Distance, proximity, and authenticity in the point of view of US military drone operator autobiographies

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Abstract
Drone warfare disrupts the generally understood experience of war, and drone operators’ distance from the battlefield has called into question the authenticity of their experiences as participants in conflict. This article examines the autobiographies of three US military drone operators, analysing how the narration is discursively oriented to particular spatial and ideological perspectives. It argues that the linguistic construction of point of view in each text reflects a dynamic and sometimes paradoxical relationship between drone operators and their distance from the battlefield. Observing the position and shifting of deictic centres, the analysis draws parallels between spatial perspective, ideology, and the social identities of drone operators and victims of drone strikes. It concludes by reflecting on the variety of discursive strategies employed across these texts, and considers this variation itself to be an emerging trend in the discourse of drone warfare.

Keywords
Authenticity, autobiography, deixis, drone warfare, point of view, war, witnessing

Introduction: Flesh-witnessing, authenticity, and drone warfare

According to Leed (1979), the experience of war ‘is nothing if not the transgression of boundaries’ (p. 21). Of the boundaries disrupted by participation in conflict, one of the
most notable has conventionally been the disruption of everyday life, either through the presence of conflict or through the physical travel from home to participate in conflict elsewhere. As Hynes (1995) summarises, ‘autobiographies narrate continuous lives; but a war narrative concerns a separate life that, however vividly it remains in the memory, is not continuous with the life the teller lives as he writes’ (p. 8). Until the late 20th century, taking a direct role in conflict required a degree of geographical disruption: soldiers have been required to ‘go to’ war. And even those means of waging war which create an extended distance between the one who performs an act of violence and the one who suffers from it, such as aerial bombing or long-range mortar fire, still disrupt the soldier’s everyday experiences, and place them at risk of retaliatory injury.

However, the advent of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, has allowed for soldiers directly involved in the performance of violence to operate from air bases on the other side of the world to those affected directly by the violence of conflict. More than being physically and psychologically disorientating, drone warfare’s distances challenge another fundamental concept of warfare. Traditionally, soldiers are understood to have unique and authoritative knowledge about the horrors of war, by virtue of having been physically present during combat. Harari (2010) has termed this ‘flesh-witnessing’, a phrase derived from a quotation attributed to a French soldier of the First World War: ‘the man who has not understood with his flesh cannot talk to you about it’ (in Hynes, 1995: 2). Alternatively, as one veteran of the Second World War puts it:

> It is virtually impossible to convey the atmosphere of battle to anyone who had not had the experience. Even the most lurid film cannot do this as the spectator – comfortably seated with perhaps an ice-cream in hand – knows he is safe and that the ‘good guys’ will win in the end. (Evans, 1991: 90).

In other words, the privileging of the physical experience of combat is part of the dominant ‘ideological-discursive formation’ (Fairclough, 2010: 30) of war writing, and the authority of flesh-witnessing helps their authors to ‘win the appearance for them as non-ideological ‘common sense” (Fairclough, 2010). That drone operators work at a distance of thousands of kilometres from the battlefield, however, represents a transgression of boundaries of space and identity which challenges the operator’s relationship with the traditional image of the warrior as an individual who puts themselves in danger (Coker, 2000; French, 2005; Kunashakaran, 2016). For Chamayou (2015), ‘judged by the yardstick of such classical categories [i.e. physical risk to oneself], a drone looks like the weapon of cowards’ (p. 17, emphasis original), while Royakkers and van Est (2010) describe drone operators disparagingly as ‘cubicle warriors’ (p. 289). Providing a narrative account of the experience of drone operators, then, requires negotiating the predominant ideological-discursive formations inherent to the genre of war writing in order to produce an account of military experience that does not rely on flesh-witnessing to support its authenticity.

Given the publicly contested authenticity of drone operators’ experiences, this paper considers the ways in which operators themselves have chosen to represent their role and experiences linguistically. While some of the autobiographies examined here have been discussed in existing drones scholarship (Bentley, 2018; Daggett, 2015; Gregory, 2011),
this paper is the first to investigate their linguistic structure, and ask how language choices contribute to the representation and understanding of drone operators’ activities and experiences. In their analysis of works of fiction concerning drone technology, Smethurst and Craps (2019) conclude that ‘each [text] has a distinct rhetorical purpose and style’ (p. 99) employed by writers across genres and modes of fiction to convey the perspectives of drone operators and victims. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that US drone operators’ autobiographies are similarly stylistically versatile, and that changes in point of view affect the way drone operators and their work are viewed and understood by readers. In doing so, this paper argues that the discursive structure of drone operators’ narratives embraces the uncertainties and paradoxes that arise from drone warfare to vary their representation of themselves as distal or proximal to conflict in different contexts.

