

REPARATIVE REDACTION



SHANNON
MATTERN

Reparative Redaction

By Shannon Mattern

Published by Library Stack,
2023.

Edited by William Wiebe
and Benjamin Tiven for
Library Stack.

Designed by Bryce Wilner.
Typeset in Linux Libertine.

Acknowledgments:

Thank you to Nora O Murchú,
Elise Hunchuck, and all the
folks at transmediale 2023,
where I presented the first draft
of this project; and to Zack
Lischer-Katz and his colleagues
at the University of Arizona,
where I shared an encore.

I'm also greatly appreciative
to all the folks on [Twitter](#) [now
called "X"] who responded to
my 2021 request for examples
of "redaction aesthetics";
I collated their responses in a
public [Arena channel](#).

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Conveying the personal without compromising privacy or allowing for identification: such a mission characterizes many redactive projects. I've redacted quite a few photos of myself over the years. I was born with a head full of dark, unruly hair. As the curls grew tighter and I became less capable of managing them, my hair became a target for ridicule and a source of shame. I hated the way I looked, so I made a point of defacing or "disappearing" particularly embarrassing manifestations of myself in family photos and VHS tapes. I became an anti-archivist, a redactivist. When I look at those defaced photos today, I feel the persistent scars of that early derision, but I can also project into the redacted void all the accomplishments and virtues I'd someday come to appreciate about myself. Today I call this "pulling a Baldessari"—like when I disguise my students' identities in class photos by Photoshopping cheerful polka dots atop their faces.

The conceptual artist John Baldessari was well known for the dot stickers he used to obscure the faces in found photographs, film stills, and political photo ops. “I just got so tired of looking at those faces,” he said. “If you can’t see their face, you’re going to look at how they’re dressed, maybe their stance, their surroundings.”ⁱ The photo op is rarely about the individual subjects anyway; it’s about the handshake, the kiss, the ribbon about to be cut with those ridiculously huge scissors. Michael Govan, director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, agrees that Baldessari sometimes “takes away the thing that’s most obvious in the center of your vision, forces you to look at everything else, almost for the first time, to make new sense of what you’re seeing.”ⁱⁱ The redaction elicits revelation. Perhaps these playful alterations emerged from a broader deletionist impulse: in 1970, stalled and bored with his work, Baldessari famously cremated 13 years’ worth of his paintings at a San Diego mortuary.ⁱⁱⁱ As Susan Stamberg explains, “It was a ritual act of purification. A farewell to the tradition of painting.”^{iv} But unlike purification or deletion, redaction leaves behind a trace: a scar that reminds us of what we’ve abandoned, what we’ve survived, what we continue to push against.

i Susan Stamberg, “[For John Baldessari, Conceptual Art Means Serious Mischief](#),” NPR (March 11, 2013). See also [More Than You Wanted to Know About John Baldessari](#), Vol. 1/Vol. 2, redacted with black insulation tape (Null Island, 2022).

ii Ibid.

iii Jennifer Mundy, “[Lost Art: John Baldessari](#),” Tate (2014).

iv Stamberg.



Image from Kat Mustatea's *Voidopolis*, an augmented-reality book from MIT Press, 2023. Courtesy of the artist.

Over the past couple years, we've all *lived* a sort of unintentional or incidental redaction—existential obfuscation and loss-without-erasure—at multiple scales and in various contexts. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly all of us have observed real-world elisions in our towns and cities and landscapes: the closure of small businesses; the emptying of schools and gyms and libraries; the exodus of white-collar workers to their home offices, leaving behind empty urban high-rises and suburban office parks. The pandemic likewise left lacunae in our brains, viral swarms producing cognitive fogs that dulled our senses of smell and taste, withdrew familiar words and faces from ready grasp, impeded our concentration, and obstructed our short-term memory.¹ Drawing inspiration from her own experience of wandering the pandemic city in 2020, playwright and digital artist Kat Mustatea created *Voidopolis*, a series

1 Most of us were still sufficiently cognizant to see the cloud, to feel its deleterious presence, to witness our own diminution—to endure the redaction—and to take cold comfort in reassurances that these impairments were only temporary. But of course, we're still learning about the effects of Long COVID. For nearly a

year, I forgot how to write—a distressing lapse that precipitated many cancellations and renege promises and yielded a mass expunction of my professional calendar. Those deletions, I keep telling myself, cleared space for convalescence. I can now feel my own incremental recuperation.

of Instagram posts featuring urban stock photographs from which Mustatea “wiped” the city’s inhabitants, leaving behind “shimmering mirages” on once-vibrant streets. Mustatea then paired her redacted images with GPT-2-generated text that reimagined Dante’s *Inferno*. While the *Voidopolis* posts themselves disappeared from Mustatea’s Instagram profile at the end of 2020, they will soon be reincarnated in a printed book, with an accompanying augmented reality app that will algorithmically decay the images and words over successive readings, miming the haze of memory itself.

After two years of surreal pandemic adaptations, redaction moved further into the public consciousness with the glaring spectacle of the January 6 (J6) hearings in June of 2022: a highly polished multimedia production featuring text messages, cell phone videos, and interview transcripts chronicling President Trump’s role in inciting the 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. In August, we watched the FBI seize classified documents at Trump’s Mar-a-Lago resort, followed by other caches at the homes of both Vice President Pence and President Biden. A public agitated by years of political unrest turned a critical, often conspiratorial, eye to the countless redacted documents (and, at times, shockingly *unredacted* screenshots) that fluttered across their TV screens and through their social media feeds.

As the country geared up that November for the mid-term elections, right-wing groups flooded their local and state officials with public record requests, forcing them to busy themselves with mass redaction efforts.² In late December, shortly before the J6 committee’s dissolution and the 118th Congress’s commencement, when Republicans would regain control of the House of Representatives, the committee requested that their official records be carefully and expeditiously processed by the National Archives in order to protect the anonymity of their informants from newly empowered obstructionist legislators.³ Many in the public learned for the first

2 In doing so, right-wing activists inverted the practice of groups committed to social reform and justice who have long deployed Freedom of Information requests “to claw back surveillance, police brutality, workplace harms, and more,” as Lilly Irani and Jesse Marx write in *Redacted* (Taller California, 2021).

3 Ron Filipkowski, [Twitter](#), January 2, 2023.

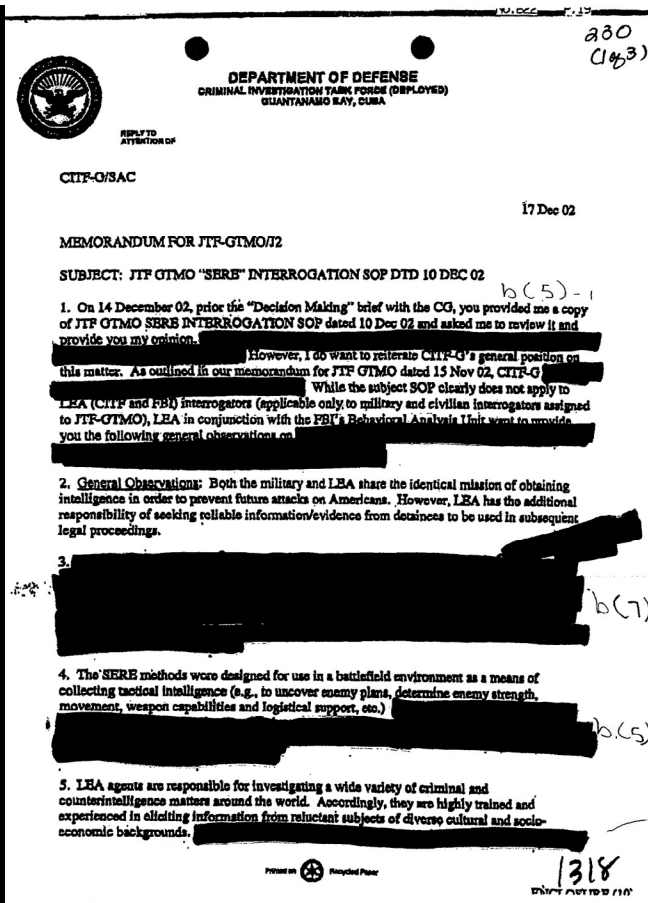
time about the work of the National Archives and Records Administration, suddenly developing opinions about classification protocols and access policies.

This amplified public interest in state secrets and the protocols of information management seems to recur across periods of intelligence-related upheaval or transformation: the World Wars, the Cold War, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the passage of the 1966 Freedom of Information Act, the War on Terror, and of course our own post-Wikileaks and post-Snowden age of suspicion. Practices of redaction have proven particularly captivating because they explicitly expose state secrecy. The black bars, blank spaces, blurred images, and audio bleeps of redacted materials offer us a stark and often maddening reminder of what stands between us and the open exchange and transparency upon which our democracy is supposedly founded. In withholding *what* we're not meant to know, redacted documents clearly communicate *that* we're not meant to know.

Conventional redaction entails censoring a document, whether military authorizations or police body cam footage or patient records, by removing or obfuscating words, passages, pages, or clips for legal, security, or privacy purposes—and not eliding the expurgation. Unlike erasure or deletion, redaction reveals the act of its own withholding. It divulges the revision; it makes the act of “secreting” visible. Yet I'd like us to consider that redaction isn't always a deleterious vanishing; nor does it serve solely to maintain state or corporate security and secrecy. And as we've already begun to see, it's not limited to textual documents. Redaction is a creative act, beyond a rote bureaucratic operation: it is informed by social obligations and affective dynamics, and it involves judgments regarding what can be known and to whom, and how much must be hidden in order to minimize the potential risks of that knowledge's dissemination. Redaction is a capacious practice with diverse applications across myriad media, contexts, and scales. Unlike the blunt act of erasure, redaction can serve diverse ethical and political ends, and it even contains a latent capacity for redemption: it can be reparative and generative even as it flags destructive practices. As literary critic Craig Dworkin proposes, redaction operates “with the logic of a

scar”—memorializing a wound while also promising healing.⁴ In what follows, we’ll examine a range of redactive practices and consider what government records management professionals, special collections librarians, artists, musicians, and creative technologists might learn from one another about the redactive bar or sonic bleep as a field of possibility.

