



## Secrecy and absence in the residue of covert drone strikes



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### ABSTRACT

By focusing on the materials and practices that prosecute drone warfare, critical scholarship has emphasised the internal state rationalisation of this violence, while positioning secrecy and absence as barriers to research. This neglects the public existence of covert U.S. drone strikes through the rumours and debris they leave behind, and the consequences for legitimisation. This article argues that by signifying the possible use of covertness, the public residue of unseen strikes materialises spaces of suspected secrecy. This secrecy frames seemingly arbitrary traces of violence as significant in having not been secreted by the state, and similarly highlights the absence in these spaces of clear markers of particular people and objects, including casualties. Drawing on colonial historiography, the article conceptualises this dynamic as producing implicit significations or intimations, unverifiable ideas from absences, which can undermine rationalisations of drone violence. The article examines the political consequences of these allusions through an historical affiliation with lynching practice. In both cases, traces of unseen violence represent the practice as distanced and confounding, prompting a focus on the struggle to comprehend. Intimations from spaces of residue position strikes as too ephemeral and materially insubstantial to understand. Unlike the operating procedures of drone warfare, then, these traces do not dehumanise targets. Rather, they narrow witnesses' ethical orientation towards these events and casualties, by prompting concern with intangibility rather than the infliction of violence itself. A political response to covert strikes must go beyond 'filling in' absences and address how absence gains meaning in implicit, inconspicuous ways.

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The frequent media and scholarly recourse to dubbing this the 'age of the drone' attests to the centrality of armed Unmanned Aerial Vehicles in the public imaginary of U.S. counter-terrorism. Yet it is striking that the official state secrecy which surrounds much armed drone practice has been afforded little commentary in critical scholarship. While drone strikes are undertaken in official war theatres by the U.S. Air Force, strikes outside those areas are conducted through programmes operated by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defence's Joint Special Operations Command. This worldwide use of armed drones was initially authorised as part of a 17 September 2001 Presidential Directive, which pre-authorised covert operations targeting al Qaeda suspects for assassination across the globe (Fuller, 2015, pp. 786–7). Being further codified in 'execute orders' pre-approving U.S. special forces actions outside official battlefields, this authorisation led to today's parallel and joint CIA and JSOC 'kill/capture'

programmes in Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia (Shah, 2014, pp. 62–3). The two organisations work in concert with other security and intelligence agencies to prosecute strikes on the basis of both 'kill lists' of profiled individuals and pre-defined categories of potentially-threatening behaviour (Niva, 2013, pp. 196–7). While their statutory authorities and histories differ, CIA and JSOC strikes are conducted covertly, intending that the role of the U.S. sponsor "will not be apparent or acknowledged publicly" (U.S. Code, 2013, § 3093(e)).

Intuitively, the covertness of these programmes would have significant implications for the existence and geopolitical dynamics of strikes conducted under their purview. Yet the secrecy surrounding CIA and JSOC strikes has been insufficiently conceptualised. Two recent articles critique the narrow scholarly framing of 'the drones debate' (Allinson, 2015, pp. 114–7; Carvin, 2015, pp. 132–5). Yet neither piece significantly addresses whether the covertness of strikes should shape a research agenda on drones. Carvin's piece begins with a T. J. Lawrence quote that references secrecy, but does not discuss the issue again. Allinson

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briefly notes two aspects of drone's secrecy: firstly, CIA strikes are only "notionally secret"; and secondly, that secrecy makes it "impossible to be sure exactly how many people have been killed by drones" (Allinson, 2015, p. 113 n. 1). The secrecy of covert strikes is therefore paradoxical: it fails to keep strikes secret, but it prevents robust understanding due to absences in public knowledge.

This article argues that both secrecy and absence are significant, and paradoxical, parts of the discursive existence of covert drone strikes, of the representations and social practices that "call [strikes] into being and give [them] materiality" (Dunn, 2009, p. 431). Both the secrecy and absence surrounding these strikes have been implicitly positioned in critical scholarship as barriers to research, as restricting access to drone warfare. This article argues to the contrary: secrecy and absence shape the existence of covert strikes *within* the public sphere. As such, strikes enact an intersection both of secrecy and publicity and of presence and absence.

These overlaps, moreover, constitute public spaces of secrecy and absence that bear on the legitimisation of state violence. These strikes materialise in public *in excess of* state practices or channels of communication; indeed, these covert operations are rarely acknowledged by U.S. actors. The secrecy of drone strikes is neither articulated nor rationalised by the state but, like absence, is a product of rumours and debris that appear in the public sphere after these events and which signify that they have passed unseen. The article conceptualises these traces as residue of covert violence. This residue produces public spaces whose meaning is not predetermined by the state. When this residue is mediated via press and social media coverage in Britain and the United States, their secretcies and absences give meaning to unseen acts of state violence in ways that do not necessarily rationalise that violence. While the operating procedures of drone warfare have been theorised as producing imagined geographies of permanent potential threat, rationalising state violence in such spaces, the rumours and debris that materialise strikes in the public sphere do not legitimise them in accordance with some state rationalisation.

