

# Drone Form: Mediation at the End of Empire

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*I traced a triangle in my mind up from our restaurant table to the satellite in space that would receive the signal, then back down to Time Control's office where the satellite would bounce it. I remember being buffeted by wind, the last full memory I have before the accident.*

—McCarthy, *Remainder*

*When [the missile] hit, we couldn't tell the difference between night and day. . . . It was day before and it immediately became dark, and I couldn't see my grandma anymore.*

—Zubair ur Rehman, age thirteen

## Enemies' Dead Strewed the Town

At the British Library, dispatches from the front lines of England's merciless counterinsurgency campaign in India, 1857–58, are collected into folders marked "Miscellaneous Indian Mutiny Papers" and "India Office Records and Private Papers." Copied on thin paper, the documents read as a perverse and staccato kind of poetry. They shape tidings of insurrection and its brutal suppression into the idiom of war-state bureaucracy. Antiseptic and technical, dehumanizing by design, this administrative jargon is further formalized during its compression into the argot of electronic telegraphy. And if compression names "the process that renders a mode of representation adequate to its infrastructures" (Sterne 35), then telegraphy of the so-called Indian Mutiny is perhaps best understood as conveying not simply the content that any given message contained, encoded, and transmitted—the movement of troops, the reports of losses, the accounts of battle—but a cipher of the war-making infrastructure of nineteenth-century imperialism.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. A. Bayly explains that the British chains of information exchange were crucially vulnerable in ways the 1857 uprising exposed: "Their chain of surveillance was at its most vulnerable where the body of elite, literate officers stretching down from the district town linked up with the hereditary servants and information collectors of the village" (8). Thus did vernacular and indigenous networks of information exchange—gossip, word of mouth, "social

One of these communiqués, marked “Copy of message received by Electric Telegram” and dated August 17, 1857 (Havelock), originated with General Havelock in Cawnpore (Kanpur) and was sent to his superiors in Calcutta. It reports a qualified victory over the massed peasants then arrayed against British paramilitary. Insurgents captured some cannon, Havelock reports, “But enemies’ dead strewed the town—I estimate their loss of three hundred killed & wounded.” It is an everyday update during this yearlong campaign, an event hardly worthy of notice and occasioning nothing beyond straight accounting of enemy casualties: part of the paperwork of empire. On the form itself, the message is copied in barely legible handwriting. At the bottom of the page, the account is dated “Calcutta, Elec. Tel. Office, 17 Aug’t 1857,” verified again (“A true copy”), and finally signed in pencil by a receiving clerk. These marks verify the contents’ correct transcription from the telegraphic original. They show us that this act of state killing has been reported by dictation, transcribed into writing, configured into telegraphic code, transmitted over vast distances of copper wire, received, decrypted, transcribed again by hand (now in pencil) onto a paper form, and then copied longhand and finally double-verified by a functionary who signs his own name: J. S. Seale, LT. Elaborately mediated yet insisting via seal and signature on its perfectly lossless transmission, the document, like many others during the Victorian era’s long war—no single year of the queen’s reign was without armed conflict—is a document of asymmetrical warfare that announces most of all its status as an act of mediation.

This essay is about the mediation of war in material form. After establishing the crucial role of mediation in wartime activities across periods of imperial rule, my first aim in what follows is to underscore the material nature of these aesthetic mediations—their intercombination with physical channels, technological apparatuses, and built infrastructures—and to suggest how these acts of mediation themselves become visible or apprehensible, as form becomes content and vice versa. “We see things shroudedly, as through a veil, an over-pixelated screen,” says the reflexively named hero (U) of Tom McCarthy’s network novel *Satin Island* (2015). “People need foundation myths,” he continues, “a bolt that secures the scaffolding that in turn holds fast the entire architecture of reality” (3). The point U is making is the Derridean one; the same one sealed in Lieutenant Seale’s seal, above: human beings yearn for immediacy, for presence and grounding, but mediation—the true subject of McCarthy’s novel—is all there is. Writing, translation, compression, transmission, recoding: “a perpetual state of passage, not arrival,” U calls it. “[N]ot *at*, but *between*” (87): “transfer points, rather than destinations in and of themselves” (5). I will return at the end of this essay to McCarthy’s technofetishistic experiments in metamediation: those sexless, theoretical fictions about the circuitry and wiring of our late-imperial sensorium. A second aim in what follows, though, is to identify, in the instances of what I will call drone form arranged here, an abiding problem of nonreciprocal action: a constitutive dissymmetry between viewer and viewed, subject and object, that becomes, I argue, an obsessive preoccupation of fiction in the drone era and that is the special focus of nearly all of

communication”—threaten importantly the techno-rationalist network of infrastructural communications maintained by the empire.

McCarthy's novels. Focusing on drones, then, what I aim to describe here is the relationship between the means of distributing death in our late imperial moment and the regime of mediation in which that sovereign power is transmitted, recoded, and ultimately visited on human bodies.

The mutiny telegram cited above already showed that all imperial power is crucially a matter of mediation: the physical channels and formal languages by which information is transmitted and, in that act of transmission, inevitably changed. But today's infrastructures of wartime communication, like our technologies for delivering violence, are no longer those of the nineteenth century: bayonet, telegram, and cannon have been replaced by data mining, satellite reconnaissance, and long-distance strikes by weaponized drones. This is the technic sensorium suffused by "[e]lectric birdsong," as McCarthy has it in *C* (52), "a set of signals . . . repeating, pulsing, modulating in the airspace" (McCarthy, *Transmission and the Individual Remix*, i). All aesthetic forms presuppose and in turn ratify an episteme or regime of perception by means of which subjects apprehend their world.<sup>2</sup> My suggestion is that to chart the shifting relations between mediation and death in our contemporary moment—to identify the way of seeing proper to the drone era—might in turn help us to comprehend our place in the cycle of American empire that observers like Giovanni Arrighi (*Long Twentieth Century*) already in 1994 saw shifting toward decline.

The isomorphisms between imperial cycles at which I have only hinted suggest that attending to the twilight of the British world system might provide analytical purchase on, and resources for understanding, the waning days of the American phase of hegemony and vice versa.<sup>3</sup> But for observers of art, it bears noting that the forms of mediation that were central to the normatively demarcated "culture" of the nineteenth century, and that are central to my own training in that period—poetry and the literary novel, say—are no longer dominant but residual or even niche categories, boutique commodities for a narrow subset of sometimes self-consciously nostalgic consumers. McCarthy's own novels exhibit a snobbish disdain for the "dumb" and facile "mainstream" (McCarthy, "Interview" 675) but play wittily with their own residual status as media objects. Moments of such self-consciousness aside, the academic fields of contemporary literature and contemporary novel studies arguably exist uneasily in tension with the novel form's ever-failing position in our grid of cultural production: criticism continues to massively overrepresent cultural forms (like the art novel) of minimal import to the sensory and affective lives of media consumers today.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> "The fundamental codes of a culture—those governing its language, its schemas of perception, its exchanges, its techniques, its values, the hierarchy of its practices—establish for every man, from the very first, the empirical orders with which he will be dealing and within which he will be at home" (Foucault xx).

