss rare opportunities for resistance if they hear or see a drone in the area. The fear of being seen by American men and breaking their religious observance could prevent women from taking up opportunities to leave an abusive or controlling household even briefly, therein exacerbating existing surveillance of Afghan women. In this sense, then, drone surveillance compounds women’s entrapment within the home. Given ‘War on Terror’ narratives that the West was/is protecting Afghan women from the violences of Afghan men, the harms produced in social relations across the drone

interface are particularly damning – far from saving Afghan women, drone surveillance is perpetuating and compounding sexist and patriarchal relations including by constraining the freedoms of Afghan women.

Conclusion

Social relations across the drone interface have gendered and gendering effects on people surveilled and targeted by drones in Afghanistan as well as USAF drone personnel. The visual, discursive and ideological conduits of the drone interface interact in different ways to (re)produce hyper-masculinity, sexism and patriarchal social relations. Gender shapes U.S. Air Force drone personnel's reactions to interacting with and through the drone interface. I argued that cultures of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchy encourage men to experience or perform rational, emotionless, prideful and/or pleasurable reactions to drone surveillance and killing. However, because hegemonic masculinity is an unstable category that is formed only in relation to alternative masculinities and femininities, these are not the only reactions to drone violence. U.S. Air Force drone personnel who more closely align with alternative masculinities and/or femininities hold counter-hegemonic potential, as they are more likely to recognise interdependence with and care about the people they surveil and target.

In drone targeting, USAF drone personnel use visual shortcuts when looking at both thermal and electro-optical imagery cameras to identify 'Military-Age Males' from women and children. The visual conduits of social relations – particularly the drone's visual sensors that capture and transmit 'evidence' of biological and social identities – interact with discursive conduits that shape and constrain who is seen as 'civilian'. I argued that confidence in the ability to distinguish between sex and gender identities – and confidence in

gendered assumptions about who is and is not worthy of targeting – puts all civilians in harm’s way. Not only can women be mistaken for men, but Military-Age Males are straightforwardly assumed to be potential combatants because of essentialising notions about masculinity and propensity/willingness to fight. This reproduction of gender-based distinctions, particularly in such an uncritical and unquestioning manner, also reifies the equally problematic civilian/combatant distinction.

Lastly, I argued that the effects of drone violence in Afghanistan are gendered. Drone surveillance (re)produces sexist and patriarchal relations, instituting a male gaze while compounding restrictions on Afghan women’s freedoms. Afghan women under drones are put in a position of either choosing to work outside and interact with their communities or to observe their religion in the way they would like (i.e. by not breaking *purdah*). If Afghan women were to choose to continue to be outside (particularly in a small scarf or no scarf) when a drone flies over, they would be exposed to American men (an interaction of the same intimacy as those between wives and husbands). As interviewees stated, few women would make such a choice – with many working women deciding to come inside to cover up if a drone is seen or heard in the area. This is a psychosocial harm inflicted by drone violence that is missed by mainstream and non-relational accounts. As such, there has been little political advocacy regarding the prevention and redress of these harms inflicted against Afghan women. Overall, this chapter has illustrated that a relational approach is needed to adequately analyse drone violence and to account for a wide range of harms to people living under drones and those operating them.

The next chapter examines drone violence and labour relations. I once again contend that the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people is one of domination, this time focusing on how the relation

causes and exacerbates poverty, alienation and estrangement from natural environments. I argue that drone attacks physically and psychologically injure Afghan people, preventing them from working or studying as often or as well as they did prior to drones targeting their areas. Drone attacks constitute 'idiosyncratic shocks' that can push already vulnerable Afghan families into poverty or worsen their existing poverty. Drone attacks that have struck people on mountains, farmland and in forests have also estranged Afghan people from accessing these areas of land and much-needed natural resources – presenting challenges to subsistence. I further consider the 'killing work' of U.S. Air Force drone personnel, including many effects produced by their relations across the drone interface that are currently unacknowledged or underexplored in the literature on drone personnel's mental health. I argue that the fetishisation of the drone, an ideological conduit of the drone interface, plays a large role in causing social alienation amongst USAF drone personnel and veterans.

6. Drone Violence and Labour Relations: The Infliction of Poverty, Estrangement and Social Alienation

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine the effects of drone violence and its social relations on people's labour, livelihoods and (resultantly) their psychological wellbeing. As with prior chapters, I apply the concept of the drone interface to analyse social relations in drone violence and the harms inflicted through those relations. In the first section, I examine the effects of drone violence on labour, livelihoods and psychological wellbeing in Afghanistan. Drone violence injures Afghan people's bodies and psyches, decreasing their capacity to work and study for the number of hours they had previously or to the same quality. In the case of at least two interviewees, drone-bombing injuries had precluded them from taking up opportunities in tertiary education. Further, drone-bombing deaths have a profound impact on the livelihoods of Afghan women and children living under drones, who are left economically impoverished when they lose their husbands or fathers in lethal drone attacks. Most girls and women are not given the same educational and economic opportunities as boys and men in Afghanistan and are thus unable to attain sufficient household incomes when they are orphaned or widowed by the death of a male family member in a drone attack (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010). In Afghanistan, these effects on labour and economic livelihoods risk exacerbating poverty, malnourishment and increasing the numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) (Akram-Lodhi 2016; Crawford 2015; Haider and Kumar 2018; Koser and Schmeidl 2009; Rizvi 2011). They also cause ongoing psychological distress

for individuals and families, who must adjust to the death(s) and injury (or injuries) of family members while also finding alternative ways to meet the cost of living. I argue that U.S. drone violence enacts a relation of domination between USAF drone personnel and people living under drones in Afghanistan, which (re)produces harms such as poverty and sexism within Afghanistan.

I also consider damage to the environment and human-environment relationships – another psychosocial and economic harm inflicted in drone violence. I argue that Afghan people’s relationship to their land and nearby natural resources has become estranged because of past drone attacks, with many now fearing lethal attack if they are to visit natural environments to obtain much-needed resources. Falling outside mainstream definitions of “critical infrastructure” (Aradau 2010), damage to the environment and human-environment relationships are harms that go unrecognised in drone violence scholarship and criticism (Grove 2019; Shaw 2016b; Steele 2013). Ecological destruction (in global South countries) has long been part of Western counterinsurgency campaigns, particularly the use of aerial bombing to destroy environments and food supplies (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011; Neocleous 2014; Nguyen 2009). U.S. drone violence therefore continues a historical relation of domination between the global North and global South whereby global South ecologies are damaged and destroyed and livelihoods are undermined.

Across the drone interface, USAF drone personnel work in exploitative and dangerous employment that is psychologically harmful. In the second section of this chapter, I argue that the U.S. Air Force exposes its drone program employees to several psychological health risks. Interviewees stated that their time at work in the drone program had been so all-consuming that any attempts to establish a work/home boundary were unsuccessful, leading to

a decline in psychological health. Drone personnel are over-worked much like employees in other sectors. However, because their work requires inflicting harm on other humans, the demanding conditions compound and exacerbate the unique stressors caused by killing work (Asaro 2013). They also experience a unique kind of social alienation because of their killing work. One of the most injurious effects described to me by drone veterans was the isolation they felt when their experiences of work were not understood or believed by their families, friends and the wider American public. I will argue that this social alienation is caused by the technological fetishisation of drones in U.S. (and Western) society, whereby the technology has become more trusted than the people who use it (Beier 2006; Ellen 1988; Shaw and Akhter 2012; Zehfuss 2010). In emphasising the unique stressors of killing work, I challenge studies by military psychologists (Chappelle and McDonald 2012; Chappelle et al. 2010; Otto and Weber 2013; Ouma et al. 2011), which argue that long work hours and other occupational health difficulties (such as shift work and ergonomic problems) are the leading cause of poor psychological health among USAF drone personnel.

Drone Violence and Experiences of Labour in Afghanistan

Effects of Drone-Bombing Injuries on Work and Education in Afghanistan

Hassan, a 42-year-old farmer from Daikundi province, was one of three men interviewed who were injured in the aforementioned Uruzgan Attack: a drone and helicopter attack on the border of Uruzgan and Daikundi that killed 21 civilians in February 2010. The transcript of communications detailing the attack was published in the *LA Times* and parts of it were analysed in the last chapter (Transcripts of a U.S Drone Attack 2014). Hassan was in the vehicle

convoy with the hope of eventually making it to Iran to look for short-term work opportunities. He sustained several injuries in the bombing:

I saw fire and then I fainted. I found myself in the hospital. I was injured in my abdomen, head, neck and hand, so that is why I was unconscious. After three nights, I woke up in hospital and I was told that foreign military had brought me to the hospital. Then I saw bandages on my hand and wounds. I felt very weak. I became very disappointed and sad when I saw my injuries. (Hassan, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Hassan explained to me the serious effects of his injuries on his work and family. In addition to the hand injury, which makes it harder for him to hold farming tools, Hassan experiences dizziness and frequent falls because of the blow to his head during the bombing. He cannot physically exert himself as much or work the same hours as before the attack because he gets dizzy and falls over. As Hassan is employed out on a daily basis as a labourer to locals for farm and irrigation work, the effects of his injuries make him less productive and therefore a less competitive employee than other daily labourers in the village. Hassan has four daughters, two sons, a wife and a mother all living in the same house, for whom he is the main provider. His injuries have thus meant considerable financial stress for him and his family and have consequently diminished his sense of self-worth and esteem:

Before, when I wasn't injured, I could work very well on the farm and feed my family. Economically, it is very hard for me. My children want food, clothing and shoes. I become ashamed of myself when I cannot provide for them. I am not a complete person when I cannot feed them well. Also, my wife, when she asks for something because she cannot

afford it, I cannot afford to bring it to her. It disappoints me. [...] Before when I was healthy, I could work better and feed them better and buy them things. Now I can't do that. That's why my children feel hopeless. (Hassan, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Because Hassan can work significantly fewer hours than he used to, the food he gets given (instead of monetary payment) is "half or maybe worse than half of what we had before" meaning that his family is eating half as much as they did prior to the attack (Hassan, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan).