Point of view in discourse

Narration requires the adoption of a perspective. Minimally, a narrative description of an event requires ‘an event structure plus a point of view coordinate’ (Hart, 2014: 124). These perspectives, however, are rarely static. Dancygier and Vandelanotte (2016) argue that multiplicity is the norm in the discursive construction of viewpoint, and that ‘seemingly ‘innocent’ or ‘viewpoint-neutral’ lower-level constructions, down to the level of examples such as determiners or negation [. . .] can also function as viewpoint markers’ (pp. 13–14). Simpson (1993) in synthesising much previous work on viewpoint, shows how spatial, temporal, and psychological planes intersect in the production of point of view, developing a modal grammar to explain how subjectivity can be incorporated into narration. The study of point of view, then, involves the integration of numerous dimensions into the understanding of how and when perspectives and attitudes shift and are fixed. As Dancygier (2012) puts it, ‘viewpoint phenomena come under scrutiny mostly in the cases where the basic deictic arrangement is somehow extended or disrupted’ (p. 219), and the disruption of drone warfare shows how narrators’ viewpoints can move across space, time, and social relationships while remaining fixed to a first-person perspective.

In Critical Discourse Studies, Cap (2013) has explored how ‘proximisation’ can describe an ideological relationship between closeness and the risk of a threat, particularly in the context of justifying military action and intervention. Although thematically similar to this paper in its typical application, proximisation specifically describes a ‘construal of the [Discourse Space] peripheral entities encroaching physically upon the DS central entities (speaker, addressee)’ (Cap, 2015: 315). As the extracts analysed below show, these texts are not concerned with describing the encroachment of peripheral entities upon the writer, literally or metaphorically, as the nature of drone warfare makes it impossible for the ground troops observed and attacked by these operators to act upon them directly. Instead, it is the writer who works to describe their proximity to, or distance from, conflict. As a result, this paper is largely concerned with the analysis of the narration’s shifting point of view.

Deixis describes the linguistic encoding of perspective, characterised by Lyons (1977) as ‘the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the
participation in it’ (p. 637). Characters, objects, and events in discourse are often described in relation to a relative orientation in space and time. For instance, understanding the sentence ‘she threw the ball over there’ requires contextual knowledge of the spatial location associated with ‘there’, while ‘tomorrow’s forecast’ grounds the information within a relative temporal position. These deictic markers thus produce a position from which the scene is viewed, known as the deictic centre: the physical and temporal anchor to which prepositions indicating relative positions refer. In constructing a relative spatio-temporal viewpoint, deictic markers may also indicate a proximal or distal relationship (Levinson, 1983). Prepositions such as ‘here’ and ‘there’ rely on a relative spatial position, and indicate the proximity of the referent to the deictic centre. Perspective within discourse can therefore often be plotted along spatio-temporal vectors to produce a geometric mapping of the location to which the reader is oriented (Chilton, 2004; 2014).

Semino (2011) describes the ‘speaker’s or writer’s here-and-now’ as ‘the unmarked deictic centre’ of a narrative (p. 422). That is, unless otherwise prompted, the reader’s perspective will prototypically align with the narrator’s point of view. However, with drone operators occupying a physical location at a distance from the battlefield, which they observe and interact with through drone technology, the ontological status of the ‘here-and-now’ for the drone operator is in question from the outset. In these cases, the concept of deictic projection (Levinson, 1983) explains how operators might produce deictic centres in discourse which differ in some respects from their own points of view, aligning instead with the spatial location of their drones. Additionally, it is possible for the deictic centre of a narrative to shift over the course of its telling: changes of scene, time, and perspective are common to all forms of narration. Deictic Shift Theory, for instance, states that the deictic centre of a narrative ‘does not remain static within the story, but shifts as the story unfolds’ (Segal, 1995: 16), and it is these shifts which are of interest to this paper’s analysis.

While the concept of deixis was initially developed through the analysis of spatio-temporal perspective (Lyons, 1977), other aspects of perspective can be configured within a comparable framework. For instance, Levinson (1979) describes the category of social deixis as ‘those aspects of language structure that are anchored to the social identities of participants (including bystanders) in the speech event, or to relations between them, or to relations between them and other referents’ (p. 206). Like space and time, social relationships are relative, and the choices made in the naming individuals, locations and events implies an ideologically-charged social perspective (Short, 1996: 272–282). A wide range of linguistic features encode focal choices dependent upon a relative social viewpoint, and in the analysis of written narratives it becomes necessary to extend the application of social deixis beyond immediate reference to discourse participants (Levinson, 1979), and to consider the social dynamics between participants in the text as a whole. As McIntyre (2006) puts it, deictic centres refer ‘not just to a speaker or hearer’s location in space and time, but also to their position in social hierarchy’ (p. 92). While Macrae (2020) notes that there is ‘at present no clear agreement on what comprises [social] deixis’ (p. 53), Stockwell (2019) has suggested that ‘modality [. . .], naming and address conventions, evaluative word-choices, and signs of social relationships in register’ (p. 54) can contribute to the social perspective in discourse. As social deictic markers determine the emotional proximity between the reader’s deictic centre and other
participants, the language employed by soldiers to describe their enemy combatants has the potential to significantly affect a reader’s affective response to the acts and individuals described. The analysis in this paper incorporates this view of social deixis, in order to show how ideological distance and proximity align with drone operators’ construals of their spatio-temporal relationship to the battlefield.

