

## **An Architecture against Dacoits**

### On Drones, Mosquitoes, and the Smart City

SAJDEEP SOOMAL

Hovering more than thirty thousand feet above ground level, military drones differ from earlier regimes of American aerial power. Invisible to the naked eye and only perceptible on the ground by their “low-grade, perpetual buzzing,” drones are routinely described sonically as *machar* (mosquitoes) by residents living in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of northwestern Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> The bleak observation gives affective texture to how drones arrive silently and suddenly into the everyday social realities of ordinary people living in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It is also a reminder that the U.S. drone strike program does not exist in a vacuum in Pakistan; the sky, the atmosphere, the blueness hold multiple, interlocking vectors of terror. Across the country, thunder roars. Mosquitoes indiscriminately spread dengue fever. The monsoon, now erratic and temperamental, heralds life-destroying rains. Toxic pollutants flow into old rivers. The economy crashes. Cunning birds trick generous fish. There is no easy way to capture—let alone sense or apprehend—the charged, atmospheric tensions that shape life in the Pakistani borderlands and to understand how military drones have arrived within and altered that landscape.

The carnage of drone warfare itself has been difficult to document. Unlike previous on-the-ground American counterinsurgencies, where war was among the people and drew media attention, drone warfare elides the same type of visual documentation by remotely using “surgical precision” and “laser-like focus” to “cleanly” obliterate insurgents.<sup>2</sup>

Public intellectual Mark Bowden explains that as a result, we do not see any of the carnage of drone killings. “There are no pictures, there are no remains, there is no debris that anyone in the United States ever sees,” he tells us. “It’s kind of antiseptic.”<sup>3</sup> Accounts of drone warfare often start from this sanitized aftermath, in hard statistics, chilling testimonies, and cold reportage. In this representational void, there has been a litany of artists, writers, and cultural producers from across South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and its diasporas who have put forward drone warfare otherwise. Their projects—ranging from the #NotABugSplat campaign in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa region of Pakistan to Iraqi American artist Wafaa Bilal’s digitally mediated performances—have drawn international attention to the impact of drone warfare and have been studied by a number of American studies scholars, including Matt Delmont, Keith Feldman, Inderpal Grewal, Ronak Kapadia, and Anjali Nath.

Thinking in line with these scholars, this chapter was initially conceived in early February 2015 as an exploration of diasporic Pakistani cultural productions about drone warfare for a yearlong graduate seminar on American empire led by historian Shanon Fitzpatrick at McGill University. Looking for texts that refused the logics of American militarism, I quickly landed on a familiar song in my iTunes library: Punjabi American rapper Heems’s debut single, “Soup Boys (Pretty Drones).” Released on November 1, 2012, the song unveils and subverts the logics of American racial and military imperialism using seemingly absurdist lyrics and imagery. I initially wrote about how the music video explores the affective similitudes between death and heartbreak, reveals the entanglements between mainland U.S. police surveillance and drone strikes in Pakistan, and showcases the promises of getting stoned as a way of living under militaristic American imperialism. In her article “Stones, Stoners and Drones: Transnational South Asian Visuality from Above and Below,” Anjali Nath takes up the same vein of thinking to consider the “possible strategic interventions of irreverence, satire, and inebriation” offered in the music video.<sup>4</sup> For her, “Soup Boys (Pretty Drones)” confronts the racial gaze of the drone with an inebriated look that blurs distinctions between the War on Terror and the War on Drugs, asking us instead to “cast a stoned glance toward the sky.”<sup>5</sup> Nath explains that in its willful incoherence, the music video puts forward a visuality from below that escapes narrative cogency, eliding

categorization as a solely “anti-drone” text by considering drone warfare alongside other facets of U.S. imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

I heard the song live when Heems performed at Bar Le Ritz PDB in Montreal in the summer of 2015. Outside the concert, I talked with friends about the necessary drama around his continued use of the *n* word, while we laughed about how exactly those pretty drones would sexually dominate him. We wondered why the pretty drones—figureheads of contemporary American militarism—were women in the first place. Nath aptly writes about how Heems paints the American Predator drone as “an irrational and an unruly femme fatale, and relies on worn sexist, gendered tropes to assert a form of resistance.”<sup>7</sup> Thinking along those lines, there was consensus on the sidewalk that he was a *philosobro*, that his inebriated assessment of politics, love, and life itself was rather a common brand of dissociative masculine ramblings about the current state of affairs.

At that point, I started thinking about Heems’s work within the gendered history of diasporic Punjabi music. In *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*, Gayatri Gopinath studies the British Bhangra movements of the 1980s and 1990s and the post-Bhangra Asian Underground music scene, demonstrating how its male artists and groups held deep investments in militant masculinity, genealogical descent, and heteropatriarchal reproduction.<sup>8</sup> Unlike his predecessors, Heems is invested in a softer type of *philosobro* masculinity from the subcontinent, one that is found among poets, fakirs, qawwali singers, worshippers of Lal Shahbaz Qalander, and men who are not really Men. In his other songs, Heems draws out nonbiological syncretic lines of masculine genealogical descent by venerating and mimicking popular *philosobros* from the subcontinent, including the popular poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi and qawwali singer Aziz Mian. Rather than championing militancy, these artists herald intoxication and ecstasy (substance driven, religious, or otherwise) as generative strategies to deal with male heartbreak, state violence, and other problems that plague the minds of men.