Shanaky is a young man (25-years-old at the time of the interview) who was blinded in both eyes by a drone attack while he was out on his family's apple orchard in Wardak province. He has struggled to find employment because of the physical and psychological injuries he sustained, despite holding a four-year tertiary degree in economics. Prior to the drone strike, he had been a high-achieving university student and a close competitor for 'Kadr' (the top student), but the attack has made his memory "very weak" and he finds it difficult to concentrate (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan).

Before the attack on me, I was in the top of my class – I was in the first or second position. After the attack, I lost all my chances as studying was very difficult for me. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Shanaky continued with his degree, but his grades dropped, and he was consequently unable to take higher level subjects that would have led to better opportunities after graduation. Shanaky's experience shares much in common

with Saifullah's. Saifullah was injured in the Uruzgan Attack alongside Hassan. He was heading to Kabul from Daikundi to study pharmacy and religious studies at university, but the injuries he sustained in the attack have prevented him from undertaking further study. In addition to losing his left leg, Saifullah experiences ongoing memory weakness which he attributes to either the injury sustained to the back of his head or the psychological trauma of losing his younger brother (23-years-old when he died) in the Uruzgan Attack. He stated,

If I am in a class I cannot concentrate throughout the lesson. Before, I was very good. I could understand and remember the lesson well. But now if I read something, after a short time I will lose it. (Saifullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

This lost opportunity at tertiary education has taken an economic and psychological toll on his family, Saifullah said:

[Before] I could continue my education, but now I can't. [...] My family believed and trusted that in our family we would have one person with high level knowledge. I was going to do further study in Kabul. The wider family thought I would become a very knowledgeable person among them, but because I couldn't continue they lost their hope. (Saifullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Shanaky likewise finds it difficult to concentrate on complex intellectual tasks, but his eye injury prevents him from performing manual tasks too:

Before I could drive, but now I can't. Before I could do any kind of work, but now I can't, because if I go to the bazaar the dust scratches at my right eye and it makes it water. I can't study well on the computer. I am

weaker than before. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Shanaky's injuries and medical expenses have had a significant impact on the family's livelihoods. Shanaky's younger brothers have been taken out of high school, so that they can work for the family. This affects their social mobility in the long-term, particularly entry into professional careers that require university qualifications. Surgery that restored sight in Shanaky's right eye (he is still blind in his left eye) cost the family 6000 USD – a loan that they are still paying back to a member of the community:

My family had a big hope, because I am the eldest son in the family, that after graduation I would have a good job and be able to support them economically, but when this happened the whole family became very sad. And all the money they had, they spent it on me for my medical costs. Economically, this hit us very hard: about 6000 USD we spent on my treatment, so the whole family is very sad and we have a lot of financial stress. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Hearing about the attack on Shanaky and his medical expenses, other families in the community were afraid that they might be attacked in a drone bombing and that they would be unable to afford the medical costs. They have since moved out of the village:

Those families who were financially able to, they moved out after the attack. They were afraid. There were about 10-15 families that moved and came down to the city: some to Kabul and some to Maidan Shar [the province capital]. The people who could move, moved. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Drone violence physically and psychologically injures Afghan people, diminishing their ability to work and study with negative repercussions on their economic livelihoods. It causes physical damage to bodies, resulting in a loss of productivity and profit for Afghan people. Psychological injury can also either reduce the hours and quality of one's work or study, or make working and studying completely unachievable. The effects of these injuries compound existing poverty in Afghanistan where "an estimated 40 percent of rural Afghans are malnourished; about 70 percent of the population lives on less than 2 USD per day; [and] over two-thirds of Afghans over the age of 15 cannot read and write" (Koser and Schmeidl 2009, p. 9). Moreover, about 40.9% of children under the age of five are "suffering from chronic malnutrition" (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 13). Analysing Afghanistan's 'National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment' (NRVA) survey data, Mohammad Hakim Haider and Sumit Kumar found that "on all three measures" of vulnerability to poverty (calorie-based, food consumption and non-food consumption) "more than a half of Afghan households are vulnerable to poverty in 2011/2012" (2018, p. 31). It only takes what is referred to in International Political Economy and Development Studies literature as an 'idiosyncratic shock' to push these already vulnerable households into poverty. Idiosyncratic shocks are "related with family characteristics like the death of a family member, loss of a job, [and] bankruptcy of the family (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 74). Haider and Kumar (2018, p. 75) hypothesise that the "risk of Afghan households falling into poverty is higher when hit by idiosyncratic shocks compared with those affected by generic shocks". If a family member is killed or injured in a drone attack, such an idiosyncratic shock can come at an enormous financial cost to the family.

There are many causes of poverty in Afghanistan and any analysis suggesting that drone violence is the sole, or even a primary, cause of poverty would be misguided, ignoring a wide range of contributing factors. However, the above interview testimonies demonstrate that drone surveillance and attacks constitute idiosyncratic shocks that have pushed families (who were previously vulnerable-yet-coping) into poverty. In interviewees' experiences, drone violence has contributed to malnourishment and, as Shanaky stated, has even created internally displaced persons (IDPs). These findings corroborate with a (2011) report on internal displacement in Afghanistan authored by Sumbul Rizvi – a Senior Protection Commissioner for UNHCR and the Afghanistan Protection Cluster Co-ordinator. Rizvi (2011, p. 3) writes that “first and foremost”, the cause of internal displacement is “the intensifying conflict between the Afghan government and its international supporters and the insurgency”. She specifically states that “methods of warfare have reportedly led to forced eviction of civilians besides destruction of homes, agricultural lands and properties by parties to the conflict”, adding that “aerial bombardments and ground troop operations remain a key cause of flight” (Rizvi 2011, p. 3). According to Neta Crawford’s research for the Costs of War project (2015, p. 5), by late 2014 there were more than 701,900 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Afghanistan. The outlook for IDPs is very poor; internally displaced persons often live in poverty, experience daily hunger and struggle to find employment (Koser and Schmeidl 2009). Those who move to other rural locations often end up occupying uninhabited land many miles away from vital services (like healthcare) and economic activity (market towns), and those who move to cities usually live in sprawling squatter settlements (Koser and Schmeidl 2009, p. 9). Furthermore, IDPs additionally lose the close kin networks they have usually developed in their hometowns and therefore can be less reliant on others for offers of food and accommodation.

In Shanaky's case, his family have had to lend their apple orchard with 275 apple trees to a local villager until the loan he gave them for Shanaky's medical costs is paid back:

We gave our orchard temporarily – with 275 apple trees – to the man who lent us money for my treatment. Until we can pay him back for what we still owe on medical costs, he will get all the money from the apple trees. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Until the loan is paid, the family are gaining no income from the apple orchard, as it all goes to the local villager. Shanaky's family were, comparatively to other rural Afghans, doing economically well before the drone attack. They owned an apple orchard, their eldest child had obtained a tertiary degree and their two teenage sons were in high school. Haider and Kumar (2018, p. 42) place orchard owners in the top 14 highest earning professions in Afghanistan, noting that "people engaged [in these professions] were prone to low risk of falling into poverty". Having a family member who has obtained secondary and tertiary levels of education is also not characteristic of the Afghan poor (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 64). The family are now working as shepherds and farmers, which are in the most poverty-prone and median poverty-prone categories respectively (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 42). Moreover, as Rizvi (2011, p. 5) notes, financial loans from friends and villagers will often "further impoverish" the borrowers, and, as such, it is not clear that Shanaky's family will ever return to their previous economic standing.

If idiosyncratic shocks can affect Shanaky's comparatively affluent family so adversely, they can certainly bring more vulnerable families into poverty. As a farmer hired out on a daily basis, Hassan is in the most-poverty prone category of professions in Afghanistan (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 42). He has now

been rendered uncompetitive (in comparison to other daily labourers) because of the injuries he sustained in the Uruzgan Attack. Although more research would need to be done to ascertain this, it is highly likely that Hassan's family meets the criteria for poverty in terms of calories, food consumption and non-food consumption (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 31). His children "want food, clothing and shoes" and Hassan feels ashamed because he cannot provide for them (Hassan, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). Farmers and shepherds are already vulnerable to poverty in Afghanistan and drone violence is the kind of idiosyncratic shock that can bring farming and shepherding families into poverty. The above testimonies demonstrate that economic hardship (and resultant psychological distress) can continue many years after sustaining a drone-bombing injury. Even still, these severe and ongoing harms receive no recognition in drone violence scholarship and criticism – nor are any efforts taken to measure such harms or advocate for their redress. Mainstream, non-relational approaches cannot analytically capture ongoing harms suffered by people, given their focus on more powerful actors (states and institutions) and their view that war is made up of discrete 'events' – such as violations of sovereignty and international law.

