Dreaming with drones: Palestine under the shadow of unseen war

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Abstract
This article discusses how the first-person genre, especially a Gazan wartime diary, allows both writer and reader to imagine new possibilities for understanding contemporary colonial drone warfare, which is instrumental in the strategic silencing and invisibilization of war victims. By creating this zone of invisibilization (one that I will name the “dronesphere”) through obfuscating loss of life, war perpetrators aim to drown out the voices of opposition and resistance in Gaza. This is precisely why an increasing autonomy of military technologies that I call the “anthropomorphizing of drones” has triggered fierce debates over the unaccountability for war crimes committed against those on the receiving end of such autonomous weaponry. One specific case that deserves serious attention in this regard is the deafening silence surrounding Israel’s use of lethal drones to assassinate people in Palestine, which has led to the strategic silencing and invisibility of Palestinian deaths and a struggle for survival through the use of top-down control via drones in the region. However, Atef Abu Saif’s use of “strategic anthropomorphism” in his wartime diary The Drone Eats with Me: A Gaza Diary does not grant the drone absolute autonomy in death-dealing but imagines Drone as a fictional character. Instead, the execution of Gazans is presented as a prolonged reconnaissance performance, which not only allows Gazans to see drones as an extension of (absent) drone operators’ bodies, but also to register their protest against the Israeli authorities by imagining Drone as a living entity. Therefore, using the authority of direct experience that Youval Noah Harari calls “flesh witnessing” (2008), Abu Saif’s wartime diary enables the formation of Palestinian subjectivities held under the sign of erasure, thereby claiming their rights as social and political human bodies.

Keywords
contemporary drone wars, enclosures, dronesphere, flesh witnessing, Palestine, strategic anthropomorphism, violence

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Terror from Above

Let me tell you a story
a bedtime story
Let me tell you a story
of Predator drones with giant wings
equipped with hellfire missiles
and “light of God” lasers
choking the skies over northwest Pakistan

Let me tell you a story
a daytime/nightmare story
of grandmothers as “bug splats”
and children as “double taps”
Let me tell you a story
an everyday story
of terror from above
villagers burned, body parts strewn
over cultivated fields

Let me tell you another story
The official story
a drone warfare story
Let me tell you a story
of precision strikes
where no innocent is mutilated, incinerated
or murdered
Let me tell you a story
But we know this story is a lie.
(unknown, qtd. in Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, 2014)\(^1\)

Although written in the Pakistani context, this poem, entitled “Terror from Above”, usefully captures a universal experience and the fear of living under the shadow of drones, whether in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, or Palestine. Nevertheless, what immediately connects this poem to my theme of drone warfare in Palestine is the way it deploys the motif of “story” (a stream of “bedtime”, “daytime”, “everyday”, “nightmare”, and “official” stories) that corroborates Caren Kaplan’s idea of “drone-o-rama” — a stream of reportage or “cacophony of multimedia ‘noise’” — used to distract the public from “accountability as the civilian death toll from drone strikes mounts” (Parks and Kaplan,
A similar stream of reportage (official, drone warfare stories) which recurs in the poetic epigraph, in the context of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, has continued to inform social and cultural imaginaries as well as mainstream (hegemonic) political narratives about the region under aerial attacks. As Kaplan points out:

Multiply these kinds of stories and images by a high number and this begins to approximate [to] the immersive cultural practices that transform things like drones and events like wars in other places into a mind-numbing scroll of info-bites — fragments of information [...] without really helping us to understand that the time of war, its technologies, and the spaces that are being produced are marshaled in the service of some extremely specific modes of spectatorship.

(Parks and Kaplan, 2017: 163)

Taking its cue from the motifs in the above poetic epigraph and Kaplan’s term “drone-o-rama”, this article rebuts the stories comprising “official lies” about top-down control by Israeli authorities to bring to the fore (bedtime/daytime/nightmarish) stories of Gazan resistance to Israeli forces to discuss how a contemporary diarist responds to modern warfare technologies that are in the service of specific modes of spectatorship.

The article discusses how a Gazan wartime diary as a literary genre intervenes in both the writer’s and reader’s understanding of contemporary colonial drone warfare, thus emphasizing the potential power of contemporary wartime diaries as art and an act of resistance. Drawing on contemporary theories of drone warfare, which has given rise to a culture of convenient killing through anthropomorphized authority of unmanned technological weaponry, I discuss how Atef Abu Saif’s The Drone Eats with Me: A Gaza Diary deploys the genre to excoriate Israeli tactics. These strategies include forced hijacking (both geographical and existential) of the minds and bodies of innocent civilians, which can be described as an ontological reconfiguration of the Gazan world. Abu Saif challenges the hegemonic discourses surrounding the legality and morality of contemporary drone warfare, which devolve responsibility to drones instead of sovereign states. In so doing, the author’s wartime diary offers a plethora of critical possibilities in bringing to the fore the drone operator’s omissions of ethical detachment and disembodiment. Abu Saif’s “strategic anthropomorphism” of drones, as an act of resistance, devolves this absolute autonomy of the drone in death-dealing by presenting drones as an extension of drone operators’ bodies, staging the execution of Palestinians as a prolonged reconnaissance performance, which allows civilians on the ground to register their protests by imagining Drone as a living entity. Abu Saif’s text can, in this sense, be understood as a (textual) space that brings to life a community that has been viewed as objects or “technologically enabled identities”, mediated and killed via computer screens.

