**Fetishized Data: Counterterrorism, Drone Warfare, and Pilot Testimony**

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*Drones now comprise a major part of our culture – primarily as a consequence of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ and the rise in violent extremism. Yet the available data on what it means to operate a drone (where this can influence wider perceptions on the appropriateness and effectiveness of remote warfare as an act of counterterrorism) is highly contradictory. This article explores a new source of data capable of shedding light on this contested issue: online interviews with current and former pilots discussing their personal experiences. Access to this testimony has the potential to influence cultural understandings of remote warfare, specifically where these stories highlight the severe psychological difficulties pilots can be subject to. In analysing this new data, however, the article questions whether the media typically employed to express pilot testimony comprises an appropriate space in which to publicize and engage with this evidence. It argues that this presentation has caused these personal accounts to become fetishized – to the extent this undermines the cultural, political, and informative value of the data and even reinforces the narratives of remote warfare this testimony frequently seeks to reverse.*

Keywords: drones, remote warfare, military, media, fetishization.

Drones now comprise a major part of our culture; they are the ‘signature device of the present moment’ (Benjamin Noys in Jackman, 2016). Adam Rothstein (2011) comments: ‘You are obsessed with drones. We all are. We live in a drone culture, just as we once lived in a car culture.’ In particular, the prominent use of drones within the so-called ‘War on Terror’ has placed a spotlight on remote warfare – not only in terms of current affairs, but also conceptions of what counterterrorism should look like, military involvement in counterterrorist activities, and expectations of combat personnel. This construction is frequently based on the assertion that drones represent a positive revolution in warfare; a view Sara Brady (2015: 35) argues exists as an inherently cultural expression by the public, as well as government and military elites. Specific terrorist ‘enemies’ can now be targeted without the need for more expansive airstrikes or ‘boots on the ground.’ Furthermore, remote devices supposedly secure the user by removing military personnel from direct physical conflict and reducing the psychological turmoil of killing by establishing a geographical and emotional distance between pilot and target. This conception, however, is under challenge. New studies reveal a darker side to drone warfare. Far from clean killing, remote warfare is increasingly associated with negative implications concerning the operator, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This assessment is reflected in cultural representations of remote warfare; for example, see films such as *Good Kill* (2014), *Eye in the Sky* (2015) featuring Alan Rickman, and *National Bird* (2016) that question the ethics and experience of drone-based counterterrorism. This more critical understanding is also evident in the focus of this article – the online publication of personal interviews with current and former drone pilots, where these accounts frequently undermine representations of drone warfare as both physically and mentally ‘safe’ for the user. Purported to be ‘tell-all’ tales of what it means to operate a drone, this testimony repeatedly (although not exclusively) expresses stories of severe psychological problems, difficult working conditions, and personal distress. Within the context of the wider debate on drones, therefore, this data offers a new source of information as to what the implications of remote warfare actually involve. More specifically, this analysis is important in that it adds significant weight to a major shift in conventional understandings of drone use towards an oppositional standpoint. Looking at the wellbeing of the pilot, and finding such trauma in the process, challenges not only perceptions as to what pilots go through, but also whether that impact means we should abandon strategies of drone use in a bid to protect combatants, or not. We should comprehend exactly what the pilot experience involves in order to make a full and informed decision on the use the drone counterterrorism.

The identified testimony cannot, however, be easily divorced from the media via which this is communicated. This article argues that this specific media – sensationalised interviews on Internet news sites – has contributed to the fetishization of the pilot experience, and that this fetishization threatens to undermine the analytic and cultural value of this data. The interviews convey not simply the expression of pilot trauma, but the *fetishization* of trauma: there is no separation between the two. While the discourse on drones has considered the fetishization of drones as physical weapons, this observation has not been extended to the pilots themselves. This article argues that a full assessment of drone counterterrorism necessitates extending fetishization in this way. Adopting a wider approach is critical as fetishization in this context weakens attempts by pilots to highlight the negative psychological implications they say can be caused by drone operation, to the point this actually replicates conflicting cultural narratives. While the interview data potentially offers a new perspective on the pilot experience – one that humanizes those involved – in fact, the fetishization of these stories achieves the exact opposite. Consequently, this article is effectively divided into two parts: (1) assessing the content of this testimony relative to the current debate on the nature of remote warfare, and (2) analysing what this data can realistically contribute in light of the limitations identified with regards its presentation.

This argument requires a few clarifications. This analysis *does not argue* that the personal testimony of pilots is unimportant; indeed, the article demonstrates that listening to former pilots is critical in challenging perceptions that drone pilots are psychologically secured from their experience. The discussion here is limited to the problems associated with the contextual presentation of the identified data in a specific form, where this directly undermines the intentions of many pilots in exposing their personal feelings. Equally, this article does not excuse the actions of drone pilots in the sense that they contribute to a controversial form of warfare. Drone attacks are highly contentious, especially in terms of collateral damage and the killing of non-combatants. In promoting a sympathetic approach towards the pilot, this should not be interpreted as a sympathetic comment on the use of drones. It is possible, however, to discuss the pilot experience as traumatic and not also endorse the act of carrying out a drone attack. Finally, in discussing media presentation of information, this is not to assume any audience will necessarily take this at face value, especially where this is identified as sensationalist. Yet, despite these qualifications, this article will still demonstrate that fetishization remains problematic within this context and that a distinct opportunity exists for misinterpretation in respect of the stories these pilots are trying to tell.

**A Short Comment on Data**

Before engaging with an analysis of pilot testimony, the issue of data should be addressed. Where this article considers the problems of context – specifically here, certain forms of media fetishization – in comprehending a data set, it is important to ascertain what ‘data’ means in this respect. Personal testimony and the narratives this contributes to are problematic whereby this evidence is based on a person’s subjective opinion – a far cry from more directly quantifiable information such as statistics. The extent of this is evident in Cara Daggett’s (2015: 363) discussion of queerness and drone warfare, where she demonstrates that – whereas pilot experience is typically reduced to a basic spectrum concerning the level of intimacy pilots invest in their actions – ‘this axis is too “crude” to describe the experience.’ Testimony cannot be treated as immediately quantifiable, but must be contextualised in order to consider the subjective and emotional context. Similarly, Lauren Wilcox (2017: 11; see also Wilcox 2015) uses gender to highlight the embodied nature of drone warfare, where this ‘demonstrates a flaw in the supposed perfectibility of the algorithm in removing issues of identity or prejudice from security practices.’ Again, personal testimony is revealed to be highly subjective. This applies to the extent that some may argue that personal testimony is not ‘data’ in the conventional sense. This article opposes this view and treats both testimony and any associated narrative as a data set. To draw distinctions between different types of analytic information – for example, between what we say and what we can count – threatens to introduce a difficult and controversial hierarchy of evidence into the academic field. Consequently, issues pertaining to testimony are discussed within the frame of the ‘data’ label, and this article maintains that the problems of contextualised data identified here are applicable to other forms of information – including data such as statistics, where even quantitative methods also frequently seek to measure subjective opinion.