The Economic Outlook for Widows and Orphans

Drone violence also renders Afghan women and children particularly vulnerable to poverty and further violence when male relatives are killed, as men are most often the family breadwinners in rural Afghanistan. Saifullah and Nabi testified that the Uruzgan Attack killed many husbands and fathers, leaving wives and children with little income. They explained that five or six women remain widows and have not re-married since the attack. Nabi stated:

Economically the effect was harsh because they lost their breadwinners, or lost their children. And the other villagers also have a difficult life

[because they] help and support them. If a Muslim or a non-Muslim went to visit them, they would not keep themselves from crying. It is a very, very hard situation. (Nabi, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Aarif is a farmer in Khost province and the mother of a two-year-old daughter. Her experiences of U.S. drone surveillance were documented in the last chapter. In 2015, a U.S. drone attack killed 14 men in Aarif's family, including six men in her immediate family: her husband, son, father in law and three nephews. In addition to the grief suffered by Aarif and her remaining family members, they have also been left impoverished by the loss of the family's breadwinners:

We have a very heavy load of sadness. A sad life has been given to us. Many women are now young widows and their young children are left to us to take care [of]. [...] Hopefully someone will help us because we have a very bad life. (Aarif, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Aarif pointed to her 18-year-old nephew, who was also in the room during the interview, stating:

This boy is the oldest man in the family. All the others are very young. He is the man in the family. [...] He has all the economic responsibility. For him, it is difficult. He cannot fulfil this responsibility. How do you run a family when you don't have any property or anything? (Aarif, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

The injuries and deaths of male family members in drone attacks increases Afghan women's vulnerability to poverty and violence, as women in Afghanistan are most often reliant upon their male relatives' income (Eggerman

and Panter-Brick 2010). Widows and orphaned girls are unable to match the income that the now-deceased male member(s) of the family had contributed because sexist power relations in Afghanistan frequently exclude them from the same educational and economic opportunities available to boys and men. According to Eggerman and Panter-Brick (2010, p. 75), “social functioning” in Afghanistan is “particularly difficult for widows and orphans”. They state that, for widows, “restrictions on female mobility in the absence of a male ‘chaperon’” means that “their eldest child had to generate an income” (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, p. 75). Widows interviewed by Eggerman and Panter-Brick cited “their lack of a male ‘guardian’ as their most distressing problem” and this was the case even when they resided with their extended family “due to their lack of status and influence over decision-making” (2010, p. 75). Orphan girls living in an impoverished household are at greater risk of being “promised in marriage to less desirable partners”, including those who might be abusive and/or substantially older (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, p. 75). Moreover, Eggerman and Panter-Brick’s (2010, p. 75) study of war-affected areas in Afghanistan found that “economically-frustrated husbands” were more likely to experience “outbursts of anger” that lead to domestic abuse. Women and girls are therefore greatly vulnerable to poverty and/or abuse when their male relatives are injured or killed in drone attacks. U.S. drone attacks therefore (re)produce and compound sexist social relations and poverty within Afghanistan.

The loss or disability of parents or older siblings in U.S. drone attacks also adversely affects young boys. Young boys whose parents or older siblings have been injured or killed in U.S. drone attacks have their educational opportunities, and therefore their chances at attaining higher paying professional careers, curtailed. They are likely to be withdrawn from school early to work for the family, as was the case for Aarif’s nephew and Shanaky’s

high school-aged younger brothers. According to Human Rights Watch (2016), at least a quarter of Afghan children between the ages of five and 14 work for their families. A 2013 survey by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) paints a more dire picture, finding that as many as 52% of children are working “in one way or other”. This points to further problems with the ‘Military-Age Male’ targeting category. Not only is it very difficult to ascertain sex and gender identity through the visual conduits of the drone interface, as explained in the last chapter, it is also impossible to distinguish with certainty between people older and younger than 16-years-old. The risks of being a ‘Military-Age Male’ in an area of active operations are therefore not exclusive to adolescent boys and men over 16-years-old, but also pose a danger to younger civilian boys. The visual shortcuts used to ascertain age through drone surveillance cameras include bodily movement (whether, as Richard put it, the person(s) surveilled have frenetic, child-like energy) and observed social behaviours. The likelihood of Afghans being mis-aged by U.S. drone personnel is therefore particularly high, given Afghan children have a greater burden of responsibility from a much younger age than their Western counterparts and are less likely to be at school or playing. Afghan boys performing activities seen as ‘adult’ in the West could easily be mis-targeted as ‘Military-Age Males’ – increasing their vulnerability to injury and death.

Afraid of the Mountains: Estranged Relationships to the Land

Estrangement from the environment is another ongoing harm inflicted on Afghan people through U.S. drone violence, continuing a history of North-South relations whereby people in the global South have their natural environments destroyed and their self-sufficiency undermined. Abdul Qodus lives in a mountain village community where, he says, the community’s “lives are connected to the mountain” (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). They take their animals to the mountain to graze, they collect

bushes for firewood (for warmth and for cooking), they collect mushrooms and leeks to eat, and water irrigation pipes run from a spring on the mountain down onto their farms:

We are people living close to the mountain. We are mountain people. We go to the mountain to collect wood for fuel, for fires. We need it for our cooking and to make bread. In the flat areas of the village, there are no bushes for firewood to collect. We take our animals to the mountain. Our lives are connected to the mountain [...] We also go there to collect mushrooms and mountain leeks to cook them or to dry them. We get water from the mountain too, because there is a spring there. So, we connected a pipe to bring the water down to irrigate our farms. (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Abdul's brother was killed by a U.S. drone attack on the mountain in 2015. The drone attack that killed his brother left the bombarded site of the mountainside blackened by fire and also killed three of the family's goats. In previous years, four other civilians had been killed by U.S. drones on the mountain:

I don't remember the year, but it was before my brother's death. They were also civilians, they had also gone to the mountain to bring bushes on their shoulders, collecting firewood for cooking and heating. Some of them had gone up there to take their animals to the mountain. The whole village life is with the mountain – it is a mountain village location. (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Since U.S. drone attacks have killed villagers on the mountain, the community's relationship to the mountain has changed significantly:

[Now] we go less to the mountain. When we go to connect the pipes and organise the irrigation of our farm, we do it in a hurry, not like normal. We go with fear. We cannot care as well for our farms as before because our access to the mountain is limited. (Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

Abdul was not the only interviewee who expressed a close connection with, and dependency, on nearby mountains. Amidullah explained that his village also relies upon neighbouring mountains:

We go to the mountains to collect bushes for fuel – as firewood. And when we go to collect those bushes, we go with fear and we are very afraid because if the aircraft comes, or the drone, they think that in the mountains everybody is Taliban. But that is our culture: we go to collect firewood from the mountain because we need it for our tandoor [bread oven]. (Amidullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

The U.S. drone attack that blinded Shanaky while he was irrigating also destroyed part of his family's orchard. Shanaky was alone, holding a shovel, at about 1.30pm during the day when he saw “a flame, fire and then found [himself] in Peshawar, Pakistan” for medical treatment (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). He had lost consciousness. “I just saw fire in front of me”, he said, “and heard the sound of the explosion, but that is all I remember” (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). However, years later, the environment where Shanaky was injured still tells the story of the drone bombing:

The attack heavily damaged three trees in my apple garden, they were uprooted. Around that point, other trees burnt. Some trees have metallic wire shrapnel embedded in their trunks, and they don't give apples

anymore. Three trees are completely destroyed, and six others are damaged – they give no apples. There is also a hole about 50cm deep from where the bomb dropped. (Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan)

In chapter four, I recounted the story of two farmers, Mohammed and Amidullah, who have heard drones at night while irrigating their farms and have retreated back into their homes. As Mohammed describes, “if I miss the water on my turn to leave and go home, then my wheat dries out because I have to wait till my next turn” (Mohammed, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan). Given 50% of Afghan households rely on agricultural work as a source of income (and 30% as their main source), U.S. drone violence that prevents people from farming and irrigating can undermine many Afghans’ capacity to be self-sufficient (Akram-Lodhi 2016, p. 169). Further, the ability to irrigate land is much more valuable than simple ownership of land in Afghanistan, a country where only 12% of the soil is arable and where farming families survive on their own wheat and other crops (Akram-Lodhi 2016, p. 169). Haider and Kumar (2018, p. 56) likewise find that there is not much difference in land ownership between poor and non-poor families in Afghanistan. “What really matters”, they write, “is its irrigation status, whether some source of irrigation is available to the farmers” (Haider and Kumar 2018, p. 56). That the U.S. Air Force continues to fly drones over civilians’ farms in Mohammed and Amidullah’s village, preventing irrigation, comes at a significant economic and psychological cost to these farmers and their families who have lost entire crop harvests because their irrigation has been disrupted.

In addition to the economic effects of this (and resultant psychological distress), there is also the psychological harm of this altered relationship with the land – from a relation of close connection to one of estrangement. This is

similar to what Brent J. Steele refers to as “architectural scarring” – scarring that entails the literal destruction of the built environment as well as the metaphorical scarring of people’s affective and emotional connections to that environment (2013, p. 114). While Steele is referring to feelings of loss, grief and fear towards (damaged or destroyed) built environments (2013, pp. 119-120), these feelings can also be evoked by the damage and destruction of natural environments. Ian Shaw (2016b, p. 689) refers to warfare as “atmospheric” to capture these affective dimensions of war and war’s destruction. Atmospheric warfare, he argues, “must be understood as both ecological and electronic” (2016b, p. 691). From the 20th century, warfare has entailed the enclosure of people’s lifeworlds through both ecological and electronic means – the poisoning, burning and destruction of the lived environment and the capture of the atmosphere electronically through tracking and surveillance. Shaw writes that “a range of global apparatuses, from satellites and drones orbiting the planet, to National Security Agency (NSA) listening posts, now produce an increasingly totalising form of atmospheric surveillance” (2016b, pp. 695-696). Electronic enclosure works together with ecological enclosure – whereby the natural environment is made untraversable or inhospitable – to completely shrink the lifeworlds of war-affected peoples (Shaw 2016b, p. 690). Afghan people living under drones are made to feel fearful of mountainous areas and farmland and limit their movement to and around those areas. The U.S. Air Force therefore shrinks their lifeworlds through electronic surveillance and ecological destruction.