The image of the drone has continued to spark the interest of poets, writers, artists and academics since the end of the twentieth century. A number of Palestinian writings also feature drone warfare, including Basma Ghalayini’s edited collection of speculative fiction Palestine+100 (2019), Selma Dabbagh’s novel Out of It (2011), Amir Nizar Zuabi’s play The Beloved (2012), and Atef Abu Saif’s The Drone Eats with Me: A Gaza Diary (2014). These are just the most notable ones, and in addition are other autobiographical works, life writing, and war reportage. Each subgenre of Palestinian life writing can be viewed as a version of reality whose acceptability is governed by a specific convention
and narrative necessity instead of empirical verification. Nevertheless, as Batsheva Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos remind us, “despite horrific circumstances, many diarists struggle valiantly to maintain their individuality and optimism and often write honestly and with astonishing intimacy, qualities not found in memoirs and autobiographies that are written retrospectively” (2020: 12). My choice of Abu Saif’s wartime diary for this article is particularly informed by his strategic use of paratextual elements (footnotes and notes) in his diary in relation to its sine qua non feature, the date, in addition to the I-narration rhetorical device. While both devices immediately connect the diarist to his readers while divulging the most painful memories of war events, the essential characteristic of “datewise entries” that capture the authenticity of the moment is further authenticated by Abu Saif through the use of footnotes that juxtapose every victim in the wartime diary with a real face and life. I will discuss how this specific wartime diary usefully unravels the emotional history of the Palestinian war which reportage fails to capture. In doing so, this text successfully not only achieves the purpose of bringing victims out of the zone of invisibility and giving meaning to their deaths, but also cuts through some of the ambient noise created by the Israeli authorities to drown out the voices of resistance in the occupied territory of Palestine in a way that reportage and other literary genres cannot replicate.

In fact, Abu Saif’s wartime diary acquires what Ben-Amos and Ben-Amos call:

a political and often tragic dimension when written under occupation, in war, or during times of political terror. In response to external crises, diarists turn to writing as resistance, historical commemoration, evidence for future testimony, an outlet for their anger and hopeful revenge, and in desperation to leave traces of their own lives for an unknown supportive reader in the future. (2020: 11)

Since diary poetics depends upon past memories and future-oriented expectations, the textual space of Abu Saif’s Gazan wartime diary personally allows him to utilize the political potential of the genre by going beyond the consideration of theatics of wartime Palestinian subjectivity to questions of style. At times he supplements the text with “scholarly apparatus in the form of annotations, introductory overviews, and other paratextual materials, making them digestible to readers trying to understand the historical context in addition to the diarists’ [his own] words” (Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos, 2020: 253).

This article is divided into two sections: “Terror from above: War through civilians’ eyes” and “Courage from below: Gaza writes back”. The article begins by mapping the mechanisms of invisibilization or what I call bodily and psychic prisons created by Israeli forces through drone surveillance. Drawing on contemporary theories of drone warfare, I argue that this unmanned technological weaponry normalizes war through the erasure of “human” agency in acts of political violence that transform Palestinian civilians into objects of technologically enabled identities, mediated and killed via computer screens, representing the whole military operation as a video game. In this way, the war imposed on innocent civilians can be easily silenced through “enclosure building”, as I will explain. It is precisely this videogame dimension of drone warfare that makes useful Baudrillard’s idea of the simulacrum (which, as I will discuss, informs contemporary discourses about simulational hyperreality and videogame dimensions of cyberwars). According to Baudrillard, human deaths and bodies are easily reduced to numbers by
blurring the boundary between reality and virtuality. This is where Abu Saif introduces paratextual elements (footnotes and other notes) as a most effective strategy to bring his Gazan war victims out of the zone of invisibility and give meaning to those deaths.

**Terror from above: War through civilians’ eyes**

Given the challenges posed by the increasing computerization of contemporary warfare, Philip Alston and Hina Shamsi draw attention to what they term the “PlayStation mentality” that has become a significant feature of drone killings. According to them,

Young military personnel raised on a diet of video games now kill real people remotely using joysticks. Far removed from the human consequences of their actions, how will this generation of fighters value the right to life? How will commanders and policymakers keep themselves immune from the deceptively antiseptic nature of drone killings? Will the standards for intelligence-gathering to justify a killing slip? Will the number of acceptable “collateral” civilian deaths increase? (2011: n.p.)

The most alarming aspect of this techno-bestiary epochal shift, highlighted by Alston and Shamsi, is the way in which this unmanned technological weaponry normalizes war through the erasure of “human” agency in acts of political violence. Thus, fundamental ethical questions concerning neo-techno colonizers’ acts of violence and exploitation remain invisible. This paradigm shift (from linear to three-dimensional war), which utilizes various mechanisms of invisibilization to hide state violence, crucially underscores the dialectics of otherness, based on racialization against Muslims. As Lisa Parks and Caren Kaplan observe, “Strategic uses of juridical power have undermined the civil rights and liberties of people around the world, particularly Muslims and people of color, forcefully impeding their mobility, infringing upon their privacy, and detaining them without cause” (2017: 11). This is something that needs urgent reconsideration, particularly in the context of how crises related to Muslim communities (such as in Kashmir, Myanmar, Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Gaza) can be conveniently silenced or underrepresented by the mainstream Western media.

I similarly wish to draw attention to the strategic silencing and invisibility of the Palestinian struggle for survival, “the world’s most visible contemporary colonial conflict” (Bernard, 2013: 20). The biased pro-Israeli lobby (Waxman, 2010; Cook, 2019; Saleem, 2015) has resulted in “the mechanized destruction” of the Palestinian community by one of the most technologically advanced and “diplomatically shielded militaries in the history of mankind” (Saleem, 2015: n.p.). Andrea Miller’s observation regarding such a racialized imaginary against Muslims becomes extremely pertinent in the context of Palestinians who are:

always already criminal for the actions [their freedom struggle against Israeli colonial ambitions which has now become a classic example of settler colonialism?] that are always imagined as imminent and immanent to their persons, preemptive governance has created for itself an extended logic of incitement that renders criminal and material the perceived desires and imaginations of racialized Muslims who might inspire future violent actions by others. (Parks and Kaplan, 2017: 129)
No wonder, then, that Israel has continued “to exercise effective control over Gaza, including the capacity to impose a suffocating siege, total closure of boundaries, and aerial surveillance” (Hajjar, qtd. in Parks and Kaplan, 2017: 59–88). The Palestinian crisis, as a result of legal challenges against the Israelis, has had practical implications. Indeed, there has been a deafening silence surrounding Israel’s use of lethal drones to assassinate people in Palestine. In this article I challenge the hegemonic narratives surrounding surgical precision and minimal casualties, supposed to characterize contemporary drone warfare, which inform social imaginary and mainstream political narratives about the Muslim world, in particular Palestine. At the same time, foregrounding this particular wartime diary’s potentially powerful political resonances, I discuss Abu Saif’s creative ways of refocusing and reorienting the reader’s ideas about what war means.

Using Abu Saif’s The Drone Eats with Me: A Gaza Diary as a prism, I will show how Abu Saif’s wartime diary, as a narrative of embodied experience, seeks to do what Philippe Lejeune and Catherine Bogaert refer to as “anchor[ing] the past, which disappears behind us, but also in apprehension of our future disappearance” (qtd. in Ben-Amos and Ben-Amos, 2017: 30). I contend that such disappearances, which I previously referred to as invisibilization, are predominantly perpetrated by Israeli military forces via enclosure-building — something I will shortly describe as a three-dimensional battlefield or a psychic prison created through drone surveillance — not only to silence the voice of Palestinian civilians, but also to erase human agency amid Israeli acts of violence. However, Abu Saif’s narrative rebuts this Israeli strategy of disavowal of human operators’ relation to killing by portraying Drone as one of the characters in a wartime diary whose presence is entangled in civilian life. By anthropomorphizing the figure of the drone, Abu Saif makes communication possible, so as to give voice to the raw emotions of Gazans. Abu Saif’s narrative juxtaposes Palestinian subjectivities held under the sign of erasure vis-à-vis the omni-technical objects of warfare. This juxtaposition not only renders the question of the invisibility of violence against Palestinian lives more complex, but also connects the reader with these bodies in an affective register.

The Drone Eats with Me, a self-translated wartime diary of the Palestinian columnist, political scientist, and novelist Abu Saif, portrays the dronified territory of Gaza from 8 July to 26 August 2014, when Israel launched its Operation Protective Edge offensive in the aftermath of the murder of three Israeli teenagers. This bombing campaign lasted for 51 days, killing more than 2,000 Palestinians, including nearly 600 children, and with over 11,000 injured. Even these numbers utterly fail to capture what it means to live through 51 days of constant bombing. Abu Saif’s wartime diary is a devastating account of the everyday life of a community struggling to survive in the midst of whirring drones, rolling blackouts, echoes of explosions, day-to-day migrations from home to the Jabaliya refugee camp, frequent electric outages, and queueing for food. The 51-day narrative, told from the viewpoint of a non-combatant, raises significant questions in relation to the political, social and ontological status of a deworlded Palestinian community and their bodies’ imbrication with technologies of killing. What makes Abu Saif shudder with fear is the transmutation of human life into an instrumentalized videogame. As he says:

This is how Gaza looks on the computer screen — a thousand images captured by a speeding drone and relayed back to a computer, perhaps a laptop on a desk. The images might include any detail. One of them could be of Hanna and me sitting on the blue sofa in our flat, staring
into the darkness. Another might be of our children sleeping in the corridor, spied through the bathroom window at just the right angle. It must be quite entertaining for those soldiers, sitting at their computer screens. (Saif, 2014: 31)\textsuperscript{5}

Whereas the Israeli soldiers sit in their safe havens and sanitized environments, operating drones by looking at computer screens as if the whole military operation is a new videogame for them, it is Palestinian civilians who are stripped of any kind of humanity and transformed into objects or “technologically enabled identities”, mediated and killed via computer screens. The narrator of the diary imagines a drone operator looking at Gaza the way “an unruly boy looks at the screen of a video game” (31), who can press a button and transform a human life or an entire street into “one of those images on the TV” (29).

The enmeshment of human with machine, which is nowhere as visible as in contemporary deterritorialized drone warfare, has given rise to a profound sense of unease about extrajudicial killings, carried out via unmanned robotic systems. As a result of multi-aircraft control and automated features, the most sophisticated unmanned systems, such as MAGMA, omnicopters, and Taranis (Burt, 2018: 15, 38), have engendered deep concerns around the increasing anthropomorphization of drones, which are considered to be more efficient than human beings at killing. This anthropomorphized authority of autonomous military technologies has sparked heated debates over the unaccountability for war crimes committed against those on the receiving end of such modern military technologies; in such wars, nobody dies except the enemy. As Federica Caso rightly points out, “the anthropomorphisation of weapons increasingly justifies the automatization of killing [by reducing] responsibility and accountability in the act of killing” (2018: n.p.). This is precisely because drone operators carry out the entire military operation from the safety of their civil home sites, as the narrator imagines in the lines quoted in the last paragraph. A similar concern has been voiced in an NGO report entitled “Convenient Killing: Armed Drones and the Playstation Mentality” (2010). According to the report, drone warfare has given rise to a “culture of convenient killing”, whereby “at the touch of a joystick button the operator can fire missiles or drop bombs on targets showing on a computer screen” (Cole et al., 2010: 4, 6). Instead of seeing human beings, drone operators “perceive mere blips on screens” (2010: 4). These insignificant blips can be erased without any consideration of the ethical consequences of such acts of violence. This aerial prothesis, in the form of videogame dimensions of drone killings, is one of the ways in which war has been normalized in relation to Muslim communities (“bodies that don’t matter”) in Palestine (and the same holds true for Kashmiris, Afghans, Rohingyas, and Pakistanis). Not only that, but war has also been silenced through enclosure-building via dronified skyscapes by Israeli soldiers (“bodies that matter” (Butler, 1993)).