**About the texts**

The analysis below focuses on three books: *Predator* by Martin and Sasser (2010), *Hunter Killer* by McCurley and Maurer (2016), and *Drone Warrior* by Velicovich and Stewart (2018). These represent the total available book-length narratives of military experience from the perspective of drone operators, working both as pilots (Martin and McCurley) and sensors (Velicovich) within the US Air Force. Although each operator has a unique experience of military drone operation, each autobiography still aims to communicate the experience of warfare from the perspective of a drone operator to a lay readership. Each memoir is also co-authored by an established writer, and the extent to which these authors have influenced or decided the language choices of the text is impossible to determine. However, given that each drone operator has approved the publication of their memoir, this analysis treats the language of each memoir as a representation of the experience of drone operator either written or approved by operators themselves.

Byrnes (2018) has claimed that Martin’s autobiography *Predator* is perceived as ‘laughably unrealistic and self-aggrandising’ (p. 98) by current aircrews. Even if these texts are not considered by other drone operators to accurately reflect their experiences, they nonetheless comprise the available narrative representations of drone operations to those outside the community, and as such are formative to the way civilian readers might come to understand them. Moreover, as the analysis below shows, there are common linguistic patterns to the way distance, proximity, and authentic military identity are constructed across all three books, and together they constitute the primary contributions of military drone operators to public discourse about drone warfare.

**Spatial perspective**

By the very nature of the technology they use, drone operators view and affect events which occur at a distance to their own physical location, and their language choices construct points of view which either foreground or background this spatial relationship. This analysis explores how and why both proximal and distal deictic centres are constructed across the three autobiographies, connecting the variation in the discourse of drone warfare to the emerging nature of drone operators’ identities as soldiers. In each case, these narratives use point of view to align the operator’s experience with the spatiality of more conventional military engagement. As Bucholz and Hall (2004) note, the linguistic construction of identity through sameness to another is ‘a process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes’, but is also the process of ‘inventing similarity and downplaying difference’ (p. 371). Understanding the discursive
construction of point of view in these autobiographies, then, entails a critical analysis of the identities and ideologies such perspectives create and reflect.

Proximity

The opening lines of *Predator* give a clear demonstration of the choices available to drone operators in selecting a point of view from which to narrate their experiences:

> From ten thousand feet in the sky I peered down upon a large multiwinged building, a technical college taken over by insurgents in the heart of Baghdad. It was after midnight. Streets were unlighted or poorly lighted. Perfect conditions for cockroaches and other vermin to venture out of the gutters. (Martin and Sasser, 2010: 1, my emphases)

The prepositional phrases emphasised above orient the reader to a point of view with a specific spatial position within the narrative (Simpson, 1993: 17) which here positions the reader to view the scene from directly above Baghdad. This reading is supported by the temporal adjective ‘midnight’, using Baghdad’s time zone over the local time in Nevada, the location from which Martin is physically stationed while viewing this scene. The deictic centre of this opening narration is therefore projected, as it aligns with the drone’s spatio-temporal location, rather than Martin’s. Use of the first person pronoun ‘I’ seemingly blends a potentially allocentric focus on the drone with an egocentric pronoun, thereby including Martin himself as a narrator implicitly present with the spatial position marked as the deictic centre. Without further context, it would be impossible to know that Martin was not piloting the drone from within, giving the impression that he himself is in physical proximity to the battlefield.

This position is not maintained consistently, however, as is shown by the contrasting prepositional phrases on the following page:

> My first ten minutes at the controls of the MQ-1, otherwise aptly known as Predator, and I had already been in on a kill.