In bombing natural environments and weakening human-environment relationships, the U.S. Air Force continues a historical relation of domination between the global North and global South. This relation of domination has seen global North countries destroy the environment and food supplies of the global South, estranging Indigenous peoples from their lands, in attempt to

quash insurgencies. Aerial bombardment and the dropping of herbicides and defoliants has been a key feature of several Western counterinsurgency wars fought in the global South. The ‘Malayan Emergency’, a counterinsurgency war fought between the Malayan National Liberation Party and Britain, Australia and New Zealand (the Commonwealth), became a blueprint for America’s anti-Communist counterinsurgency wars in South East Asia – with heavy use of bombardment, herbicides and defoliants seen as the most effective way to defeat insurgents (and intentionally or not, civilians) living in jungles, mountains and uplands (Sodhy 1987). Geographers Nancy Lee Peluso and Peter Vandergeest write that a key aspect of British counterinsurgency in Malaysia was “cutting off food and supply lines, as well as preventing physical access between the two sets of jungle dwellers [insurgents and local people] as much as possible, to prevent prior residents’ political re-education [...] or empathetic support” (2011, p. 596). The Malayan Emergency saw the first use of Agent Orange and other defoliants to destroy insurgents’ food crops (Nguyen 2009). This later became the strategy of the U.S. in Vietnam; to starve insurgents and to destroy jungle cover that the Viet Cong may be hiding in with heavy bombing, herbicides and defoliants (Nguyen 2009). Over a 10-year period (1961-1971), the U.S. Air Force dropped as much as 73-77 million litres of herbicides in South Vietnam, on “15-20% or up to one fifth of the forest land in the south” directly spraying as many “as 3-7 million Vietnamese” people (Nguyen 2009, p. 12).⁶¹ As Nguyen (2009, pp. 14-15) details, this had

⁶¹ The environmental effects of U.S. drone violence are much less catastrophic than those caused by wide area bombing and the defoliant and herbicide drops of the 20th century’s counterinsurgency wars or even more recent ‘War on Terror’ examples. The blast radius of the two munitions dropped by the U.S. Air Force’s Reaper drones – GBU-12s and Hellfire missiles is 15-90 metres (Hellfire missiles have a 15-20 metre blast radius, while GBU-12s have a 60-90 metre blast radius) (Gregory, D. 2013; Stanford Law School/NYU School of Law 2012, p. 10). While undeserving of their reputation as clean and precise, these munitions’ blast radiuses are much smaller than the heavy munitions often dropped by piloted aircraft. The U.S. Air Force continues to fly B-52 bombers over Afghanistan, which can carry up to 70,000 pounds of munitions with much wider and more devastating blast radiuses. The U.S. Air Force has also dropped Depleted Uranium (DU) munitions during the ‘War on Terror’ – most (in)famously in the invasion of Iraq, but there are also indications that the U.S. used DU in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2006 (though these are yet to be confirmed) (PAX 2014, p. 13). Depleted Uranium is a heavy metal that is chemically toxic and radioactive. After the initial impact (and the secondary incendiary effect it causes), DU “dust and fragments will contaminate the target” and “those that miss will end up or soils where they can corrode, potentially polluting ground water” (PAX 2014, p. 13). U.S. drone violence

considerable effect on the ecology of South Vietnam and Vietnamese people's relationship to the environment, causing long-term damage: deforested areas remained barren due to soil contamination, wildlife and bird populations dropped significantly due to habitat destruction, and contamination of the waterways led to high levels of dioxin found in ducks, chicken and fish.

Much like 20th century counterinsurgency wars in South East Asia, the U.S. Air Force perceives people as guilty due to their physical proximity to, and close association with, the natural environment. In Malaysia, Vietnam and Cambodia, it was people in the jungles that carried this guilty connotation (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011). People living in jungles were “tribalised’ by their associations with jungles and rendered violent by alleged associations with insurgents” (Peluso and Vandergeest 2011, p. 590). In Afghanistan, people spotted in the mountains by U.S. drone personnel are assumed to be Taliban fighters, as Taliban fighters have historically sheltered themselves in mountainous areas of Afghanistan. From a U.S. Air Force perspective then, the mountains are approached as if synonymous with Taliban hideouts. Farmers are also looked at with suspicion. This is because Taliban fighters have planted roadside Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) in Afghanistan's rural provinces, posing lethal risks to on-the-ground U.S. Military personnel and pro-government Afghan forces. USAF drone personnel interviewed for this project suggested that civilians are mistakenly targeted while doing irrigation work because the activity (bending down and reaching into the soil) mimics that of planting IEDs. Afghan people are resultantly fearful and avoidant of accessing both mountains and farmland areas, despite being dependent on these areas to obtain and harvest resources needed for survival.

appears to be much less destructive, in comparison to these historical and more recent environmental and ecological abuses by the U.S. Air Force. However, U.S. drone attacks still cause bodily and environmental damage, and fear of these attacks significantly alters Afghan people's relationship to the environment causing estrangement.

Even before the counterinsurgency campaigns of the so-called Cold War, in the early-mid 20th century, aerial policing was used by European colonial powers in the 'Middle East' to ensure a North-South relation of domination. Mark Neocleous (2014, pp. 144-148) writes that the British Royal Air Force's aerial policing strategy in Mesopotamia was in large part aimed at undermining the ability of Iraqi rebels (who protested British rule) to be self-sufficient, increasing their economic dependency on the British:

In dispersing or killing flocks, preventing tribesmen from entering their fields, obstructing them from ploughing when in the fields, interrupting harvesting during the most important periods, and denying access to springs and rivers for water, air power was used specifically to destroy modes of subsistence that might have enabled Indigenous peoples to survive outside the new regime of accumulation being imposed on them. (Neocleous 2014, p. 145)

Neocleous adds that, "tribes were bombed for their refusal to pay taxes, or even for refusing to have crops inspected for revenue purposes" (2014, p. 147). Undertaking archival research, Neocleous finds an Air Staff Memorandum from 1924 in which the British RAF's strategy to "seriously interfere with the actual food source of the tribe[s]" is explicitly stated (2014, p. 144). The British were purposeful in their attempts to estrange the Iraqi rebels from their land, enacting a relation of domination that would increase dependency on the British and ensure compliance with the British Mandate. Whether intentional or not, the U.S. Air Force is similarly estranging Afghan people from their land and undermining their self-sufficiency.

The estrangement of Afghan people from the land is yet another ongoing harm inflicted in U.S. drone violence that is not captured by mainstream and non-relational frameworks. Domestic counterterrorism discourse in Western countries has, particularly since 9/11, taken “critical infrastructure protection” seriously (Aradau 2010, pp. 491-492), and increasingly so in evaluations of how cyber-attacks may affect national security by bringing down electricity grids or communications networks. To a limited extent, the emphasis on critical infrastructure protection at home is reflected in the Laws of Armed Conflict (LOAC) and the protection of hospitals and ambulances in war zones, as these are considered illegal targets even if ‘enemy combatants’ are present in these locations (ICRC 2010). This suggests there is some recognition in mainstream frameworks, albeit limited, that humans can be killed not just by a lethal attack on their bodies but from the destruction of life-supporting resources. In other words, there is at least tacit acknowledgement that humans are dependent on wider ecosystems for their survival. However, in both critical infrastructure protection discourse and the Laws of Armed Conflict, only human-built infrastructure is deemed critical to support human life. Trees and plants, non-human animals, natural sources of water, among the wide range of other biotic and abiotic components of ecosystems are not considered critical infrastructure.⁶² Drone violence scholarship and criticism rarely, if ever, recognises or measures environmental damage – whether damage to human-built environments or natural environments. An ecological view of war, as put forward by Jairus Grove (2019), would better capture the interdependence between humans and wider ecosystems and therefore the harm inflicted when

⁶² Advocating for an ecological view of human life, 24 scientists have recently published an open letter (in the science journal *Nature*) calling for a new Geneva Convention to ensure the environment is protected during armed conflict. This comes 10 years after UN Environment began to push the UN International Law Commission to introduce tighter legal protections of the environment during armed conflict, leading to the appointment of a Special Rapporteur on the issue and draft principles being agreed upon by UN member states, but no implementation or operationalisation of the principles to date. According to legal scholar Shireen Daft (2019), however, these new draft principles (like their predecessors) set much too high a threshold for violation – environmental damage must be “widespread, long-term and severe” to be prohibited. Daft (2019) contends that, with the threshold for violation set so high, states’ militaries will continue to damage and destroy natural environments with no legal repercussions.

humans are estranged from natural environments. Grove (2019) argues that ecological destruction in war undermines the survival of human and non-human species alike, as organisms and ecosystems are internally related and interdependent. He asks:

On what grounds do we distinguish the cell or microbial colonies living in a body (for which the body, say a human, is their ecology), from the place that humans live and eat (which is their ecology), from the larger systems like swamps or even larger systems like oceans..? (Grove 2019, p. 68)

Grove further contends that war “pursues a *savage ecology*, radically antagonistic to survival as a collective rather than discriminatory goal” (2019, p. 4, emphasis in original). A close relation to land and natural resources is vital for human survival in rural Afghanistan. Mountains provide food and water (for human and non-human animals), and firewood for warmth and cooking, while fields and farmlands allow for the planting and harvesting of wheat and other food crops. U.S. drone violence, while attempting to ensure the survival of Americans, is “radically antagonistic” to survival in Afghanistan (Grove 2019, p. 4); it limits and prevents Afghan people in rural provinces from obtaining vital natural resources.