4 “The erasures and cancellations of a censored text, in short, operate with the logic of a scar.” Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Northwestern University Press, 2003): 144. See also Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford University Press, 1999).



Redacted Defense Department memo dated December 17, 2002, regarding enhanced interrogation techniques in the military prison complex at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Image found via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Art historian Pamela Lee proposes that redaction’s “cancellation is a form of editing; its work is as productive as it is censorial.”⁵ It produces the secret as an “ideological contrivance” whose power arises through its withholding, and it produces meaning through its aesthetic manifestation. Even redaction of the institutional sort involves some editorial license and a measure of creativity. The U.S. Freedom of Information Act authorizes agencies to withhold information, perhaps through redaction, when they determine that its disclosure could compromise national security, law enforcement, trade secrets, the supervision of financial institutions, geological information about wells, internal agency operations, privileged communication between agencies, or individuals’ privacy.⁶ Lilly Irani and Jesse Marx note how authorities often interpret such threats as capaciously, and

5 Pamela Lee, *Think Tank Aesthetics: Midcentury Modernism, the Cold War, and the Neoliberal Present* (MIT Press, 2020): 575. See also Ella Klik and Diana Kamin, “[Between Archived, Shredded, and Lost/Found: Erasure in Digital and Artistic Contexts](#),” *Media-N*, (November, 2016) and Michael G. Powell, “[Blacked Out](#),” *Culture* (January 25, 2023).

6 “[Redaction Codes](#),” [National Archives](#).

thus as conservatively, as possible, “taking any legal excuse for a redaction and liberally applying it to conceal an unflattering truth or motive.”⁷

Yet “for an act so often associated with the anonymous, passionless churning of the government machine,” journalist William Brennan writes, “redaction betrays a striking individualism in its choices about what to leave visible and what to obscure, and in the shapes of the black bars themselves.”⁸ Redactors are advised to watch for discrepancies between copies of the same or associated documents that have been treated by different censors, which could allow a savvy researcher to cross-reference those copies and fill in the blanks. The UK National Archives, in its 2022 “Redaction Toolkit,” advises agents to adopt any of a number of tools and techniques—cover-up tape, black markers, white out, scalpels, Adobe Acrobat tools, electronic file format conversion techniques—to create those black bars.⁹ The taped, marked, or cut-up document should then be photocopied for public access; the multi-step process of analog redaction often involves the transmediation of the original document. Digital files, which often contain embedded metadata and record their own change histories and audit trails, should be either printed out and materially redacted or digitally “roundtripped”: converted to another format, then converted back to the original format, to erase—rather than simply redact—digital traces of their own redaction.¹⁰

For audio and video, the U.S. Department of Justice encourages its agents to use either cloud-based redaction applications or professional editing software as needed. Government agencies had long argued that they lacked the tools, expertise, and time to redact audiovisual records—but the DOJ, citing a 2020 appellate court case, evoked Snapchat filters to guilt its agents into action: “Courts have shifted the burden to the government to explain why teenagers are

7 Lilly Irani and Jesse Marx, *Redacted* (Taller California, 2021): 11.

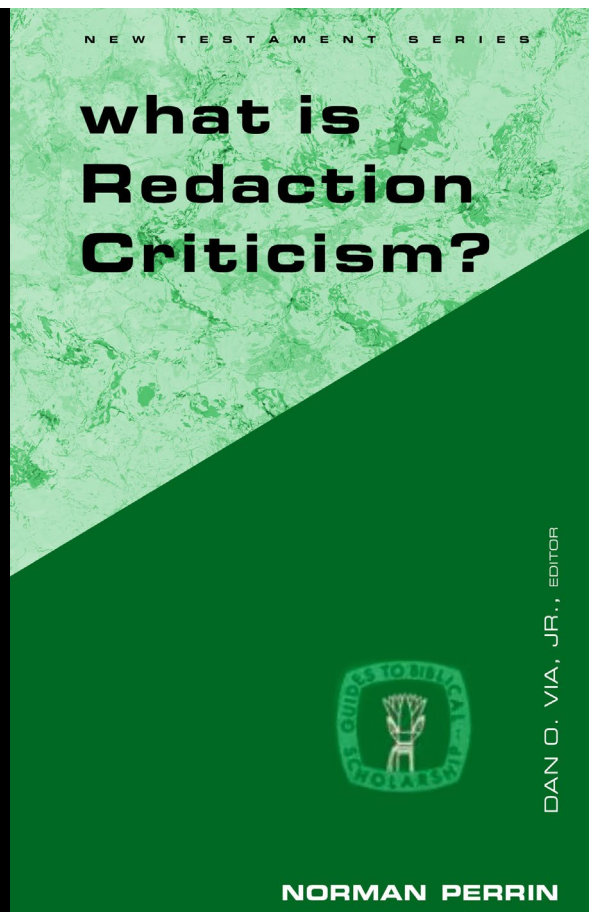
8 William Brennan, “The Declassification Engine: Reading Between the Black Bars,” *New Yorker* (October 16, 2013).

9 The National Archives, “Redaction Toolkit: Editing Exempt Information from Paper and Electronic Documents Prior to Release,” UK National Archives (Crown Copyright, 2022).

10 *Ibid.*, 11–12. See also Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive*, trans. Jussi Parikka (University of Minnesota Press, 2013) and Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (MIT Press, 2008).

‘inserting cat faces over the visages of humans’ in social media posts but government agencies cannot similarly redact its video records.”¹¹ Some hospitals, law enforcement agencies, and other institutions use automated redaction tools, too, to expedite the tedious process and, ostensibly, to reduce human bias and error.

11 Technology Committee for the Chief FOIA Officers Council, Video Redaction Working Group, “[Best Practices for Video Redaction](#),” United States Department of Justice (July 29, 2021); the document references *Michael S. Evans v. Federal Bureau of Prisons*, USCA Case #18-5068, 2014 (March 10, 2020).



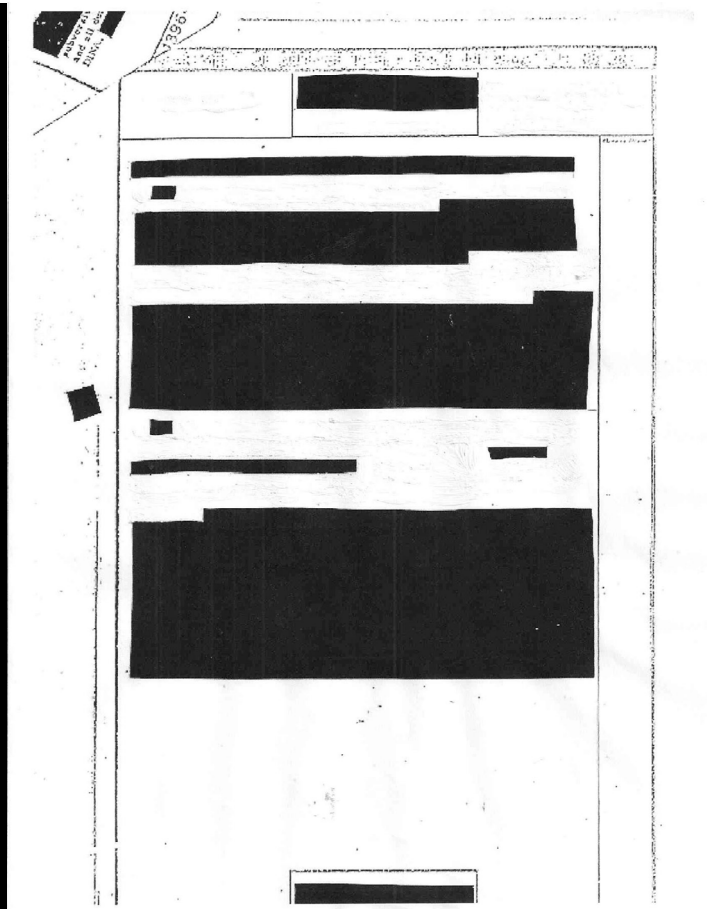
Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

Redaction can also function as an epistemological method. Media scholars Lawson Fletcher, Esther Milne, and Jenny Kennedy argue that “viewing redaction as a mode of authorial production opens up the space of creative intervention”—and, I would add, critical understanding.¹² Such an analytical approach is actually in keeping with another of redaction’s meanings. “Redaction criticism” is a theological method that, according to biblical scholar Norman Perrin, involves tracing “the form and content of material used by the author concerned or in [determining] the nature and extent of his activity in collecting and creating, as well as in arranging, editing, and composing.”¹³ As Fletcher and his colleagues write, redaction criticism acknowledges that the various actors involved in the production, dissemination, and reception of a text—archivists, collectors, editors, and so forth—are involved in creating its meaning. We can add redactors to that list, too: they create meaning by delimiting it, by

12 Lawson Fletcher, Esther Milne, and Jenny Kennedy, “[The In/Visibilities of Code and Aesthetics](#),” *Scan: Journal of Media Arts Culture* 10:2 (2013).

13 Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?* (Fortress Press, 1969): 2.

bounding readers', viewers', and listeners' access to particular information. And the redactive constellations they create shape broader meanings about knowledge politics. We can practice our own form of recursive redaction criticism on the redactors' work, focusing on both the content and material and aesthetic form of their elisions.