In understanding testimony as data, there exists a long history of using intimate reflections by conflict personnel as a valid and valuable source of data. This analytic trend includes memoirs such as *Jarhead* – Anthony Swofford’s (2005) now famous account of combatancy in the Gulf War (see also Karl Marlante’s (2011) portrayal of his emotional experiences in Vietnam). Additionally, this genre includes studies of multiple solider testimonies, specifically where these explore deeply emotional, psychological, and even philosophical questions concerning warfare and, as J. Glenn Gray (1998: 242) puts it in his seminal study, the ‘acceptable standards of humanity’ (see also Terkel, 1984; Bourke, 1999; Neitzel and Welzer, 2013)[[1]](#footnote-1). Critically, this is not to suggest such data can be analysed without acknowledging its subjective nature. Claims made within testimony cannot be taken ‘as is’ without risk of bias. This, however, does not negate using testimony within the ideological expectations of ‘data.’ Indeed, it highlights the importance of this specific research project of listening to drone pilots, where their evidence can inform debate concerning the combatant experience.

The article analyses 21 personal accounts acquired from online newspaper/magazine interviews conducted by journalists, on a voluntary basis, with current and former pilots[[2]](#footnote-2). Interviewees are primarily American, although British pilots were included. One of these Americans is former operator Brandon Bryant, who has been especially prominent in speaking out (yet there are sufficient accounts from other pilots to ensure the results are not overly dominated by one person). Many of those interviewed, however, spoke under the condition of anonymity. Consequently, it is not possible to identify the exact ethnic/national background or gender of all participants, and this is recognised as a limitation in terms of the data analysis. No selective criteria were applied in terms of choosing which accounts to consider, and all accounts found in the data search were included – although these are limited to interviews conducted in English. The questions asked during these interviews inevitably vary from account to account and have been determined by the journalist. The presentation of this interview data is also within the control of the journalist and the publisher (in the case of the latter, these are all established online news sources). Data is limited in that former pilots have experienced a negative reaction to speaking out publicly and this can disincentivise others to do so (Walker, 2015): there is government resistance, e.g. pilots report having their bank accounts frozen after speaking out (‘Confessions of a former US Air Force drone technician’, 2016), and pilots have experienced backlash from the public where they are criticised as disloyal to the services (Power, 2013). Despite these constraints, however, this analysis still provides compelling evidence concerning how drone pilots express their personal experience. The interview data was analysed and coded negatively/positively for: (1) specific types of experience e.g. evidence of ‘moral injury’ (discussed below); (2) inclusion of sensationalist words/phrasing e.g. ‘terror’; and (3) information that could be interpreted as fetishized or excessively lurid e.g. tales of watching targets ‘bleed out’ (again, discussed below), where this analysis also noted the presentation and positioning of such references within the text.

**Pilot experience**

Since 9/11, drones have been frequently extolled as the latest in weapon – and more specifically, counterterrorist – technology. Within this narrative, it is highlighted that drones can be utilised tactically to target specific terrorist ‘enemies’ without the risk of wider combatant or collateral damage. Furthermore, remote warfare physically secures the operator by removing them from the direct conflict zone (Schulzke, 2011: 296; Sharkey, 2012; Whetham, 2013: 24-26; Williams, 2015). Pilots are ‘able to kill without being able to be killed; to be able to see without being seen’ (Chamayou, 2011). Consequently, soldiers’ bodies are not put at risk (Strawser, 2010). Nor, supposedly, are their minds. The distance between pilot and target established by remote warfare is also claimed to reduce the emotional pressures associated with carrying out lethal military strikes (Singer, 2009, 2011: 396; Wall & Monahan, 2011: 246; Coeckelbergh, 2013: 87-84). Pilots do not kill with the intimacy of ‘in person,’ where the latter is identified as potentially traumatic for military personnel (Grossman 1995). Indeed, some academic and military analysts argue that drone operators find it easier to kill (relative to direct killing on the ground) as a consequence of this psychological security and emotional detachment (Der Derian, 2009: 9-10; Sparrow, 2009: 27; Brunstetter & Braun, 2011: 349-51; Asa Kasher in Kasher & Plaw, 2013; Megret, 2013: 1298; Clarke, 2014: 242; Enemark, 2014: 375; Powers, 2015). Philip Alston (2010: 15), UN special rapporteur on extrajudicial executions, notoriously labelled the psychological act of remote killing as a ‘Playstation mentality.’ Remote warfare supposedly motivates all the mental and moral responses of playing a computer game.

Former British Army drone pilot, James Jeffrey (2012), agrees. Based on his own experience, he says the moral and physical insulation of remote warfare made killing ‘too easy’: ‘So you are in this position where you can remove all threats or risk and dangers to yourself and just go – and just go straight ahead.’ Interview-based accounts from current pilots support this. For example, one journalist – talking with pilot Anne, call sign Sparkle – describes their interviewee as ‘perfectly OK with dealing out death’ (Maurer, 2015):

Sparkle watched as they picked up the target’s blasted body. ‘It’s just a dead body,’ Sparkle said. ‘I grew up elbows deep in dead deer. We do what we needed to do. He’s dead.’

Sparkle’s reduction of the target to both (1) a characterless dead body (i.e. a physical husk as opposed to a ‘person’) and (2) an animal (i.e. non-human) indicates an emotional detachment from the killing. Furthermore, the specific reference to deer places the strike on the level of recreational hunting. In a similar vein, other current pilots describe remote killing as simply part of their role:

When the decision had been made, and they saw that this was an enemy, a hostile person, a legal target that was worthy of being destroyed, I had no problem with taking the shot.