‘Killing Work’ in the U.S. Air Force

The task of (intentionally or incidentally) rendering Afghans incapable of working and obtaining much-needed resources is carried out across the drone interface by U.S. Air Force drone personnel. The labour of military combat is unique compared to most other kinds of labour in society because it requires direct and violent harm of other people. It is widely recognised that the work

of killing other people is uniquely distressing and that soldiers and veterans are much more likely than those outside the armed forces to experience ongoing problems with their psychological health (Bourke 1999, Dohrenwend et al. 2019; Grossman 1995). The role of USAF drone personnel is in many ways different from other killing roles in the U.S. Military, including soldiers who kill in close combat, snipers and even pilots and bombardiers in piloted aircraft, because drone personnel are physically removed from the theatre of war (Benjamin 2012; Chamayou 2013; Der Derian 2009a; Pugliese 2016). However, it is still psychologically distressing labour to undertake (Asaro 2013; Clark 2019; Edney-Browne 2017; Gusterson 2016; Press 2018).

In chapter four, I documented John's testimony of being tasked with surveilling and then killing five men and a camel who had travelled over the Pakistan-Afghanistan border into Afghanistan. This was analysed with regard to the drone's visual gaze and racist exclusions from the 'civilian' category. Further, John also stated that the attack haunts him for its mundanity: "That's probably one of the ones that haunts me the most because it just felt so 'everyday office work' type deal, like checkbox" (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). The reason it was "checkbox" was that John had solely been flying missions in Iraq in the months leading up to launching the attack on the five men, but he was about to "lose currency" and so needed to tick off that he had flown a mission in Afghanistan (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). 'Currency' refers to how often USAF drone personnel have used skills considered compulsory for the job. Flying over Afghanistan and Iraq are not considered the same skill set; drones need to be flown at different altitudes over the two countries and the terrain is not the same (Afghanistan is more mountainous, for example), meaning that obstacles to flying and vision are different. In order to maintain currency, USAF drone

personnel must therefore fly on a combination of Afghanistan and Iraq missions:

You have to have currency. Every once in a while, you have to fly in Afghanistan, you have to practice Hellfire shots, you have to go through certain checklists. And it was my time...like the next day, if I didn't fly in Afghanistan I was going to lose currency, which would mean I'd need an instructor to fly with me and all that bullshit. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

The day John killed five men travelling with a camel was his first day flying in Afghanistan for months – a mission he only needed to fly to retain currency. The mundanity of what he had done made the killing work all the more psychologically distressing.

I not only got to check off that I had flown in Afghanistan, but I also got my Hellfire missile requirement for that month. It wasn't just a practice; it was an actual shot. I mean, what would you think of that? Like, "congratulations you just killed five people and you also fulfilled a training requirement". (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

John stated that one of the aspects of drone work he found uniquely difficult was having to stay surveilling a person or people after launching a lethal attack in order to conduct a post-strike assessment:

It's not like you kill someone and you walk away [and] that's it. You kill someone and you watch. You make sure no one comes up and cleans the bodies. You sit there and watch people come up and pick up the

bodies. You watch them. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Long shifts and a poor work environment contributed to John's deteriorating psychological health. "We were sitting for a long period of time and we were staring at screens in the dark and they are bright black and white screens", he said (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). But these common workplace problems interacted with and compounded the stress of killing work. John offered the following analogy to explain the interplay between the psychological effects of the working conditions and of killing:

The killing aspect [of the work] is instantaneous. It's quick and it's hard. It's like a volcano or an earthquake. It does something to your psyche, but then the rest of it is like the Grand Canyon. There's a stream of water that's consistently flowing and after long periods of time it erodes so badly that you're now trapped between these walls and you can't escape. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

John quit his work in the drone program because of how psychologically taxing he found it, turning down a promised promotion and improvements to his work conditions. Throughout this period, he continued to come up against people whose conception of drones and the U.S. drone program was very different to his own experiences. He stated, "one of my friends was an aircraft maintenance guy and he was about to cross-train into drones until I told him about what really happens, and he decided not to" (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States), adding that:

I just couldn't get over the nightmares and people knew that I flew drones and thought it was so cool and everything. There was a couple of

my mum's students who I had talked with and they were like “yeah, I want to fly drones!” and I was like “you need to know exactly what goes on. It's not pretty, it's not fun, and it's not easy!” and I actually discouraged these people from going into the program. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Richard grew up in a very rural area in the state of Texas and joined the U.S. Air Force, as he had few other opportunities. He did not "want to get stuck in that town for the rest of [his] life smoking pot and doing odd jobs", so he became "clean" and enlisted in the Air Force in 2005 (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Richard flew his first drone mission in 2006 over Afghanistan. In 2006, there had been no public acknowledgement of the drone program by the U.S. government. New USAF drone personnel encountered the technological object for the first time with no prior knowledge, adding to its magical allure. Richard was initially excited by the prospect of working in the drone program:

I was like “sweet, I get to go rub shoulders with pilots and fly this really cool and expensive aircraft that I didn’t even know existed until now. Yeah, absolutely, I’d love to.” And, that’s when it all started. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

He said that in those early days of his career, he was also impressed by the military drone, telling me:

Yeah – who wouldn’t be impressed by that aircraft after not knowing it existed and coming from literally the middle of nowhere where you haven’t seen anything like that before in your life and not knowing it

existed until today? (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Richard's initial impression of the drone changed over the three-month training period because "you got to know everything about the aircraft", including its many limitations (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). As stated in chapter four, Richard's faith in the technological capacities of the drone is firm at times and wavering at others. Richard sometimes blames human error entirely for civilian deaths in U.S. drone attacks, but here he voices a completely defetishised view of the drone:

The biggest degradation quality for infrared imaging is humidity and wind. If it gets too windy outside, it's going to blur the image and you can't see anything. It causes artificial pigments to appear on the image, and then the image is blurred and skewed and that's why they have processing algorithms that go along with it, but even those processing algorithms are limited. Electra-optical – it's blowing dust. Blowing dust happens and you can't see anything anyway. If cloud cover happens you can't see anything anyway. If they go under a tree, you can't see anything. If they get inside a car, you can't see anything. [...] There are limitations – gross limitations – to it. That's why assurance is a rarity. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

While the drone is reputed to produce high quality intelligence and conduct strikes accurately and precisely, Richard said that there is always doubt that the person you are watching is the alleged target you have been commanded to track and kill:

Even with the new HD cameras they have, you're still not 100% sure. And I don't give a damn how well they say it looks because you are still not 100% sure at 10,000 feet. When you're 3 miles away looking at somebody, you're not sure. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

I asked Richard why, given these technological limitations, many drone attacks happen at night-time in Afghanistan (as Afghan interviewees had stated). At night-time, the electro-optical camera is rendered almost useless by the dark and drone crew are consequently reliant upon the thermal imaging camera, which has many limitations of its own.⁶³ Richard's reply is again a defetishised account of the U.S. drone program:

Why do more people rob people at night? Because you have the cover of darkness. People feel more akin to night-time whenever they're doing something shady. It's a sort of protection. [...] People do things in the dead of the night when everyone's asleep. They prey at night. (Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

The fetishisation of the drone is an ideological conduit of social relations across the drone interface. Faith in the drone's technological capabilities to distinguish combatants from civilians affects USAF drone personnel's psychological responses to surveillance and killing, offering the attractive illusion that using drones means acting ethically in war. De-fetishising the drone means psychologically confronting the reality that it does not have the capabilities it has been imbued with, and this comes at a psychological cost for USAF drone personnel who build, use and repair them.

⁶³ Humidity and wind are explained above in Richard's words, but the thermal imaging camera's other limitations include the difficulty of using heat signatures to distinguish between human and non-human animals – let alone civilians and combatants.

Social Alienation and The Technological Fetish

There has been significant academic and public interest in the labour of drone personnel, particularly the phenomenon of psychological distress and PTSD amongst drone operators (Asaro 2013; Chamayou 2013; Clark 2019; Edney-Browne 2017; Gusterson 2016; Press 2018). Several psychological studies have been commissioned by the U.S. Air Force that attempt to ascertain how many drone personnel experience psychological distress and what causes this distress (Chappelle and McDonald 2012; Chappelle et al. 2010; Otto and Weber 2013; Ouma et al. 2011). These studies make for interesting reading, as they only briefly consider (if at all) the effects of killing other people on psychological wellbeing. In Ouma, Chappelle and Salinas's (2011, pp. 7-8) study, "combat stressors" are acknowledged as a possible contributing factor, but the authors ultimately attribute "operational stressors" as a more significant cause of burnout among active duty USAF drone operators. Long hours, shift work, and living in "undesirable geographical locations" are identified as key operational stressors that cause burnout among drone personnel (Ouma et al. 2011, p. 8). Combat-related stressors, on the other hand, "were not rated within the top sources of stress among participants" (Ouma et al. 2011, p. 12). An earlier study of drone operators and 'manned' aircraft pilots likewise found that:

...the most commonly cited stressors among RPA operators included long hours, shift work, deployed in-garrison status, ergonomic design of the ground control station, and sustaining vigilance to large amounts of real-time visual and auditory data. Combat-related stressors were not rated as top sources of stress among participants. (Chappelle and McDonald 2010, p. 1)

It is striking that the psychological effects of killing are not given more careful and substantive consideration in these studies. Drone personnel are regularly

on the edge of killing and most have the experience of it, yet the studies do not investigate further as to why combat stressors are not ranked as top sources of psychological distress.