Carlos Soto-Román, page from *Chile Project: [Reclassified]* (Gauss PDF, 2013), a project that performatively re-redacts declassified CIA documents surrounding American support for Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet.

For over a century, redaction’s political, formal, and aesthetic dimensions have inspired countless writers, artists, and creative technologists to adopt it as a means of formal play, a tool of critical commentary, and a “tactic of denouncement, resistance, and progressive change.”¹⁴ Although the recent proliferation of “erasure poetry” and “redaction aesthetics”—particularly in response to the War on Terror and the Trump Administration—might suggest that the black bar, the sonic bleep, and the video blur have been reduced to a cosmetic treatment or a generalizable style, digital culture scholar Álvaro Seiça reminds us that each redaction project is a product of its sociopolitical and historical context.¹⁵ Seiça explains that redaction artists and poets turn the typographic and editorial techniques of the state and the corporation back on themselves “to reflect, mimic, camouflage,

14 Álvaro Seiça, *Introduction*, *Erase!* (September 2021). I’m grateful to the dozens of people who responded to my 2021 Twitter query about redaction aesthetics (Shannon Mattern, [Twitter](#), October 24, 2021). I’ve collected their responses in this [Are.na channel](#).

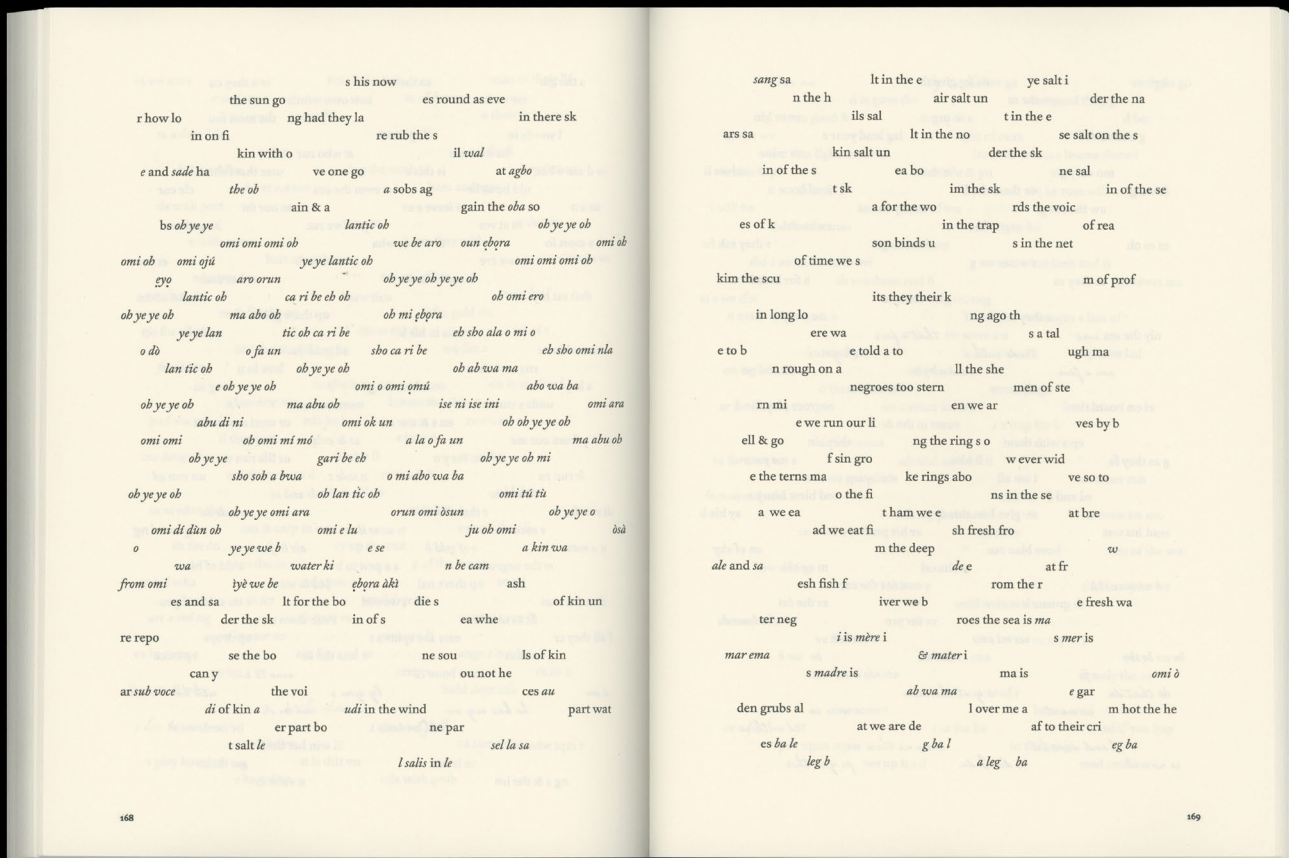
15 Ibid.; Rachel Stone, “[The Trump-Era Boom in Erasure Poetry](#),” *The New Republic* (October 23, 2017).

détourner, or sabotage media and infrastructures of control, surveillance, and oppression.” Jenny Holzer’s *Redaction Paintings* (2005–ongoing), for instance, transform redacted government records into paintings that highlight the barbaric bureaucracy of the United States’ War on Terror, giving material form to its losses and erasures.¹⁶ As Joshua Craze writes, Holzer’s works are themselves “forensic analyses of one of the weapons with which the war is fought: the structure of the military and intelligence bureaucracies, and the legal impunity that veils their actions in shadow.”¹⁷

16 See, for instance, Robert Bailey, “Unknown Knowns: Jenny Holzer’s Redaction Paintings and the History of the War on Terror,” *October* 142 (Fall 2012): 144–161 and Jon Bird, “Under Erasure: Jenny Holzer’s War Paintings,” *Journal of Contemporary Painting* 3 (2017): 1–12

17 Joshua Craze, “In the Dead Letter Office,” *Media-N* 11:1 (Spring 2015). Of course, Holzer is only one in a network of artists who have worked on the conventions of state and military secrecy in the recent wake of the War on Terror. Jill Magid’s decade-long *Spy Project* (2005–16), for instance, began with a commission from the Dutch secret service and ended with the confiscation of her work, the heavy redaction

of her final report, and restricted access at the final exhibition. Likewise, Trevor Paglen’s photographs of remote “black sites”—military and intelligence facilities—are often captured from great distances with a telescope, which creates a blur that evokes the sites’ own redaction from public consciousness and public records. See Trevor Paglen, *Blank Spots on the Map: The Dark Geography of the Pentagon’s Secret World* (Dutton, 2009). See also Carlos Soto-Román’s *Chile Project*, which includes declassified CIA document pertinent to Pinochet’s coup d’état. Carlos Soto-Román, *Chile Project: [Re-classified]* (Gauss PDF, 2013 and [Libros del Pez Espiral](#), 2016).



M. NourbeSe Philip, spread from *Zong!* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2008). Courtesy of the artist.

Communication scholar Anjali Nath proposes that redactions can function much like Roland Barthes’ *punctum*, the aspects of a photograph that prick, sting, cut, and bruise us affectively.¹⁸ Those bruises might be the physiological product of state violence, but the prick might also derive from the photo’s poignancy and profundity: Redactions can manifest as scars, which can augur repair. In her study of “wake work,” which she describes as a mode of living in the wake of slavery and rupturing its ways of knowing, Christina Sharpe proposes that Black annotation and redaction offer means of “seeing and reading otherwise”—of “counter[ing] the force of the state” and instead centering “care as force.” Rather than focusing on security and control, redaction can prioritize “the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something.”¹⁹ Redaction as wake work means treating the bruises and scars.

18 Anjali Nath, “Beyond the Public Eye: On FOIA Documents and the Visual Politics of Redaction,” *Culture Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* 14:1 (2014): 26.

19 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016): 123.

That redactive treatment can take myriad forms. Erasure poetry engages with the reparative scar as both a linguistic *and* material practice.²⁰ In *Zong!* (2008), poet and lawyer M. NourbeSe Philip works with the text of *Gregson v. Gilbert*, a 1783 British court case in which the owners of a slave ship, the *Zong*, threw 150 enslaved people overboard en route from Ghana to Jamaica, and sought to profit from the insurance payment. As Philip states in a 2012 interview, “I was deeply aware at the time I worked on *Zong!* that the intent of the transatlantic slave trade was to mutilate—languages, cultures, people, communities and histories—in the effort of a great capitalist enterprise.” So, she sought to mutilate the text, to rearrange its words, to “[break] the spell that the completed text has on us” by “untelling” it and asking readers to “wrest meaning from words gone astray.”²¹ On the page, amidst redactions, Philip offers space for readers to engage in that work—and to breathe. “One of the most important things happening in *Zong!* is not the words. It’s the spaces between the words—the breath.”²² While the Black community “will get a form of justice in the legal system,” Philip acknowledges, “that is not sufficient.” It is through ritual and ceremony—through the mutilation of words that sanctioned the mutilation of cultures and bodies, through the respiratory space created within these wounds—“that we can heal ourselves and honor our ancestors.”

