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Carrie Andersen Wins Prestigious Granof Prize For Top Dissertation Across the University

by American

Studies

AMS :: ATX is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.





Congratulations to UT AMS PhD Carrie Andersen! She has been awarded the most prestigious prize for a PhD graduate at the University of Texas: the **Michael H. Granof Award**, given “to recognize the University’s top dissertation.” Carrie is also the recipient of the UT Graduate School’s Outstanding Dissertation Award in the Humanities and Fine Arts.

The title of Dr. Andersen’s dissertation is “Securing America: Drone Warfare in American Culture After 9/11.” We sat down with Carrie to learn more about about her work, her academic inspirations, and advice she has for current and future graduate students. This is award-winning material, so please do read on!



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1. First: Congratulations on not one, but two major awards for your recently completed dissertation: the UT Graduate School's Outstanding Dissertation Award in the Humanities and Fine Arts, and the extremely prestigious Granof Award, for the best dissertation at UT! Can you reflect on your feelings right now?

Thanks so much! To say I'm shocked would be an understatement; I certainly didn't anticipate this sort of recognition. I'm incredibly excited, grateful, and honored.

2. Your dissertation is, broadly, on the subject of drones in America. How did you come to this topic, and how did your work at UT leading up to your dissertation inform your topic and research question(s)?

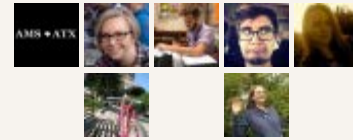
When I enrolled at UT, I, like many American Studies students, had incredibly expansive interests, ranging from digital media to political theory to 1960s proto-punk in Detroit. So it certainly wasn't a project that I planned on doing before I got to graduate school, and it took a few years of germination.

Eventually, a few things nudged me towards studying drones. My academic interests in media and technology were honed in coursework in our department as well as in the department of Radio-Television-Film, and I found opportunities through those classes to examine my growing interests in

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media, technology, and power. Later, I built on those interests in my orals exam lists, which focused on media, war and emotion, American cultural history, and political theory. The oral exam process was completely essential to figuring out how to approach a project that melded all of those disciplines. I also found myself most interested in the books that examined technologies through cultural lenses, so I wanted to pursue a project in a similar spirit.

So my path to a dissertation on drone warfare was of course informed by this general academic trajectory born of coursework and the exam process. But it was also heavily based on what was happening in American culture at the time when I was formulating my project. After about 2008, there was an increasing national and global focus on drone warfare in the news, and those conversations typically centered on the ethics or legality of drone strikes abroad, or concerns about surveillance and privacy at home in America. But beginning in about 2011 and 2012, I started noticing more nods to military robots and unmanned machines in TV shows like *Saturday Night Live*, films like *Iron Man 2*, and videogames like those of the *Call of Duty* series. By the time I was finishing orals and beginning to conceptualize my dissertation, this important national conversation about drones was increasingly happening in *cultural* spaces, not just political or legal spaces. Drones were suddenly everywhere.

Caroline Pinkston and Teaching Teachers

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So I wanted to examine the meaning and consequences of the machine's apparently sudden cultural ubiquity.

3. What projects, people, or “real life” experiences, at UT or beyond, inspired your project?

So many of the books I read in orals and in my coursework were inspirations. Paul Boyer's *By the Bomb's Early Lightstands* out as the clearest example of a cultural history of a military technology that provoked a broad range of complex emotional responses, from fear and anxiety to excitement and wonder. Patrick Wright's *Tank*, a cultural history of tanks during WWI, offered a similar approach that I look to as a model (and some fascinating stories of Scottish churches decorated with tank- and-bomb emblazoned stained glass windows). And a broad body of literature on militarization, spanning scores of the disciplines, provided the most significant theoretical spine to my work.

And, like many graduate students in our department, I was fortunate to work with several faculty members whose work inspired my own. My adviser, Randy Lewis, pushed me to try to understand why drones were, and are, so culturally pervasive, and why they inspire such a range of visceral responses, from disgust to delight. His concern with understanding what makes Americans tick—as you'll see in his **forthcoming book** on surveillance—is an impulse that I emulate in my project.