In order to analyse the geopolitical dynamics of these spaces of secrecy, and their consequences for challenging state violence, the article turns to both colonial historiography and scholarship on lynching practice in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Recent studies of colonial archives and literature have conceptualised how texts and bodies can allude to ideas about colonial practices in excess of any explicit articulations. This article elaborates this concept to examine how the secrecy and absences of strike residue together signify things in excess of the explicit articulations of press coverage and social media. Residue intimates suggestive but unverifiable ideas about unseen state violence, in particular ideas about people and objects which appear absent from the public sphere: the casualties of these strikes, and the networks that conduct drone warfare.

To analyse how these intimations affect the legitimisation of state violence, the article proposes an historical affiliation between the residue of covert strikes and the public traces of lynchings that were used to report on the practice nationally in the United States. While the dynamics of each practice are significantly different, their existences in public discourse through material traces and rumour involve similar absences, of documentation of the violence and violated bodies. In the case of lynching, these non-bodily traces gave meaning to the practice as something confronting society in its aberrance, as being difficult to comprehend relative to wider societal changes. This meaning marginalised the violence inflicted upon casualties from the ethical significance ascribed to the practice.

The article uses this affiliation with lynching to demonstrate that intimations from covert strike residue implicitly produce a similar discursive dynamic, through unspoken hints and allusions

about what remains absent. These intimations do not dehumanise targets and legitimise violence, a dynamic frequently attributed to drone warfare's operating mechanisms; rather, they represent this practice as ephemeral, as too fleeting and insubstantial in its public mark for witnesses to comprehend its dynamics, to understand 'what happened'. As with lynching, this shapes a subject-position focused not on the infliction of violence but on the struggle to comprehend intangible state practices.

This dynamic from spaces of residue undermines the idea that drone warfare can be effectively challenged by deconstructing how strikes are rationalised through their secret conduct. As well as decoding the imagined geographies of hidden networks and procedures, it is vital to recognise how public residue materialises strikes as intangible events, and positions witnesses as spatially, intellectually and morally distanced from them, delimiting the ethical import of the violence inflicted upon casualties. Unlike targeting procedures, the spaces shaped by strike residue do not demonise or dehumanise targets, but they do "establish the conditions of possibility for a political response" to this violence, of what is politically and ethically significant about it (Campbell, 2007, p. 361).

The article proceeds by first examining the critical literature around armed drone attacks, before detailing the theory and methodology of residue and intimations and outlining the historical affiliation with lynching. The article then analyses covert drone strike residue in United States and British national newspaper and social media coverage from 2011 to 2015, pivoting on moments when critical interest in drone warfare increased – for instance, the period during John Brennan's confirmation hearing as the new director of the CIA – since emblematic representational practices are often intensified at such moments, providing a relevant source of data (Doty, 1996, pp. 12–13). This also allows us to test the idea that intimations from residue could reconfigure state rationalisations of drone warfare.

## 1. Theorising drone strikes beyond their operationalisation

Covert strikes are rarely documented as they are enacted, but instead are primarily known through snippets of information, rumour and debris. Critical scholars and journalists have drawn on these traces to assemble particular understandings of the practice. Critical scholarship has predominantly focused on traces of the *operationalisation* of drone strikes policy, covering the visualisation methods of drone surveillance, the operating procedures of target-construction, and the materiality and embodiment involved in drone strike networks. The critical literature in International Relations, political geography and security studies has traced the existence and political dynamics of strikes, the meanings that strikes produce in the world, to the materials, discourses and networks that operate these programmes. As such, the spaces and identities that are produced by drone strikes – that is, the way that social reality is made intelligible, giving spaces and identities materiality, through the social practices that constitute strikes (Dunn, 2009, pp. 426, 431) – have been conceptualised as cohering with the rationalisation of this violence within these materials and operating procedures.

Insodoing, this literature has reduced the ontology of drone warfare, that which constitutes drone strikes in the world, to its prosecution within these procedures and networks, and delimited strikes' political dynamics to those that correlate to strikes' internal representation and prosecution. Secrecy is implicitly relevant only insofar as it hampers analysis by restricting access to the event of a strike, which exists outside the public sphere. What happens once strikes leave the state apparatuses that enact them and materialise as *public events*, through the after-the-fact narrative weaving of

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