20 See, for instance, the work of poets Jordan Abel, Jen Bervin, Ian Hatcher, Ronald Johnson, Austin Kleon, M. NourbeSe Philip, Tom Phillips, Mary Ruefle, Solmaz Sharif, Tracy K. Smith, and others cataloged on Álvaro Seiza’s *ArtDel*. For critical studies of this work, see Jonathan Abel, *Redacted: The Archives of Censorship in Transwar Japan* (University of California Press, 2012); Kenneth R. Allan, “Metamorphosis in 391: A Cryptographic Collaboration by Francis Picabia, Man Ray, and Erik Satie,” *Art History* 34:1 (February 2011): 102–25; Jennifer S. Cheng, “Other Ways of Seeing: The Poetics and Politics of Refraction,” *Jacket 2* (2016): <https://jacket2.org/commentary/jennifer-s-cheng>; Brian C. Cooney, “Nothing Is Left Out’: Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Sports* and Erasure Poetry,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 37:4 (2014): 16–33; Martin Paul Eve, “Reading Redaction: Symptomatic Metadata, Erasure Poetry, and Mark Blacklock’s *I’m Jack*,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60:3 (2019): 330–41; Kamila Kocialkowska, *The Aesthetics of Censorship and*

the Russian Avant-Garde: Abstraction Beyond Art, Vol. 1, Dissertation, Department of History of Art, University of Cambridge (2019); Travis Macdonald, “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics,” *Jacket 2* 38 (2009); John Nyman, “Double/Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry,” Dissertation, Western University (2018); “This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry”; and Stephen Joyce, “Reading the Redacted,” *Amodern 6*: Reading the Illegible (July 2016).

21 Andrew David King, “The Weight of What’s Left [Out]: Six Contemporary Erasurists on Their Craft,” *Kenyon Review* (November 6, 2012); M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Wesleyan University Press, 1998): 198; Kristen Smith, “‘It’s All to Do With the Breath’: (Un)Sound in M. NourbeSe Philip’s ‘The Ga(s)p’ and *Zong!*” *Pivot* 9:1 (2022).

22 Dzifa Benson and m nourbeSe philip, “Breath and Space: m nourbeSe philip interviewed by Dzifa Benson,” *The Poetry Society* (2021). See also Jean-Thomas Tremblay, *Breathing Aesthetics* (Duke University Press, 2022).

Stop and frisk
Stop and frisk
Stop and frisk
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Jeremy Mickel and Forest Young, Redaction typeface in Regular and Italic styles, 2019.

While Philip creates a clearing within typographic space, other poets and artists intervene at the scale of the letterform. For their 2019 *Redaction* project at MoMA PS1, painter Titus Kaphar (whose work commonly uses cutouts, white-outs, black-outs, shredding, wrapping, crumpling, and other forms of concealment) and poet/prison reform advocate Reginald Dwayne Betts created screenprints of incarcerated individuals overlain with poetry composed of redacted legal documents addressing the disproportionate social impacts of cash bail and mass incarceration.²³ Typographers Forest Young and Jeremy Mickel rendered Betts's poems in a bespoke, openly-downloadable typeface that aims to subvert the typefaces typically used in legal documents, Times New Roman and New Century Schoolbook. Their typeface,

23 See Kaphar & Betts's recently released book on the project, *Redaction* (W. W. Norton, 2023) See also Meg Miller, "A Typeface Inspired by Legal Briefs That Challenges the Justice System," *AIGA Eye on Design* (April 16, 2019); "Redaction: A Project by Titus Kaphar and Reginald Dwayne Betts," MoMA PS1, March 31–May 5, 2019; and *Redaction*; Spitfire Staff, "The Power of Poetry: Shifting the Narrative in Criminal Justice Reform," Spitfire (April 30, 2019).

Redacted, evokes the graphic breakdown one often encounters in legal documents subjected to iterative copying, scanning, and faxing. With successive degrees of degradation built into its cuts, Redacted indexes the endless, dehumanizing churn of the legal machine. The artists' dual redaction—of legal language and its graphic form—both challenges legal authority, by visually connoting its decreased integrity and potency, and democratizes it, by giving anyone the opportunity to adopt its typographic identity. The font's typographic scars, we might say, allow for cathartic expression and potentially reparative use.

Kaphar and Betts's layered presentation also evokes the work of Glenn Ligon, whose text paintings consist of stencils layered repeatedly in paint, often rendering the words illegible and transforming the text into a picture, or even a sculpture.²⁴ Here, redaction occurs not through elision, but through accumulation—through the accretion of what we might call a semantic scar. In the artist's *Stranger in the Village* series, the smudges reference those that accumulated on his well-worn studio copy of James Baldwin's eponymous essay.²⁵ Literary scholar Kinohi Nishikawa proposes that Ligon's smudges function "as a critique of use," as with Young and Mikel's degraded font. Ligon's smudges are an "annotation on the annotation," an embodied form of citation—a sign of repeated, material engagement with Baldwin's ideas, even if those ideas then become illegible to us through the layering of ink.²⁶ Ligon's annotation reads to *us* as redaction, but that obfuscation is the product of Ligon's own repeated engagement with Baldwin and the illumination and internalization of his words. While Kaphar and Betts attend to typeface and printing technique, Ligon considers the mark-making medium. In either case, by working reflexively on the media through which redaction manifests, the artists show how the aesthetic qualities of redaction can embody ethical principles and create space for care and plenitude.

24 Mary Ann Caws likens erasure to sculpture, "chipping off bits of textual or visual materials in order to give shape to new semiotic patterns" (Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville, *Undoing Art*, Quodlibet Elements (Macerata, 2017), 18; quoted in Raphael Rubinstein, "Missing: erasure | Must include: erasure," *Under Erasure* (2019)).

25 "Glenn Ligon: What We Said the Last Time," Luhring Augustine (2016). See also Darby English, *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* (MIT Press, 2007); Monika Gehlawat, "Strangers in the Village: James Baldwin, Teju Cole, and Glenn Ligon," *James Baldwin Review* 5 (2019): 48–72; and Glenn Ligon, *Stranger*.

26 Kinoshi Nishikawa, "Black Arts of Erasure," *ASAP/Journal* 7:2 (May 2022): 302.



Elizabeth Alexander, *A Mightier Work is Ahead: Lee and Staff* and *A Mightier Work is Ahead: Stonewall Jackson at Harper's Ferry*, 2021. Altered plates from the "Jackson and Lee: Legends in Gray" collection of commemorative plates, hand-cut found porcelain, dust, glass, cork, gold leaf, and brass; 13 × 8 × 1 in.

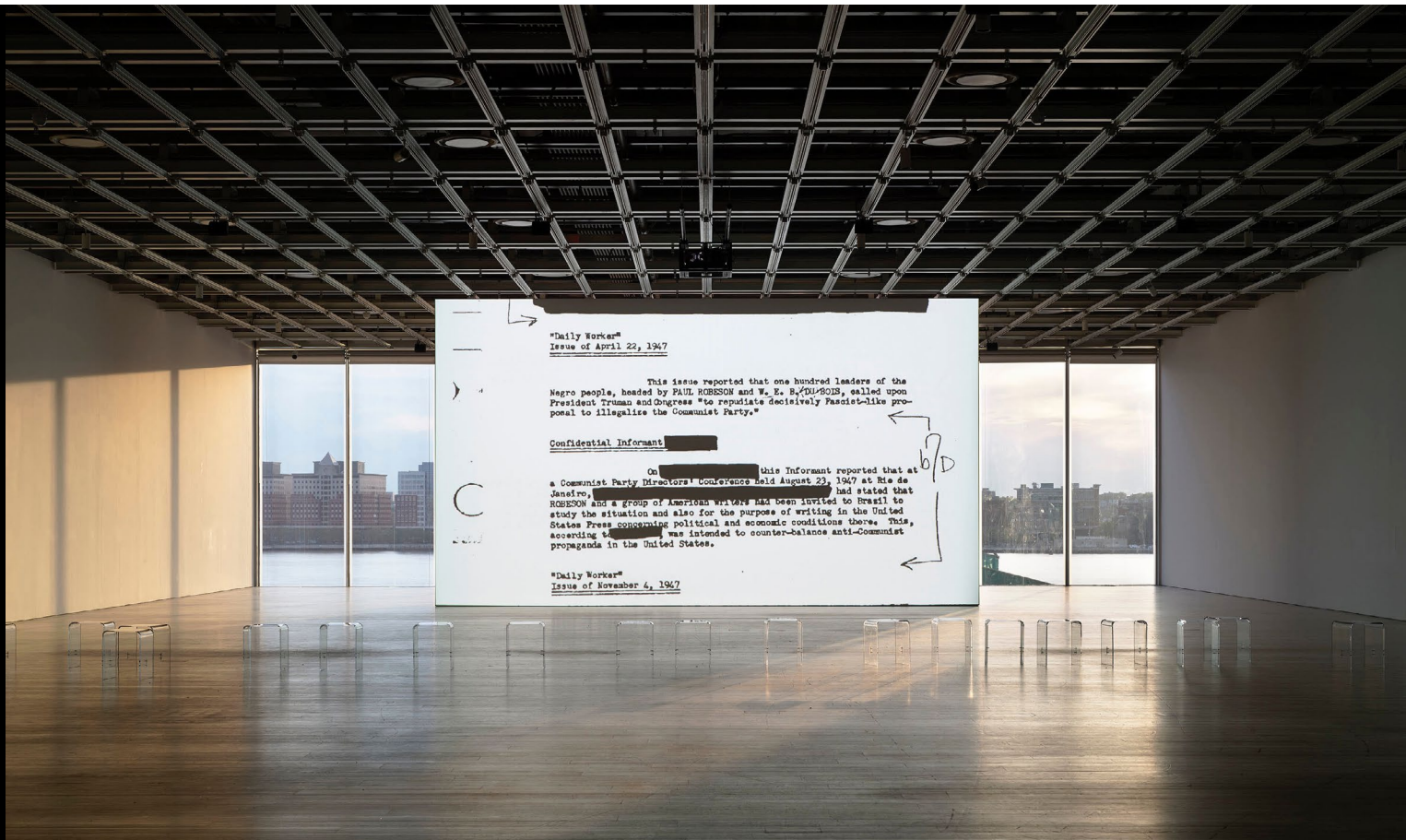
In 2016, artist Elizabeth Alexander began collecting Confederate commemorative plates, which she regards as “Trojan horses hanging innocently [on living room walls] among family photos,” surreptitiously romanticizing the Civil War-era South. For *A Mightier Work Is Ahead*, whose title references Frederick Douglass’s call to admit the freed Black men of the South and the free Black men of the North fully into the body politic of America, she uses a rotary tool to grind from each plate all the Confederate symbols, “leaving only the American landscape between the voids.”²⁷ That landscape, of course, was itself the product of slave labor. Alexander then collects the dust from each redaction and displays it below the plate “to show that history cannot be erased; there is still a residue and the dust remains.”²⁸ We might regard her process as a critical reinterpretation of the ancient practice of *damnatio memoriae* (“condemnation of memory”)

27 Frederick Douglass, “Our Work Is Not Done,” Proceedings of the American Anti-Slavery Society at its Third Decade (AASS, 1864).