<sup>3</sup> I have approached these questions at more length in "Allegories of the Contemporary."

<sup>4</sup> Thus did a special issue of *Novel*, titled *The Contemporary Novel: Imagining the Twenty-First Century* (Bewes), justify its existence by noting that the current moment "marks a point of crisis and transition in the history of the novel" (Duke University Press n. pag.). But the issue (including an essay by the present author) addressed only prestige fiction and art novels, by such consecrated

This is hardly news, however, and I want to flag, without resolving, this issue of how disciplinary object choice fits often uneasily with contemporary regimes of cultural and social practice. My topic here is drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and particularly military ones. These machines for remote seeing and killing should be understood, I argue, to signify an end of empire in two senses. First, an end as in *conclusion*, or terminus. Hannah Arendt, among others, has noted that proliferating death is a sign not of hegemony but of its waning: “[r]ule by sheer violence,” she notes, as though gazing toward contemporary Afghanistan, “comes into play where power is being lost” (53). This means that the still-proliferating assassinations undertaken in the name of an American phase of accumulation are the sign not of its strength but of its weakness; drone war is, to twist Fernand Braudel’s evocative phrase, a “sign of autumn” (246).<sup>5</sup> Second, an end in the Aristotelian sense of *telos*, or purpose. If we take seriously the fact that empire is best understood not as culture or discourse but as a monopoly on putatively legitimate violence—the stretching of the state’s power to kill even beyond its “own” citizenry—then the power of sovereign decision crystalized in remote assassination machines is the very essence of empire: its *telos*, or end. President Obama’s now infamous “kill list meetings” only sharpened to an obscene purity the state’s power of decision over life and death and thus allegorize as event the very crystal of imperium as such.

Drones, I am arguing, are at once a symptom and a realization of the empire’s end. But they are also a regime of figuration, a way of seeing and, therefore, a modality of thought. In the words of Roger Stahl, drones have “capacity as a medium” (659). Even a small survey of the artifacts that have drawn on the drone’s odd coincidence between media form and instrument of sovereignty would stretch across the field of cultural production. Such a survey might start in the corporate world of mass-market films and massively capitalized video game franchises by major game studios like Sony Interactive, Activision, or Bethesda Softworks, today’s version of golden-age Hollywood’s studio system. But it would move toward vernacular forms like Twitter bots and dissident public art installations, reaching all the way to the anxious dreams recorded in the drawings of victims.<sup>6</sup>

But any survey of drone form would need to move all the way up the hierarchy of cultural value, too, reaching to the self-consciously rarefied idioms of prestige fiction and gallery art: works that, like McCarthy’s self-consciously avant-garde fictions and

figures as Michael Chabon, Vikram Chandra, Don DeLillo, Jonathan Safran Foer, Jonathan Franzen, David Lodge, Ian McEwan, Michael Ondaatje, and Orhan Pamuk. McCarthy’s *C*, which makes media nostalgia its subject, toys self-reflexively with the residual status of its own form, the novel; but it also, in its promotional front matter, refers to McCarthy as “the standard-bearer of the avant-garde novel” (n. pag.), wearing its place on the restricted end of the Bourdieusian grid on its sleeve. That is OK, since as McCarthy never tires of explaining in interviews, the vulgar and problematically realist “entertainment industry” is “dumb” compared to the modernist art-objects he presumes we too will fetishize (McCarthy, “Interview” 677, 675).

<sup>5</sup> Arrighi’s final book, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, points to the future his analysis imagined beyond American hegemony.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the wobbly and haunting sketches of Predator drones by nine-year-old Nabeela ur Rehman of Pakistan, whose mother was blown apart in a 2012 drone strike by US forces (Knefel).

the monumental contemporary-art photographs I examine below, attempt to represent critically the ontological and political, and therefore also aesthetic, novelities generated by our drone era. There is even—and this will be a focus in what follows—a clutch of mass-market novels about drones produced for a global anglophone audience, generated from the very epicenter of the “entertainment industry” to which McCarthy condescends (“Interview” 677). Seen together, what the cheaply printed best sellers and high-art productions mutually help sketch is a comparative analysis of the aesthetic technologies that have emerged to structure the sensory regime of our endless late-imperial war.

### Consolidated Vision

The visual rhetoric of drone optics, with targeting sight, framing flight data, and conspicuous pixelation, has become a cliché. Figure 1 shows a still from a Predator drone feed, part of a five-minute wordless video that was intercepted by a hacker in 2009 while being transmitted over unencrypted DOD satellite circuits.<sup>7</sup> A year later, and by the magic of changed context, this pirated feed became an installation artwork titled “Drone Vision,” which appeared under the name of Trevor Paglen, the conceptual artist and contemporary art cause célèbre I will discuss shortly.

The point is that UAV optics are now part of our everyday image-world, defining how we apprehend the present: they structure million-hit YouTube videos of actual drone kills (Stahl 663) but also massively profitable video game franchises, big-budget films, and television dramas up and down the scale of so-called quality. The fourth season of *Homeland* (2014), near the top of this mass-cultural prestige hierarchy, kicked off with Claire Danes’s character overseeing an assassination of a suspected terrorist by video feed seconds before enjoying cake at an office birthday party (“Drone Queen”) (figure 2).<sup>8</sup> An over-the-shoulder shot positions us as spectators: watching sovereign bureaucrats as they watch something else, a drone feed, which in turn watches the Afghan farmhouse where a fictional terrorist has been incinerated along with forty civilians.

Reminiscent of the Velázquez painting that opens Foucault’s famous account of the modern episteme in *The Order of Things*, this scene’s baroque perspectival scenario—frames within frames—begins to suggest that drone vision is not only about crosshairs and black-and-white targets. But where the complex sightlines of *Las Meninas* meant, for Foucault, that the object watched back, creating a “pure reciprocity” of gaze—a “slender line of reciprocal visibility” (4)—in drone form, sight runs only one way. As I will suggest, the regime of perception inaugurated by the drone is marked instead by its precise negation of the reciprocity Foucault ascribes to the classical episteme; this is the same reciprocity that, not

<sup>7</sup> They were not encrypted because in 2009, doing so introduced too much latency in the feed, extending to a tactically disadvantageous length the delay between events on the ground and the drone pilot’s apprehension of the information. That delay is now, with encryption, down to about two seconds.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Scott Selisker for alerting me to this episode and for his expert feedback on aspects of this argument.

coincidentally, commentators from Hegel and Emmanuel Levinas to Judith Butler have identified as the prerequisite for ethical life. But drone vision cancels reciprocity while extending the classical order's will to knowledge in ways Foucault could scarcely have imagined.