It was only after repeated attempts to meet with an intoxicated Heems when he performed in Montreal that I took a step back from writing about the music video. At that event, I was forced to reckon with the complex realities behind the promises of getting stoned. Intimately familiar with the impact of addiction within my own family and in

Punjabi communities more broadly, I suddenly saw the inebriated gaze and meditative intoxication that Heems and his predecessors put forward in a more common and less revolutionary light. That point became clearer later that fall when life circumstances led me back home to southwestern Ontario to visit my dying grandfather. As I sat in the hospital chair, I listened to my grandfather reflect on the decades that he lived as an alcoholic, his decision to convert to *Namdhari* Sikhism, and his dismay that not even God could fix his kidneys. When there was nothing left to say and death was hanging in the air, he started reciting Punjabi folktales from my childhood. For the first time, I spent time considering the narrative forms and unruly lessons of these folktales while reacquainting myself with some disturbing cultural tropes and an unending cast of anthropomorphized animals. Enchanted by this mode of storytelling from South Asia, I started looking for contemporary folkloric accounts of drone warfare in Pakistan.

With that approach in mind, I stumbled upon the first text that forms the bedrock of this chapter: an Urdu-language cartoon titled “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone” (Sometimes Dengue, Sometimes Drone) that stages a conversation between a dengue-carrying mosquito and an American Predator drone. Produced in 2011 by Pakistan’s most popular television station, Geo TV, the video shows the drone and mosquito duo flying, talking, and colluding together. Unlike the femme fatale drone in “Soup Boys (Pretty Drones),” the drone and his interlocutor in this text are presented as subcontinental men of a different sort: *dacoits* (bandits). In my analysis of “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone,” I explore how the cartoon obfuscates the threats of American Predator imperialism and dengue fever by ballooning and displacing those threats onto a local figure of terror: the Dacoit. Emerging from the subjection of criminal tribes under British colonial law, the figure of the Dacoit is best captured in popular cinematic portrayals of morally depraved rural outlaws. Studying representations of dacoity in Indian cinema, I describe how dacoit characters were remade as “Indian savages” after American Western films—with their prototypical Cowboy and Indian storylines—circulated to South Asia in the 1970s. To better understand the implications of this cross-cultural encounter, I turn toward the work of Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd, who draws out how the recurring figure of the “merciless Indian Savage” put forward in American Western film functions as the stencil for what Jasbir Puar

defines as Islamic monster-terrorist-fags.<sup>9</sup> It is through the reproduction of a paradigmatic, merciless Indianness in the United States–led War on Terror against monster-terrorist-fags, accordingly to Byrd, that the American empire identifies, remakes, and manages its terrorist enemies, transiting across the globe to places like the FATA. Building on that line of thinking, I suggest that the contemporary Global War on Terror arrives in the FATA with ease because the Pakistan state simultaneously identifies, remakes, and manages its terrorist enemies through the reproduction of an analogous, local variant of the “merciless Indian savage,” namely the outlaw figure of the Dacoit. In my close reading of “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone,” I show how dacoity functions as a powerful psychic stencil in South Asia, one that can be mobilized to shape Predator drones, dengue-carrying mosquitoes, and other threatening forces into local, villainous dacoits. When postcolonial states like Pakistan psychically collapse new threats such as drone warfare into older, ongoing fights that subject Indigenous and tribal peoples as dacoity does, I contend that the shaky foundation upon which those postcolonial states base their rights to sovereignty is once again revealed. These reflections set the stage for the second inquiry of this chapter: If not in the postcolony, then where can we find shelter from the drone?

New media artist and writer Hiba Ali has been asking this question for a few years. I first met Ali while I was working at the South Asian Visual Arts Centre in Toronto. The nonprofit, artist-run center supports artists of color to produce art that offers challenging, multifarious perspectives on the contemporary world. The organization programs artwork beyond the constricting economies of sexism, racism, and classism that have shaped programming paradigms for work by artists of color in the Canadian art world since the rise of liberal multicultural politics in the 1970s and 1980s. It is within this context that I first met Ali and learned about her experimental architectural proposal for a drone-proof smart city. A collaborative effort with architect Asher J. Kohn, *Shura City* is a provocation to think about the possibilities and pitfalls of defensive architecture in the contemporary moment. Using the smart city and the drone as its conceptual starting point, the proposal explores the possibilities of an architectural build for a new postcolony, one that will protect its occupants from the carnage of drone killings. In this chapter, I consider one iteration of their

proposal: a satirical, corporatized presentation for potential investors to fund the drone-proof smart city. Thinking through the short video pitch, I demonstrate how paradigms of speculation, securitization, extraction, privacy, and surveillance are endemic to the architectural imperatives of contemporary smart-city development projects. In their pitch for Shura City, the artists reveal how a seemingly subversive, drone-proof smart city can quickly turn into its own technosecuritized, neoliberal state—one that is destined to replicate the same structuring logics as the old postcolony. An architecture against drones quickly turns into an architecture against dacoits. Considering the project as an experiment in architectural thought, I end by reflecting on conversations with Ali about her emerging music practice and how to dream architecturally in the midst of military drones, dengue-carrying mosquitoes, ever-expanding neoliberal states, and unresolved antagonisms.