Existing scholarship on the notion of enclosure shows that it has been associated with a range of concepts and processes. On the one hand, enclosure refers to a way of legal and symbolic power (Blomley, 2007); a form of social alienation (Arendt, 2013; Thompson, 1963); a mode of existence that “deworlded communities, village by village, like a coinage reducing all things to a common measure” (Thompson, 1991: 164); and a means by which we can understand the worlding of capitalist spaces, which aims “at securing the hegemony of a social group to the detriment of the autonomy of others” (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2015: 1005). On the other hand, it gestures towards a regime of
imprisonment (Foucault, 1977; Linebaugh, 2014); warfare and state violence (Shaw, 2016); Palestinian occupation (Fields, 2010); and the violent imbrication of biopolitics and geopolitics (Jeffrey et al., 2012; Vasudevan et al., 2008). Since my intention in this work is to discuss the implications of enclosure-building via dronified skylscapes in Palestine and its impact on innocent civilians living in very violent situations, I align myself with the second group. I argue that Abu Saif’s self-translated wartime diary presents the non-Arabophone reader with an opportunity to access the thoughts and concerns of non-combatant civilians during times of global conflict, recognizing the ways in which autonomous military technologies are entangled with modes of perception and practices of knowledge, as I shall explain.

Following Ian G. R. Shaw and Gregoire Chamayou, I identify enclosure-building as a three-dimensional battlesphere. The battlesphere, according to Shaw, is “a localized — and at times lethal — zone of violent enclosure [that is] increasingly materialized through the presence of robotic prostheses, lending them an emergent and cyborgian character” (2017: 897). A similar notion is put forward by Chamayou, who also describes the battlesphere as a three-dimensional “temporary autonomous zone of slaughter [which] could be opened up anywhere in the world if an individual who qualifies as a [so-called] legitimate target has been located” (2015: 55). This means that drones can produce “oppressive psychic prisons” (Chamayou, 2015: 45) by jeopardizing human freedom and mobility. Therefore, as a dronified milieu, the battlesphere can be described as “a posthuman emergence, not centred [specifically] on human experiences or connections but [...] also rhizomatically spread across the (human and nonhuman) bodies of its emergence” (Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2016: 157). I will go on to describe this cocooned posthuman existential sphere as the “dronesphere”, characterized by the simultaneous presence of robotic spectres and the haunting absence of visible perpetrators.

The Drone Eats with Me foregrounds that existential dimension to the dronification of Gazan skies which I call the dronesphere. For instance, Abu Saif captures the nightmarish complexity of the reality that drone technology brings with it: “We all sit around five dishes: white cheese, hummus, orange jam, yellow cheese, and olives. Darkness eats with us. Fear and anxiety eat with us [...]. The drone, and its operator somewhere out in Israel, eat with us” (31). Drone, as an apparently inanimate object, is shown by Abu Saif to govern spaces of Gazans’ everyday lives and activities in such a way that it practically leads to the enclosure of their minds and bodies. As Abu Saif wonders, it is a question of not only “[h]ow do you relate to the world around you?” but “[h]ow does the world relate to you?” (45). The relationship between human and machine is presented by Abu Saif as unidirectional, characterized as it is by an immense imbalance of power between adversaries. It is only the enemy, the (human) target, who is vulnerable, as Abu Saif says: “Because, at most, you’re only ever a tiny detail in this complicated universe. You are only one person, barely a cog in an infinitely complex machine” (45). This forced hijacking — which is indeed both geographical and existential — of the minds and bodies of innocent civilians can be termed an ontological reconfiguration of the Gazan world. Since aerial prostheses bypass any terrestrial obstacles with their capacity to target subjects from above, they can reduce a human, as Abu Saif puts it, to “a cog in an infinitely complex machine”. This may remind the reader of a puzzle videogame, Cogs, released in 2009 by Lazy 8 Studio. The player of the
game moves tiles to connect sets of gears, piping, and other physical elements to make that object behave in a specific manner. This is little different to the videogame dimensions of drone warfare in which the dronesphere “immerse[s] humans within artificial climates, [a] 3-dimensional object-space of radical exposure and vulnerability” (Shaw, 2017: 897). Absorbed in this process, the killers become desensitized to the consequences of their violence. At the same time, the lives of people within the dronesphere are completely monitored, controlled, and manipulated. In other words, a prosthetic relationship with lethal drones helps drone operators extend their bodies via technology in use: “the joystick and controls are experienced, through sustained interaction, as extensions of their arms and hands” (Edney-Browne, 2017: n.p.). This gives them the freedom, without accountability, to obliterate lives, which is the stuff of videogames.

Therefore, when Abu Saif asks so passionately: “Who will convince the drone operator that the people of Gaza are not characters in a video game?” (66), he does take upon himself this responsibility of narrator of a wartime diary to negate some of the ambient noise created by the Israeli authorities to drown out the voices of non-combatant Gazans. Therefore, rather than focusing primarily on his personal feelings, Abu Saif testifies to the horrendous realities of life in an illegally occupied Gaza. The way he narrates those realities, in the present tense, lends eyewitness authority to his description:

Who will convince him that the buildings he sees on his screen are not graphics, but homes containing living rooms and kitchens, bathrooms and bedrooms; that there are kids inside, fast asleep; that mobiles hang over their beds; that teddy bears and toy dinosaurs lie on the floor; that posters line the walls? Who will convince him that the orchards his craft flies over in the dark aren’t just clusters of pixels? Someone planted those trees, watered them, watched them as they grew. Some of those trees are ancient, in fact, maybe older than the Torah itself, older than the legends and fantasies he read about as a boy. (66)