(‘Vanessa Meyer’ in Abe, 2012)

[T]hat individual [the target] is the one that brought it on himself.

(William Tart in Wood, 2013)

I feel no emotional attachment to the enemy. I have a duty, and I execute the duty.

(Scott Brenton in Bumillier, 2012)

Former pilot Brandon Bryant reveals that operators he worked with seemed to actively enjoy remote killing: ‘[T]here was one individual who got the word “infidel” tattooed in Arabic on his side, and he had Hellfire tattoos marking every shot’ (in ‘A Drone Warrior’s Torment’, 2013).

The above perception of remote counterterrorism has permeated cultural understandings of what it means to operate a drone and use it to kill, including at the public level. Sue Brady (2015: 49) says with ‘its ability to assure its pilot complete protection from physical harm, the drone symbolizes a sanitized, preferred notion of war, and of culture.’ This conceptualisation has been repeatedly reinforced by the US government’s narrative portrayal of drones in these specific terms. From Presidents George W. Bush to Donald Trump, successive administrations have been keen to win public support for drones, where these military systems have comprised a fundamental tactic in the so-called ‘War on Terror’ and beyond (Harvey, 2003; Shaw & Akhter, 2012; Kampmark, 2015). Drones have been labelled Washington’s ‘weapon of choice’ in carrying out foreign policy and counterterrorism since 9/11 (Byman, 2013). Administration officials have rhetorically highlighted the supposed benefits of drone warfare as an attempt to justify and rationalise the decision to employ this as a form of counterterrorism, not least in the face of claims that drones still kill innocent civilians (Zulaika, 2012: 53-54). For example, President Barack Obama (2013) said in a major speech on drone policy:

So it is false to assert that putting boots on the ground is less likely to result in civilian deaths or less likely to create enemies in the Muslim world [than drones]. The results would be more U.S. deaths, more Black Hawks down.

By focusing on the allegedly greater risks to American soldiers positioned on the ground, so Obama effectively absolved the employment of drones on the basis of troop safety. Such rhetoric has had a significant impact in constructing a public image of drones as a positive act of military engagement, evidenced by high public support for drones within the US (Pew Research Centre, 2015). In turn, this narrative has succeeded in making the public culturally ‘comfortable’ with drones (Zenko, 2016).

There are, however, three related issues with this narrative – specifically where these relate to the interview data. First, it is difficult to divorce the pilot testimony demonstrating no/minimal negative psychological impact from more conventional notions of combatant killing and soldierly duty – as expressed by Elaine Scarry (1985), and also in Nancy Sherman’s (2005) ‘stoic warrior.’ Military figures at all levels have long justified the act of killing as ‘part of the job,’ regardless of the method involved. Consequently, this specific set of interview data does not support the assertion that drone warfare engenders a different type of psychological decision-making concerning fatal acts of conflict, as compared to conventional/traditional forms of warfare. Specifically, there is no evidence that the operators cited above conceptualise and rationalise lethal tactics in a less emotionally damaging way than previously experienced. Indeed, to the extent that the first pilot cited in this analysis, James Jeffrey, discusses the relative ease of killing, he presents this as a *negative* feature of drone operation. Killing is more straightforward – yet this is not to be celebrated, but criticised. Second, an inherent subjectivity exists within this data whereby those pilots who speak positively/neutrally of their experience are all currently employed within a drone operator role. Numerous reasons can explicate this trend, such as: former pilots who experienced their role positively have no incentive to express that experience publicly (the classic idea that people speak out when they are upset, but not when satisfied); their testimony may be part of a propaganda effort, as per the governmental rhetoric already highlighted; or pilots may feel unable to criticize while currently employed. This subjectivity extends into the third issue: that a significant number of former pilots dispute this positive view of the drone operator experience, or at the very least cannot reconcile their experience with the justification of duty. Together, the accounts put forward by these pilots create a very consistent narrative outlining the serious trauma they have experienced, where they all report very similar experiences. This section will now outline the key trends within this testimony.

***The concept of ‘distance’***

New military and academic studies demonstrate that drone operation can result in negative emotional repercussions (Martin, 2011; Dao, 2013; Otto & Webber, 2013; Thompson, 2013; Blaszczak-Boxe, 2014). The US Air Force reports that so many drone personnel are leaving because of stress and anxiety that it no longer has sufficient staff to meet demand (Chatterjee, 2015; Drew & Philipps, 2015). The data derived from the personal interview analysis supports this alternative view of the pilot experience. Specifically, these accounts challenge the assertion that distance protects the pilot. Despite the physical gap between their target, pilots still report that they experience distress. Bryant says of killing one target: ‘I felt disconnected from humanity for almost a week’ (Abe, 2012). When he left the Air Force he was given a certificate confirming how many kills he had contributed to: 1,626. ‘The impact of such knowledge, and the myriad other stresses of sitting in a tin box in Nevada… has taken a heavy toll on Bryant and other drone operators’ (Pilkington, 2015). This distress can be exacerbated by the expectation that pilots will continue to watch the post-strike aftermath, often for hours – to ensure the target is deceased and identify potential new targets based on those who attend the scene (Power, 2013). This process may additionally involve watching the funeral, as many Muslims believe burial should occur within 24 hours of death, which can be also psychologically upsetting (Maurer, 2015). This emotional pressure is not expected of combatants in the field, who typically leave the scene immediately (Jean Lin Otto in Bennett, 2015: 187):

While fighter pilots have to worry about being shot down, they rarely see the results of their attack. After an engagement, we have to conduct surveillance for quite a long time. Yes, we may only be seeing it, but sometimes, we’re seeing it for hours on end, and that is part of the traumatic impact of the mission. It’s a definite form of stress on the operator in and of itself.

(Slim in Chow, 2013)

The concept of emotional distance is further challenged by claims that pilots can form strong bonds with their target, especially if they have been surveilling that target for a protracted period of time (which may be months depending on the scale of the mission):

You become immersed in their life. You feel like you’re a part of what they’re doing every single day. So, even if you’re not emotionally engaged with those individuals, you become a little bit attached…Targeting with RPAs [remotely piloted aircraft] is more intimate. It is war at a very intimate level.