28 Elizabeth Alexander, *A Mightier Work Is Ahead*, 2021.

wherein the depictions or names of dishonored leaders were scrubbed from inscriptions, documents, and statuary. Given the difficulty of “editing” stone and wiping public memory, these defacements rarely resulted in complete erasure; instead, they were a form of redaction that incited condemnation—and, I would add, critical reflection—rather than obliteration.²⁹

29 Lauren Hackworth Petersen, “The Presence of ‘*Damnatio Memoriae*’ in Roman Art,” *Notes in the History of Art* 30:2 (Winter 2011): 1-8. As classicist Polly Low writes, “studies of the memory politics of this practice have, rightly, emphasised that this sort of (large-scale) obliteration should be seen not so much as an attempt to obliterate memory entirely as to transform honorific commemoration into a form of visible denigration. That is: the power of an act of *damnatio* relies, at least in part, on the viewer of a monument being able to supplement the gaps in an inscription with their own knowledge of what those gaps had once contained, and the reasons why the text had been removed.” (Low, “Remembering, Forgetting, and Rewriting the Past: Athenian Inscriptions and Collective Memory” in *Shaping Memory in Ancient Greece: Poetry, Historiography, and Epigraphy*, eds. Christy Constantakopoulou and Maria Fragoulaki (Histos Supplement 2020): 245.)

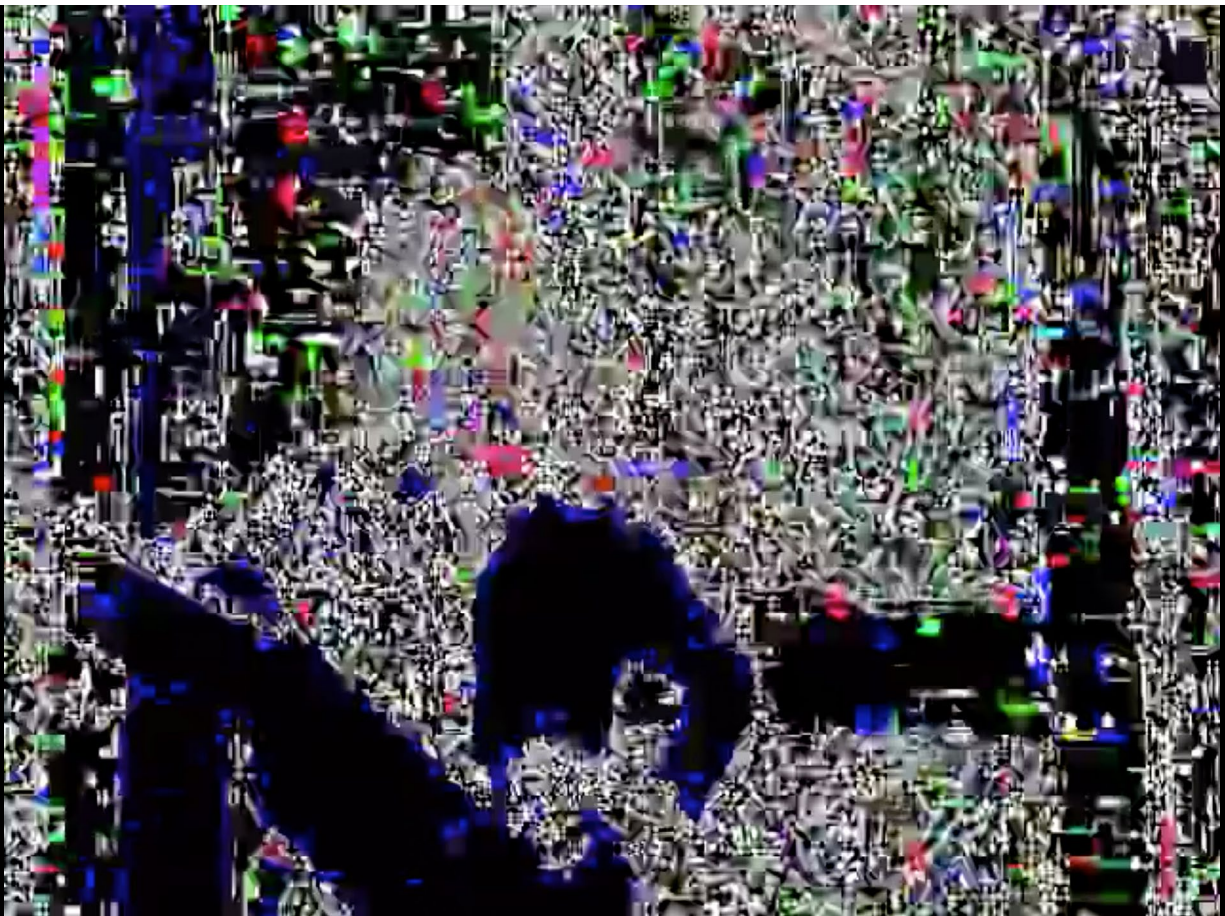


Steve McQueen, *End Credits* featured in *Open Plan: Steve McQueen*, Whitney Museum of American Art, April 29–May 14, 2016. Photo by Ron Amstutz.

Steve McQueen uses film as a means of archiving and collating redaction, and thereby demonstrating its scale and scope and potential destruction. His *End Credits* (2012–ongoing) is a survey of the thousands and thousands of heavily-redacted documents in the FBI file of athlete-actor-singer-activist Paul Robeson.³⁰ The video runs for nearly 13 hours, but the audio, featuring various men’s and women’s voices reading the documents (and flagging all the redacted names), runs for over 42 hours, creating a split between the video and audio. That de-synchronization juxtaposes the recitation of Robeson’s laudable commitments and contributions, with their translation and diminution into incriminating documents. While resembling the list of contributors that traditionally rolls at the end of a film, McQueen’s “end credits” document the accomplishments that led to Robeson’s blacklisting and his ultimate professional redaction. By playing the sonic against the

30 See Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012–ongoing. HD Video; 12’ 54”. See also Clarrie Wallis, “Sir Steve McQueen, *End Credits*, 2012–20” Tate (May 2017).

visual, McQueen demonstrates that redaction, typically associated with the visual register in its opaque lines or digital blurs, can function across acoustic or aural modalities, too.



Ryan Maguire, still from *moDernisT_V2*, 2014. Video and website, <https://theghostinthemp3.com>.

Audio redaction is a means of disciplining sound, particularly offensive speech. The broadcast equivalent of the black bar is the sonic bleep. By the 1950s, radio and television broadcasters had grown into national corporate networks regulated by the FCC, which could impose fines and revoke licenses over indecent content. The bleep was born, allowing stations to use their mixing board oscillators to generate a one-kilohertz beep to redact any questionable material. They preferred that strident sound to silence, because silence meant dead air, which could lead to listener defection. Digital capitalism changed the valence of sonic regulation, from the moral censorship of public airwaves to the refined support of commercial audio files. In the 1980s, audio engineers began to experiment with the compression of digital files in order to minimize their storage requirements and facilitate their transmission. The compression of audio into a format like the MP3 results in the excision of data—specifically, the components of sound that are thought to be outside the realm of human hearing, or at least the hearing of European audio engineers’ idealized listening subjects. The MP3 is a “lossy” format, but the