As Grégoire Chamayou explains in *A Theory of the Drone*, the order of vision proper to drones rests on at least three principles: (1) persistent surveillance or permanent vigilance in the present;

(2) a totalization of perspectives or synoptic viewing, covering all space; and (3) total archival retention, aggregating surveillance diachronically in storage (38–39). All of this adds up to what Chamayou calls a “revolution in sighting” (38). The US Air Force’s incredibly named Gorgon Stare program, for example, offers what its advocates call an “unrelenting gaze”: mounted on a “hunter-killer” MQ- Reaper, which can hold two tons of weaponry and remain airborne fully loaded for fourteen hours, the Gorgon Stare setup uses 192 different cameras and can store the data it collects for thirty days, enabling “after-action forensic analyses,” a diachronic capacity that makes this technology “the number-one reconnaissance asset that warfighters crave” (Thompson). That is not least because with it, the state can “discern patterns in the behavior of insurgents—where they hid, how they operated, who they interacted with—that would have been unknowable using other surveillance systems” (Thompson). Transforming long-duration observation into databases massive enough that individual behaviors might algorithmically be predicted from that general set, drone surveillance thus reverses at the level of war-making technology the relationship between instance and category that Catherine Gallagher identifies in the realist novel, say, where “a general referent was . . . indicated through a particular, but explicitly nonreferential, fictional individual” (61–62). Here, concrete and indeed living individuals are indicated by general pattern, with lethal but unevenly accurate results.<sup>9</sup>

Diachronic, totalizing, and aspiring to omniscience, drone form is also, as a result of all this, predicated on massive asymmetries of perspective—a point *Homeland*



Figure 1. *Drone Vision*, 2010. Archival pigment print, 16×20 in. Copyright Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist, Metro Pictures New York, Altman Siegel San Francisco

<sup>9</sup> In a November 2017 exposé called “The Uncounted,” *New York Times Magazine* reported that “one in five of the coalition strikes we identified resulted in civilian death, a rate more than 31 times that acknowledged by the coalition” (Khan and Gopal).



Figure 2. Screen shot, “The Drone Queen,” *Homeland* ep. 37 (season 4, ep. 1), Showtime, 2014

hammers home by melodramatically juxtaposing birthday cake and state murder. As Chamayou notes, the weapons-loaded drone eliminates reciprocity from the scene of killing and turns seeing, and with it the risk of death, into a one-sided operation: I see you but you don’t see me, and a drone operator at Creech Air Force Base in Nevada or at a situa-

tion-room birthday party on *Homeland* can kill but is not herself at risk of being killed. This constitutive dissymmetry of drone vision has tactical and legal ramifications but is also a political-aesthetic problem. It means that the dilemma of unevenly distributed narrative space that Edward W. Said detailed in *Culture and Imperialism*, for example—where the core speaks and has the power to act, while the margins figure only as silence—now describes the tactical *raison d’être* of a new war-making technology, its operational advantage. Recall that the relevant chapter in *Culture and Imperialism* is titled “Consolidated Vision.” Said’s argument about uneven representation within the novel-space has long been critiqued for construing imperial power as a representational or cultural and not properly political problem. In this vein we might note, for example, how that text slips in its description from optics to power, silently analogizing “vision” with political sovereignty by referring, in a chapter titled “Consolidated *Vision*,” to “what I have been calling . . . consolidation of *authority*” (77; emphasis added). Representational capacity is not identical to political authority, but drone technology helps us see that in fact, “consolidated vision” was always naming a problem of sovereignty, albeit one that in 1993 still awaited the wartime infrastructure that would make it so. Drone form makes this coincidence between vision and power explicit, since it twins representational capacity—the power to see and to observe or, as Said has it, to narrate—with the capacity to kill.

Twitter bots like Dronestream seek to interrupt drone form’s unidirectional or vectored omniscience, since they push information about drone strikes happening in “peripheral” zones like Waziristan, Yemen, or Afghanistan back to the core, using that social networking platform to make the darkness of drone war visible. “Early Tuesday,” as one post read, “in a village south of Thal, a US drone fired missiles at a house. Two people were killed (Pakistan)” (@dronestream). Iraqi-born artist Wafaa Bilal exposed the perversity of these seemingly unthinkable spatial dissymmetries in *Domestic Tension* (2007). This thirty-day performance piece saw Bilal sitting in a Chicago art gallery while Internet users across the world, anonymously and at any time, could click a button to shoot him with a paintball gun. As Bilal’s website explains, this interface “transform[ed] the virtual experience into a

very physical one.” Other artists, working yet more explicitly in the idiom of drone war, have attempted to redistribute the unequal representational and political space on which remote killing depends. Khesrau Behroz’s “Everybody knows where they were when they heard that Kennedy died” is an app that uses Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram to send push notifications to followers as soon as a drone strike is reported. Often remediating notices from sites like Dronestream or *Agence France Presse*, these notifications include details of the numbers killed and wounded, the location of the attack, and, occasionally, a brief description of the scene. What Behroz adds, juxtaposed against these notifications of drone execution, are, in his words, “picture[s] of where I was when I heard about the news.” The resulting collages set a space of precarity against one of safety, putting periphery against core and underscoring, in the process, the obscene anonymity of these killings. Unlike after the Kennedy assassination for which the series is named, no one remembers where he or she was when these unnamed individuals die. What Behroz’s project generates is the characteristically contemporary affect—flat, numbed, endlessly sad—that critics (as we will see) without quite knowing why consistently ascribe to McCarthy’s fiction.

In January 2013, Teju Cole likewise turned to the media platform of Twitter to test how drone war might tweak, invert, or satirically revise famous examples of a once-dominant media form. His “Seven Short Stories about Drones” jarringly bolt onto the plots of classic novels conclusions provided by drone killing: “Someone must have slandered Josef K.,” reads number 5 in the series, “for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was killed by a Predator drone” (@tejucole). Compressing vast, complex, and almost exclusively modernist novels into 140-character clips, Cole’s unevenly successful experiment aimed to expose a disjunction between drone killing and novel form itself. Here the capaciousness of what it performatively suggests is modernity’s signal form (Cole’s examples include *Ulysses*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, and *Invisible Man*) is jammed with ironizing compression into tweet-sized bites, sealed with death: “human” stories reshaped into inhuman form. This process of self-consciously sloppy reduction may subscribe to a humanist ideology of the novel form and fetishize mainline modernism; it certainly exposes what it suggests is the violence of compression, performing (contra Sterne) the message’s inadequacy to its media infrastructure. It goes further, I think, to associate the brevity of the tweet form (against the implicitly more substantial novels it ironizes) with the anti-deliberative and all-but-instantaneous violence of weaponized UAVs.<sup>10</sup>

Cole’s tweets hint at a formal observation about mediation, simultaneity, and drone war that they nevertheless do not fully theorize. By contrast, the digital chromogenic prints of multimedia artist Paglen—vast in format, variously opaque and hyperreal in their macro-scaled high resolution—seek avowedly to reverse or reorient the protocol of seeing that is constitutive of the drone state. (The function of the MQ-9 Reaper, according to an Air Force fact sheet, is to “find, fix, and finish targets” [“MQ-9 Reaper”].) Inverting this vector of predication, Paglen’s artworks deploy sophisticated surveillance technology to find and fix the state, if not to “finish” it: they use long-range

<sup>10</sup> One resident of Datta Khel, North Waziristan, interviewed by Stanford researchers in 2012, “remembered hearing the hissing sound the missiles made *just seconds* before they slammed into the center of his group” (Cavallaro 59; emphasis added).