> Then I remembered that Trish had asked me to pick up a gallon of milk on the way home. (p. 2, my emphases)

In the transition between paragraphs, spatial deictic reference shifts though a flashback (Segal, 1995) in orientation from a motion towards the violence of the battlefield and a journey towards home. Combined with the social deictic reference to specific military terminology being juxtaposed against a casual shortening of Martin’s wife’s name ‘Trish’ and the everyday errand described, such a dramatic transition epitomises the paradoxical structure of the drone operator’s experience. Events and perspectives are located simultaneously in Iraq and Nevada, performing the violent and mundane. Moreover, that this extract appears on the reverse of the book’s jacket suggests an emphasis on the disjointed nature of the drone operation is central to the public and commercial fetishisation of drone operators and their experiences, as well as the concept of drones themselves
(Bentley, 2018). Conflicting spatial deictic references continue to appear throughout *Predator*, maintaining Martin’s dual position both close to and far from battle:

I couldn’t have been more involved if I had actually been *inside the plane* [. . .] For just a moment, I reverted to survival training instinct and thought about ejecting. What a hell of a wasps’ nest it would be to parachute *into downtown Fallujah*, where wolves outnumbered sheep four to one.

Fallujah? If I ejected, I would find myself standing *outside the GPS trailer in Nevada*. (p. 107, my emphases)

As with the deictic shift in the book’s opening pages, the extract above moves from the illusion of physical proximity to combat back to a spatial deictic centre which aligns with Martin’s explicitly distanced location in Nevada. *Predator* continues to place great emphasis on the rhetorical importance of physical proximity to conflict, and the text is filled throughout with assertions of Martin’s closeness to combat (my emphases in each):

I was actually in pursuit of Osama bin Laden! How much *closer* than that could one get to the war? (p. 55)

I was about to get even *closer* to the war. (p. 136)

I was no longer a spectator *from 7,500 miles away*. You couldn’t get much *closer* than this. (p. 162)

The continual emphasis placed on increasing physical proximity to conflict demonstrates the extent to which Martin and Sasser value a traditional view of warrior identity in which flesh-witnessing creates a direct social relationship between proximity to conflict and the authenticity of an individual’s war experience. Indeed, the chapter in which Martin is transferred from Nevada to Iraq is titled ‘Getting Real’ (p. 147). Once a proximal relationship to the battlefield becomes a possibility, Martin and Sasser trade increased narrative tension for the implication that the distanced ‘spectator’ role is comparatively less authentic as a military experience.

As drone operators are physically distant from war, yet have constant access to camera footage and reports from support staff, ‘it is now possible to be both close and distant, according to dimensions that are unequal and combine a pragmatic co-presetence’ (Chamayou, 2015: 116). Similarly, Riza (2014: 270) has noted that existing research has produced conflicting results in determining whether such technology enhances or makes distant the experience of killing. McCurley and Maurer’s *Hunter Killer* highlights this paradox, with physical distance supplanted by an intellectual and emotional proximity as the authors claim that:

One of the biggest misconceptions surrounding the RPA community is that the aircraft allows us some distance from the killing, since we’re *thousands of miles away*. The opposite is true. We are *too close*. We know too much, and when it is time to shoot, we can *zoom in* until our target fills the screen. (2016: 135)
Holmqvist (2013) has described how the physical distance of the drone operator can be disrupted by a ‘sense of proximity’ (p. 542) owing to the technical precision of the imagery available to them. In many ways, drone operators have access to a greater range of information and imagery than their counterparts on the ground (Gregory, 2011). Because the technology of drone warfare allows the pilot a detailed view of their target, knowledge of the individual takes the place of physical proximity as the incommunicable essence of military experience. In the process, this substitution legitimises McCurley’s experience within the framework of conventional flesh-witnessing, by framing the pilot as ‘too close’, with a proximity that implies an emotional risk in and of itself. The importance of this rhetoric to McCurley’s narrative is suggested by its prominence within its marketing, as the quote above appears prominently at the top of the reverse of the book’s jacket. Not only is the concept of proximity to conflict given prominence in the book’s design, but the addition of the intensifier ‘too’ suggests that McCurley is at risk of emotional harm by virtue of his engagement with drone warfare.

While drones can be piloted thousands of miles from the site of conflict, operators are sometimes deployed to sites closer to the battlefield. In *Drone Warrior*, Velicovich and Stewart describe the following reflection on Velicovich’s return to the US, following his deployment as a drone operator in Iraq:

> Some soldiers see combat as a break from their families, their wives, the monotony of the day-to-day grind that is normal life. I liked that you didn’t have to deal with all the bullshit of life back home that takes up so much time, like random text messages, always being on your phone, driving in traffic just to get groceries. (2018: 148).