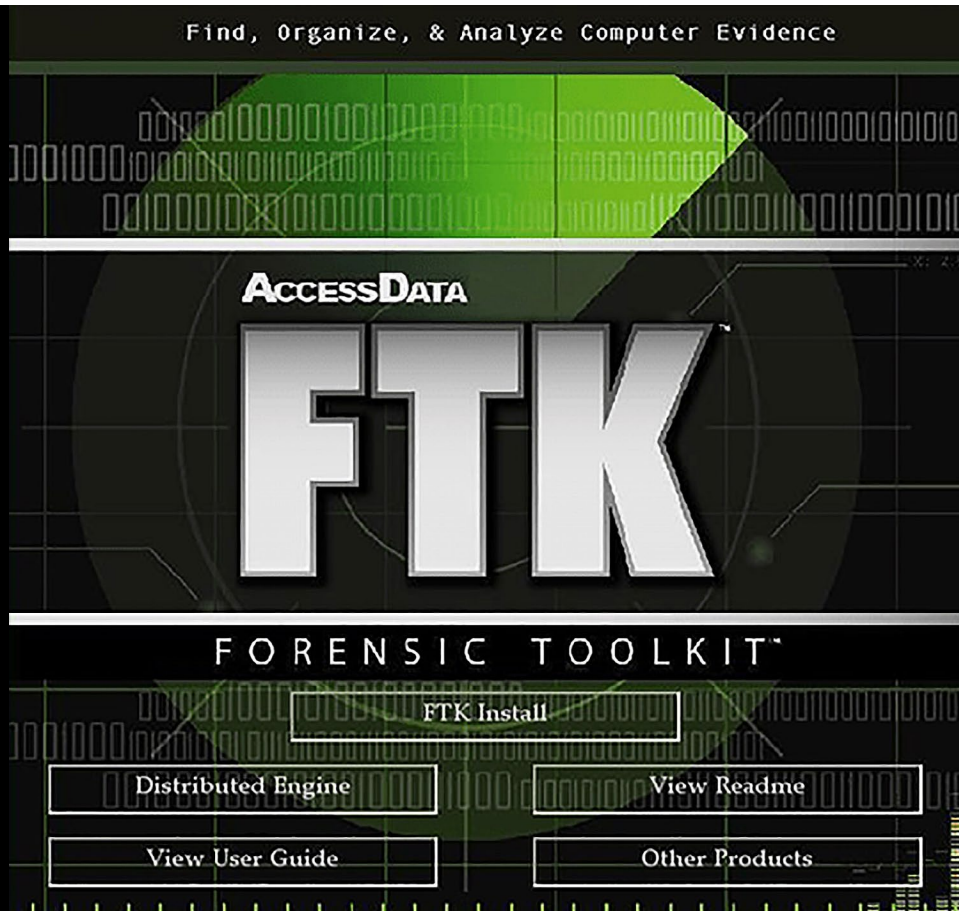
assumption is that few listeners will notice what's missing.³¹ But even the most technically precise edits—designed to occur beyond the threshold of perception—leave behind some residue of their erasures.

Composer Ryan Maguire wondered about all those sounds that escape in compression: what if, rather than a deletion, we regarded those sonic ghosts as a redaction—one we could salvage and perform? Maguire collected all the residue excised from Suzanne Vega's "Tom's Diner," one of the songs used in the original MP3 listening tests, to produce "The Ghost in the MP3." From these lost fragments, Maguire retrieves the skeletal architecture of the song, which wafts along behind the shimmering, echoing artifacts of the synthetic editing process. Maguire's composition confronts the seeming undetectability of digital redaction, serving as a "mode of cultural critique" that amplifies what algorithmic redaction agents deem imperceptible. Maguire's salvaged sonic scraps should make us wonder about the musical forms and listening subjects that don't match the system's logic and risk being redacted into the silence of *erasure*.³²

31 See Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Duke University Press, 2012).

32 Ryan Maguire, *The Ghost in the MP3*. See also Lizzie Plaugic, "These Are the Sounds Left Behind When You Compress a Song to MP3," *The Verge* (February 19, 2015) and Audra Schroeder, "These Are the Sounds that Disappear When an MP3's Compressed," *Daily Dot* (February 22, 2015). Thanks to <https://assemblag.es/@attentive> for the reference. I also want to point the reader toward artist Susan Philipsz,

who explores similar silences and exclusions through audiovisual installations that display or perform redaction in myriad forms. See Philipsz, *Part File Score*, Tanya Bonakdar; Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, "Susan Philipsz—Part File Score," Vimeo (2014). Artist and composer Seth Cluett informed me that he's also working on a piece that involves "redacting parts of works by composers questioned during the red scare." [Twitter](#), January 6, 2023.



Exterro's Forensic Toolkit Suite interface.

The politics of redaction take on a different moral and ethical valence in libraries and archives, challenging their dedication to the collection, description, and preservation of information. A growing community of archivists, theorists, and artists have questioned the archival gap—those subjects, perspectives, and experiences omitted from the archive writ large—and wondered how best to make those absences *visible*, to render gaps in the collection as *redactions*, as products of historical biases, injustices, and failures in archival and social practice.³³ At the same time, archivists must themselves perform redactions to balance the public interests their collection

33 Thomas Padilla, “[Engaging Absence](#)” (February 26, 2018). See also Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016) and Lauren F. Klein, “The Image of Absence: Archival Silence, Data Visualization, and James Hennings,” *American Literature* 85:4 (2013). Artists who have taken on this task (and whose works have been important for my thinking) include Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani (*Index of the Disappeared*), creative technologist Mimi Onuoha (*Library of Missing Datasets*), and historian and “cultural data hacker” Tim Sherratt, among many others.

materials serve against the safety of the private data they often contain.

Archivists are legally obligated to remove personally identifying information (PII) and sensitive data, including social security numbers, financial information, names of research participants, health data, and student records.³⁴ They may also feel compelled to remove material that could be embarrassing to collection donors. Furthermore, archivists are *ethically* obliged to consult with communities of interest around sensitive collections. They must seek consent from, and consider the potential risks and benefits of exposure to, the vulnerable *subjects* of those collection materials, like incarcerated individuals, children, victims of abuse, or people from marginalized backgrounds. Archives can address concerns by restricting access to particular files, by asking researchers to sign forms acknowledging their shared obligation to manage the risk of exposing data, and through redaction.³⁵ When the San Diego State University Library recently acquired a collection of asylum seekers' letters, they first sought guidance from the university's legal counsel and from community stakeholders, and later asked three or four library staff members, plus a volunteer from a detainees' advocacy organization, to read each letter to ensure that the redactions were accurate and complete.³⁶

To perform redactions on large volumes of digital material, archivists often rely on software such as Bulk_extractor, Archivematica, BitCurator, Bulk Reviewer or Forensic ToolKit, which scans disk images for particular types of content, like hidden metadata or structured strings that look like a telephone or Social Security

34 Relevant laws include the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act and the Health Information Portability and Accountability Act.

35 Ben Goldman and Timothy D. Pyatt, "Security Without Obscurity: Managing Personally Identifiable Information (PII) in Born-Digital Archives," *Library & Archival Security* 26:1-2 (2013): 37.

36 Anna Culbertson and Amanda Lanthorne, "Praxis, Not Practice: The Ethics of Consent and Privacy in 21st Century Archival Stewardship," *Archives Across the Disciplines* 18:1-2 (2021): 8. See also Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, "Toward a Survivor-Centered Approach to Records Documenting Human Rights Abuses: Lessons from Community

Archives," *Archival Science* 14:4 (2014): 307-22; Caswell and Cifor, "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives," *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 23-43; Zakiya Coller and Tonia Sutherland, "Witnessing, Testimony, and Transformation as Genres of Black Archival Practice," *The Black Scholar* 52:2 (2022): 7-15; Zachary G. Stein, "Privacy in Public Archives: Managing Personally Identifiable Information in Special Collections," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 22:1 (Fall 2021): 93-4; and Laura Carroll, Erika Farr, Peter Hornsby, and Ben Ranker, "A Comprehensive Approach to Born-Digital Archives," *Archivaria* 72 (2011): 68.

number. Some of these are open-source tools created by cultural heritage professionals; others are proprietary forensic platforms designed for use in law enforcement and corporate security. Monique Lassere and Jess M. Whyte emphasize the need for archivists and curators to “develop or aim to use tools developed by their own communities and subjects,” which are more likely to align with cultural heritage workers’ best practices and values. “Rather than focusing on the gathering and retention of evidence,” which is the priority in law enforcement, archivists guided by “radical empathy [would] center human experience in archives” and “consider all users, creators, subjects, and communities that the existing records affect.”³⁷ Similarly, anthropologist Christen Smith, in a 2021 lecture in my old department at The New School, called for an “anthropology of redaction” to protect the privacy, sovereignty, and sanctity of the field’s interlocutors.³⁸ Such a framework might inform what’s ultimately shared in publication—or, Smith proposes, it might compel researchers to question their own “need to know,” and thus put ethical boundaries on what they gather in the field.

37 Monique Lassere and Jess M. Whyte, “Balancing Care and Authenticity in Digital Collections: A Radical Empathy Approach to Working with Disk Images,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 3 (2020): 22. I’m also indebted to Dorothy Berry’s poignant January 19, 2023 talk at the Price Lab for Digital Humanities at the University of Pennsylvania.

38 Shannon Mattern, [Twitter](#), September 22, 2021.



Left: Stephanie Syjuco, detail from *Block out the Sun*, 2019. Thirty archival pigment prints mounted on aluminum and displayed in custom vitrine. Right: Martina Bacigalupo, detail from *Gulu Real Art Studio*, 2011–12. Courtesy of the artist and The Walther Collection, New York/Neu-Ulm.

On the cover of her 2017 book, *Listening to Images*, art historian Tina Campt features a photograph by Martina Bacigalupo, appropriated from the Gulu Real Art Studio in Uganda, where locals go to get their identity portraits taken.³⁹ The shop’s equipment prints out photos in large format, so customers typically cut out the standardized facial portrait and discard the rest. That “rest”—a decapitated, seated body depicted from the shoulders down to the knees or mid-calves—becomes Bacigalupo’s, and Campt’s, subject matter. In Gulu’s faceless photographs, Campt writes, “other forms of individuality are transferred from background to foreground as studium shifts to punctum”—as our historical, cultural, and political interpretation of the photograph shifts to the piercing personal detail.⁴⁰ Bacigalupo explains that, because Northern Uganda suffered years of unrest, official identification is required for entry to most institutions. This is

39 Martina Bacigalupo, *Gulu Real Art Studio*, 2011–12. Courtesy The Walther Collection, New York/Neu-Ulm. Also: Alexander Strecker, “*Gulu Real Art Studio*,” *LensCulture* (n.d.).