The studies do, however, make the caveat that participants would be careful not to disclose psychological distress caused by the harming and killing of others. As Otto and Webber (2013, p. 6) point out, Air Force pilots (of both piloted aircraft and drones) are likely to underreport significant mental health concerns “due to detrimental career ramifications”, including the “career threatening effects of MH [mental health] diagnoses”. These ramifications include “removal from flying status, loss of flight pay, and diminished competitiveness for promotion” (Otto and Webber 2013, p. 6). Further, “social stigmas” may also prevent active duty drone personnel from self-reporting psychological distress caused by harming others (Otto and Webber 2013, p. 7). As argued in previous chapters on race and gender relations, the USAF has an institutionalised culture of Islamophobia, sexism and hegemonic masculinity and denigrates character traits that are deemed feminine. In this institutional culture, it is much easier to report distress caused by changeable external factors such as shift lengths and ergonomic design than to disclose one’s own psychological turmoil at harming and killing other people.

In agreement with Peter Asaro (2013), I caution against relying on these studies by U.S. Air Force commissioned psychologists because of what is missed in their research. Rather than a genuine attempt to understand the psychological dimensions of labouring in the drone program, Asaro contends that studies on USAF drone personnel are “a contemporary form of Taylorism” that seek to “identify inefficiencies in labour” and “potentially reconfigure [...] work practices to reduce or eliminate these inefficiencies” (2013, p. 202). Asaro (2013, p. 202) argues that the “overarching intention of these military studies is

to identify and remedy aspects of the involved labour practices that contribute to reducing or limiting the operational performance of drone operators”. After long hours and poor ergonomic design, the reports then focus on stressors that “have long been the focus of post-Taylorist scientific work management, such as the Quality of Working Life movement’s focus on ideals of job satisfaction, home life and career prospects” (Asaro 2013, p. 215). While the U.S. Air Force can replace the chairs in the drone cockpit for comfier ones or reduce shift lengths, killing will always be a significant part of drone labour and thus psychological reactions to killing cannot be removed from the labour process. This is perhaps another reason why little effort is invested into better understanding and analysing the psychological effects of killing work in these Air Force commissioned studies; from an employer perspective, not much can be done to reduce the psychological burden of killing other people. A relational approach to understanding drone violence, on the other hand, would better identify the psychological effects of social relations across the drone. Listening to John’s allegory of volcanic eruptions and erosion, it is killing other people that shakes and shocks one’s psyche while poor work conditions gradually wear it down.

There are other psychological effects of drone labour that are not discussed in journalistic or academic writing, nor have they been identified or analysed in military commissioned studies (Chappelle and McDonald 2012; Chappelle et al. 2010; Otto and Weber 2013; Ouma et al. 2011). One of the most injurious psychological effects that U.S. Air Force interviewees explained to me was their social alienation from wider society. They suffer a unique kind of isolation whereby their experiences of work are misunderstood and, in many cases, outright rejected by family members, friends and the wider American public. This, I argue, is because the fetishisation of drone technology in the United States (and Western society more broadly) has led to greater trust being

invested in the capacities of the technology than the lived experiences of the people who use it.

This is not new, but a continuation of societal trends that emerged during the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) in the 1990s, which signalled a shift towards the use of high-technology weaponry with the promise that such weapons would be much more precise and ethical (Beier 2006; Dillon 2003; Niva 2013). Television coverage of the First Gulf War was replete with video imagery taken from Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) – ‘smart’ bombs and missiles that were said to perform targeted strikes unlike the indiscriminate ‘dumb’ bombs of the past. Beier (2006, pp. 43-44) writes that, during the Gulf War, PGMs and “other advanced weapons systems” were “highly fetishised” and “celebrated on newscasts and in a dizzying proliferation of solicitously framed documentaries”. These fetishistic depictions, he argues, discouraged citizens from questioning the true capacities of the technology and distracted them from reflecting on the military’s “unprecedented control over access in the war zone, which left Western media almost completely dependent on Coalition forces for these snippets of video” (Beier 2006, p. 43). As scholars like Maya Zehfuss (2010, p. 547) have argued, depictions of weapons as highly precise are “seductive” because people want to believe that there is a “technological fix for an ethico-political predicament”. There are few ethico-political predicaments more difficult than the injuring and killing of civilians in war, and so claims that new technologies can remedy this problem are too readily accepted by citizens.

The military drone is a fetishised object in the anthropological sense of the term (Ellen 1988; Graeber 2005). It is a material object that has been imbued with fantastical, even religious, properties that it does not possess. As Shaw and Akhter (2012, p. 1502) write, “the supernatural element is never far away” when

it comes to the fetishisation of the drone. The drone is portrayed as morally good, able to protect civilians in war and discern perfectly between civilians and combatants. This fetishisation of the drone reflects and reproduces dominant beliefs in the U.S. that the country has both a superior military force (with the most high-technology and effective weaponry) and is a beacon of human rights and progress internationally. Ellen (1988, p. 215) argues that fetish objects are notable for the “inner ambivalence” people express about how they work. Inner ambivalence towards how military drones actually work keep them operating as a fetish object, as faith in the drone to perform “a war without bodies” goes unquestioned (Shaw and Akhter 2012, p. 1502). In contrast, U.S. Air Force drone personnel know exactly how the military drone works and they experience drone technology in ways that are de-fetishising. They see the technology’s fallibility and, consequently, its inaccuracy and imprecision; and yet family, friends and wider community members are often not willing to hear or believe de-fetishised accounts of the technology. The disbelief USAF drone personnel are faced with is reinforced by dominant messages in U.S. society, which continually re-fetishise drone technology. Shaw and Akhter (2012, p. 1502) write that this was certainly the case during the Obama Administration, when the drone was regularly touted by then-President Obama and his officials “as the ‘magical solution’ to the ‘War on Terror’”. John likewise testified to hearing President Obama refuse to admit, in a televised statement, that the drone had any technological limitations, blaming all civilian deaths on mistakes made by USAF drone operators:

I remember I was with my squadron and they were talking about drones on the news and Obama said, “whatever happens with drone strikes is operator error, not an intelligence error”. He basically said that we have the best intelligence in the world, so whoever makes a mistake is the one who is pointing the trigger. And I was just like, “that motherfucker is

throwing us under the bus!”. (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States)

Coming up against such firm beliefs in the drone, USAF drone crew and veterans experience social alienation when trying to convince members of the public that drones are neither cool nor morally good. While John “couldn’t get over the nightmares” about killing people with drones, he also had to try persuading friends and members of the public not to join the drone program despite their wishes to do so (John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). Wendy moved into a campervan by herself in a forest near to the Air Force base to avoid going into town and talking to people who thanked her for her service; she was “pushed” to remove herself from society because she “couldn’t not say anything, couldn’t not piss people off, couldn’t be sure to hold [her] temper” (Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States). The social alienation USAF drone personnel experience from working in a secretive program with a highly fetishised technology is yet another ongoing psychosocial harm that is missed in non-relational accounts of drone violence. Our frameworks for understanding war and measuring its effects must therefore change to include the wide range of harms documented in this and previous chapters.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined the effects of drone violence on labour in Afghanistan and what ‘killing work’ does to U.S Air Force drone personnel. I argue that U.S. drone violence has reduced people’s capacity to work and study in Afghanistan, and in some cases has prevented Afghan people from working and studying entirely. The injuries and deaths of male breadwinners also makes women and children particularly vulnerable to violence and poverty,

reproducing sexist social relations in rural Afghanistan wherein women do not have the same economic and educational opportunities available to them. Further, Afghans' relationship with the natural environment has changed from one of close connection to one of estrangement and fear after U.S. drone attacks. Past drone attacks on mountains and farmlands, and the threat of future strikes, have limited people's access to these vital areas of land and made it increasingly difficult to obtain much-needed natural resources. The effects of this are particularly pronounced in Afghanistan where people are already more vulnerable to poverty, malnourishment and internal displacement.

On the U.S. side of the drone interface, U.S. Air Force drone personnel experience the psychological effects of 'killing work'. I take existing studies by Air Force commissioned psychologists to task for suggesting that occupational health factors such as work hours, shift length and ergonomic design are the main causes of poor psychological health amongst drone personnel. Such studies give little consideration to the complex interplay between poor work conditions and 'killing work', whereby the stressors of killing are compounded by the stress caused by long shifts and the associated deterioration of work/home boundaries. There are other unique stressors of drone labour, too, the psychological effects of which are not currently recognised or discussed. These include the social alienation felt by USAF drone personnel whose experiences of work are rarely understood or believed because they run counter to seductively fetishistic portrayals of drone technology.

The wide range of harms I documented in this chapter – experienced on both sides of the drone interface – go mostly unrecognised in drone violence scholarship and criticism. Non-relational frameworks for identifying and measuring harms in war, and drone violence specifically, are unable to capture the ongoing harms caused by physical and psychological injuries in Afghanistan

or ecological damage and destruction. Nor can they recognise and analyse the harms experienced by USAF drone personnel who experience psychological distress as a result of social relations across the drone interface and social alienation within the United States.