(Anon in Ricks, 2014)

Bryant says he found it particularly problematic to kill after seeing the target engage with their family; specifically, he felt he was depriving children of a father (Abe, 2012). ‘They [the targets] were good daddies,’ he says. Cian Westmoreland (in ‘Confessions’, 2016) describes a similar sentiment:

If you’re in danger, if someone is pointing a gun at you, you can justify – in your own mind – shooting someone. But if you’re sitting in Kandahar, you’re comforted with a screen where you watch people day in, day out – you might even start to realise they’re not bad people.

For pilots such as Bryant and Westmoreland, therefore, remote killing is not the emotionless and practical act of removing an unknown enemy that has frequently characterised narratives of drone warfare. Pilots insist they can form emotional attachments with the targets, where this intimacy may result in negative psychological and mental consequences for the operator. This is particularly interesting as it demonstrates that the pilots, and the narratives that their experiences construct, do not ignore the impact drone warfare has on the victims, including collateral damage. In fact, the killing of targets and civilians is actively used to highlight the distress and trauma that the pilots can experience in inflicting pain on others.

***‘Real’ world engagement***

Unlike soldiers on deployment, drone pilots go home at the end of their shift. Pilots report that this constant alternation between the ‘real’ and military worlds is a distressing and disorientating experience (Paul Rolfe in Smith & Serle, 2014). While this inability to reconcile work and personal life is also evident within troops returning from longer-term deployment (Milliken, Auchterloine, and Hoge 2007), drones-based experiences are more significantly compressed in time and the readjustment recurs on a daily basis. In addition, pilots cannot talk to their family because of the classified nature of their work, which (1) precludes an outlet for pilots to express their feelings and (2) creates barriers between them and their family (‘Interview with a Drone Pilot’, 2010; ‘Afisr Predator’, 2014). Former operator Slim (in Chow, 2013) says this personal pressure had a highly negative impact on his marriage:

The need to decompress is tremendous, but the problem is you can’t talk about your work, what you have seen, or what you have done, because of security. Pretty soon, spouses don’t understand why, and the friction really begins. In many ways, I wanted to tell my wife everything, but knew that I couldn’t, so we mainly focused on how her day went. Needless to say, I didn’t get the chance to decompress very much, and that led to a lot of pent-up stress.

This situation can also make ‘normal’ life difficult, where this appears irrelevant in comparison to the work of counterterrorism:

You get back home and you’ve been inundated with trying to strike this guy, save this guy, and your wife says, ‘Honey, should she wear a pink or blue tutu?’ Or I’d walk into, ‘Honey, your truck leaked oil on the driveway’, and I know that’s important, but I’m sorry. I just can’t get excited about it. Nobody’s going to bleed because of that stuff.

(Bruce Black in Fenton, 2013)

Interviewees additionally state that their personal lives are marred by cultural assumptions of drone pilots as heartless killers. They feel that ‘other people’ (i.e. the general public) assume they are not physically or emotionally scarred by their work as drone operators, including the ability to kill. Pilots say they are openly and repeatedly accused of finding it easy to take lives – including, in some cases, the lives of non-combatants – and that they do not care about the moral consequences associated with this. Westmoreland describes this as a situation where fathers (i.e. pilots) have to ‘explain to their kids that they’re not monsters’ (in ‘Confessions’, 2016).

***Post Traumatic Stress Disorder***

Former pilots report that PTSD and depression is pervasive amongst drone personnel. Stephen Lewis says of developing PTSD: ‘It’s not about if, it’s about when. And when it hits you it’s hell’ (in Walker 2015). Bryant – who has an official medical diagnosis of PTSD – would use his time between shifts reading unsettling novels: ‘He read the dystopian sci-fi classic *Ender’s Game,* about children whose violent simulated games turn out to be actual warfare’ (Power, 2013)[[3]](#footnote-3). Journalist Matthew Power continues his discussion of Bryant’s condition: ‘Over time he found that the job made him numb: a ‘zombie mode’ he slipped into as easily as his flight suit.’ Many of Bryant’s interviews detail his subsequent alcoholism and breakdown, to the point at which he can barely sit still due to nerves (Abe, 2012):

Bryant posted a drawing on Facebook the night before our interview. It depicts a couple standing, hand-in-hand, in a green meadow, looking up at the sky. A child and a dog are sitting on the ground next to them. But the meadow is just a part of the world. Beneath it is a sea of dying soldiers, propping themselves up with their last bit of strength, a sea of bodies, blood and limbs.

There are frequent references to sleep problems and on-going nightmares throughout the analysed accounts (Bryant in Power, 2013; Walker, 2015). Westmoreland (in Pilkington, 2015) describes one of his dreams:

I’m in a village in Afghanistan and the whole place is burnt out and there’s a woman on the ground covered in soot and a child crying over her. I go to help the child, but half her face is blown off and there’s nothing I can do.

There are also claims of ‘rampant’ self-medication through drugs and alcohol amongst both current and former pilots (‘Afsir Predator’, 2014). Former pilot Michael Haas comments: ‘In the last six months I was… taking little bumps of bath salts [drugs]… In my mind I was thinking I was sharper and more clear, but in honesty I was just spazzing out’ (in Walker, 2015). Haas estimates that a dozen others in his squadron were also self-medicating. In addition, there are numerous anecdotal reports of suicide (‘Afsir Predator’, 2014). The accounts also reveal how little psychological support there is available outside the military system. ‘Afisr Predator’ (ibid) says it took many months to find a psychologist with the appropriate security clearance, which he feels severely limited his recovery, and he claims he received no support from the Veteran’s Association because he was not ‘boots on the ground’. Bryant similarly reports that there have been attempts to remove his benefits because there are ‘no physical scars’ (Walker 2015).