Here, Abu Saif’s description of the lethal capabilities of drones raises serious questions about the ethics of killing, as well as the political and cultural significance of robotics. Abu Saif critiques the way Drone “destabilizes the ontological coherence of a spherically disclosed humanity”. Most importantly, violence is not simply “enforced with death and destruction, but in the discombobulation and disorientation of spherically enclosed subjects” (Shaw, 2017: 897). This is evident from Abu Saif’s growing concern not only for people reduced to numbers, but also for places that are emblematic of the tragic history of Palestinian lives. The erasure of architecture, represented in the wartime diary through the complete annihilation of city areas, is a reflection on the enforced forgetting of places of memories — an organized phenomenon of cultural cleansing. This is why “Gaza City’s key features change with each war. Every time the war machines roll up to feast on the city once more, they do not scratch at its face or scrape at its skin, they devour whole parts of it” (177). This destruction is perpetrated whether or not the targeted area includes humans, a building, memories of friends in a café, or part of Gaza blossoming, like “a girl blossoming into womanhood” (230). Everything is buried “under the dust and rubble” (229). It is a sphere saturated with fears, memories, hauntings, and anticipation. On encountering such mutilation and death, wartime diarists, such as Abu Saif, feel an urgent to record them as “real time” events before they are transformed into game scenarios.
I want to compare this mode of being-in-the-world to the idea of the simulacrum, which informs contemporary debates surrounding the simulational hyperreality and videogame dimensions of cyberwars (Cristiano, 2018; Der Derian, 2008; Crogan, 2011; Parks and Kaplan, 2017). Recent scholarship on simulacra renditions of drone warfare emphasize how simulation makes “a territory, a referential being, or a substance” nonexistent by generating “models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Der Derian, 2008: 937). It thereby enables the “gameplay of war through the creation of narratives” (Cristiano, 2018: 22–25). Cristiano further argues:

By fictionalizing war into a gameplay narrative, game scenarios become cultural products that possess their own existence in relation to the phenomenon or event they purport to simulate. As the remoteness of cyberwar precludes, to a great extent, a linear abstraction of this phenomenon into simulated outcomes, the circular relationship between fiction and reality interrupts to make space for a merged cultural hyperreal outcome: the game scenario. (2018: 25)

Interestingly, these debates surrounding a long-distance simulation phenomenon that possesses an ambivalent relation to reality are largely informed by Jean Baudrillard’s idea of simulacrum, which he flags up in his controversial book, The Gulf War Did Not Take Place (1991). Baudrillard also highlights the significant consequences of long-distance drone warfare, which tends to deliberately blur the distinction between the real and the virtual in order to obfuscate any sense of responsibility and accountability for human targets. For him, “we are no longer in a logic of the passage from virtual to actual but in a hyperrealist logic of the deterrence of the real by the virtual” (1995/1991: 27). As Paul Patton rightly observes in his introduction to Baudrillard’s book, contemporary warfare is a “seamless manipulation” in which “the seams between reality and virtuality will be deliberately blurred” and “real tanks can engage simulator crews on real terrain which is simultaneously virtual” (1995: 4). This clearly indicates how real images of flesh, blood, and pulverized bodies, which show the true cost of war, can easily be hidden behind special effects of simulation, simulacra, and long-distance scopic visuals that portray a clean war. As in a Baudrillardian simulacrum, Abu Saif says it feels “like you’re part of a disaster movie. You’re not a lead character in the movie though; you’re one of the background figures, the extras, being terrorized or falling prey to the disaster en masse. Your role is simply to engender terror in the viewers, and then to die” (112). I tend to agree with Joseph Pugliese that, in drone warfare, the material violence unleashed on human targets becomes merely “kinetic activity”, in which killing is viewed as just a form of gym exercise; and the “human targets of drones are reduced, in turn, to yet another abstract kinetic term: ‘dismounts’. ‘Dismounts’ effectively abstracts the human drone targets of the materiality of their subjecthood: they are objectified and reduced to trackable movement without bodies” (2013: 190). Viewed through the lens of a Baudrillardian simulacrum, war events, as a hyperreal scenario, lose their identity “when they become encrusted with the information which represents them” (Patton, 1995: 10). It is against this backdrop that Baudrillard describes the Gulf War as a clean war or a blank war — a war without victims. There are no dead on the side of the perpetrator, and victims are reduced to “the collective glory of a number” (1995/1991: 73). The blank war can be viewed as a
pure killing machine devoid of any form of relations of ethics and humanity, a composites of so-called civilized wars.

The relevance of Baudrillard’s idea in the Palestinian context, where hundreds of Palestinian deaths can easily be reduced to numbers and extras, provides Abu Saif with ways to vent his frustration at the drudgery of military actions in Gaza through his choice of writing a diary, with a rich source of unconventional material (paratextual elements and footnotes). As Abu Saif refers in his diary to the havoc wreaked by the war, when “[e]verything is turned into numbers. The stories are hidden, disguised, lost behind these numbers. Human beings, souls, bodies — all are converted into numbers” (76), he challenges the idea of normalcy that contemporary drone warfare intends to perpetuate. At one point in the diary, he even imagines himself becoming a number, showing the reader how a first-person narrator can intensely explore consciousness that other genres fail to capture: “Victim Number 568 […] merely a digit in a much larger number” (76). However, Abu Saif’s diary challenges this rhetoric of numbers by juxtaposing every “number” in his diary with a real face, because “every number is a world in itself” (77). These numbers, according to Abu Saif, are in reality “moments of lust; onslaughts of pain; days of happiness; dreams that were postponed; looks, glances, feelings, secrets” (77). These all too human experiences are now buried under the rubble, dust, and stones. The characters who die in the wartime diary are a symbolic remembrance of real victims of drone attacks, commemorated in the diary’s footnotes. Thus, Abu Saif deconstructs the “seamless manipulation” of drone warfare in Palestine, which deliberately aims to blur “the seams between reality and virtuality” in order to hide the facts from public view or from the prying eyes of journalists.