The spatially deictic prepositions ‘from’ and ‘back’ foreground Velicovich’s physical distance from his civilian life. Given that Velicovich operates his drone from Iraq, he experiences a physical disruption that equates to greater proximity to the site of conflict than pilots who operate from Nevada. Strawser (2010) argues that drone operators should be moved ‘much closer to the theatre of combat [. . .] in a deployed environment, along the same time-zone as the combat, and under more standard battlefield conditions and stresses’ (p. 353) in an effort to simulate the same transgression of temporal and spatial boundaries which occur in more conventional modes of military deployment, and Velicovich’s deictic expressions reflect this. In doing so, Velicovich is able to parallel discursive practices associated with more conventional military experiences. By contrast, when Martin is transferred to pilot his drones from a station in Afghanistan, his focus is on the proximal movement ‘closer’ in relation to conflict (Martin and Sasser, 2010: 136), as opposed to foregrounding his newly extended distance from home.

Although *Drone Warrior* places greater emphasis on distal deictic markers than comparable passages from *Predator* and *Hunter Killer*, the authors still embrace the role of proximity to conflict as an authentication of military identity. Recalling the experience of seeing a soldier coming into ‘the Box’ (Velicovich’s operating station) after a mission, still stained with blood from shooting someone at close range using intelligence provided by Velicovich, *Drone Warrior* describes how ‘In the box I only saw his death from a distance. But right up next to me, with the wet stink of human blood on his vest, Eric was
saying: this is what death looks like’ (p. 130, my emphases). While Velicovich is explicitly distanced from the flesh-witnessing of death and violence, the contrasting and emphatic proximity of Eric and the smell of blood ‘right up next to’ him serves as a reminder that conflict remains near at hand. Similarly, when Martin sees wounded soldiers being carried onto a medical evacuation flight, he notes ‘this was closer to the war than we had ever gotten via monitors’ (Martin and Sasser, 2010: 257). Rather than shifting the deictic centre, these passages foreground prominent sensorial experiences in close proximity to the narrator that are closely associated with the direct flesh-witnessing of war. Thus, while drone operators are not physically situated within the battlefield, reported proximity to the consequences of violence serves as a substitute for the immediate flesh-witnessing as an authenticator of their military experiences.

**Distance**

The passages examined so far have worked to produce a sense of spatial proximity between drone operators and the battlefield, but there are also moments across each text where linguistic choices in the narration instead foreground the distance between operators, their drones, and the targets they act upon. The opening lines of *Drone Warrior* demonstrate several linguistic means through which this sense of distance can be achieved:

> I was wired on Rip It energy drinks, heart pounding, eyes glued open to the bright screens as we followed a white bongo truck for miles as it drove south, kicking up dust from the Syrian border through the open desert. [. . .]

> It was midday, September 2009, and I was in the Box, a secret windowless bunker at the edge of an undisclosed military base south of Mosul, Iraq, not far from the Syrian border, staring at eight flat-screen TVs on the wall’ (Velicovich and Stewart, 2018: 1)

While the Box itself is construed as proximal to the battlefield site, ‘not far from the Syrian border’, the point of view remains fixed within this location, as the reader is explicitly informed that their view of the trucks at the Syrian border is mediated by the screens through which Velicovich monitors them. Unlike the projection of the deictic centre to the drone’s location as was present in the opening of *Predator*, the foregrounding of the ‘bright screens’ and ‘eight flat-screen TVs’ requires a continued recognition of the mediation involved in Velicovich’s point of view.

In foregrounding the mode through which images are seen, as opposed to the images themselves, drone operators’ language can ensure that the deictic centre of the narrative remains distanced from the location of the images witnessed, and potentially the consequences of actions undertaken. According to Chouliaraki (2014), ‘if looking through the screen immerses spectators in suffering as authentic reality, as social theory tells us, looking at the screen reminds them of the reality of the medium that disseminates suffering as spectacle and fiction’ (pp. 37–38). In the context of drone operators’ autobiographies, the process of narration requires a decision to either represent or leave absent an explicit description of the screen through which events proximal to the drone are witnessed. As
was seen in the analysis of *Predator*’s opening lines, the absence of mediation creates a deictic centre within the narrative that aligns with the location of the drone itself.

By contrast, the following extract from *Hunter Killer* shows how the linguistic foregrounding of screens can produce a distance between drone operators and the experience of conflict:

*A split second after I saw the exhaust trail, the missile detonated in a blinding flash that whited out our screen. About a second later another almost imperceptible flash blotted out the screen again.* (McCurlery and Maurer, 2016: 131).

Although the main clause of the first sentence describes an event which occurs at the border of Afghanistan, reference to ‘our screen’ again locates the deictic centre from which the explosion is viewed within the operator’s room in Nevada. McCurley and his fellow operators are able to survey the battlefield after the fact and report additional details about the effects of the strike, but the stylistic decision to reflect the real-time temporary loss of information distances his narrative from the precise moment in which violence is inflicted, and reminds the reader of his physical distance from the battlefield itself. Unlike proximisation theory’s assessment of encroaching risk (Cap, 2013), the event processes on the battlefield which impact the drone operators are not caused by external aggressors, but by the consequences of their own strikes.