Figure 3. Trevor Paglen, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010. C-Print, 48 × 60 in. Edition of 5 plus 2 AP. Copyright Trevor Paglen. Courtesy of the Artist, Metro Pictures New York, Altman Siegel San Francisco.

lenses and military-grade optics to turn the object of the state's gaze into its subject and vice versa. They depict secret interrogation sites, half-visible drones, and private tarmacs used to transport detainees to overseas gray zones for torture. Paglen uses long exposures to reveal the orbits of secret government surveillance satellites in transit, for example, inverting the state's powers of vision to disclose the regimes of watching that are, for citizens, normally occluded. I wrote "depict,"

"reveal," and "disclose," but the point is that these images aim to redirect the desire for immediacy and presence that is inherent to drone vision (find, fix, finish) and that structures war-state informatics logic more broadly—or so the mutiny telegram with which I began would suggest.

Rather than the frictionless transfer of information or "documentary" accuracy, Paglen's work aims, in his words, to be "useless as evidence": "I want photography that doesn't just point to something" he continues; "it actually *is* that something" (Stallabrass and Paglen 11, 4). The point of these works, then, is to bring into focus not the thing observed but the technologies of seeing themselves, and an image like *Untitled (Reaper Drone)* (2010), for example (figure 3), from his series of quasi-abstract drone photographs from 2009–10, announces itself as a grandly beautiful depiction of color itself, its wash of graduating blue-red referencing mid-century color-field painting by people like Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko no less than J. M. W. Turner's smeared depictions of suicidal modernity from the Victorian phase of accumulation. With concentration, Paglen's haunted vacancy becomes legible as an evening sky. The Reaper drone flecking the corner of the frame, once noticed, becomes the photograph's maddening focal point, impossible to unsee. That is the point: for instead of *objects* or *content* these images show walls of distance, highlighting the forms of mediation, recoding, and transmission—aesthetic, technological, spatial—separating it from us.

Of course, even as they comment, obliquely but critically, on the militarized ways of seeing proper to our fading hegemony, Paglen's self-consciously high-cultural artifacts occupy a specific (elevated) place in the contemporary culture industry, hanging in galleries, headlining exhibits, and acquiring the fetish character that remains the sine qua non of the marketplace for cultural capital that is the world of

contemporary art. (Paglen was awarded a MacArthur “genius” award in 2017.) Yet Paglen is rare among fixtures of this milieu in his commitment not just to noting the paradoxes of critiquing of the contemporary art world’s fetish character from inside it (this is common enough among the *October* set of avant-garde artists) but also to weaponizing this very art-world success in hands-on projects and noncommodified happenings funded by sales of the gallery work. This strategy is evident, for example, in Paglen’s dissident public works, like *Code Names of the Surveillance State*, in which he projected NSA code names onto the British Parliament (2015); his monumental tube stop installations, like *An English Landscape (American Surveillance Base near Harrogate, Yorkshire)* (June 15, 2014–July 13, 2016); or his work (as producer and provider of still images) for Laura Poitras’s documentary about Edward Snowden, *Citizenfour* (2014).

### The Sting of the Drone

To shift from the “restricted” to the unrestricted end of our contemporary field of cultural production, I move now from the gallery spaces of “art-as-pure-signification” (Bourdieu 114) to the “field of large-scale cultural production” (115; emphasis removed), where art is money and the point is to sell in volume. The “drone thriller” is a relatively recent subgenre of fiction that has begun to occupy a niche, albeit a small one, in the contemporary mass market for literature.<sup>11</sup> These emergent forms are pitched as stories for a new era, but they triangulate themselves within well-established conventions in the literary middlebrow. Yet these conventions themselves point up many of the same cognitive and political tangles that artworks like Paglen’s address in the key of enlightened critique. The cover of Dan Fesperman’s *Unmanned* (2014) announces the book as “part mystery and part thriller,” while *Sting of the Drone* (2014), a clunky exercise by former US counterterrorism czar Richard A. Clarke, is unmistakably a “thriller”—unmistakable because the word is repeated five times on its back cover. (“This first rate thriller,” one apparently anxious blurber says, is “a cross between a techno-thriller and a docu-thriller.”) Among the most delightful of these openly derivative offspring of Clancy is Mike Maden’s “Troy Pearce” series of “intense, page-turning novel[s]” (*Drone*, cover copy), whose phallically named, eponymous hero is “still lean and cut like a cage fighter despite the strands of silver in his jet-black hair” (15). Pushed out in quick sequence, the series kicks off with *Drone* (2013) and moves through *Blue Warrior* (2014), *Drone Command* (2015), and *Drone Threat* (2016).<sup>12</sup> (Maden’s latest project

<sup>11</sup> Nielsen Bookscan reports that sales in this new subgenre have yet to storm the culture industry, though their numbers as of February 2016 would be the envy of many academics. Mike Maden’s series had sold about 23,600 copies (*Drone*: 6,493 cloth, 9,838 paper; *Blue Warrior*: 1,285 cloth, 5,469 paper; and *Drone Command*: 609 cloth); Richard A. Clarke’s *Sting of the Drone* about 7,600 (4,849 cloth, 2,760 paper); and the literarily aspirational Dan Fesperman clocked in last—at around 1,250 copies for *Unmanned* (985 cloth, 268 paper). By comparison, Tom Clancy’s latest book, *Commander-in-Chief* (Greaney), has sold 145,000-plus copies. I thank Sam Douglas and Becky Cole for tracking down these figures.

<sup>12</sup> Maden is sophisticated in his awareness of how the conventions of his chosen genre both enable and constrain his capacity to dream up new scenarios and characters. He has noted the

closes the generic loop, since it finds him writing *as* Tom Clancy in *Tom Clancy: Point of Contact—A Jack Ryan Novel* [2017].)

I call them “delightful” because as all their names and titles—*Warrior, Command, Pearce*—suggest, Maden’s interventions into this new subgenre operate unapologetically as masculine fantasia. In defiance of the rules of narrative point of view, they include full specifications for every gun and piece of war-making technology to grace their pages and feature a no-nonsense female president, her frame “strong and lean” from “years of swimming and Pilates” (*Drone* 17), who drinks bourbon and shows no patience for fussy questions of human rights. What President Margaret Myers unknowingly discloses is the ghost of matriarchal authority tangled into the DNA of the drone’s technological history: as J. D. Schnepf has noted, the term *drone* was originally chosen by American officers in homage to the early British radio-controlled craft called the *Queen Bee*, because these mindless vehicles were, from the Navy’s perspective, “male subordinates, constitutionally subservient to a female queen” (Schnepf 275). Says one military historian: “The term fit, as a drone could only function when controlled by an operator on the ground or in a ‘mother’ plane” (quoted in Schnepf 275).