Crucially, the footnotes become a very useful aesthetic strategy in two ways. First, footnotes do not allow the reader to disconnect from everyday reality as they are reminded that every number mentioned in the diary is someone’s father, mother, brother, son, sister, daughter, or cousin, and has a real face with a history and a story to tell. Writing a wartime diary from the position of a non-combatant suggests Abu Saif’s emotional proximity to the victims whom he names in the footnotes. This physical proximity to war victims, which Youval Noah Harari calls “flesh witnessing” (2008), and which Abu Saif emphasizes through his footnotes, also connects the reader to the bodies of the victims. In other words, the footnotes defy the disembodied existence of the victims (who are perceived by drone personnel as mere blips on screens) by juxtaposing names with real victims, and hence re-humanizing the cogs or blips as human beings. My analysis of Abu Saif’s use of footnotes corroborates Kate McLoughlin’s idea of imposing a “discursive order on the chaos of conflict […] to render it more comprehensible; to keep the record for the self and others; to give some meaning to mass death; to memorialise; […] to provide cathartic relief; to warn; and even, through the warning, to promote peace” (2011: 7). Footnotes therefore serve to bring the victims out of the zone of invisibility or silence and to give meaning to their deaths. 22 out of 29 footnotes (plus 66 endnotes, most of which also refer to casualties during the Operation Protective Edge offensive) show that these deaths do matter for Palestinians and how they occurred. In so doing, Abu Saif’s wartime diary provides insights into the intimate particulars of the individuals, who without memorialization would be lost in the larger web of historical events and narratives. As Elizabeth R. Baer points out, a wartime diary “yields to astute readers a vivid sense
of the author’s state of mind, his anxieties and decisions, his struggles with his oppressors, and his relationships with those he leads as well as his enemies” (Ben-Amos and Ben-Amos, 2020: 317). Abu Saif achieves this by creating a tension between the immediacy of the experience as expressed in a diary and structuring that experience into some kind of coherent narrative.

Second, the seamless manipulation, which establishes a causal disconnect between the drone operator and the killing that transpires on the ground in remote regions of Palestine, is also challenged by the footnote entries of the victims. Footnotes problematize the issue of direct responsibility for violence and death by bringing back “human moments” (DeLillo, 1983) in the Gazan war. In order to understand this, it is important to situate the metallic bodies of drones within the wider atmospheric technological and political network on which they rely. William Walters draws attention to the specific use of the term “dingpolitik” that he borrowed from Bruno Latour, arguing that “in fields where issues of violent conflict, secrecy and international security are at stake, this theory needs to become better attuned to questions of absent presence” (2014: 104). Basing his analysis of Israeli drone strikes in Gaza and Human Rights Watch reports on civilian casualties, Walters emphasizes that, in “dingpolitik”, “quite often an object will shape public understanding and the dynamic of a controversy not by virtue of its immediate presence within the assembly, but through its trace, shadow, rumor or phantom” (2014: 112). Abu Saif’s *The Drone Eats with Me* addresses “dingpolitik” by highlighting the nexus between the fleshy bodies of victims, drone personnel, and the metallic bodies of drones. By accentuating this broad human–nonhuman–human interface, Abu Saif’s wartime Gaza diary situates the figure of a drone within the larger political and legal network. Drone as an “actor” in “the hyphenated expression actor-network is not the source of an action but the moving target of a vast array of entities swarming around it” (Latour, 2005: 56). By this I mean that the real actors in the context of the use of drone technologies are not the drones themselves but those who exhibit themselves through tele-techno mediations of interacting networks. These networks or entities include the state, the military, and teams of technicians and drone personnel, who collectively make drone strikes possible.

Abu Saif shows how Drone, as a visible representative of the hidden apparatus, is connected to the body of the drone personnel through the technique of anthropomorphizing drones in the wartime diary. The use of unmanned technological weaponry normalizes war through the erasure of “human” agency in acts of political violence, so that fundamental ethical questions concerning drone operators’ acts of violence also remain invisible. The physical distancing of the drone operator from the site of conflict allows the drone personnel to dehumanize victims, who are visible to him on computer screens in the form of blips or, as Abu Saif says, “barely a cog” (45). The human victim, who is “reduced to [an] anonymous simulacrum that flickers across the screen” (Pugliese, 2013: 193), can then be conveniently disembodied through what is called a bug splat programme. Therefore, the physical invisibility of the perpetrator — which is the main reason for the ethical detachment and disembodiment of the drone operator — leads to the invisibility of the victims too.

Abu Saif counters the politics surrounding the invisibility of drone operators, as well as drone victims, by creating a liminal space in his wartime diary for the emergence of the unrepresentable, or what “dingpolitik” calls an absent presence. The diary shows
how the lives of characters within the “dronesphere” are enmeshed with a lethal drone that is perceived as a living entity, “patrolling the streets [as it] sharpens its teeth every minute” (112). It does this so that it can eat “as much as it could before it fasted. It was filling its stomach” (133) with Gazans. Most importantly, the diary portrays one drone “always up there, hiding among the constellations” (227), watching Gazans. Abu Saif also narrates his own experience of being surrounded by “a squadron of drones [...] they have just one plan: to kill me. They’re arguing over who’s going to have the first shot. If I run, I will look more like a reasonable target, a dangerous threat in motion” (227). Abu Saif imagines dozens of eyes are watching him. This “strategic anthropomorphizing” of the drone in the diary is double-edged. On the one hand, it allows Gazans to see drones as an extension of (absent) drone operators’ bodies, and on the other it allows them to register their protest by making communication possible by imagining a drone as a living entity, as I will explain.