A similar scene appears in *Predator* when Martin observes another Predator crew launch a missile, only to see children on bikes entering the impact area after launch. Martin and Sasser describe how ‘I caught my breath as the missile impacted and the screen pixilated. I heard a muted scream from Kimberly. Brent shrieked, “No!” He had kids about the same age’ (p. 212). Once again, the focus immediately after the explosion shifts to the operations room and the sensory stimuli closest to Martin’s physical location. In a moment where violence is enacted and witnessed, Martin and Sasser’s narration foregrounds the remoteness of the control room from the battlefield, in contrast to earlier rhetorical work in presenting the operator as proximal to the battlefield. For Chilton (2014), the conceptual foregrounding of discourse entities results in their construal as closer to the deictic centre, and the reference to ‘kids’ further orients the reader in proximity to the civilian lives of the operators. The paradox of drone warfare, its positioning of the operator as ‘being at once distant and close’ (Holmqvist, 2013: 545), allows for a style of narration in which the deictic centre shifts in accordance with the narrator’s desired focus on their distance from, or proximity to, the site of violence.

**Social perspective**

Having explored the impact of discursive constructions of spatial point of view, the analysis below investigates whether social deixis is as versatile in the construal of ideological perspective within each narrative. Social deixis refers to ‘that aspect of sentences which reflect or establish or are determined by certain realities of the social situation in which the speech act occurs’ (Fillmore, 1975: 76), and the definition employed in stylistic research (Gibbons and Whiteley, 2018; McIntyre, 2006; Short, 1996: 172; Stockwell,
2019: 54) shows how naming strategies and similar lexical choices suggest social relationships with differing degrees of social distance and proximity. The analysis first focuses on the language used by drone operators to describe themselves, before considering the ways in which they choose to describe enemy combatants and other victims of drone strikes.

**Orienting to the operator**

In choosing how to describe their work, the authors of drone operator autobiographies provide descriptions through which they configure a perspective on the purpose and effect of their actions. The opening lines of *Hunter Killer’s* ‘Author’s Note’, which precede the main narrative, establishes such a view explicitly:

I am an operator.

I am not a door kicker. I do not fast rope, rappel, or jump out of airplanes. Never have I been called upon to assault any position, be it fixed or fluid, though I have been trained to do so. I do not claim to be like the SEALs or Special Forces. That wasn’t my career path.

But I am still an operator. A fighter. (McCurley and Maurer, 2016: xi)

From its opening lines, *Hunter Killer* orients the reader towards an understanding of McCurley’s role in relation to traditional military activity. While the imagery of close-quarters combat is explicitly not ascribed to McCurley’s role, its presence nonetheless evokes a schema of conventional warrior activity (cf. Nahajec, 2021) into which McCurley is positioned through his description as a ‘fighter’. Indeed, each autobiography is framed from the outset by the imagery evoked in its title of a figure directly involved in the performance of violence. However, drone operators perform multiple roles which are delineated in their narratives. When describing operations in which he was stationed in Nevada, McCurley narrates his first experience of drone operation as a means of engaging in strike action, as opposed to intelligence gathering on behalf of a ground or local air team. Reflecting on this mission, McCurley and Maurer (2016) conclude the chapter with a single simple sentence paragraph: ‘We were no longer voyeurs’ (p. 91). As with the representation of spatial perspective, *Hunter Killer’s* naming choices regarding McCurley’s changing role suggests a continued emphasis on closeness to the performance of acts of violence as a defining feature of authentic military experience where possible.

The social value of physical proximity to the battlefield is likewise made clear in language choices used throughout *Predator*. Initially, the book’s opening pages describe how Martin ‘felt like a God hurling thunderbolts from afar’ (p. 3), a simile which affords the narrator social power as a direct result of his unconventional distance from conflict. Further emphasising the value of the drone operator’s unique perspective, Martin and Sasser go on to argue that ‘flying the Predator allowed me the extraordinary perspective of being not only a “combatant” albeit from 7500 miles away, but also an observer with a broad overview’ (p. 76). Although this passage describes the advantages of this
distanced view of combat, the use of quotation marks around the term ‘combatant’ foregrounds an evaluation of this description as inauthentic.

This evaluation is continued in Part II of the book, when Martin is transferred from Nevada to Iraq, and his attitude towards his earlier role shifts: ‘I was no longer a spectator from 7500 miles away’ (p. 162, my emphasis). The description of the drone operator as ‘spectator’ by Martin and Sasser, and the comparable ‘voyeurs’ by McCurley and Maurer, provides a social evaluation of the narrative’s deictic centre where the notion of proximity is closely connected to authenticity. Just as Predator juxtaposes the spatial locations of Iraq and Nevada in its early narrative, so too does it maintain a dual social identity for Martin, who is described as living ‘a schizophrenic existence between two worlds, one as a combat pilot fighting a war halfway across the world, the other as an ordinary American citizen’ (p. 44). This comment serves as a kind of ‘decompression’ (Dancygier, 2012: 223) of two alternative construals of Martin’s experience. In presenting them both equally, the narrative foregrounds and maintains – rather than attempts to resolve – the paradoxes of experience associated with military drone operation.