7. Conclusion

In this thesis, I sought to answer the research question “how should we understand the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones?”. To do this, I developed the concept of the ‘drone interface’, which has a relational ontology. This relational ontology is informed by Feminist and Postcolonial IR, which argues that actors are internally related to each other and demonstrates the falsity of binaries such as ‘Self’/‘Other’, ‘East’/‘West’, ‘global North’/‘global South’ and ‘man’/‘woman’ (among others) (Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Barkawi 2016; Barkawi and Brighton 2011; Barkawi and Laffey 2006; Bhabra 2010; Go and Lawson 2017; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012). I argued that U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones in rural Afghanistan are internally related through the drone interface, having the power and agency to affect and be affected by the other. Following methodologies from Feminist and Postcolonial IR, I undertook interviews in Afghanistan, refugee squats in Greece, and the United States, to “effectively listen” to people’s testimonies of living in drone-affected areas of Afghanistan and operating drones from the U.S. (Robinson 2011). Throughout the thesis I consider ‘drone violence’ to include drone bombardment *and* surveillance.

A stronger analytical account and normative critique of drone violence emerges when the concept of the ‘drone interface’ is applied. Following Barkawi and Laffey (2006, p. 344), I argue that there is a “social science problem and a political problem” with Eurocentric and non-relational accounts of war in IR and that the same is true of drone violence scholarship. The concept of the drone interface draws attention to important and often forgotten actors in drone violence – people – and their lived experiences, while identifying a far wider range of harms inflicted. I contended that the relationship between U.S.

Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones needs to be understood as a relation of domination, where the U.S. Air Force enacts dominance over, and perpetrates violence against, Afghan people. This international relation of domination is harmful, (re)producing sexism, racism, alienation and poverty with adverse emotional, psychosocial and embodied effects on both sides of the interface. Moreover, it exacerbates domestic relations of domination, compounding racism, sexism, alienation and poverty within Afghanistan and the United States. It is necessary to understand these relations and their effects as ongoing. I argued that most drone violence criticism fails to document and address ongoing harms, applying non-relational ontologies that only recognise discrete, time-restricted harms such as the moment state sovereignty is infringed, international law is violated, or a lethal strike kills a person. In these accounts, drone violence is portrayed as if made up of discrete and detached events – a temporality that poorly reflects people’s experiences of drone violence and its ongoing emotional, embodied, and psychosocial effects on their lives.

While seeking to centre human experiences and relations, I did not posit that military drone technology is neutral or merely a tool. Following Andrew Feenberg (2002, p. 14), I approached the human-technology relationship as one of co-constitution; technology “structures the world regardless of users’ intentions”, at the same time it is “affected by human action”. Throughout the body chapters (chapters four to six), I considered the wider social context in the United States (particularly the U.S. Air Force) and Afghanistan that shapes the conduits of the drone interface and, consequently, social relations between U.S. Air Force drone operators and Afghan people living in drone-affected areas. However, I also sought to understand what exactly drone technology does in its role as a technological conduit of humans’ social relations – particularly the drone’s visual sensors. I argued that the visual/technological

features of the drone contribute to racialisation and gendering in drone violence, thereby (re)producing racism, Islamophobia and sexism. I identified three significant conduits (visual/technological, discursive and ideological) shaping social relations across the drone interface. These were 1) (in)visibility and the gaze, 2) the 'civilian' category and 3) the fetishisation of the drone. These visual, discursive and ideological conduits (respectively) are technological and non-technological, and often interact with each other when shaping social relations.

Race, Gender and Labour Relations

Interviews revealed that the adverse effects of drone violence are closely tied to the (re)production of racism, sexism, alienation and poverty. Chapter four analysed drone violence and race relations. I considered two U.S. Air Force veterans' testimonies that suggested the social and historical context of racism and Islamophobia in the United States has led to racism and Orientalism in the U.S. Air Force drone program. However, I contended that drone technology also plays a role in racialisation, racism and Orientalism. The drone's visual sensors afford drone personnel the ability to closely observe people's behaviours, identifying differences between the Afghan Other and the American Self that are racialised and essentialising. Moreover, its purported objectivity gives drone personnel the confidence to make these racialised claims, cloaking the subjective nature of their judgements. Here, the gaze of the drone (a visual conduit of relations) interacts with the civilian category (a discursive conduit) with the effect of continually placing Afghan people's civilian protections under question.

This invasive surveillance relationship has myriad effects on Afghan people living under drone surveillance, who are not considered worthy of

privacy or dignity – even in their most private moments. Furthermore, the fetishisation of the drone (an ideological conduit) has led on-the-ground U.S. Military personnel to spread misleading accounts of the drone’s surveillance capacities in Afghanistan. This means that some Afghan interviewees think they are more surveilled than they actually are, worsening the already adverse effects of being subjected to drone surveillance. I argued that (real and imagined) drone surveillance instigates a process of objectification and self-objectification, wherein Afghan people are forced to internalise the perspective of their American watchers under the threat of being targeted by a drone strike and stop partaking in activities that were previously considered integral to their personal and cultural identities.

In chapter five I argued that social relations in drone violence are significantly shaped by constructions of gender, masculinity and femininity. In turn, hegemonic masculinity, sexism and patriarchal relations are (re)produced through the drone interface. I contended that U.S. drone personnel’s emotional reactions to surveilling and killing were in large part shaped by institutional cultures of hegemonic masculinity and “fratriarchy” (Higate 2012). Social pressures within the U.S. Air Force influence drone personnel’s reactions to surveillance and killing, as hegemonic masculinity and fratriarchal culture encourage cold, rational, and even celebratory reactions to the work. This (re)produces patriarchal and sexist relations within the United States, which denigrate femininities and alternative masculinities.

Drone technology is not neutral in the gendering of people across the drone interface, either. I further posited in chapter five that the gaze of the drone affords drone personnel the ability to read details about people’s bodies that would otherwise be inaccessible – not just from a distance but also in face-to-face interactions. Thermal imaging cameras measure body temperature,

which is used as a visual shortcut by drone personnel to infer gender and sex identity. Binary sex and gender categories are then reified by drone personnel, inferring guilt and innocence on the basis of the perceived sex and gender of the people they watch. Bodies that are difficult to identify in binary sex and gender categories are considered to be potentially ‘tricking’ drone surveillance cameras and are approached as suspicious on this basis (Redden and Terry 2013; Shepherd and Sjoberg 2012). Here again, the visual/technological and discursive conduits of the drone interface interact, as gendered constructions of the civilian and the ‘Military-Age Male’ affect how bodily and social information is interpreted through the drone’s visual sensors. The U.S. Air Force’s dominant relation over Afghan people is therefore sexist, patriarchal and transphobic, enforcing gendered and essentialising ideas about Afghan men, women and people whose sex or gender identification is ambiguous.

U.S. Air Force drone personnel’s invasive surveillance has gendered effects on Afghan people. Interviewees testified that boys and men experience heightened increased fear about drone strikes on their own lives, aware that they are more likely to be mistaken for insurgents. Girls and women have their privacy and freedom of movement acutely affected by drone surveillance, therein compounding already existing sexist relations of domination within Afghanistan. Interviewees testified to Afghan women retreating inside after hearing a drone, rather than staying outside to continue their work or their meetings with neighbours. Contrary to claims that Afghan women are rescued by Western intervention, drone surveillance places limits on Afghan women’s freedom of movement – giving them the impossible choice of either observing their religion as they would like (and therefore retreating inside to follow *purdah*) or staying outside (working or engaging in the community) and violating cultural and religious codes that are important to them.

In chapter six I once again found that the relationship between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and Afghan people living under drones needs to be understood as a relation of domination. I argued that drone violence injures Afghan people's bodies and psyches and estranges them from their land and natural resources, exacerbating poverty. Drone strikes that (physically or psychologically) injure or kill Afghan people, I argued, constitute "idiosyncratic shocks" that can push already vulnerable Afghan families into poverty or worsen their existing poverty (Haider and Kumar 2018). Drone attacks that have struck people on mountains and on farmland have also frightened Afghan people away from accessing these areas of land and much-needed natural resources, which presents significant challenges to subsistence. These effects produced from the relation of domination between the U.S. Air Force and Afghan people are felt acutely in Afghanistan – a country that already has high rates of poverty and vulnerability to poverty. Furthermore, loss of income and impoverishment from drone strikes has adverse effects on women and children in Afghanistan and in some cases creates internally displaced persons (IDPs) – a position that is very dangerous and highly likely to worsen one's poverty due to restricted access to economic opportunities (Koser and Schmeidl 2009; Rizvi 2011).

I further contended in chapter six that the 'killing work' of U.S. Air Force drone personnel exposes them to several mental health risks that are downplayed in existing psychological studies. I criticised psychological studies, commissioned by the Air Force, that focus on "operational burnout" and "occupational health" difficulties, for failing to consider the social relations between U.S. Air Force drone personnel and people surveilled and bombarded by U.S. drones as a significant cause of psychological distress (Chappelle and McDonald 2012; Chappelle et al. 2010; Otto and Weber 2013; Ouma et al. 2011). I argued that it is ultimately unsurprising studies commissioned by the

U.S. Air Force focus on stressors such as long hours, shift work and ergonomic design, as they are ultimately intended to “identify and remedy aspects of the involved labour practices that contribute to reducing or limiting the operational performance of drone operators” (Asaro 2013, p. 202). Further, I argued that one of the most injurious effects of working in the U.S. drone program is the social alienation drone personnel suffer when their experiences of work are not understood or believed by their families, friends and the wider American public. I argued that the fetishisation of the drone (an ideological conduit) means that the experiences of the people who work with drone technology, particularly those whose experiences de-fetishise the drone, are not believed.