***Moral injury***

Pilots also report ‘moral injury’ (e.g. Bryant in ‘Torment’, 2013; Westmoreland in ‘Confessions’, 2016). Kent Drescher and David Foy (2008: 91) describe moral injury ‘as damage or harm received to one’s moral center’ caused by acts of conflict. In line with Dave Grossman’s (1995) assessment that killing in war can cause emotional distress, moral injury specifically expresses the mental harm this can cause a soldier in respect to their moral perception. Critically, moral injury is not merely conceptualised as the emotion of trauma typically associated with PTSD (Drescher and Foy, 2008: 91; Currier et al, 2015: 54), but encompasses a more extensive range of feelings associated with moral wellbeing: ‘loss or shame, guilt or regret’ amongst others (Dokoupil, 2012). Yet in the same way PTSD has found a parallel with physical harm (via the emphasis on trauma, Tanielian et al, 2008), so to has moral injury (via the emphasis on injury, where this word is more typically associated with physical wounds). This parallel has been established in order to demonstrate that mental and moral pain is as important as the pain inflicted on our bodies (Pontara, 1978: 24). The concept has gained significant traction in response to soldier experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 (Wood, 2016; Sherman, 2015), although the concept itself dates back to Vietnam (Shay, 2012). For many interviewees identified in this study, these recognized experiences in relation to Iraq and Afghanistan also extend to their involvement in these conflicts as drone operators. They relate this to a number of moral dilemmas, including: whether targets have the right to a trial; does remote warfare clash with the US Constitution; is distance killing moral; justifications of collateral damage; and whether surveillance is ethical. ‘Afisr Predator’ (2014) also discusses the moral dilemma of judging pilot success in terms of kill count:

Performance evaluations highlighted an airman’s number of ‘enemy kills,’ I asked, “Why does it matter how many people we killed?” Is that truly the definition of success – death? I joined the Air Force to save lives, not take them.

Westmoreland (in ‘Confessions’, 2016) comments: ‘You’re trying to figure out what you did, why you did it, and what’s going on in that country. That’s what brings you to a real point of hopelessness.’ Haas (in Pilkington, 2015) concludes that being a drone pilot involves ‘psychological gymnastics to make it easier to do what you have to do,’ otherwise the moral stress could be debilitating.

For many of the pilots identified in this study, the concept of moral injury has provided the ideational means to express the harm they feel, specifically where this harm is not physical. Moral injury provides a narrative for the expression of that experience. Moreover, the need to equate the emotional with the physical is especially important for drone pilots, where they say they have been ridiculed for not being present on the ground as ‘proper’ combatants (Tart in Abe, 2012):

Some troops thanked the drone crews for being ‘angels in the sky,’ but more often they were the butt of jokes, mocked as ‘chair-borne rangers’ who would ‘only earn a Purple Heart for burning themselves on a Hot Pocket.’

(Bryant in Power, 2013)

In the vein of the ‘Playstation mentality,’ Bryant refers to feeling reduced to a ‘Nintendo warrior’ (in ‘Torment’, 2013):

We hear that all the time, ‘You play videogames for a living.’ Well, people do not die in videogames. And you’re not able to save people’s lives in videogames. I can’t cause an aircraft to have a collision with another aircraft in a videogame.

(Anon in Ricks, 2014)

Consequently, moral injury is a conceptual vehicle for pilots to construct their experiences, specifically for consumption by a public audience. The pilots are trying to communicate their feelings, knowing their audience may possess preconceptions that (specifically physical) pain is not relevant to their experience. Moral injury is a means of breaking down that cultural preconception and opening an audience up to alternative versions of the drone pilot experience. This relates to wider efforts by certain pilots to challenge more general conceptions of drone warfare as a positive. By demonstrating that there is another version of this story – one that highlights the potentially devastating impact of drone operation on a pilot – the testimony is designed to destabilise the idea that drone warfare is a purely positive experience. This does not necessarily mean any audience will reverse its view, especially where they may be reluctant to accept what is effectively anti-government testimony. Nor is it guaranteed that an audience will take this testimony at face value, as highlighted in the introduction to this article. Yet these accounts still provide a new means of understanding that can undermine expectations that have, until now, characterised Brady’s cultural perception – both in terms of how public audiences understand drone warfare as a good, and also political and military elites.

**Fetishizing drone warfare**

The way these accounts have become fetishized via their presentation in the media must be addressed, specifically where this threatens to obscure the data and its value to the drone debate. Moreover, even where an audience does not engage with this fetishization – that is, they effectively ‘see through’ the fetishization involved – this can lead to that audience rejecting the data outright as unreliable. While misinterpretation/rejection is not inevitable, therefore, fetishization still creates a major problem in terms of the wider understanding of this data and limits the contribution this can make in comprehending not only the pilot experience, but also the issue of employing drones more generally.

The idea that the media fetishizes in order sell copy is nothing new: it is the classic case of ‘if it bleeds, it leads.’ Fetishization, however, is an inherently difficult idea in that it has been conceptualised in a variety of ways. The two key areas of conceptualisation are Karl Marx’s (1990: 163-77) commodity fetish (whereby goods become associated with an inflated sense of value as a consequence of the production system) and Sigmund Freud’s (1977: 345-57) sexual fetishization (whereby the penis is ‘replaced’ by objects that, as is the case with Marx’s commodities, obtain an exaggerated meaning via the process of disavowal). These two forms of fetishism represent ‘social and individual neuroses, respectively’ (Johnson 2000: 247). Yet these are not the only theories concerning fetishization; and indeed even Marx and Freud frequently overlap, for example, in the way sexual fetishization of the female body is sold as a commodity (Mulvey, 1993: 3-4). Beyond Marx and Freud lies a convoluted debate wherein fetishization has been categorised in a plurality of ways – to the point at which some scholars argue the term should be abandoned as a scholarly classification (Masuzawa, 2000: 250). This plurality has created long-standing confusion, recognised since the late 19th century when Robertson-Smith (1884: 209) dismissed fetishism as ‘merely a popular term, which conveys no precise idea, but is vaguely supposed to mean something very savage and contemptible.’ Others have attempted to identify a third category, however. William Pietz (1985) says this is religion, although this theological approach is also more widely embraced as the idea of primitive thought and so-called ‘uncivilized’ cultures (Hegel 1956: 95). Bonnie Smith (1995: 1170), in discussing the scholarly development of the concept in the late 19th century, says fetishism has developed around the three main middle class concerns: ‘economic value, rational knowledge, and love.’ In this sense, everything other than Marx and Freud – including religion (for example, see Lang, 1879) – is reduced to ‘rational knowledge.’ Roy Ellen (1988: 213) expresses a similar sentiment, but terms this category ‘anthropological.’ Consequently, ascertaining the meaning of ‘fetishization’ is more complex than a simple definition.