## Folkloric Skies

On September 28, 2014, John Oliver delved into America's drone strike program on HBO's award-winning late-night talk and news satire television program *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*. Garnering nearly twelve million views on YouTube, the episode was covered in popular liberal media outlets including the *Rolling Stones*, *Slate*, *Esquire*, and *Huffington Post*. In the thirteen-minute segment, Oliver explores what political geographers Ian Shaw and Majed Akhter call the “dronification of national security” in the United States.<sup>10</sup> The terror of the drone—we are told—is unparalleled in contemporary Pakistan and elsewhere on the edge of empire. Like other news media, Oliver's reportage draws on sanitized statistics, brute analyses, and somber testimonies to reveal the political life of the U.S. drone strike program. This data reportage about the drone is broken up by unlikely comedic and satirical commentary that places the drone within other, overlapping worlds. For Oliver, drones are not only a “specter of imminent death” but simultaneously the “third most annoying thing in the sky after mosquitoes and plastic bags caught in the breeze.”<sup>11</sup>

Toward the end of that segment, Oliver shares a clip from the folkloric cartoon that I take up in this chapter: “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone” (Figure 12.1). After screening the “weird, satirical cartoon,” as he calls it, Oliver defends the clip to his American audiences by assuring



FIGURE 12.1. In this episode about drones on *Last Week Tonight*, John Oliver presents the folkloric Pakistani cartoon “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone.”

them it would be a lot funnier if they “spoke Urdu and lived in constant fear of being murdered by a drone.” Oliver uses the cartoon to explain how drones have become “a routine feature of life in Pakistan.” As Oliver continues on to other damning testimonies about the everyday impact of drone warfare in Pakistan, he sidesteps the “weird, satirical cartoon” that I use in this chapter to explore the complexities around how American drone warfare is psychically digested in the subcontinental postcolony.

Referencing the successful 2001 Bollywood family drama *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (*Sometimes Happiness, Sometimes Sadness*), the title of the cartoon “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone” locates drone strikes and dengue infections within the ups and downs of daily life in Pakistan. The cartoon was first aired to the Pakistani public on a number of local channels, including Geo News and the popular sports channel Geo Super. Subsequently uploaded to YouTube by various Pakistani users, the online videos have garnered a modest twenty thousand views in total.

During the opening title scene and throughout the video, the song “Mareng Ya Mar Jayenge” (“We Will Hit It and It Will Die”) from the hit 1983 Bollywood film *Pukar* (*Cry Out to the World*) plays in the background, situating the fight against American Predator imperialism

against another South Asian anticolonial struggle. The film *Pukar* delves into the liberation struggle in Goa against the Portuguese government that continued past 1947, the year when the British Raj collapsed in South Asia. By selecting a song from that particular anticolonial film, the producers place the cartoon within a *longue durée* of political struggles against European imperialism across the subcontinent. The refrain of the song featured in the cartoon—"Marengé ya mar jayenge. Wo dhamaka kar jayenge. Dekho dekho hor se dekho" (We will hit it and it will die. We will make that explosion. Look, look, look some more)—sardonically comments on the visual sadism of American aerial militarism by compelling viewers to consider the gaze of the drone. Lev Grossman explains, "A drone isn't just a tool; when you use it, you see and act through it—you inhabit it."<sup>12</sup> Military drone technology—typified by the asymmetrical embodiment of sight between the hunter and the target (where the drone operator has the capacity to see without being seen)—reconfigures how enemy combatants are identified, processed, and killed. As Derek Gregory explains, looking through the eye of the drone, military analysts see objects as rifles, prayer as a "Taliban signifier," civilians as "military-aged males," and children as "adolescents."<sup>13</sup> In this cartoon, the playful instruction to "look, look, look some more" in the song emphasizes what Gregory identifies as the unending, searching gaze of the drone, one that is designed to find enemies where there are not any.

The opening scene of the animated short transports the viewer to the seemingly empty and inhospitable mountain ranges of Pakistan, somewhere along the postcolonial frontier. The sandy, desertlike, hilly landform signifies either the Pothohar Plateau or the Salt Range, suggesting the area is in the heartland of Pakistan somewhere between Punjab, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and the FATA, where the drone and mosquito might practically crossover. Against the backdrop is an animated rendering of a Predator drone. Colored light blue with black and white accents, the drone seems to be camouflaged to blend into the clear blue sky. On the back panel, where the aircraft number is usually inscribed, you can make out the marking "US420."