40 Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017): 20.

the studium, the context, for Gulu Real Art Studio's images. Yet like Baldessari's colored dots, those redacted white squares—anchored by bodies in different poses, in different clothes, sometimes stuffed awkwardly into voluminous suit jackets, sometimes supporting purses and bored children on their laps—invite projection. The cut-out precipitates the punctum's prick. These redactive scars become spaces of possibility into which we can project all kinds of imagined futures for these individuals: a loan for a new home, an identification card for a new school or job, a passport for travel, or, Campt suggests, myriad other indicators of “their desire to be agential black subjects.”⁴¹

The artist Stephanie Syjuco likewise uses redaction to redeem an eclipsed subjectivity. In her 2019 exhibition *Rogue States* at the Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, Syjuco searched for documentation of a faux Filipino village—a “human zoo”—at the local 1904 World's Fair. Despite various institutions' attempts to critically frame these images, Syjuco found that they still perpetuated the power dynamics and stereotypes of their time—so, in re-presenting the photos, she used her own hands as a redactive tool, physically blocking the images and thus preventing viewers from “consuming” the people they caricature. Her manual redaction becomes a palpable scar. “Over a century after the original photos of the Filipino Village were taken,” she states, “my own body, sitting in the archives, becomes both a temporary shield and a marker of defiance, while at the same time acknowledging that the images still remain.”⁴² In Bacigalupo and Syjuco's works, redaction reveals another of its faces: not foregrounding the fact of excision, but recapturing the context that catalyzed the loss.

41 Campt, 21.

42 Stephanie Syjuco, *Block Out the Sun*, 2019; and the [corresponding video](#), from 2021.



Ellen Gallagher, *eXelento*, 2004. Plasticine, ink, and paper on canvas; 96 × 192 in. Broad Museum, Los Angeles
© Ellen Gallagher. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Ellen Gallagher's *eXelento* and *DeLuxe* projects draw from mid-century Black magazines like *Ebony*, *Our World*, and *Sepia*, and particularly the beauty advertisements among their pages. These ads—for wigs and pomades, slimming pills and bleaching creams—depict the body as mutable, perfectable, potentially capable of approximating white beauty ideals. Gallagher extracts the models' heads from the page and, as in Bacigalupo's work, presents them in a grid, emphasizing their seriality and adherence to convention. Yet Gallagher's images, unlike Bacigalupo's, circulate within cosmetic rather than bureaucratic realms. She embellishes these black-and-white prints with a variety of techniques and tools: etching, lithography, aquatint, embossing, tattooing, the application of color, glitter, gold leaf, and coconut oil. She adds googly eyes and carefully molded plasticine masks and wigs. Collectively, these various ornaments redact the models' heads, replacing them with more spectacular, even ridiculous, versions of themselves. "Seen from the side," Gallagher says, "the grey tones of the ads disappear and the yellow plasticine Afros become like lily pads,

a strange surface that also, uncannily, looks like a skin”—perhaps a scar.⁴³

These “enhancements” parody the improvements proposed in the original advertisements, which “underscore in particular the role of hair as a signifier of difference” within the Black community.⁴⁴ In the 1930s, wigs were called “transformations.” Gallagher acknowledges that her sculpted wigs chronicle a history of Black hairstyles as well as broader social transformation: “they map integration, the civil rights movement, right through to Vietnam and women’s rights. And they chart an emerging Afro-urban aesthetic.”⁴⁵ These wigs constitute the historical and social context, the work’s *studium*. Yet combined with the eyes and glitter and gold leaf and oils and other forms of ornamentation, the wigs also constitute a form of redaction-by-excess-accumulation, which paradoxically offers a means of liberation. Redaction can be reparative and generative, even if it flags destructive practices. As Gallagher explains, “The wig ladies are fugitives, conscripts from another time and place . . . I have transformed them, here on the pages that once held them captive.”⁴⁶

43 Suzanne P. Hudson and Ellen Gallagher, “1000 Words: Ellen Gallagher,” *Artforum* (April 2004).

44 Ellen Gallagher, *DeLuxe*, 2004–05, Tate Modern. See also Ellen Gallagher, *eXelento* and Carine Harmand and Tate, “Art in Focus: Ellen Gallagher’s Artwork DeLuxe,” YouTube (February 18, 2022).

45 Hudson and Gallagher.

46 Ibid.



Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich, still from *Spit on the Broom*, 2019. HD video; 12 minutes. Courtesy of the artist.

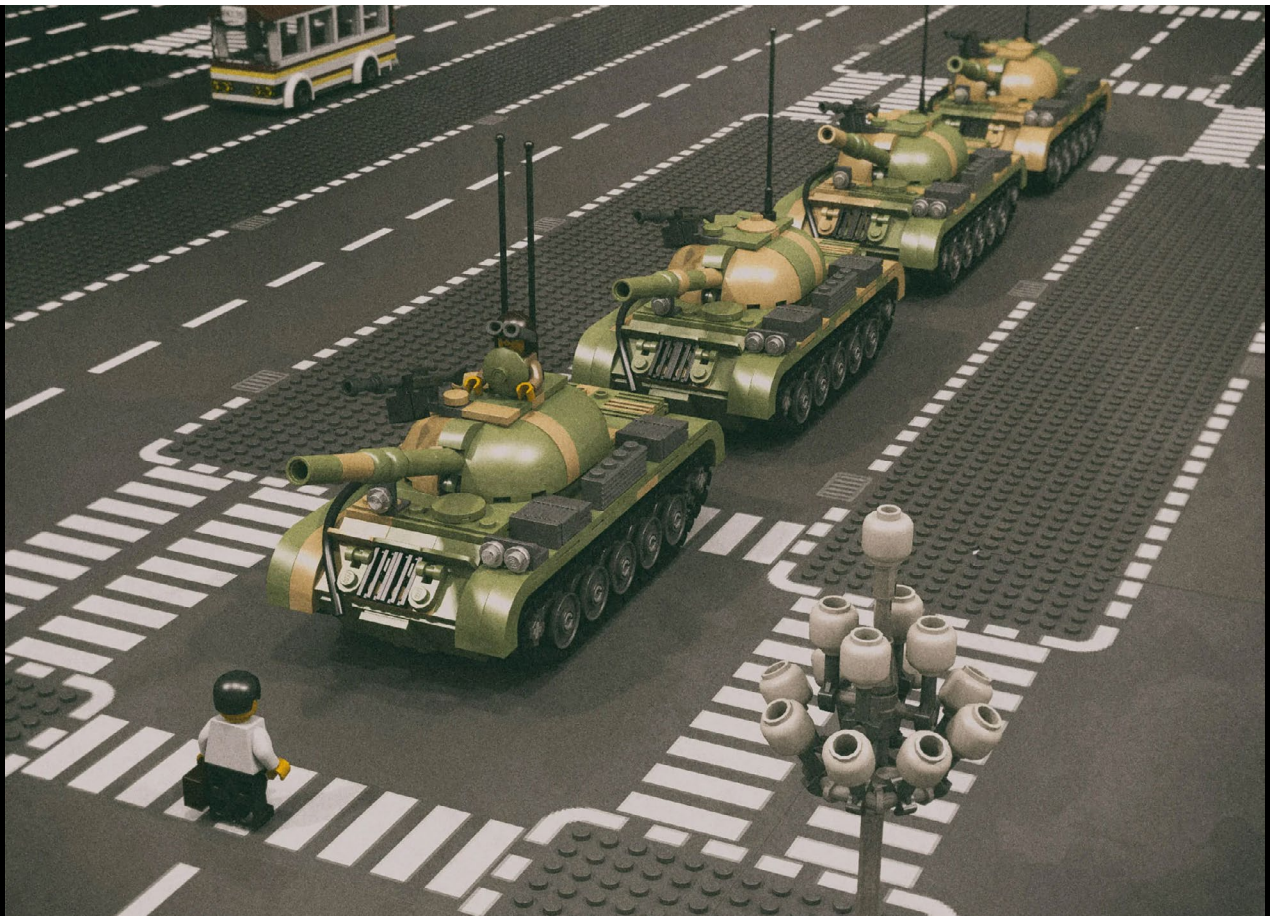
Drawing on Christina Sharpe's theories of Black redaction, filmmaker Rhea Storr proposes that filmic redaction can also be conceived as "a shielding of information from oppressive forces which seek to control Black lives."⁴⁷ She describes Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich's *Spit on the Broom* (2019), an experimental documentary that examines the United Order of Tents, an African American secret society founded by freed women in the 1860s. Their secrecy is honored and manifested in the film's narrative and visual form: As Storr explains, "the film is pieced together using newspaper articles and statements from public records, an insight into the order from the outside. The use of reconstruction and dramatization also ensured a level of continued secrecy."⁴⁸ Bodies and settings are repeatedly obscured throughout the film, by foliage, material, or the camera's framing. In one sequence,

47 Rhea Storr, "Redaction," *Black Aesthetic Strategy: Images that Move*, Fotomuseum Winterthur (July 20, 2021). In *In the Wake*, Sharpe discusses Black redaction in Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* (1991) and Abderrahmane Sissako's *Timbuktu* (2014), both of which feature indigo as a redactive hue or medium.

48 Storr and "Spit on the Broom – Trailer (BSDFF 2020)," Big Sky Documentary Film Festival (2020).

we observe a photographer from inside a veil. Later, when we gaze upon ourselves from *outside* the veil, we realize that the shrouded body provides an invisible support for white babies as they sit for their portraits: we're redacted human pedestals. In another scene, a Black arm, its body invisible off-screen, stretches a mirror into the frame, perhaps with the intention to invite us to look at ourselves, or to project a blinding light into our eyes. Hunt-Ehrlich deploys these redactive techniques as a means of “tell[ing] stories without giving away their power.”⁴⁹

49 Quoted in “[Madeleine Hunt-Ehrlich](#),” *Filmmaker* (2020).



Tank Man photo recreation, by user “plokoon005” on the [reddit Lego forum](#), dated 2017.