Additionally, as the books are situated within a broader discussion of the nature and ethics of drone warfare, the discursive construction of the operator’s identity is necessarily responsive to external opinion. Predator acknowledges and challenges critical opinions on the nature of drone warfare when the authors note that ‘those who would call this a Nintendo game had never sat in my seat’ (2010: 55). Anticipating a criticism of the operators’ experience of war as comparable to a simulated or game-like (Bentley, 2018; Coker, 2013; Stahl, 2013), Predator evokes flesh-witness-like authority, through reference to ‘my seat’ as a site of unique insight into the knowledge of war. By contrast, however, Velicovich and Stewart (2018) willingly evoke, and positively evaluate, the comparison between drones and video games: ‘Like a video game, he worked the drone with a remote control. It reminded me of an old-school, handheld Sega Genesis console [. . .] I was in awe’ (p. 27). Rather than challenging or discrediting the view as Martin and Sasser do, Drone Warrior embraces the language and imagery of drone technology’s critics. Just as Velicovich and Stewart seem less interested than Predator or Hunter Killer’s authors in asserting a conventional warrior identity in terms of the operator’s spatial relationship with the battlefield, so too do they appear unfazed by the accompanying critique and potentially reductive view of the operator’s role. This stance is not unique to Drone Warrior, as other drone operators have described the experience as ‘like a video game. It can get a little bloodthirsty. But it’s fucking cool’ (in Singer, 2010: 308–309). Notably, Martin and McCurley both previously served as an Air Force pilots who elected to retrain as drone pilots, while Velicovich was recruited as a drone operator from the outset. The difference in attitude between their narratives may therefore reflect a generational shift in relation to drone technology, as expectations shift amongst newer recruits with regards to what taking part in conflict might entail, although Predator drone aircrews have previously rejected such a comparison (cf. Campo, 2015).

**Framing enemy combatants**

As well as orienting the reader to a view of drone operators and their work, each autobiography employs evaluative linguistic choices which construct a particular ideological
view of the narrator’s enemy combatants. For instance, the opening lines of *Predator* refer to enemy combatants as ‘cockroaches and vermin’ (Martin and Sasser, 2010: 1). The ideological perspective encoded within this kind of social orientation is fundamentally one of distance: enemy combatants are framed as non-human, with Martin therefore justified in performing and coordinating acts of violence against them as a kind of pest control (cf. Scarry, 1985). As with the narrative’s spatial deictic centre, however, evaluative ideological naming strategies reveal paradoxical assessments of enemy combatants. Imagining himself parachuting into Fallujah, a change in animal metaphors indicates a new stance: ‘wolves [enemy combatants] outnumbered sheep [American/allied soldiers] four to one’ (p. 107). Here, the text’s metaphorical descriptors foreground a different dynamic to the one implied by the earlier imagining of enemy combatants as cockroaches: in the context of physical proximity, their capacity to inflict harm becomes salient to the metaphor. Thus, social deictic reference to enemy combatants shifts according to context and narrative function.

Just as *Predator* constructs both proximal and distal spatial relationships between its narrator and the site of conflict, so too does its evaluation of enemy combatants shift between social distance and closeness. This can be seen in later evaluations throughout the text, such as the reminder that ‘those were *real people* down there. *Real people with real lives*’ (p. 55), in stark contrast to the dehumanisation observable in the book’s opening. Likewise in *Hunter Killer*, McCurley and Maurer’s descriptions of enemy combatants continue to reflect the proximity implied through their use of spatial deixis. For instance: ‘I had removed *one of God’s creatures* from His world. What greater *sin* could I have committed?’ (2014: 135). Just as McCurley and Maurer suggest that drone operators are ‘too close’ to combat through the high-definition imagery and information available to them during engagement, so too can their social evaluations emphasise the humanity of their targets. The narratives thus retain a kind of emotional proximity to enemy combatants through a more empathetic association, which in turn positions the drone operators themselves as personally aware of and affected by the consequences of wartime violence. As a result, drone warfare is presented as both impersonal and highly personal, just as it is simultaneously distance and proximal.