The marking urges us to consider in more depth the deceptive tactics of the U.S. military state. In northern India and Pakistan, the term 420 (pronounced "char-so-bees") is popularly used when someone cheats or cons you.<sup>14</sup> It refers to what Michelle Murphy calls the



“infrastructures of gaslighting,” where powerful neoliberal states, corporations, and individuals seek to sow the seeds of doubt in affected or targeted populations.<sup>15</sup> It is not coincidental that the cartoon was first released in late 2011, months before the Barack Obama administration—after decades of public statements that denied the existence of a drone program—finally publicly admitted to having used drone strikes in Pakistan since 2004. Drone technology first emerged during the Cold War in the 1950s with unlimited funding from the U.S. National Reconnaissance Office, which meant that drones did not have to compete with fighters, bombers, or other military agents for financial resources. Diplomatic historian Robert Farley explains that the Predator drone’s later success in the 1990s and onward hinged on the emergence of a “robust, reliable data system for linking drones and operators,” as well as on bandwidth and data storage capacities that were unimaginable to those who first conceived of the drone in secret in the 1950s.<sup>16</sup> As drone capabilities improved, the Obama administration secretly ordered a total of 193 strikes from 2009 until mid-2011—a stark contrast to the 52 drone strikes carried out under the George W. Bush administration. After investigative journalist Jane Mayer first reported on CIA-authorized drone strikes in Pakistan in 2009 and the wreckage of the strikes themselves accumulated over the following years, the Obama administration was finally compelled to end its gaslighting tactics and publicly acknowledge its decades-old drone program in January 2012.<sup>17</sup>

*As the US420 marking disappears, the drone continues loudly snoring while a dengue-carrying mosquito creeps up behind him. As the mosquito approaches, the buzzing gets louder and louder until it startles the drone awake. The American drone screams out, “Kon hai?!” (Who is it?!), frantically attempting to flap his wings and get away while heavily panting. “Hello brother,” the quick-talking mosquito says in a high-pitched voice, flicking about. “Mujhe pehchante main kon hoo?” (Do you recognize who I am?).<sup>18</sup>*

The dengue-carrying anopheles mosquito has been present in Pakistan since the mid-1990s. The first outbreak of viral fever from dengue-carrying mosquitoes in Pakistan happened in the port city of Karachi from June 1994 to September 1995, but it was not until 2006 that

dengue epidemics became an annual occurrence.<sup>19</sup> In 2011, dengue mosquitoes reportedly infected 21,314 people in Punjab alone, causing 337 deaths—the most of any Pakistani province.<sup>20</sup> While there are no writings about how exactly the dengue-carrying mosquitoes came to Pakistan, it is worth interrogating further how the mosquito's movement is directly linked to the circulation of capital along the infrastructure of empire. Instructive here is Timothy Mitchell's historical research that documents how British colonial expansionism involved the incidental transportation of disease-ridden mosquitoes across its imperial geographies, turning the mosquito into a harbinger of death across the Commonwealth.<sup>21</sup> After reading through Mitchell's work, it was unsurprising to find out that the dengue-carrying mosquitoes arrived in the port city of Karachi in the mid-1990s through the global supply chains that connect Pakistan to the Indian Ocean world economy.

*After the drone correctly identifies his new friend as the infamous Pakistani dengue mosquito, he laments, "Tu mujhe to janta ho main kon hoon" (You must know who I am). Naming him as an "American drone airplane," the mosquito remarks that the drone's "target koi hota hai, aur thook kisi hor nu dehta hai" (target is one person, but he ends up hitting the other one). The awkward, uncoordinated drone proudly exclaims, "Yeh tho Amereek di style hai!" (That is the American way!). The tricky, clever mosquito informs his friend about his own style of killing. "Chup se ke teeka lagate hoon" (Quietly I give them a small injection), he says proudly. "Jab pathe chalta hai ke dengue kata hai to marne te dho din pehlan hi marjahte hai" (When they finally realize that the dengue mosquito has bitten them, they die two days before they are supposed to).<sup>22</sup>*

The mosquito-borne viral disease entered the public lexicon in the 2010s as epidemiological researchers and nongovernmental organizations in Pakistan attempted to address the fatal rates of dengue infection. Published in 2013, the first major study on the domestication of the viral disease in Pakistan by postcolonial epidemiological researchers critiqued the lack of government-funded intervention into the spread of dengue.<sup>23</sup> Public awareness infomercials produced by local NGOs have proliferated during this time, warning the Pakistani



FIGURE 12.2. In this still from the folkloric Pakistani cartoon “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone,” the dengue-carrying mosquito colludes with the American Predator drone.

public about the dangers of dengue-carrying mosquitoes. Presumably because of their small size and almost invisible presence, the mosquitoes featured in these infomercials are consistently animated as larger-than-life figures.

Bishnupriya Ghosh traces the history of animating mosquitoes to Winsor McCay’s six-minute line-drawn animation “How a Mosquito Operates” (1912). For Ghosh, the mosquito is “planetary, here before us, and perhaps . . . after us.”<sup>24</sup> Narrowing in on the atmospheric threat that disease-carrying mosquitoes have posed to human life, she offers the example of malaria, reminding us that it was named after bad air (*mal aria*).<sup>25</sup> Ghosh compels us to consider that the anopheles mosquito is always already a threatening force that is all-encompassing, fully atmospheric. The ambient presence that the mosquito invokes is strikingly similar to the looming drone. And yet, in “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone,” the drone and mosquito are not visualized as atmospheric at all. Quite the opposite: they are presented as two men—shamelessly flying, talking, and colluding over the skies of Pakistan (Figure 12.2.). There is something decisively abnormal yet familiar about the two men in the cartoon, those two flying dacoits.