But the gender complications that have marked drone technology from its advent become sublated—enhanced, cancelled, and heightened to something like art—in Maden’s novels. President Myers “wore a black Nike long-sleeve polo shirt and a matching golf skirt and shoes, very subdued. She still had the toned arms and shapely runner’s legs to carry off the ensemble smartly. She was more than fifty but looked a decade younger. Heads turned when she entered a room—men and women both” (*Drone Command* 18). In Maden’s plots, the lean and gym-toned female president leagues with the cage fighter Pearce to scrub the world of Mexican gangsters and Iranian terrorists. The fantasy president from Texas nonetheless balances her badassery with fetchingly conventional maternal instincts, nearly starting a pointless and politically disastrous war with Mexico—but only to avenge the death of her son (17). “[S]he had a bigger nut sack than any man he knew in politics,” Pearce reflects (*Drone* 353); “[s]he hit from the same tee box as the men” (*Drone Command* 20). The novels’ adolescent gaze, seemingly standard-issue for a subgenre aimed at (in Maden’s words) “bring[ing] current technology into stories in a powerful and entertaining way” (“A Conversation”), leaves no equipment or human body unadmired, and its taste, as suggested by the president’s skirt, runs to the conventional. But the lady president’s nut sack announces gender as a site of contestation and helps us see that, in this novel and all drone fictions, the stabilization of gender identities along familiar axes of power is less an ideological solution than a fraying, constant problem. In Maden, “Madame President” “pour[s] herself another bourbon” (*Drone* 17), but a female scientist has “long legs, soft curves, and cloying eyes . . . more like a Bollywood movie star than a Ph.D. in robotics engineering” (*Drone* 32); the enemy

requirements of creating familiar characters and scenarios that nonetheless (and paradoxically) feel new and identified a father figure for all the drone books I have just named. “In my opinion,” Maden told me, “everyone who writes in the action-thriller genre today is essentially writing a variant of a Tom Clancy novel” (personal interview). I am grateful to Maden for taking the time to speak with me about his novels and his process for writing them.

(and male) Castillo twins, meanwhile, are “[n]aked and tan, their muscled bodies glisten[ing] with sweat” (*Drone* 37). As a character, Pearce himself might have been ripped from the rhetorical vocabulary of ads for impotence drugs (“[I]t was his blue eyes that grabbed most women” [*Command* 116]) and, as we will see, this potency is always at risk. He drinks beer and splits logs shirtlessly between fishing trips, chainsaw maintenance, and sexual conquests, all while organizing assassinations by robot (*Drone* 158). “Men want to be him,” as Maden summarized to me in an e-mail exchange, risking a familiar phrase; “women want to \$^&% him” (personal interview).

However mottled by the shadow of matriarchy, the *Drone* books’ internally divided aspiration toward infantile masculinity is important, because this gender trouble only enciphers at the level of sex a larger concern about the category of agency itself. As Chamayou helps us to see, the constitutive absence of reciprocity in drone technology—what one air force pamphlet calls the “FREEDOM FROM ATTACK” combined with the “FREEDOM TO ATTACK” (*Global Vigilance* 4)—demands a dramatic restructuring of the category of masculine military agency. This restructuring becomes legible as a lingering, obsessive concern about potency—a worry about action as such—stretching across these aspirationally masculine texts, a castration anxiety that shouts from nearly all of the books’ titles: *The Sting of the Drone*, *Drone Command*, *Point of Contact*. Where Dan Fesperman’s 2014 novel raises drone war’s crisis of male authority to the level of explicit problem in his *Unmanned*—get it?—marking his book as the most safely middlebrow of the novels (it sold by far the fewest of these titles; see note 11), the others labor unevenly to solve it. Heroic action must now be recast to include sitting at a desk and pushing buttons. *Tom Clancy: Point of Contact* finds Maden reviving the Jack Ryan franchise for the era (as a press release puts it) of “quantum-powered AI-generals and AI-admirals waging land, sea and air drone campaigns” (“Conversation”). But if this new world of artificial intelligence and mediated action feels antiheroic, at removes from the direct action of real combat, it is the media form of the thriller itself—with its male heroes, identifiable antagonists, love interests, and resolutions—that emerges to graft onto this brave new informatic world a structure of direct agency we have seen before. As Maden writes in a promotional interview, “a two-fisted, red-blooded Jack Ryan, Jr. . . . will be right in the middle of all that digital mayhem, if I have any say in the matter” (“Conversation”). As though to hammer home the point, the book’s cover depicts only an enormous, grayscale knife, charming in its phallic simplicity.

In an interview, Maden explained what his novels more artfully show, which is that the structure of action mandated by the bourgeois novel, in which *characters* perform *actions* against backgrounds of *setting*, fits only unevenly with the hyperdistributed and ultramediated nature of drone warfare. This distention of the field of action presents a challenge, he explained, for the thriller form itself. The “factual reality” of drone war, Maden said, “is often mind-bogglingly complex”; “[f]or example, a military deployment of a long-range drone like Reaper typical entails 80+ people in the loop—from maintenance personnel on the ground to JAG lawyers in D.C. in oversight positions. Fully describing each of those functions would completely bog the story down” (personal interview). But a “readable” and

“interesting” story, he continued, cannot afford to distribute its action across this too-vast chain of actants; the result would be boring. Instead, translating drone form into the media technology of the thriller requires devising scenarios in which red-blooded and two-fisted men can do red-blooded and two-fisted things. Did Maden find it difficult to create a hero who performs daring acts in the context of drone war?

*The short answer is “Yes” for many of the reasons you’ve already stated, e.g., long distance, “push button” warfare. I work around that challenge thusly: (a) using pre-drone historical storylines and action events in Troy’s life (e.g., Iraq); (b) focusing on bad actors who don’t have drone resources (though this category is becoming scarcer by the day) who are battling with Troy; (c) featuring non-military drone activity (e.g., rhino conservation) where there are no expectations of combat; (d) finally, by emphasizing tactical drone warfare where operators are necessarily present on the battlefield (and also deploying conventional weapons) rather than on the larger, long range systems like Reapers that are operated from stateside. (personal interview)*

All of this shows admirable insight into the difficulties of matching a chosen subset of novel form with the technical novelties of its subject. It also highlights for us the misfit between a residual media regime and the emergent one it seeks gropingly to describe.

Yet the tangle that arises when the bourgeois novel meets bureaucratic and multiply mediated warfare is conceptual too and, like all conceptual tangles, plays out perhaps most vividly at the level of syntax. This mismatch between forms—which, as I have suggested, plays out around the gendered problem of action—generates, in Clarke’s book, a hero called Dougherty and another with “still firm pecs” (10)<sup>13</sup> but also syntax like this, where the sentence itself must strain to find a human agent for its act of killing: “The mechanical extension of Major Bruce Dougherty, the thing that moved in the air when Bruce’s hand made adjustments with the joystick in his cubicle, was pressing ahead . . . against the cold wind two miles above the canyon” (Clarke 6). Dougherty’s virtual piloting leads in the end to an execution, and after the novel gives us the scene of explosion, it switches erratically to Creech Air Force Base. Here, a world away from human bodies dismembered by explosives, and on the other side of the novel’s vigorous formal crosscutting, fake pilots are high-fiving and cheering, giving “hoots and applause” (8). “Righteous shoot. Big Kill,” says the secure digital message summarizing the bombing, a detail that aims to cleanse these pseudo-pilots—and readers’—consciences about this act of digitized killing (8). But the compensatory, conscience-assuaging work of Clarke’s novel is not done, for the chapter follows Dougherty’s copilot, Erik Parsons, as he drives home from Creech in “his black Camaro” (8) to a