The role of social deixis in construing military experience in these texts, then, is highly variable. Notably, it contains the same ethical paradoxes as the representation of spatial orientation: while distance from those targeted by drone strikes and reconnaissance provides operators with an emotional barrier from the consequences of their actions, social proximity is also used to evoke empathy with the reader for the pilot. In other words, the emotional harm experienced by drone operators appears to function in place of a physical risk of harm in order to authenticate their warrior identities. Bar and Ben-Ari (2005) have observed how Israeli snipers, whose distance from killing is combined with intimate optical detail, employed comparable shifts in de/humanising reference to targetted individuals during interviews about their service. Naming choices provide a flexible way in which authors adjust the frames of reference through which their actions are considered. Describing enemy combatants variously as vermin or as human, they produce an emotional distance and proximity respectively, affording in each case a justification for violence or an appeal to the reader for empathy.
Like *Predator* and *Hunter Killer*, the social deictic orientation of *Drone Warrior* towards the victims of its operations parallels its spatial deictic structure. Just as enemy combatants and targets are consistently construed at a physical distance, so too are they always described in socially distant terms. For instance, Velicovich and Stewart write that: ‘These people, but for biological technicality, were not human’ (p. 128), and that ‘We were after terrible people. End of story’ (p. 128). As well as the social deictic orientation of the adjective ‘terrible’, the declarative ‘end of story’ performs a textual deictic function, foregrounding ‘the textuality of the text’ (Stockwell, 2019: 54). In doing so, it draws attention both to the narrator’s authority both as a soldier with a privileged experience of war, and the written nature of the discourse to which the reader cannot directly respond. Moreover, where *Predator* and *Hunter Killer* provide contrasting, socially proximal evaluations of enemy combatants, no such shift is presented within *Drone Warrior*. In the same way Velicovich and Stewart are willing to employ videogame imagery that earlier operators associated with critique, the absence of humanisation further demonstrates a departure from discursive conventions around the representation of military experience. Instead, conflict and its consequences are consistently emotionally distant, with little indication that the nature drone warfare might entail the paradoxical experiences explored in the narratives of earlier operators.

**Conclusions**

The three autobiographies examined here show three distinctive relationships with drone warfare, manifest through three stylistic approaches to the construal of the narrative’s spatial and social perspective. As Rothstein (2015) observes, ‘just as we cannot treat the drone technology itself as a singular and unique system, we cannot treat any particular idea of drones as singular’ (p. 107). Likewise, the variable discursive strategies adopted across these autobiographies suggest that there is no singular means of describing the drone operators’ experience, which is presently configured both within and against the context of conventional military identity. Textual analysis of the construction of point of view therefore provides insight into the various ways drone operators’ linguistic construction of narrative point of view aligns particular ideological perspectives within their writing.

Despite their physical distance from the battlefield, drone operators maintain paradoxical spatial and social positions, continuing to represent themselves within a view of a military identity built on proximity to conflict and personal risk of harm. ‘Flesh-witnessing’ remains central to the ways in which military experience is authenticated, and the rise of a technology which is fundamentally at odds with the close proximity of conventional warfare does not seem to lead immediately to the production of an alternative frame of knowledge. Indeed, once Martin and McCurley are able to claim experiences which more closely parallel conventional expectations, their descriptions of their previous roles as comparatively voyeuristic demonstrates the continued primacy of flesh-witnessing to the authenticity of war experience. Even *Drone Warrior*, which seems less invested in the notion of social proximity between operator and conflict than *Predator* or *Hunter Killer*, emphasises the experiences which bring its narrator closer to the immediacy of violence and personal risk. Given the collaboration of all three
operators with professional ghost writers, it is also worth noting both the narrative and commercial value of detailed, proximal descriptions of combat action as an engaging expectation of military memoir as a genre. Although drone operation has been viewed as offering ‘emancipatory potential’ (Clark, 2018: 611) in relation to the confines of traditional perspectives on war and masculinity, these autobiographies still largely rely on conventional discursive approaches to authenticity to frame their experiences.

That said, with only three published books the sub-genre of drone operator autobiography is unfixed, and continues to evolve. *Drone Warrior* indicates a departure from *Predator* and *Hunter Killer* in terms of its strategy of social deictic reference, but also contextually. As more soldiers like Velicovich are recruited from the outset to pilot drones, operators will become further removed from more traditional experiences of military engagement. It would be interesting to see if this is indicative of a general shift in discourse around drone warfare, and future research may well distinguish between the first generation of hybridised pilot-operators, and those who have only served as operators. For now, however, drone discourses continue to be defined by the active maintenance of their paradoxical position at once close to and far from the battlefield. When describing their experiences, the representation of drone operators’ spatial and social relationship to conflict as proximal or distal deictic has been shown to be a stylistic choice, and these linguistic decisions serve as an indicator of the authors’ relationships with their work, their ideologies, and the consequences of their actions.

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