Courage from below: Gaza writes back

As I have argued in the previous section, Abu Saif’s “strategic anthropomorphism” does not grant the drone absolute autonomy in death-dealing. The execution of Gazans is presented as a prolonged reconnaissance performance. Although the narrator of the diary is never oblivious to the drone’s incessant whirring, he does acknowledge that

Our fates are all in the hands of a drone operator in a military base somewhere just over the Israeli border. The operator looks at Gaza the way an unruly boy looks at the screen of a video game. He presses a button and might destroy an entire street. He might decide to terminate the life of someone walking along the pavement, or he might uproot a tree in an orchard that hasn’t yet borne fruit. The operator practices [sic] his aim at his own discretion, energized by the trust and power that has been put in his hands by his superiors. (31)

The drone’s camera — which is generally referred to as an unblinking eye or the gaze of the drone in drone narratives — and the looks of the unruly drone operator are juxtaposed to merge the bodies of the two. Put differently, this trope of the so-called unblinking or watchful eyes of the drone is presented in Abu Saif’s wartime diary as an extension of the drone operator’s body, which performs the act of seeing for the drone. The drone itself is shown to be blind (66). As Pugliese points out, drones can be described as “blindseeing technologies of death [...] they cannot “see” what they execute; rather, they execute what must be seen for them by their sensor operators” (2013: 187). Since the power entrusted in him by his superiors to kill people on the ground lies with the drone operator, in order to execute his plans, the drone operator develops a prosthetic relationship with his equipment, in this case with a drone. This dependency of drones on their sensor operators to carry out the execution of their targets can be understood in terms of what Jacques Derrida calls the inextricable tie between physis and techne (2002: 244). Derrida emphasizes that “the relation between physis and technics is not an opposition; from the very first there is instrumentalization [...] a prosthetic strategy of repetition inhabits the very moment of life; life is a process of self-replacement, the handing-down of life is a mechanike, a form of technics” (2002: 244; emphasis in original). Therefore, it is impossible to separate the body of the drone from its human agent. In fact, as Bernard Stiegler
notes, “[t]he prosthetic is not a mere extension of the human body; it is the constitution of this body *qua* ‘human’” (1998: 152–53).

It is for this reason that I describe Abu Saif’s anthropomorphized representation of drone as “strategic anthropomorphism”. The prosthetic relation between drone personnel and the drone constitutes the body of the drone *qua* human. And when the characters in the Abu Saif’s diary rebel against the drone, the ever-present “Lord of War” (87), they actually rebel against the drone operator, who “must be annoyed that his little video game has been paused for now” (151). The unblinking gaze of the drone camera provides the characters with an opportunity to look into the eyes of the drone operator who, “in a military base somewhere just over the Israeli border” (31), now “looks at us on his screen and kicks his desk, waves a fist at us: ‘This is not the end of the game!’” (151). Thus, Abu Saif’s wartime diary challenges the myth of the alleged “boundary” separating drone personnel from drone technology, which predominantly seeks the ethical detachment of the drone operator from acts of violence. Since *physis* (drone operator) and *techne* (drone) are inextricably linked to each other in acts of violence, the ethical consequences of these acts are naturally transposed from the drone to its operator.

This very act of reaching out to the body of the drone operator via his prosthetic extension in the form of a drone is one of the most powerful aesthetic strategies Abu Saif deploys to show how Gazans claim their rights as social and political human bodies, worthy of compassion and respect. For example, the unblinking gaze of the drone camera largely serves to render Gazans immobile and grounded, so that the violence inflicted on them also remains hidden. But, significantly, this military drone policing carried out via drones, which results in the loss of privacy and personal freedom of Gazans, is largely countered in the wartime diary through a defiant act of eating. Despite enduring the constant hum and shadow of death by drones in the city, Gazans signal or register their protest and desire for freedom through the Ramadan ritual of eating food at the *suhoor* and the *iftar*. In the diary, as the “gaping mouth of [the drone’s] gun turret [...] salivat[es] with hunger for their [Gazans’] souls” (19), Gazans begin to create their own “culinary scapes” (Mannur, 2002: 1) to write their “gastrophilic histories, which [...] are nonetheless saturated with the idioms of national belonging and national purity much like the heroic and relentless histories” (Roy, 2002: 472). It is through this everyday Ramadan food ritual that we can identify the formation of Palestinian subjectivities against top-down control. As Abu Saif writes:

There is a strange irony to these raids. The heaviest passages in the round the-clock bombardment seem to be at the two times of the day when we’re serving food — the *suhoor* and the *iftar*. Then the raids go crazy. They rain down on all sides — it’s like a monsoon that we’ve just escaped from, to eat. The building shakes. The horizon dances in the window. You don’t know if it’s you or the whole of Gaza that’s moving. Explosions can be heard intermittently all day and night, but when we set the table at 3:30 a.m. for the *suhoor*, and at 7:40 p.m. for the *iftar*, it feels like there’s a fanfare being played, especially for the food. (11)

There is an extraordinary literalism in the ways in which day-to-day activities, including eating and buying food in long queues against this aerial control, loom large in Abu Saif’s wartime diary. Abu Saif juxtaposes the drone’s hunger drive, which is in fact the hunger drive of the drone operator and by extension Israeli military forces, with Gazans’ eating
rituals. I read this self-staging of a Ramadan meal ritual, which is intricately linked to the survival tactics of Gazans, as a non-violent and non-verbal mode of protest and resistance against the actions of the Israeli government. Israel’s non-compliance with any ceasefire or truce in the diary fails to turn Gazans into a docile population who emphatically resort to Ramadan rituals to “escape the torment of just sitting and waiting for the unknown to happen” (45). Most specifically, Abu Saif gestures towards an institutionalized opportunity for Gazans to actively engage in contestation and negotiate power relationships with Israeli forces via omni-technologies of surveillance and warfare.