All these classifications come back to a single concept, however: the reification of an object (Pitkin, 1987: 264;). A ‘fetish’ was once exclusively conceptualised as a revered object – often religious – that was thought to embody a sacred element. Critically, this understanding comes with the caveat that reification is not purely rational, and that this exaggerated value can be uncovered as a disproportionate construction (Petrof, 2015: 217). Webb Keane (1997: 677) says: ‘To impute fetishism to others is to set in motion a comparison, as an observer recognizes that someone else is attributing false value to objects.’ This recognition involves looking at fetishized behaviour with ‘a clear eye,’ specifically ‘one from which the scales have fallen.’ Indeed, fetish is an English word of Portuguese origin, derived from *feitico*, meaning ‘made’ or ‘artificial’ (Nassau, 1904: 262). The fetishized object is ‘a form that significantly resisted the reduction of things to their instruments or exchange value’ (Reed, 2007: 152).

Technology is fetishized, where this also embraces weapons (Salter, 2014: 163) and, more explicitly, drones (Bill Roggio in Klaidman, 2013; Michel, 2015; Yehya, 2015: 1; Mitchell, 2016). The fetishization of drones can be seen as ‘positive,’ where this plays into those ideas already outlined that drones comprise a beneficial form of modern warfare. Ian Shaw (2011; Shaw and Akhter, 2012: 1494) provides an excellent account of the drone’s fetishized construction as a valuable and progressive weapon. This sentiment is echoed in Ian Roderick’s (2010) work on Explosive Ordnance Disposal robots – where this can be expanded to drones according to the way weapons are fetishized by their ability to save lives – and David Harvey (2003: 3), who argues that fetishization occurs in relation to technology’s supposed capacity to solve major problems. Yet there also exists a negative form of fetishization, where this maps onto the trauma that can be associated with the pilot experience.

Technofetishism is ‘the intensification of our cultural lust for new technologies’ (Fernbach, 2000: 235; see also Baggiarini, 2015: 129; Noys, 2015: 3). This lust means that the fetishization of drones has parallels in Marx (Pfaffenberger, 1988: 242), where this relates both to the consumption of technology and to power. In terms of the latter, Anne Harrington de Santana (2009) discusses nuclear weapons as a ‘currency’ of power in respect to commodity fetishism – which can in turn be applied to drones as an expression of a novel form of military power. Indeed, ‘newness’ is central to technofestishm. In combination with the work of Charmaine McEachern (2001: 233), who demonstrates the media tendency to fetishize anything novel, it is argued here that drones have been characterised in ways that facilitate such fetishization. There are also overtones of Freud, however. During one of the analysed interviews, Power (2013) says of drones: ‘Even their shape is sinister: the blunt and featureless nose cone, like some eyeless creature that has evolved in the darkness.’ His comments not only sound like the description of a monster (fetishization as terror), but also are highly phallic. Despite these similarities, however, technofetishist scholars have frequently presented their approach as something ‘more’ than Marx/Freud (Hornborg, 1992: 12) – a trend that goes back as far as the Victorians (Sussman, 2000: 202). Benjamin Noys (2015: 3) describes his conceptualisation of drone fetishization as distinct from, albeit it drawing on a mix of, these two key thinkers. For Noys, fetishization comprises ‘the mysticism of material object being treated as possessed of divine power, and the sexualisation of that power as a peculiar displaced potency.’ Although Noys does not explicitly reference religious fetishism, as documented above by Pietz, the reference to the divine certainly also appeals to this discourse. Noys (2015: 3) argues that the power associated with drones comprises a God-like quality, in that this reference to a higher being subsequently fetishizes the drone:

To treat drones as if they were the ‘travelling eye of God’ is to flatter this mundane and brutal surveillance and killing device. We may give a technological object, or technological assemblage, a philosophical dignity it does not deserve.

Consequently, it is easier to view the debate on drone fetishization as a hybrid of different forms of fetishism than pertaining to any specific form, one that extends into that ambiguous ‘third category’ surrounding religious reification (at least to the extent that the media construction of drones embraces concepts of power).

Academics who examine the fetishization of drones, however, have not discussed this issue in terms of the *pilots*. They analyse the fetishization of the weapon, but not the experiences of those who operate them. The pilots are not explicitly mentioned, but are effectively subsumed within the weapon they operate. While this is not to state there are no studies on the pilot experience itself (e.g. Williams 2011; Gregory 2014), this issue has not been discussed within the fetishization context. Perhaps this is unsurprising. Fetishism comprises an innate materiality, where this is built around the construction of an object (Pietz 1985: 7; Masuzawa 2000: 248). Within this context, it is much easier to fetishize the weapon than the more abstract concepts of personal experience and emotion. As this article will now demonstrate, however, analysis can and should separate out the pilot experience from the wider discourse on fetishizing remote warfare. Where this specific focus has been overlooked in the past, introducing this into debate creates an opportunity to comprehend this issue within a much fuller picture – moving beyond an understanding based only in terms of the fetishization of drones themselves, and expanding this to consider the persons who pilot them. Within this context, analysis can consider how the pilots’ experience has been fetishized in relation to their public interview testimony. The way in which the type of media employed in presenting these accounts – particularly where this relates to the act of killing – fetishizes the pilot experience, with implications for the wider cultural understanding of drones at both the public and political levels.

***Click bait***

Sensationalist headlines – more commonly known as ‘click bait’ – are frequently used to attract attention to online content (Kuiken et al, 2017). This approach plays into the idea that news is a fetishized product in the vein of Marx in order to ensure it ‘sells’ to an audience. This tactic has been extensively employed in terms of the public presentation of pilot testimony. Indeed, the sensationalist headline is identified here as the key ‘starting point’ in the fetishization process. For example, one of Bryant’s most prominent interviews is with *GQ* magazine (Power, 2013). While the piece claims to unveil the human side of the drone pilot, it is introduced with the following headline: ‘Meet the 21st-CENTURY KILLING MACHINE who’s still utterly, terrifyingly human.’ The capitals are in the original. In setting the scene for, and conveying a message to, an audience about the nature of the publication, this is highly sensationalist. The violent and aggressive references to killing and terror shapes the tone of the entire piece, explicitly in a way that promotes voyeurism on the part of the audience – in a manner not unlike Freud’s sexual voyeurism. While sex is replaced with trauma in this sense, it engenders a comparable fascination of fetishization.