Directions for Further Research

Applying a relational ontology to the study of drone violence opens up many new avenues for research that were not explored in this thesis or were only hinted towards. As flagged in the introduction chapter, the interviews that I analyse in this thesis were mostly with men and, as such, women are underrepresented in this otherwise feminist research. To better understand women’s lived experiences of drone violence and its social relations, it would be necessary to interview more women in Afghanistan as well as more women veterans of the USAF drone program. In Afghanistan, recruiting more women would require careful planning and a longer period of in-country research given the complex and context-dependent character of gender relations there, as well as the employment of female interpreters (if the researchers lack fluency in Pashto and Dari). Future research projects could also consider the effects of drone violence on the environment, including the human-environment relationship. As I argued in chapter six, Afghan people living under drones have become estranged from their land and from natural resources because of past drone strikes on mountains and farmland. Future research could consider how

the effects of this estrangement interact with climate change-related events, such as droughts and floods, and natural disasters in Afghanistan. Another avenue for future research could be the extent to which drone personnel also experience estrangement from the environment. Sparse desert locations are required to house U.S. Air Force bases. The classified nature of the activities and the physical mass of Intelligence Surveillance Reconnaissance (ISR) technology and other Air Force infrastructure (such as aircraft hangars and runways) necessitates these remote locations. Anthropological accounts of life on U.S. Military bases find that these are highly artificial environments that are remarkably homogenous regardless of where in the U.S. or the world they are located – housing fast food corporations, such as McDonalds and KFC, chain restaurants, minimarts, department stores, gyms and barracks (MacLeish 2013). That is to say, the bases feel transplantable and are not embedded within or reliant upon the local environment. It would be interesting to find out how, if at all, drone personnel’s relationship to their environment affects their relations across the drone interface with the people and natural environments they surveil.

Future research should also consider whether the covert nature of drone operations reinforces traditional notions of hegemonic masculinity whereby men must be emotionally closed-off and stoic. As stated in chapter five, hegemonic masculinity is not fixed, but only takes shape in comparison and contradistinction to femininities and alternative masculinities, and this allows for change. Masculinity is “always incomplete” and in a “constant dialectic – shifting in different fields and established temporarily and evasively” (Kirby and Henry 2012, p. 457). Kimberly Hutchings (2009, p. 394) agrees, referring to hegemonic masculinity as “flexible and shifting”. For military men, Hutchings argues that it is the characteristics and demands of different wars (and modes of war-fighting) that give hegemonic masculinity its shape (Hutchings 2009, p.

401). War necessitates the “institutionalisation of a range of beliefs, skills, and capacities, which shift according to context”, and men who perform hegemonic masculinity are those who subscribe to those beliefs and excel at those skills and capacities (Hutchings 2009, p. 401). In the context of the secretive U.S. drone program, it would be fruitful to consider whether covert operations (re)produce very traditional notions of masculinity whereby men refrain from outwardly experiencing their emotions. Active duty drone personnel are barred from speaking to journalists and external/non-military academics by the U.S. Air Force. Perhaps most damagingly, this bar on communication extends to civilian psychologists who cannot be approached for psychological counsel on classified matters. Secrecy is “in the DNA of a lot of the dark programmes that the U.S. has, including the drone program” (Jesselyn Raddack, interview with Author, June 2017):

A lot of the time people have signed various secrecy agreements, and even if they are not discussing classified information they are still afraid of getting in trouble because the U.S. has prosecuted people for espionage even though they were not discussing classified issues, so there is a real fear. (Jesselyn Raddack, interview with Author, June 2017)

In covert operations, men who are constructed as the ‘ideal’ soldiers are those who compartmentalise and keep their experiences of work private. It may be the case that becoming “walled off from feelings” is still integral hegemonic masculinity only because that is what fighting in the ‘War on Terror’ demands (Cohn 1999, p. 462).

Resistance to Drone Violence

The ongoing harms documented in this thesis need to be brought into the debate about drone violence, which currently only considers forms of harm that are discrete: violations of state sovereignty and international law, and the infliction of lethal harm in a drone strike. Definitions and measures of harm in these mainstream frameworks, if they recognise human harms at all, are restricted to civilian deaths as recorded in civilian casualty counts. In this thesis I demonstrated that drone violence inflicts myriad emotional, psychosocial and embodied harms on people living in targeted areas and those who operate them, which are not represented by civilian casualty counts and measures of ‘proportionality’.

The bleak content of this thesis is unsurprising given its focus on people and their social relations in drone violence. However, I have tried to avoid depicting drone violence as overwhelmingly powerful and resistance as futile. The application of the drone interface concept and its relational ontology allows us to better identify and exploit cracks and fissures in the U.S. drone program, so drone violence can be challenged and resisted. Some of these cracks and fissures are precisely the social relations between drone personnel and people who live under drones. U.S. Air Force veteran interviewees all testified to feeling varying degrees of interdependence with, and ethical responsibility for, the people they surveilled and targeted. They regret their past actions, feel guilty, suffer anxiety, depression and PTSD, quit the drone program, and, as veterans, many are either actively involved in anti-war activism or are otherwise trying to atone for what they have done (such as Dauwood training as a nurse to help Pakistani drone strike victims). Active duty drone personnel, however, work within an institution that presents numerous obstacles to recognising their interdependence with, and ethical responsibility for, the people they surveil and

target. Many of these obstacles I have documented in this thesis: the institutional culture of racism, Islamophobia and hegemonic masculinity; secrecy agreements; and the threatening nature of the U.S. state's treatment of national security and military whistleblowers. All of these act to deter drone personnel from having thoughts and feelings that resist the violence and domination of drone violence, let alone acting on them.

There are some steps that can be taken by drone violence critics to encourage U.S. Air Force drone personnel to act on resistant thoughts. For one, academic researchers, journalists and documentary filmmakers can undertake training to provide drone personnel with safe, privacy-protected lines of communication, so that they can speak to people external to the drone program about their experiences. These external people must enquire about how drone personnel experience their social relations with the people they surveil and kill; it is not enough to ask about the adverse effects of long hours, shift work and bad ergonomics, as it is drone personnel's involvement in killing work that makes their experiences unique (and uniquely dangerous) compared to the general working population. Friends and family must "effectively listen" to drone personnel and their experiences (Robinson 2011) – even when what they are told contradicts, or undermines, their fetishised belief in military drones.

Given the many institutional obstacles U.S. Air Force drone personnel face, however, the strongest resistance to drone violence needs to come from outside the institution. To this end, I have provided details about drone violence that can strengthen external critiques of the U.S. Air Force and U.S. counterinsurgency more broadly, showing the extent of the damage caused and compounded by drone violence. It is my hope that the testimonies documented in this thesis prompt direct political actions towards limiting and preventing drone violence. In addition to these aforementioned harmful effects, I also

documented several ways in which drone technology does not perform the capacities it is endowed with in dominant fetishistic accounts of the military drone. De-fetishising the drone requires challenging the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Military's embellishments about drone technology, proving that drones are neither precise nor humane. Pointing out the imprecision of so-called precision bombing reveals that there is no technological fix for harming civilians in war. This shifts responsibility back onto U.S. citizens (and citizens of allied countries) to challenge their elected representatives for the harms inflicted against others in their name. It is likely the case that drone violence would still be supported by some U.S. citizens even if it was de-fetishised. To the extent that wider social contexts of racism, Islamophobia, sexism and hegemonic masculinity cause citizens to support drone violence, then this must be called out and resisted through continued anti-racist and feminist activism.

The role that Afghan people have in resisting drone violence is not for me to assign. The onus ought to be on citizens of Western nations that use or support drone violence to politically resist. However, I have been careful in this thesis not to depict Afghan people as totally devoid of agency in the face of U.S. drone violence, following John Hobson and Alina Sajed's reminder that critical IR too often "raises the non-Western agential bar so high that it becomes virtually impossible for non-Western agency to appear on [the] radar screen in any meaningful or consequential way" (2017, p. 548). Afghan people living under drones already exercise agency through surviving in very adverse circumstances. Social relations between themselves and U.S. Air Force drone personnel could be further harnessed for resistance, through more active communication with drone personnel across the drone interface. Art projects like 'Not a Bug Splat' [see Figure 4] in Pakistan have sought to emotionally engage U.S. drone operators by showing the faces of children endangered by

drone strikes. Humanising oneself to the other is (unfortunately) necessary, as it makes ethical demands on the other to not inflict harm or injury.



Figure 4: 'Not A Bug Splat' art project in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province (North-West Frontier), Pakistan. The child depicted lost both parents and two younger siblings in a U.S. drone attack.

Lastly, because of the growing role of the U.S.-supplied and trained Afghan Air Force in conducting aerial bombardments in Afghanistan, political resistance to drone violence will increasingly necessitate a domestic movement within Afghanistan. The close relationship between the U.S. and Afghanistan governments means that Afghan people who live under drones need an anti-drone protest movement that is both domestic and international.

8. Interviews

In order of appearance:

Reverend Chris Antal, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
Dauwood, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
Wendy, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
Richard, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
John, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
Wahab, interview with Author, May 2017, Greece.
Saifullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Mohammed, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Kathleen McClellan, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
Abdul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Ahmad, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Amidullah, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Gul, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Shanaky, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Steve, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.
Aarif, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Nabi, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Hassan, interview with Author, April 2017, Afghanistan.
Jesselyn Raddack, interview with Author, June 2017, United States.

Thank you to everyone interviewed whose testimony does not feature in this thesis due to space constraints. Your time was valuable, and your stories are likely to be documented in future publications.

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