4. Drones are a fairly recent technology (right?) in the US. What does it mean to study drones from an “American Studies perspective,” or to study the cultural and political meanings of drones more generally?

Well, the drone’s relative newness depends on how you define a drone! In the 1800s, military officials were using “balloon bombs” to send explosives over to enemy territory, and WWI saw the use of pigeons with cameras attached to them—early surveillance drones, arguably—as well as unmanned airplanes operated with gyroscopes. So they’re arguably a fairly old technology.

But their incredible cultural notoriety is definitely new, and that’s what I intended to analyze in my project—why are these machines so pervasive both in military circles and in popular culture nowadays, and what could some of the consequences of the ubiquitous drone be on a cultural level? Scores of scholars and military officials have examined the former question, which has fairly clear answers: drones are cheaper than manned vehicles, they typically keep American fighters out of harm’s way, and unmanned vehicles can fly farther and longer than manned vehicles can. But an American Studies approach meant that I was more interested in the drone as a cultural object rather than the intricacies of military strategy. How are people encountering these machines if they aren’t members of the military? Why are they so

prevalent in popular culture? What could the consequences of the drone becoming an increasingly mundane of everyday life be? What's the deal with [this SNL sketch](#)?

5. What are three things about drones that readers of the blog may not already know?

I'll tell my favorite historical story about drones. In the 1910s or 1920s, a man named Reginald Denny, a veteran of Britain's Royal Flying Corps, moved to Hollywood to pursue acting. He found initial success in the silent film industry, and, by the late 1920s, he was acting regularly in films with sound. By 1934, he opened a hobby shop for remote-controlled aircraft, and, over time, started making unmanned machines that could be used for training gunners—these drones were for target practice, in other words. The U.S. Army gave him a contract, and Denny's company manufactured thousands of drones for them.

So someone who was acting in films with Katherine Hepburn (like *The Little Minister*) and Laurence Olivier (like Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca*) was, at the same time, manufacturing military-grade target drones for the Army during the earliest days of World War II. His company was bought by Northrop, which eventually became Northrop Grumman, in the early 1950s.

Denny's last film role was about 15 years later: he played Commodore Schmidlapp in the 1966 *Batman* movie starring Adam West.

As if all that weren't weird enough, one of Denny's employees was a woman named Norma Jeane, also known as Marilyn Monroe. She was discovered, so the story goes, after a young Army captain named Ronald Reagan (yes, that Ronald Reagan) assigned a photographer to snap some photos of her assembling the drones to celebrate America's industrial power, and convinced her to become a model. The rest, as they say, is history.

5. How do you see your work fitting in with broader conversations in academia and beyond?

I see this work as an extension of a long impulse in American Studies to excavate the cultural significance of everyday life and culture: the media we consume, the toys we play with, the marketing we encounter. My work also builds from and upon an increasing scholarly concern with interiority—the beliefs, feelings, and subjectivities we all have—that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of subdisciplines like affect theory, for instance. This growing academic impulse to understand what makes people tick and why people feel the way they do undergirded my approach in this project.

6. As a now-decorated graduate of the UT AMS PhD program, do you have any sage advice for graduate or undergraduate students in American Studies, or the humanities more generally?

Yes! Say “yes” as much as you can without overworking yourself. Broaden your skill set, your network, and your body of interests. There are so many fascinating people at UT (and beyond) to connect with, and so many opportunities in front of you to develop new skills and interests. Push yourself to do something that isn’t your dissertation or your class work. Even if you can’t devote a *huge* amount of time to endeavors beyond your core academic work, it’s healthy to engage in a diverse variety of projects—and those ancillary activities will likely confer benefits in the long run that you never anticipated.

7. What projects are you excited to work on in the futureFirst things first, I’m excited to turn this project into a fully-fledged book. I’m also increasingly interested in the culture of hacking and cybersecurity, and anticipate a second research project about emotionally-charged rhetoric about violation, security, and protection that has come to infuse any discourse about cybersecurity. I imagine I’ll always want to study politically and culturally hot topics.

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