More specifically, the dual construct of the drone pilot as (1) modern and (2) machinery promotes the same fetishization as seen in respect to drones as a military device discussed previously. The same elements of techno-fetishism are associated with the pilot, where Bryant himself is effectively reduced to a new technology. As a machine, Bryant is subject to the identical fetishizing assumptions as the drone he operates. This construction is backed up within the article itself, where Bryant is referred to as a ‘drone warrior’ – a much more emotive and gratuitous term than ‘pilot’ or ‘operator’, or indeed ‘person.’ To the extent that Bryant is identified as human, he is ‘terrifyingly’ so. This description sets him apart as something other than the human norm, where this ‘other’ is specifically presented as something grotesque and even dazzling in its horror. Similar headlines include: ‘Dreams in Infrared: The Woes of an American Drone Operator’ (Abe, 2012) and ‘Confessions of a Drone Operator: The Men Who Deal Out Death from a Computer’ (Berkowitz, 2013). Again, the pilots are constructed as a dispassionate extension of the drone and their actions equated with impassive technology as opposed to human emotion. This construction plays into the notions of pilots as an unemotional extension of the drone, and also as videogame players (not least where videogames themselves are so heavily associated with the fetishization of the military; Piot, 2003; Gagnon, 2010), that many of these pilots actively seek to dispel by speaking out. Furthermore, the reference to machines super-humanizes the pilot. This observation parallels the work of Noys (cited above) and his religious interpretation of drone fetishization as being based on conceptions of Godly power. Noys’ discussion of power as the ‘travelling eye of God’ can be compared to Power’s (2013) reference to Bryant’s ‘all-seeing presence wheeling in the sky above.’ The same sentiment is also evident in the way Power highlights Bryant’s ‘piercing ice blue gaze,’ where this too has an ethereal quality. Other examples include a quote by former pilot ‘Vannessa Meyer’ (Abe, 2012): ‘Sometimes I felt like God hurling thunderbolts from afar.’ Once more, this approach associates pilots with the machine itself, relating back into existing ideas of drones as fetishized objects.

This process of fetishization dehumanises the pilot. By adhering to cultural associations pertaining to the weapon itself, so this effectively removes the human from consideration. While many pilots claim their rationale in publicly promoting their personal testimony is to tell the ‘real’ and ‘human’ side of their experience, the media presentation has done little to find the human in their stories. This observation is especially important within the context of the work of Sara Meger (2016: 152-54). Meger argues that de-contextualisation (understood here as dehumanization) is a first step towards objectification, which in turn leads to fetishization. Furthermore, Alberto Susini (2015: 35) argues that drone fetishization distracts from the real social forces involved, where those social forces are presented here as the pilots’ experiences. Not only does this reference to ‘pilots-as-drones’ fetishize in itself, but additionally creates the conditions for greater fetishization whereby it negates the emotions many pilots state they seek to express. Fetishization effectively denies the pilots the capacity to experience emotion. Yet the potential value of this new evidence depends on the supposition that pilots do experience, specifically negative, emotions as a consequence of drone operation. If pilots are constructed as unfeeling objects, then this connection is impossible.

***The voyeurism of remote warfare***

The experience of killing is also fetishized, where the presentation of pilot interviews tends to focus on the most lurid and horrific stories:

The smoke clears, and there’s pieces of the two guys around the crater. And there’s this guy over here, and he’s missing his right leg above the knee. He’s holding it, and he’s rolling around, and the blood is squirting out of his leg, and it’s hitting the ground, and it’s hot. His blood is hot. But when it hits the ground it starts to cool off; the pool cools fast. It took him a long time to die. I just watched him. I watched him become the same color as the ground he was lying on.

(Bryant in Power, 2013)

His body was burned and unrecognizable. The driver, a regional warlord, was so badly mangled that local authorities identified him by association.

(Mark McCurley in McEvers, 2015)

Similarly, former pilot Heather Linebaugh (2013) asks of the politicians who support drones: ‘How many men have you seen crawl across a field, trying to make it to the nearest compound while bleeding out from severed legs?’ This tendency towards the shocking is not limited to physical destruction. Power (2013) identifies a strong ‘voyeuristic intimacy’ connected to reports of pilots watching their targets go to the bathroom or have sex:

The crew say they’ve watched fighters shit in the wood countless times or have sex, sometimes with animals. One sensor said he watched an Afghan target fight a goat for an hour.

(Sparkle in Maurer, 2015)

I’ve seen lots of dudes take shits.

(Mike in Hurwitz, 2013)

Admittedly, the audience itself is capable of fetishizing graphic violence irrespective of media construction. Sue Tait (2008: 94), on discussing Internet hosting of images of ‘body horror,’ talks of a market and a desire for such imagery on par with that of pornography. Carolyn Dean (2003: 91) also employs the concept of pornography, this time in relation to photos of the First World War dead and injured, where these images have ‘reduced men’s sacred bodies to objects of excitement, pleasure, or domination and thereby further violated the dead or demeaned.’ Furthermore, Mark Vera (2006: 309) says: ‘A fine line exists between “reproducing the experience of horror” and “fetishizing violence”.’ There is still evidence, however, that the media has sensationalised this testimony i.e. there exists a fetishized construction of the evidence that goes beyond the idea that the pilots’ description of events is horrific in of itself. This conceptualisation of fetishization as gore has a long pedigree in the way in which violence and weaponry has long been fetishized. Observing the traumatic side of conflict is the ‘morbid fetishization of war imagery’ (Pasquinelli, 2005: 486). This again has parallels Freud. The grisly aspects within the pilot testimony have been explicitly manipulated in order to make the stories appear more extreme and ‘clickable.’ For example, the questions asked in *Democracy Now’s* interview of Bryant seem intent on gaining the most gruesome of details e.g. ‘So, you watched this guy bleed out for how long?’ (in ‘Torment’, 2013) Journalist Ed Pilkington (2015) – in an article for *The Guardian* – uses a quote from Haas as the headline: ‘Ever step on ants and never give it another thought?’ Yet placing this quote in context of Haas’ wider testimony, the former pilot says: ‘That’s what you are made to think of the targets.’ Consequently, there is a contrast between the media’s presentation of this quote (an example of impassive killing) to the Haas’ intention in making it (an expression of moral injury), where the former is a sensationalist manipulation of the latter.