*As the drone and mosquito continue to plot, we get to see the duo up close. The new wide angle showcases the out-to-lunch drone's chubby, childish face and light skin. His deep, masculine voice makes it apparent that the drone—with his blunt, inaccurate killing style—is the dim-witted, big guy, the muscles or the brawn of the two. His interlocutor, the darker-skinned mosquito, is a skinny, quick-talking, sinister character. With clever comebacks and a high-pitched, effeminate laugh, the mosquito is the mastermind, the brains behind their evil operations. And it is not incidental that neither speaks Urdu, the national language of Pakistan. When the drone reveals that he speaks Pashto, the mosquito confesses that he speaks Punjabi.*

The cartoon casts the drone and mosquito as dacoits: criminal outsiders up to no good. To better understand the racial undertones of dacoity, it is worth considering how British colonial policy toward criminality transformed as the corpus of colonial thought about caste in South Asia grew. In *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*, Nicholas B. Dirks explains how the institutionalization and naturalization of Brahmanical caste orders through colonial administrative rule by the British facilitated the rise of intense caste politics in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth.<sup>26</sup> Considering criminality as a caste-defined hereditary profession in South Asia, similar to weaving or carpentry, British colonial officials came to believe that criminal behavior was genetically inherited rather than socially learned.<sup>27</sup> This shift from social determinism to biological determinism laid the groundwork for the imposition of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871. The act grouped various ethnic and social communities (vagrants, nomads, Adivasis, *hijras*, and some lower-caste groups) into a single legal category: criminal tribes. The British colonial state used these criminal-by-birth laws to control, dispossess, and persecute over thirteen million people by designating them as dacoits.

The separation of Indigenous peoples along the lines of criminality during British rule in the subcontinent has meant that postcolonial states in South Asia largely operate with two figurations of indigeneity: the Dacoit and the Adivasi. Emerging as a result of political self-organization in the 1930s, Adivasi struggles in South Asia gained international recognition during the 1990s within the context of the global Indigenous movement.<sup>28</sup> While the term Adivasi is derived from

the Hindi words *adi* and *vasi*, meaning “first inhabitants,” now it is widely used to represent all Indigenous and tribal peoples in South Asia. Demonstrating how the contemporary political figure of the Adivasi has been cobbled together by NGOs, anthropologists, and international law, Amita Baviskar explains how circulating images of “the loincloth wearing Adivasi playing the flute or dancing” reinforce essentialist ideas of Adivasis as “ecologically noble savants.”<sup>29</sup> This new rendering of the docile Adivasi emerges against decades of proliferating images of dacoity, typified by popular cinematic images of rural bandits running wild and wreaking havoc in the forests and hills of the postcolonial frontier in South Asia.

Predictably, the criminal outsider figure of the Dacoit has left a lasting cultural imprint in the subcontinent. Dacoits crop up as villains in a litany of artistic, filmic, and literary cultural texts from across India, Pakistan, and its diasporas. In Bollywood, there is an entire genre dedicated to them: the dacoit film genre. Discussing the wide impact of the genre, scholar Rosie Thomas explains that in the 1970s and 1980s, South Asian tourists visiting resort towns in the subcontinent would even “frequent photographers’ stalls to pose for their photographs in *dacoit* outfits—cowboy-style fringed jackets, turbans, moustaches, guns—clearly inspired by film imagery.”<sup>30</sup> Notably, the 1975 action-adventure dacoit film *Sholay* was a definitive reworking of the genre. Heralded as an Indian classic, it was the highest-grossing film in India for nearly twenty years. Blending the conventions of older dacoit films with the techniques of the American Western and its derivative works, *Sholay* became the first “curry Western.” The transnational circulation of the Western as a filmic style in the twentieth century brought the structural antagonisms of U.S. settler colonialism to bear on other political contexts. In South Asia, the curry Western replaced the “Indian savages” of the American Western film with a new cast of dacoit characters.

Understanding the contemporary ways that the racialized figure of the Dacoit functions in South Asia requires further consideration of the Western film genre and its antagonistic Indian characters within the historical context of U.S. settler colonialism. Working through Indigenous presence in a swath of literary, cultural, and political contexts, Jodi Byrd demonstrates that U.S. empire does not discretely transit across “Alaska Native villages, American Indian nations,

unincorporated, insular, and incorporated territories, Hawai‘i, Iraq, Okinawa, and Afghanistan” through the remapping of a “detachable . . . frontier or wilderness” but rather through the continuous reproduction of “Indianness.”<sup>31</sup> Tracing how the production of a paradigmatic Indianness functions as a mode of transit for the propagation of U.S. imperialism, Byrd reveals how this single, racially defined Indianness collapses indigeneity into another minority population within U.S. liberal multiculturalism while serving as the mold for remaking foreign subjects under U.S. imperial authority. Placing Indianness at the center of American statehood and empire, Byrd explains that the “non-discriminating, proto-inclusive ‘merciless Indian Savage’ stands as the terrorist, externalized from ‘our frontiers,’ and functions as abjected horror through whom civilization is articulated oppositionally.” For Byrd, this figure is “the paranoid foundation for what Jasbir K. Puar defines in *Terrorist Assemblages* as Islamic ‘monster-terrorist-fags.’”<sup>32</sup> If this timeless figure of the “merciless Indian savage” functions as the route of transit for the propagation of U.S. imperialism as Jodi Byrd contends, then dacoity functions as the route of transit for the consolidation and propagation of post-colonial state power in the subcontinent. Collapsing multiple peoples into a single population for expedited political management, dacoity now serves as a mold to remake and manage subjects externalized and deemed antinational by the postcolonial state, such as Muslims and Dalits in India. In the peculiar case of “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone,” it is the Punjabi-speaking mosquito and the Pashto-speaking drone who are imagined through dacoity as a violent subset of Indianness, as terrorists operating in the borderlands of the Pakistani state.