<sup>13</sup> If infantry warfare had heroes, in the drone era it is cubicle-bound bureaucrats who exercise the state’s putatively legitimate monopoly on violence. Dougherty’s name fairly advertises this supposed degeneration, while Erik Parsons, Dougherty’s CO, is described in the mode of mock heroic: “If pilots were supposed to look like the cartoon hero Steve Canyon, tall and blond, Erik Parsons looked more like a wrestling coach” (4).

clichéd hot wife the novel does not bother to describe, and the chapter that began with the detonation of an encampment of “human life-forms” (6) ends with the drone operator and his “night owl” spouse (9) having very straight sex in a hot tub after downing Heinekens: “Jennifer Parsons ran her fingers through the thinning black hair on his head and then through the graying hair on his still firm pecs” (10). If this is the sting of the drone, it is a sting that does not fully convince, and when Parsons, just before coitus, tells his wife, “We’re finding them, Jen. We’re winning,” we might be forgiven for entertaining doubts (10). And when Ray and Sandra, later in the novel, find themselves in their DC love nest, postcoitally talking drone bombing, the prose must again labor to convince itself of its hero’s manful decisiveness:

*She slipped her fingers slowly through the hair on his chest . . .*  
*“Some people think we are murderers,” Ray [said].*  
*“Does that bother you still?” she sighed.*  
*“No, never did,” he said. “I know who the murderers are. The guys we go after.” He took both of her breasts in his hands and buried his head in between them.*  
*She felt behind her with her right hand until she found it. “Seems like you’re ready for me to show you something this time. In this one, I play the cowgirl and you play the horsey.” He let out a loud neighing noise. (142)*

Interrupted by a Blackberry chirping with news of a drone operation in Pakistan, this aspirationally erotic scene, intercut with a pseudo-debate about the morality of drone murder, leaves its central, obsessive topic unresolved. Who is the rider and who the horsey in this cartoonish, and elaborately failed, attempt to renarrate our drone hero as a confident and unbothered leading man? The point is that these aspirationally macho texts are everywhere marked by gender inversion, confused vectors of agency, and highly choreographed scenarios of (lapsed) mastery—a combination that suggests their own slantwise insight into the difficulties novel form has in bearing out the network-logic and multiply mediated chain effects of drone war causality.

Where Clarke turns this problem into a sexual scenario in which gendered mastery is literally reversed (“[h]e let out a loud neighing noise”), Maden’s books work at the level of plot structure and sentence to recover, and paint in bright colors, the heroic male agency that drone war erodes in its very structure. Pearce himself, named “‘Troy’ as in ‘Trojan, warrior’ and ‘Pearce’ as in ‘pierce’ with a spear point” (personal interview), cannot avoid admitting that killing by remote “almost didn’t seem fair” (*Drone* 177). He concedes, too, that the bomb blast that ends the book “wasn’t as satisfying as killing the bastard Ali with his own hands” (406). But a short epilogue, literally an addition to the novel, exorcises any worry that this new form of killing is not quite manly enough. “I kill you with my bare hands,” Pearce explains to his enemy and to us, after bursting in to settle his final score (412). In this tacked-on, masculinity-saving scene—an actual and not just Derridean supplement—the remote killings, proxy agency, and murders by push button resolve at last into *mano a mano*, the cage fighter standing against his rival (now Russian) to banish the specter

of mediated war in favor of The Real Thing. The sequence works hard, I mean, to recapture as compensatory fantasy exactly the direct agency that drone war makes impossible. The scene is a blaze of active verbs and phallic knife work: "Pearce jabbed a laser-pulsed drug injector against Britnev's neck before he could scream, paralyzing him. He pushed the Russian back inside the apartment, kicked the door shut, and guided the whimpering, gurgling man onto a modular white leather sofa" (413). All this manful action, this jabbing and "inject[ion]" arriving just at the end of the book, puts away forever any doubts about whether remote warfare can be heroic. Or does it?

#### Some Relation between Me and the Machine

I have so far tracked drone content, not drone form, and it is important to note that the particularities of this new delivery system for sovereign violence are legible not just as compensatory masculinity or tangled erotic tableaux but as dilemmas of narrative point of view, themselves aesthetic ciphers or codes for what I am suggesting is the episteme of our drone era. Despite conventional associations of drone technology with "god's eye" surveillance, none of these novels unfolds in a third-person omniscient voice: think of Dickens's Shadow from *Household Words*, "the omnipresent, intangible creature . . . which may get into any place" (*Letters* 622) or the "far-reaching visions" of Eliot's consciousness-penetrating narrator in *Adam Bede* (5). The hero of *Unmanned* does wonder "what it would be like to lead a life in which every action was observed from on high for hours at a time" (Fesperman 8), but the novel does not pursue such perspectival effects as formal strategy. Rather than structurally mirror drone sighting with omniscient structures, I mean, and instead of turning this perspectival dilemma into a problem—as *Bleak House* does, say, when it formally shifts between Esther's on-the-ground narration and high-flying omniscient chapters—the drone thrillers just surveyed uniformly deploy third-person limited point of view. They follow thriller convention in heading sections with dates and named locales—Langley, Creech, Kandahar—a "meanwhile" effect that works acrobatically to negotiate the constitutive spatial caesura, the impermeable separation between there and here, on which drone war is predicated.

Only Fesperman's novel gives this crosscutting a rest, but its comparative stillness follows from its primary interest in domestic surveillance: so Nevada, Maryland, and New Hampshire rather than (as in Maden) Yemen, "Gulf of Mexico" (*Drone* 365), and "On board the Pearce Systems HondaJet" (221). Yet the effort to police social space and point of view in this way, separating perspectives by chapters headed with datelines and exotic locales, also breaks down, and Clarke's narrative, for example, proves unable to maintain its distinction among gazes, shifting as it does so haphazardly from limited points of view in the killing scenes—operator, commander, victim, witness—that it becomes simply impossible determine who is seeing what, as in the following.

*A few people heard a bang, when the triangle hit Mach 1, but it was so soon followed by the crash of the glass façade when the triangle hit it, and then by the muffled thump*

*when the triangle exploded in the Cigar Bar. Wilhelm actually saw the triangle as it came through the outer glass façade, less than a second before it went through the Cigar Bar door where he was headed. His eyes registered the flash of light when the triangle exploded in the bar, but his brain did not have enough time to process what his eyes had seen before the steel shards sliced his eyes and his brain and all the rest of him into a bloodied pulp on the burning carpet.*

The visual feed from the *Myotis triangle, Bird Two*, had looked blurred, incomprehensible shapes on the screen as the aircraft had hurtled toward the narrow laser beam projected from *Bird One*. Then the camera feed from *Bird Two*, the black triangle, had stopped.

*"Target hit. Warhead ignited. No secondary. Fire seems contained," Bruce reported into his mouthpiece after he turned his attention back to the image from Bird One.*

*"Fire alarm has gone off in the building, automatically signaling to Feuer Brigade around the corner,"* said a voice from Maryland.