Remote killing is also fetishized via the way in which the presentation of pilot testimony generates visual images in the audience’s imaginary. This process of transforming issue into image is already identified as a form of fetishization (Petrof, 2015: 2017). Elizabeth Dauphinee (2007: 140) analyses the infamous torture photos from Abu Ghraib as an act of voyeuristic fetishization, where this is generated by the ‘drive to make visible what is essentially unimaginable.’ In applying this theory here, the extremely graphic description of the pilots’ experience makes the killing and its aftermath visual to the audience. This is not simply a case of informing the audience that pilots can experience horrific sights, but of asking the audience to imagine and construct specific visual representations of this. Where this occurs in conjunction with the sensationalist headlines identified above, this may be a case in which this imagined horror scenario is exaggerated by the audience, or at least taken out of context. This limits the audience’s understanding of the exact nature of the pilot’s experience, or at least the version of this that the pilot is attempting to communicate. This act of communication is effectively reduced – at least in significant part – to an act of voyeurism. In turn, this process can distort the testimony and limit the extent to which engaging with such personal testimony can act as a learning experience – specifically one that could underpin cultural change in respect to the public debate on remote warfare. Consequently, this precludes the development and adoption of an alternative narrative of drone warfare in that the audience consumes the testimony for voyeuristic gratification as opposed to the internalisation of a contrasting viewpoint.

***Replicating cultural narratives***

Where the media norm reverts to the narratives underpinning the positive militaristic expectation of drones outlined at the start of this article, this severely limits the contribution this interview testimony can contribute to debate. The way in which the media reproduces the notion of pilots as emotionally safe precludes any audience engagement with the pilots as human and capable of human experience/emotion. Within these public accounts, the pilots appear as little more than drones themselves. Furthermore, the act of remote killing is fundamentally reduced to the gore caused, as opposed to the emotion and moral feeling that this inspires in those who carry it out. Consequently, this potential new data cannot succeed in challenging any viewpoint that upholds drone warfare as a good (where success is judged here in terms of its adoption and internalisation by public and political audiences) as its presentation replicates the assumptions of remote warfare that this emergent narrative is supposed to undermine and contradict. By failing to directly contest positive perceptions of drone warfare, this precludes any alternative narrative that expresses a contrasting viewpoint. While the pilot testimony does conflict with these perceptions, the way in which is it still framed in the same terms merely reproduce what audiences ‘know’ about the drone pilot experience. Consequently, this new evidence is effectively ‘drowned’ out.

**Conclusion**

Drones are not real – they are a cultural characterization of many different things, compiled into a single concept.

(Adam Rothstein in Moraine 2013)

The meaning of drones goes far beyond the physical machine itself. For Rothstein, this is a case where the drone does not even exist in the absence of its cultural construction. The ways in which we think about drones – what they mean to us and how we understand what they do – is just as, if not more, important than drones as physical objects. It is not simply the case that drones ‘are,’ as we culturally ascribe certain understandings to them e.g. the defender of American freedom, the destroyer of enemies, an expression of unrestrained US imperialism, the killer of the innocent. Rothstein can be criticised for reducing this meaning to social construction alone – not least where drones have caused real and extensive physical damage in the Middle East. His statement does, however, demonstrate how significant cultural understanding is when talking about this weapon (see also Kennedy and Rogers 2015). This cultural meaning, however, is subject to substantial contestation. On one hand, this expression still allies strongly with the vision set out by a US government that is keen to keep using drones, or at least retain them as a military option: pilots are not physically or emotionally affected by the experience of killing, and this contributes to a more positive and moral form of warfare. Increasingly, however, this viewpoint is subject of contestation, as studies reveal there is another side to this story – one in which pilots can suffer horrific psychological consequences as a result of their engagement with remote warfare. This alternative conceptualisation is reflected in the voices of those pilots who have operated drones – those who speak out online to raise awareness of the horror of their experience.

Within this context, pilot testimony has the potential to challenge, and contribute to, the contested debate on drone warfare. Hearing from pilots themselves as to what using a drone actually means – especially where this process reveals such emotion, terror, and trauma – is essential. Moreover, this is not simply a case of exposing the reality of the pilot experience, but opening up questions about whether drone-based counterterrorism should be utilised, where this has such a negative impact on combatants. While these accounts are subjective, this interview data sheds new light on the ethics of remote warfare more generally. Understanding what pilots go through and feel is a necessary aspect of a full and informed debate on this issue. The transformative potential associated with this data, however, risks not being entirely realised at present; at least not without careful analysis that seeks to extract the data from its problematic context. As long as this testimony is presented within a sensationalist form of media, this potential is subject to preclusion. The ‘tell-all’ approach to media reporting has turned this evidence into a fetishized, sensationalist, and voyeuristic account of the drone pilot experience. This fetishized bias not only undermines the cultural and political value of this data, but also encourages the audience’s adherence to conflicting narratives – the very narratives many pilots have sought to undermine. Critically, this is not to argue that pilot testimony is not important, or that its tabloid presentation means we should not concerns ourselves with this data. In reference to the latter, in the same way that we can overlook the subjective nature of testimony to understand this as quantifiable data, so too exists the potential to overlook fetishization, or to treat this something to be analysed in its own right (as this article does). As it stands, however, those involved in the debate on drones cannot take this data ‘as is.’ In the absence of contextualisation, this data is highly skewed and threatens to hold back the very challenge to conventional understandings of drone warfare that so often lies at its heart.

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1. This applies to fictional accounts of warfare as well as ‘real’ testimony; see Christopher Coker (2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Pilots identified by full name: Bruce Black, Scott Brenton, Brandon Bryant, Bryan Callahan, Michael Haas, James Jeffrey, Stephen Lewis, Heather Linebaugh, Mark McCurley, Paul Rolfe, William Tart, Cian Westmoreland. Pilots identified by first name and/or call sign: Anne a.k.a ‘Sparkle’, Matthew, Mike, Ryan, Patrick a.k.a Spade, Slim. Pilots adopting false name: ‘Vanessa Meyer’, ‘Afisr Predator’. One has no identification. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Power presents this as an example of Bryant’s distress, although it should be noted that *Ender’s Game* is recommended reading in the Marine Corps (Brooks, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)