If the American figure of the terrorist—and its foundational figure of the “merciless Indian savage”—is both monster and fag, then so too is the figure of the Dacoit in South Asia. Studying representations of dacoity in Indian cinema, Rosie Thomas writes about how dacoit characters are routinely presented as morally depraved and sexually uncontrollable.<sup>33</sup> Imagined along these lines, the two dacoits in “Kabhi Dengue, Kabhi Drone” are improperly masculine, hyperracialized, deformed, and sexually threatening to the reproduction of ordinary, everyday heteropatriarchal life in Pakistan. Whereas the hypermasculine drone is presented with a deep voice, light skin, and a wide body, the

mosquito is rendered effeminate through his high-pitched voice, dark skin, and disappearing body. If one reads further into the gendered dynamics and sexual undertones of the cartoon, the queer subtext is striking: the innocent, dumb, hypermasculine drone is seduced by the cunning mosquito, who charms him with his sharp wit, effeminacy, and slender body. The cartoon fosters an amplified sense of threat at the hands of the drone and mosquito: the foreign, flirtatious queer couple become harbingers of civilizational death. While the anopheles mosquito and the Predator drone pose real, material threats to human life in Pakistan, the stencil provided by dacoity flattens these complex and debilitating atmospheric phenomena.

*When the drone inquires whether the mosquito enjoys living in Pakistan, the dengue-carrying mosquito responds defiantly. "Kesa lagda hai?" (How do I like it?), he retorts. "Are mera than poura kaandaan bulaya hai!" (I brought my entire extended family here!). The mosquito continues celebrating with the drone, informing him that the Pakistani government has not even released any official reports about the dengue endemic. The drone responds in a sinister tone. "Isi lai to hum Pakistan main mauj kar rahe hai!" (That's why we're living it up in Pakistan!). On that note, the short ends with the evil mosquito and drone maniacally laughing together as they fly off into the distance to continue terrorizing the good people of Pakistan.*

Calling out officials for neglecting to address and intervene in drone warfare and dengue epidemics across the country, the cartoon is a powerful indictment of the Pakistani government for its inaction. As such, the cartoon urges us to consider how Pakistani state operatives and American military officials have colluded to facilitate American drone strike operations in the FATA since 2004. While the Pakistani government has remained publicly opposed to America's drone strike program, the presence of clear airspace whenever strikes are issued lends credence to the popular idea that the Pakistani government struck a deal with U.S. officials, permitting them to carry out attacks against targets such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban in exchange for assistance with attacks against other domestic opponents of the Pakistani government.<sup>34</sup> Although it is critical to acknowledge the asymmetrical power that undergirds U.S.–Pakistan relations, it is worth further

considering how their joint War on Terror transits to the FATA by reproducing the paradigmatic figure of the Indian savage and the merciless Dacoit respectively. This political cooperation between the United States and Pakistan reveals how drone warfare is less of a clear-cut American imperial affair than it is the newest instantiation of a timeless global war on monsters, Indians, terrorists, fags, illegal immigrants, dacoits, antinationals, and everyone else who gets in the way of powerful states. In the end, the folkloric cartoon makes us laugh at the inefficacy of the postcolonial state while providing an opening for us to consider living beyond the postcolonial frontier. But living beyond the frontier in places like the FATA means living in a dark geography, in a place where you are excised from the global citizenry and subject to the full brunt of the Global War on Terror. What do safety and security look like in practice when you are living among dacoits, under the watchful evil eye of the drone? Where do you hide when the drone is overhead?

### **Architectural Imperatives**

On November 14, 2001, the United States completed its first successful drone strike operation. Taking off from an American air force base in Uzbekistan, an American Predator drone crossed the Afghani border to track a convoy of vehicles carrying Mohammed Atef—the military chief of al-Qaeda and son-in-law to Osama bin Laden. When the vehicles stopped in front of a building, officers from the Central Intelligence Agency issued two consecutive Hellfire missile attacks from the Predator drone overhead. The first strike blasted off the back half of the building, while the second brought the entire structure to the ground, killing Atef, among other civilians. Realizing that buildings are static choke points where insurgent cells congregate, CIA operatives have strategically turned toward using domestic buildings as primary targets during drone strike missions to increase success rates. An ongoing joint investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Forensic Architecture, and SITU Research reveals that approximately 65 percent of drone strikes in Pakistan have targeted buildings.<sup>35</sup> Lacking their purported surgical precision and laser-like focus, drones routinely obliterate noncombative buildings in an attempt to kill insurgents, maiming civilians, animals, and other forms of life in the



process. To put it plainly, architecture is not incidental but rather central to the tactics of America's targeted drone strike program. In this section, I question whether it is possible to find refuge from the bombs above without going into hiding, whether we might build a place that does not replicate the racial dynamics of technosecuritization that plague American imperialism and postcolonial statehood. With that objective in mind, I study the speculative architectural project *Shura City*. Conceived by architect Asher J. Kohn and new media artist and writer Hiba Ali, the collaborative experimental architectural proposal for a drone-proof smart city was put together shortly after the Obama administration first publicly acknowledged its covert drone strike program.