These kinds of Ramadan ritual performances create, in Jan Koster’s words, a kind of “symbolic territorial model by filling a certain designated space with prescribed ritual actions” (2003: 216; emphasis in original). This not only affects the awareness of individual identity but also replaces it with an awareness of a collective identity. This is evident in the way Abu Saif becomes conscious of the collective identity of Palestinians during one of these ritual performances, when the Kawareh family was transformed into just numbers:

The Kawareh family — from Khan Younis, whom the drone decided to prevent from enjoying a meal on the roof of their small building under the moonlight — they were not just “SIX.” They were six infinitely rich, infinitely unknowable stories that came to a stop when a dumb missile fell from a drone and tore their bodies apart. (77)

This is the exact moment when individual and collective collapse into one, a moment that Abu Saif fears the most as “nobody will ever ask to hear the stories behind these numbers either” (77). No wonder, then, that Abu Saif’s anxiety, as a father, a husband, a friend, and a relative concerned with unstoppable dronized manhunting, achieves a sentence that blurs the boundaries of personal and collective. As he declares:

Your personal concerns start to erode; even your gravest fears begin to seem unjustified. What does it matter if you’re afraid for your children when all the children in the Strip are in immediate danger? What does it matter if you’re worried that your house may be reduced to rubble when thousands are being destroyed up and down the Strip? Is your house any better than these countless others? Are your children any better than the hundreds who have been killed or maimed already? (45)

This situation brings to the fore the most important aspect of high-tech wars: Do they aim to annihilate the willpower of those on the receiving end of acts of violence? Charles Dunlap’s observation in this regard is worth quoting here: “Death per se does not extinguish the will to fight in such opponents; rather, it is the hopelessness that arises from the inevitability of death from a source they cannot fight” (2012: 2). Ordinary civilians in Gaza do not fight this with guns and drones but with food rituals and quotidian activities to negotiate conflict between control and resistance. This is why Abu Saif continuously juxtaposes the gustatory perceptions of Gazans with war technology in the diary: “the F16 has taken its meal somewhere in the Rimal neighborhood” (93); “We were having lunch. We had barely started when the ever-nearing tanks began to partake in their own meal — the sound of their mortars thundering through the house” (114); “the lights of warships. Four or five miles out. Waiting for their next meal” (192). The juxtaposition of...
two very different types of hunger drive in the above lines subtly reveals the resistance of Gazans to Israeli forces. In this way, collective culinary practices in the form of Ramadan meals can be seen as a form of communication and a powerful signifier of Palestinians’ collective identity. The challenge to Israeli authority represented in these ritualized meal performances is indeed emblematic of a sense of anger and outrage for Palestinian subjectivities held under the sign of erasure against the subjective matrix of omni-technical objects of warfare.

It is against this backdrop that I have argued in this article that Abu Saif’s wartime diary allows both writer and reader to imagine new possibilities for understanding contemporary warfare. Instead of merely seeing the terror from above, Abu Saif presents the courage from below to give voice to the raw emotions of Gazans. The diary in this sense can be understood as a space that brings to life a community that have been viewed as objects or “technologically enabled identities”, mediated and killed via computer screens. Abu Saif makes this possible by what Joan Scott has termed “the authority of direct experience” (1991: 780), which works to foster understanding and build empathy. Vivian Gornick also observes how this immediacy of experience, expressed in a diary becomes:

> a work of sustained narrative prose controlled by an idea of the self under obligation to lift from the raw material of life a tale that will shape experience, transform event, deliver wisdom. [...] What happened to the writer is not what matters; what matters is the large sense that the writer is able to make of what happened. (2001: 91; emphasis in original)

Abu Saif’s wartime diary successfully achieves this purpose in bringing the victims out of the zone of invisibility or silence to give meaning to their deaths that can otherwise be lost in the larger web of colonial narratives. In so doing, Abu Saif rebuts the entire discourse surrounding the legality and morality of contemporary drone warfare, which devolves responsibility to drones instead of sovereign states in a culture of convenient killing.

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**Notes**

1. The name of the poet is unknown. Instead, I reference the book from where I borrowed this extraordinary piece of poetry.
2. See Bart Moore-Gilbert who discusses Palestine as a unique example of “ongoing ‘settler colonialism’ in which are visible many of the ideologies and techniques of conquest and repression which characterised earlier phases of Western imperialism. This includes the wholesale theft of the indigenous population’s natural resources (notably, in the case of the Occupied Territories, Palestinians’ best agricultural land and water; [...] the violent political repression of that population, including systematic assassination of its political leaders (and targeted violence against outsiders attempting to alleviate the suffering of ordinary Palestinians; the denial of basic human rights to the subjugated; the physical redistribution of the population, notably by means of the “apartheid (separation)” wall and “defence” infrastructure, and the transfer of large numbers of the invaders’ population into the conquered territories, a practice forbidden in international law by the fourth Geneva Convention (1949), which Israel signed up to in 1951” (2009: 113).

3. These implications include Trump’s Middle East plan, which has been termed the US–Israeli deal of the century. This is little different from what happened in Kashmir recently in the form of the revoking of Article 370 and the controversy related to the Citizenship Act.

4. https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180708-remembering-the-2014-israeli-offensive-against-gaza/ https://www.afsc.org/resource/operation-protective-edge-what-happened-why-and-what-now https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/06/22/the-u-n-report-on-israels-gaza-war-what-you-need-to-know/

5. Subsequent references are to this (2014) edition of The Drone Eats with Me and will be cited parenthetically by page number in the text.

6. This is the name of US Defense Department software for calculating and reducing collateral damage (dead civilians) resulting from airstrikes.

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