*"Zoom Bird One's camera in on the room, please,"* someone in Virginia said, and Bruce [in Creech AFB, Nevada] adjusted the view. *"Thanks, not much left there."*

Bruce switched the camera back to wide angle and the image on the screen showed the hotel guests filing out of the front door in orderly fashion, guided by hotel staff, as two fire trucks rolled to a stop at the curb. (Clarke, *Sting* 31–32; emphasis added)

The point in quoting at length this hopelessly muddled perspectival scenario is to show how far the narrative technology of these novels must stretch to give shape to the nonreciprocity of gaze on which drone technology is predicated. The conceptual novelty of the subject, I mean, generates difficulties for the perspectival regime of narrative fiction, a mismatch between message and medium that is legible in these drone thrillers at the level of the sentence itself. Here is Maden, describing from the point of view of its victim what Clarke's cheering flyboys called a "righteous kill": "His brain barely perceived the blinding flash [of the explosion], and that for only an instant. He was dead before the slower-moving sound waves could strike his eardrum and stimulate the aural nerve. In fact, his entire brain case, including the aural nerve, had been splattered like an overripe melon against the bathroom wall tiles, which were also a lustrous pink terrazzo" (*Drone* 170). This can be called third-person limited only with the caveat that the perspective is not a perspective at all, since it explains what Castillo "didn't hear," "didn't notice," and "barely perceived." (The same formula appears in Clarke's experiment, above, when the victim's "brain did not have enough time to process what his eyes had seen before the steel shards sliced his eyes and his brain and all the rest of him into a bloodied pulp.") Depictions of occluded perspective and snuffed-out sentience like these, despite their inadvertently complex formulations, betray origins in infantile sexuality and pornographic militarism; they also perversely literalize Said's argument about the silence of the colonial periphery, doing so by crystalizing this nonreciprocity at the level of form.

At the other, more elevated end of the literary field, these dilemmas of sex, mediation, and point of view play out in an apparently more self-conscious register, and quite apart from the dirty business of actual warfare. As consecrating



reviewers have breathlessly noted, McCarthy's an erotic, theoretical novels are concerned with taking the measure of our hypermediated contemporary. But despite their uniformly fetishistic interest in death,<sup>14</sup> these novels eschew direct confrontation with the contemporary war state in favor of obliquely narrated, first-person accounts by white men in imperial capitals; they are antihumanist experiments aimed at (in one reviewer's words) "expos[ing] as an empty delusion the bourgeois reader's pitiable need for alluring characters, emotional heights and narrative closure" (Hogan). Concerned not with human bodies but with the processes of mediation, compression, replication, and repetition connecting them, these professedly anticommmercial works play out, in U's words, in "the hiatus created by the passage of command down a chain, the sequence of its parts; the interim between an action and its motion, like those paralytic lags that come in hideous dreams" (McCarthy, *Satin Island* 60). The point is that where the drone thriller seeks variously to suture or overwrite the gaps separating subject and object in this highly technologized modernity, McCarthy dwells in them and, like Paglen, turns the "paralytic lag" or "hiatus" of mediation into his works' very subject. *Satin Island* begins in an Italian airport, like other hubs that are "predominantly transfer points, rather than destinations" (4-5).

My purpose is not to celebrate these media-fetishistic texts as heroic exposures of a technical modernity that the drone novels only blunderingly evoke. Instead, I want to suggest that McCarthy's ostentatiously rarified novels examine the same hypermediated and violent modernity that Maden and Clarke do, and to similarly anti-erotic and genre-stretching effects. And McCarthy's technical fetishism, so structurally similar to Maden's, described above, limits the capacity of his affectively flat texts to comprehend the human damage of our drone world. As in the horsey and Heineken-swilling thrillers described earlier, these novels' attempts to account for the spatial and infrastructural sinews connecting the drone world manifest at the level of erotics—or their absence. Where the drone fantasias attack this problem of mediation with a hypercharged but auto-demolishing masculine virility, McCarthy's barren works are all but expunged of sexuality. In *Remainder*, this affectively neutralized failure of sexual contact is raised to plot point and theme, as the book's aphasic narrator numbly fails to connect with Catherine, just in from Africa, in what should have been a boozy, night-ending hookup. But it turns out that for McCarthy's narrator, the mediated form of this female person is preferable to the real thing:

<sup>14</sup> McCarthy's "International Necronautical Society"—an avant-garde collective project he runs with philosopher Simon Critchley and others—lists in its manifesto a belief that "there is no beauty without death, its immanence. We shall sing death's beauty—that is, beauty" ("Manifesto"). "Our ultimate aim," says the manifesto, "shall be the construction of a craft that will convey us into death in such a way that we may, if not live, then at least persist." This tonally ambiguous document concludes with a Bataillean flourish: "[M]ankind's sole chance of survival lies in its ability, as yet unsynthesised, to die in new, imaginative ways. Let us deliver ourselves over utterly to death, not in desperation but rigorously, creatively, eyes and mouths wide open so that they may be filled from the deep wells of the Unknown." Such rhetoric would be impossible, probably, from the point of view of actual victims of the "famine, war, [and] disease" the authors cite as characteristic of their present; they close this list with "asteroid impact," making a mockery of disasters that, from the perspective of victims, are likely not as funny as they are made to seem here.

“Catherine had already begun to annoy me. I preferred her absence, her spectre” (39). Such elaborately constructed preferences for disembodiment, voiced by male narrators whose own investments track toward the cerebral, marks these professedly avant-garde works as theory-boy discourse translated to aesthetic form.<sup>15</sup>

As before, sex is where the dissymmetry of novel form and media regime plays out. In *Satin Island*, after spectacularly denarrating his relationship with an undescribed woman called Madison (“When I arrived at Madison’s, we had sex. Afterwards . . .” [20]), U reoutfits “vanguard theory” in the shape of Badiou and Deleuze for marketing campaigns (33). McCarthy plays this hyper-theoretical, antiseptic tendency for laughs when, in *Remainder*, blue liquid spurts onto the lap of the unnamed title character, whose numbed-out mind is too focused on remediating old experiences (“translating them into manoeuvres to be executed” [87]) to take action in collaboration with any other human body. “The idea that his flesh could melt and fuse with the machine parts pleases him,” we’re told of Serge Carrefax, hero of *C*. “When they sing their song about taking cylinders out of kidneys, [Serge] imagines the whole process playing itself out backwards: brain and connecting rod merging to form one, ultra-intelligent organ, his back quivering in pleasure as pumps and pistons plunge into it, heart and liver being spliced with valve and filter to create a whole new, streamlined mechanism” (164).