I met Ali while she was completing an artist residency at the South Asian Visual Arts Centre in June 2017. It is within this context that I first got the opportunity to chat in person with Ali about her work and learn about her collaborative project *Shura City*, delving into the layered meanings of the project and her thoughts on some of the conundrums that stifle clear-cut political action against drones. She explained that the project developed from an image-text originally drawn up by Kohn that envisioned a creative, hopeful response to the persistence of drone strikes. Published on *Chapati Mystery*, a "quaint" digital publication that started out "wondering what T. E. Lawrence and Bhagat Singh would talk about over dinner," the architectural project took as its starting point the failure of the law to protect civilians against drone warfare.<sup>36</sup> Thinking outside the bounds of legal recourse, Kohn turned toward architecture, exploring the potential for buildings to accomplish what international law could not. The result was a rhetorical thought project: What would an entire city designed with the violence of drones and the Global War on Terror in mind look like? Concerned by the arms-race logics at the heart of defensive architecture, Kohn decided against armoring the city as a way to deflect American ballistics. Instead, the smart city took magical deception as its operative logic. It is designed as a sleight of hand, in a "now you see me, now you don't" way. "Inscrutability is its armour," Kohn writes.<sup>37</sup>

After stumbling upon the guest post on *Chapati Mystery*, Ali initiated the collaboration with a short email to Kohn. Ali explained to me that as the thought-turned-art project developed through discussion, two latent problems started brimming to the surface. On the one hand,

there seemed to be no way to escape speculative financial capital and its authority over the imagining, drafting, branding, financing, operationalizing, and marketing of any large-scale architectural build. On the other hand, the proposed city was shaping up to be a modernized medieval fortress at its base. As a result, Ali and Kohn flipped the proposal on its head, developing a short video that would better elucidate how speculative financial capital is mobilized to build modern, securitized smart cities that reproduce nearly universal, racially encoded antagonisms: life/nonlife, fort/surround, citizen/terrorist, settler/native, lightness/darkness, civilization/wilderness. Reading the video as an experiment in politicized architectural thinking, I explore the productive openings that the artists have offered for rethinking the paradigms of security that continue to underpin contemporary approaches to defensive architecture.

The corporatized video presentation, set to an audio track by the experimental techno DJ 兪+ㄣCHAIiT, opens with an animated Predator drone taking flight into modern cyberspace.<sup>38</sup> Remaining out of the frame, its terror lurks in the atmosphere. As the military drone glides off-screen, the camera pans to reveal the logo—"Shura City"—sprawled across the ground and stylized in large holographic, three-dimensional English and Arabic block letters. Mimicking a flashy, high-end, large-scale corporate presentation, it is the perfect pitch for a modern Gulf capitalist looking to finance a smart city in the desert. As the drone flies across the screen, the architectural crisis is disclosed: "With the goal to eliminate a single person or a small group, [drones] scoff at conventional architecture." Laying out how "architecture against drones is a contemporary imperative," the enterprising duo clarify that "such creations are not needed for the John Connors but for the Abdulrahman al-Awlakis." The geopolitics are clear: *Shura City* is a project for those targeted by drones. Thoughtfully selected, the name John Connor is drawn from the American science-fiction film series *Terminator*. In the series, John is a messianic young boy who successfully leads resistance efforts against synthetic intelligence and its genocidal robots. On the other hand, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki is the name of the fourteen-year-old boy and U.S. citizen who was killed in a drone strike in 2011. Born to an al-Qaeda operative, he was robbed of life, innocence, and the messianic possibilities that are given to prototypical white American boys like John Connor. Unlike

John Connor, Abdulrahman al-Awlaki will not be the superhero who fights off the drones and saves the day. And neither will his eight-year-old sister, who died during a raid approved by the U.S. government in early 2017. The message is clear: the al-Awlaki children and their Muslim brethren need a modern, smart defense system. And Shura City is the ideal solution—all it requires is your funding.

In the video, the drone-proof city is visualized as an anti-imperial project. Shura City strategically incorporates Islamic architectural features into the future postcolony, including minarets. Minarets are tall, slender towers that typically form part of a mosque. As the place from which a muezzin calls Muslims to prayer, it is an integral component of religious life in Shura City. Compelled to include minarets in light of “the Switzerland ban,” the smart city’s creators neatly situate it within a long-standing anti-imperial contest between Euro-American Christianity and the Islamic world. The commentary refers to a popular initiative to prevent the construction of mosque minarets in Switzerland that turned into a successful referendum in November 2009 when it was confirmed by 57.5 percent of participating voters. The defiant minarets of Shura City are colored green in traditional Islamic fashion. Used as a marker of “freedom of expression,” as well as “a symbol of the beliefs of the inhabitants and their pride in them,” the minarets offer a dream of religious unity for potential investors, bypassing concerns about divisions between different sects and practitioners of Islam. By defining its community along ethnoreligious terms, the minaret-decorated smart city situates itself in opposition to the Christianization project of Euro-American imperialism.