This relentlessly mechanical, cyborg world is characterized by transmission, relay, and death, and here the only pleasure comes, perhaps paradoxically, from the supercession of body by machine, its becoming-drone in the performance of “manoeuvres.” Even Madison herself, in *Satin Island*, finds a slanted eroticism—some pleasure “beyond sexual,” she says—in feeling (as she poses for a stranger’s camera) “some kind of relation between me, the angles of my limbs and torso, and the machine, the rhythms of its crackles, beeps and oscillations” (166–67). At this

<sup>15</sup> Toril Moi has offered the following taxonomy of the theory boy:

*Every year some female graduate students tell me that they feel overlooked, marginalized, silenced in some seminars. They paint a picture of classrooms where the alpha males—so-called “theory boys”—are encouraged to hold forth in impossibly obscure language, but where their own interventions elicit no response. These women, in short, say that they are not listened to, that they are not taken seriously, and that they get the impression that their perceptions of the matter at hand are of no interest to anyone else. Such experiences tend to reproduce a particularly clichéd ideology in which theory and abstract thought are thought to belong to men and masculinity, and women are imagined to be the bearers of emotional, personal, practical concerns. In a system that grants far more symbolic capital, far more intellectual power, to abstract theorizing than to, say, concrete investigations of particular cases, these women lose out in the battle for symbolic capital. This is bad for their relationship to the field they love, and it is bad for their careers in and out of graduate school. This is sexism, and all this goes to show that sexist effects often arise from the interactions of people who have no sexist intentions at all. (4)*

Moi continues with an important addendum, relevant to McCarthy’s novels: “But there is another side to this. Sometimes I have a conversation with someone who has been described to me as a theory boy. Then I invariably discover that the theory boy doesn’t at all sound like an intellectual terrorist. He is, simply, profoundly, and passionately interested in ideas. He loves theory and precisely because he loves it, he has strong theoretical views” (4). An eighteen-page 2013 interview generated the names of no fewer than fifty-six writers, artists, philosophers, and critical theorists, of whom (by my tally) four were women (McCarthy, “Interview”; my analysis).

point, technology becomes a literal fetish, as McCarthy's novels play out with self-conscious relish the fact that humanized forms like the novel cannot be adequate to our brutal new networked sensorium, thick with "hordes of bits and bytes," "uber-server[s]," "stacks of memory banks, satellite dishes sprouting all around them, pumping out information non-stop, more of it than any single person would need in their lifetime, pumping it all the way in an endless, unconditional, and grace-conferring act of generosity" (*Satin Island* 73).

*Remainder* concludes its own antihumanist experiment in transforming bodies to machines with the endless, suicidal looping of an aircraft, the culmination of the narrator's efforts to "ma[k]e all our actions passive. We weren't doing them: they were being done. The guns were being fired, I was being hit, being returned to the ground" (216). All of this boils down, I mean, to a concern with agency and with the strange between-space where action and passivity intertwine, a tangled scene of capacity and helplessness in the face of determining systems that plays out, as it does with drones, as a problem of observation, knowledge, and data. Like the Reaper drone that aspired to omniscience, U's "Great Report," in *Satin Island*, seeks the total knowledge or perfect social anthropology that drone surveillance too holds out as its aspirational conclusion or *telos*. "It's about identifying and probing granular, mechanical behaviours," U tells us, "extrapolating from a sample batch of these a set of blueprints, tailored according to each [client's] brief—blueprints which, taken as a whole and crossmapped onto the findings of more 'objective' or empirical studies (quantitative analysis, econometric modeling and the like), lay bare some kind of inner social logic, which can be harnessed, put to use" (23). My point is that here as in the drone-focused texts above, a concern with weaponizing aggregated data gained by "'objective'" study transforms into a problem, at once formal and thematic, of agency and its lack. It is true that McCarthy's novels, despite their interest in surveillance, replication, communications technologies, and human-machine relations—and despite the fact that planes, airports, and remote technologies feature in all of them—are unconcerned with UAVs at the level of plot. Still, I am suggesting they can be usefully redescribed as drone novels.

U's dream in *Satin Island* is that he is flying, drone-like, "over a great, imperial city, the world's greatest—all of them, from all periods: Carthage, London, Alexandria, Vienna, Byzantium and New York, all superimposed on one another the way things are in dreams" (141). In this palimpsest of Arrighi's imperial cycles—empire upon empire, with more superadded—what U sees is a hybrid image of imperium itself. At the core of this power is a burning pile of trash, glowing: "Yes, *regal*—that was the strange thing: if the city was the capital, the seat of empire, then this island was the exact opposite, the inverse—the other place, the feeder, filterer, overflow-manager, the dirty, secreted-away appendix without which the body-proper couldn't function" (142). Concerned here to chart a connection between the empire's regal core and its abject outside, McCarthy's novel now bears witness to the caesura in contemporary social space that Maden and Clarke's drone thrillers attempt more disorientingly to coordinate. The realization that occasions this dream of modernity's cataclysm is the narrator's recollection of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which he (the narrator) imagines the

human beings on the receiving end of the anthropologist's gaze. "[F]or them," the novel's narrator reports, "civilization represents no less than a cataclysm. This cataclysm . . . is the true face of our culture—the one that's turned away, from *us* at least" (141). McCarthy's novels fetishize the technical regime of their hypermodernity and revel in the "structures of untold complexity" available to rich male narrators in Western capitals. In this they are test cases in the consolidated vision Said long ago described. But if these experiments in narrating the "order and harmony of the West"—as *Satin Island's* narrator puts it (140–41)—do not have the capacity to imagine the experiences of those human beings on the West's receiving end, they at least labor to mark those experiences as unknowable from within the form of the metropolitan "literary" novel as such. Like Maden's equally experimental thrillers, McCarthy's upmarket fictions work to translate the relationship of violence and mediation of our contemporary into a residual form, the novel, and in so doing show how this misfit itself becomes apprehensible most fully as a problem of action.

#### My Heart Was on Fire

The hyperviolent twilight of the American century has been bracketed under various periodizing rubrics, including neoliberalism, late capitalism, or, with Elizabeth Povinelli and others, "late liberalism," the "lates" and the "neos" suggesting at once continuity and rupture with the orders that came before it (see Povinelli). However named, our extending present is characterized not just by new forms of warmaking or an expanded capacity for profit extraction and the capture of nature, but by dizzying proliferation of material technologies and digital genres. These new forms have emerged to mediate and monetize lived experience in late capitalism. One of these forms remains the novel itself, which I have suggested has stretched and, in some instances, all but fallen apart in an effort to comprehend the coincidence of mediation and death in our contemporary moment. To the jarringly sexual, late-imperial drone fables by Maden and Clarke we might oppose aspirationally critical artworks about mediation, violence, and modernity's trash-heap deathworlds by Behroz, Bilal, Paglen, McCarthy, and others, even as we note how the seemingly obvious distinction between critical and affirmative culture breaks down. Which group is symptomatic, and which critical, of our brave new antihuman sensorium? It may be that these familiar categories of ideology critique also stretch to breaking in the face of these media objects. However we answer, it is clear to me that against all such forms—high and low, critical and affirmative, and including our own criticism—we should array the testimony of people like Faheem Quershi, a fourteen-year-old boy whose skull was fractured and eye destroyed by shrapnel in a 2009 strike in Pakistan, one of President Obama's first "signature strikes." Faheem's first-person account comes at the end of one section of Stanford's long 2012 report, *Living under Drones* (Cavallaro). The section is titled "Voices from Below." "[I] could not think," reports Faheem. "I felt my brain stopped working and my heart was on fire" (70). In the words of another voice from below: "I started weeping. Lots of people there were weeping . . . weeping fiercely" (65).

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