Covered in an ultramarine dome, the city emerges in the middle of a never-ending desert. Elizabeth Povinelli explains how the desert is imagined as a place denuded and inhospitable to life to maintain and exacerbate the distinction between life and nonlife for the proliferation of capitalist extraction projects (oil, carbon, and so on) and development projects (plastics, cities, and so on).<sup>39</sup> Against the imaginary, emptied desert, the three-dimensional digital model rendering of Shura City glimmers as a fantasy of technoscientific modernity. Intended to maximize both “external confusion and internal livability,” Shura City is designed in the image of a traditional fortress. Analyzing enduring images of the “surrounded fort,” Stefano Harney and Fred Moten explain how the core (settler society) makes incursions into the surround

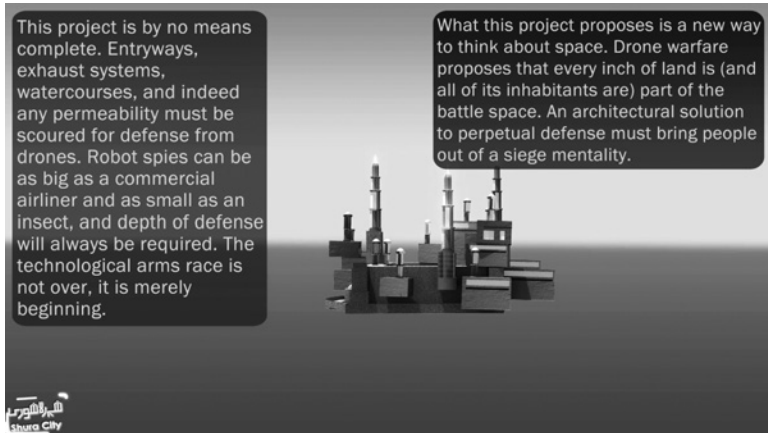


FIGURE 12.3. In this final scene from the video pitch for *Shura City*, artists Hiba Ali and Asher J. Kohn flip the smart-city proposal on its head.

(native land) through incursions and land grabs, highlighting how “the surround antagonises the laager in its midst.”<sup>40</sup> The core holds the political, the settler commons, the capitalist state that is the real danger.

“Knowing that there is something between them and the unspeakable darkness outside,” the artists sardonically remind us in the video that “the [dome] roof allows people to feel comfortable meeting and mixing.” Throughout the video we see drones, domes, minarets, and QR codes, but human life is missing from the proposed smart city. Avoiding the task of visualizing fallible humans, the video satirically envisions a perfectly calculated robotic, machinic future that promises to keep “inhabitants” secure from the malleable, shifting “darkness outside.” Racially amplifying and localizing the atmospheric threat of the drone, the video compels us to think about how those outside the new city, beyond the polis, are rendered as terrorists in the name of collective security. With its objective to protect those living in the dark geographies of U.S. imperialism, the drone-proof city quickly becomes a technosecuritized, neoliberal city-state itself, with its own dark geographies and, by extension, its own dacoits.

With one final disclaimer that the project is “by no means complete” and requires thinking about “entryways, exhaust systems, [and] watercourses,” the video presents investors with what “next steps” might look like if funding is secured (Figure 12.3). It is in this last scene that

the artists drive home their point and flip the entire project on its head. “The technological arms race is not over,” they instruct, “it is merely beginning.” By situating the smart city within a continuum of rivalistic, nationalist movements to “armament,” the artists place the proposal to build a drone-proof city within a global history of technosecuritization, revealing the racial logics of fear, security, and safety that have long structured conflicts within the well-worn circuitry of Anglo-American political hegemony. The project proposes “a new way to think about space,” telling us that any effective architectural solution must “bring people out of a siege mentality,” out of the medieval fortress. Straddling the liminal space between speculative fiction and satire, the proposal for Shura City speaks to the deep dejection felt by people whose kin have been murdered by American Predator drones and hunted down by modern postcolonial nation-states like Pakistan. The video leaves us without answers, left looking for an elsewhere without drones.

“What if some Gulf capitalist actually builds the city?” Ali offered, laughing, during our discussion. “What a nightmare that would be.” While the afterlives of Shura City are not foreclosed, Ali explained that the project was only meant as a proposal, a provocation to think about how the paradigms of speculation, security, privacy, and surveillance that continue to underwrite so many architectural futures can so easily be turned against anyone. When I asked Ali if dengue-carrying mosquitoes would ever infiltrate Shura City, she lamented, “The powerful will always find a way to protect themselves and condemn the rest.” As Ali suggests, perhaps it is time to slow down, to momentarily put aside the drone while we focus our attention on all the ways that power reproduces itself. Once architecture is wrestled away from those powerful, ever-expanding neoliberal states, corporations, and individuals, we might stumble upon a different set of architectural imperatives for those lands under occupation by the postcolony, ones that do not subjugate dacoits.

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