When we perform redaction criticism on analog media, we can trace various iterations of their development, or different editions, to appreciate how they’ve taken shape over time. With web-based media, we may be dealing with much more frequent edits and updates, as well as potential geographic variability in how a text appears to users within different access or censorship zones.⁵⁰ Creative coder and researcher Winnie Soon recognizes redaction in the digital realm as a socially and technologically distributed phenomenon. Her *Unerasable* series examines how digital censorship—particularly that imposed by authoritarian regimes—rarely means “total deletion,” because the deleted material’s “marks and traces may still be found elsewhere on the Internet, potentially ad infinitum.”⁵¹ Soon echoes Matthew Kirschenbaum’s contention that “most things that are

50 See Lucy Pei, Benedict Salazar Olgado, and Roderic Crooks, “Market, Testbed, Backroom: The Redacted Internet of Facebook’s Discover,” CHI 2021, Yokohama, Japan, May 8–13, 2021 for a discussion of geographic variations in the redactions applied to Facebook’s Free Basics.

51 Winnie Soon, “[Erasure: The Unerasable Series](#),” *Erase!* (September 22, 2021).

written and transmitted via electronic media are stored and re-inscribed. A simple e-mail message may leave a copy of itself on half a dozen different servers and routers on the way to its destination, with the potential for further proliferation via mirrors and automated backup systems at each site.”⁵² In Soon’s case study, savvy users exploit this tendency toward distributed resinscription by finding ever-new ways to rework or reformat the offending material so as to thwart the human and automated censors. Soon uses the example of “Tank Man,” the iconic protester standing in front of a row of tanks in Tiananmen Square. Each year, as the June 4 anniversary approaches and people seek to memorialize the tragedy, they “think of ways to hack the system”; Soon describes the reinvention of Tank Man as a Lego construction, a seemingly innocent children’s toy that’s more likely to evade censorship . . . for a while. Even the Lego assemblage was ultimately censored, though copies of the image are still searchable. Soon demonstrates how redactive systems can be distributed across broad geopolitical infrastructures in which state censors and hackers engage in a perpetual game of deletionist “whack-a-mole,” with the mole repeatedly modified and migrated, leaving traces of its iterative redaction and adaptation.

52 Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (MIT Press, 2008): 141–42.



The pedestal that once held the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee on Monument Avenue in Richmond, VA. Photo by Steve Helber/AP Photo.

The contestation of national memory also plays out in material spaces, where historical symbols in clay and concrete have proven likewise delible and subject to redaction. In recent years, particularly in the wake of the social unrest of 2020, cities around the world have debated what do to with public statuary celebrating colonizers and white supremacists. As Richmond-based historian Michael Dickson explains, “Confederate monuments in [Richmond] and elsewhere in the country were center stage amidst Southern efforts to reassert white dominance during the Jim Crow Era. In addition to preserving an idealized narrative of Southern nobility in the war, they also acted as massive, imposing physical reminders for African Americans about who was in power.”⁵³ In Summer 2020, Dickson’s colleague Gregory Smithers advocated for the removal of the city’s Confederate statues—but not their pedestals, which would remain as redactive scars. “Empty pedestals represent opportunities for us to grapple with

53 Gregory Smithers and Michael Dickinson, “Race, Space & Memory,” *The Bitter Southerner* (June 23, 2020).

history's light and darkness. They are invitations to empathize with the perspectives of people previously marginalized from the interpretation of the past."⁵⁴ Robert E. Lee's empty pedestal, Smithers proposed, would offer Richmonders an opportunity to reflect on the displacement of the indigenous Powhatan people, the enslaved people who built Richmond, the Klansmen who relied upon that statue to validate their beliefs. It could also serve as a substrate for public proclamations in chalk and spray paint, a hub for public gatherings and discussions, a symbol of possible redemptive futures. Monument Lab, a public art and history studio born at the University of Pennsylvania, where I also work, has suggested several strategies for critically reactivating those pedestals: by supporting counter-memorials, by inviting collective interventions, or, as Smithers proposes, by keeping them empty.⁵⁵ By the end of 2022, Richmond had removed the last of its Confederate statues—and it had documented and disassembled many of their pedestals, too.⁵⁶

54 Smithers and Dickinson.

55 Shimrit Lee, "[When We #TakeItDown, What Should Go Up?](#)" *Monument Lab* (January 18, 2021). See also Mel Chin, "[Two Me](#)," City Hall Courtyard, Philadelphia, September–November 2017 and Sharon Hayes, "[If They Should Ask](#)," Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, September–November 2017. Art critic Hal Foster proposes that we take a cue from artist Cornelia Parker by "blow[ing] up, . . . and then string[ing] up" memorials "for the purposes of historical reflection" (Hal Foster, "[Hal Foster on Cornelia Parker](#)," *Artforum* (December 2022)).

56 Sarah Kuta, "[Richmond Removes Its Last City-Owned Confederate Monument](#)," *Smithsonian Magazine* (December 15, 2022); Gregory S. Schneider, "[The Last Stands: Richmond Starts Taking Down Confederate Statues' Pedestals, Too](#)," *The Washington Post* (February 1, 2022).



D.I.R.T. Studio, Core City Park, Detroit Michigan, 2019. Excavated sandstone puzzled together for terraces amongst found concrete expanses, repurposed brick, and black slag. Photo: Prince Concepts, courtesy of D.I.R.T. Studio.

Scaling up from the monument, we find architects and urban planners engaging with similar questions in adaptive reuse and historic preservation projects, and in the remediation of terrains contaminated by prior use and conflict. Julie Bargmann and her firm D.I.R.T. (Dump It Right There) have responded to toxic, post-industrial sites not by scrubbing them clean—nor by ignoring what has been extracted from the landscape—but by baring the site’s foundations; using slow, local, natural processes to clean the dirt; integrating all the on-site rubble; and honoring the generations of laborers who’ve worked that plot of land. Design critic Zach Mortice writes that “Bargmann makes a remix of ghost landscapes and visibly scarred landforms that aims to describe the development, industrialization, and deindustrialization” that has brought each site to where it is now.⁵⁷ Bargmann’s design process, we might say, is a form of redaction criticism. The histories of these sites, and of those who’ve

57 Zach Mortice, “Deep Cut,” *Landscape Architecture Magazine* (November 2015); reprinted at Mortice’s website: <https://zachmortice.com/2015/11/25/deep-cut>.

labored there, are often obscured in redacted documents and corporate archives, so D.I.R.T.'s research and design process requires the empathic, inclusive engagement that archivists like Lassere and Whyte have encouraged. That work requires fieldwork—both archaeological and anthropological. “Rather than glamorizing and framing industry’s leftovers,” architectural critic Justin Davidson explains, Bargmann “let[s] a site speak the language of its own history.”⁵⁸ Instead of performing geoengineering, “moving great mountains of earth,” Bargmann’s preference is to “sift through what is already there. Don’t delete; preserve”—even if what’s preserved reveals the scars of what’s been redacted over decades or centuries.

Bargmann’s practice, like Monument Lab’s, reveals the connections between redacted documents—secreted histories, backroom deals, archival occlusions—and redacted landscapes. Her projects exemplify how redaction translates across scales and media, and how redactive practices in one modality might help to heal wounds inflicted in another. Bargmann extends the work of the late architect Lebbeus Woods, whose 1995 treatise *Radical Reconstruction* proposed that buildings can function as a kind of scar that reveals what had been redacted by war, environmental devastation, or economic injustice while also offering adaptive spaces for healing and survival. We hear echoes of Dworkin, who also likened a redaction to a scar. For Woods, the scar is stage of reconstruction “that fuses the new and the old, reconciling, coalescing them, without compromising either one in the name of some contextual form of unity. The scar is a mark of pride and of honor, both for what has been lost and what has been gained.”⁵⁹

* * *

Thinking more expansively about redaction could enable all those who practice it—from powerful institutions to marginalized individuals—to consider the range of values and purposes it could embody: not only security, secrecy, and privacy; but also transparency,

58 Justin Davidson, “[A Landscape Architect Who Loves Ruins and Hates Ruin Porn](#),” *Curbed* (October 14, 2021). See also [D.I.R.T. Studio](#).

59 See Lebbeus Woods, *Radical Reconstruction* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1997): 16.

accountability, self-determination, empathy, and reparation. Acknowledging the range of redactive aesthetics, too, could allow its practitioners to consider how their chosen media and methods embody particular affective and ethical qualities—and prepare them to more intentionally choose approaches that balance the interests and values of all those entities invested in and affected by the redacted medium, whether a photograph, a document, a piece of music, or a parcel of land.

The tools of redaction criticism can help all of us look and listen more closely, more empathetically, and learn to see (or hear, or sense) the latent scar beneath any erasure's purportedly seamless cut. We'll likely find shimmering mirages, ghostly voices, forgotten figures, and silenced subjects hiding behind each one. Who or what was blacked out? What would mean to bring them to light, to give them voice, to see their faces and all their scars?

AFTERWORD

This text grew from a public talk I shared at Berlin’s transmediale festival in February 2023. There, I highlighted numerous other artists and projects—far too many to be included in this pamphlet. Yet because the theme of “reparative redaction” emerged, like the accretion of a scar, through a comparative study of well over 100 theorists, poets, visual artists, playwrights, composers, and other creative practitioners, I want to identify here some of those who’ve been redacted, but not erased, from the above text: Alexandra Bell, Jen Bervin, Clare Birchall, Ariana Broussard-Reifel, John Cage, Sarah Charlesworth, Edmund Clark and Crofton Black, Bethany Collins, Jamal Cyrus, Fyeroool Darma, Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani, Lisa Gitelman, Ken Gonzales-Day, Ben Grosser, Ann Hamilton, Mishka Henner, Daniel Howe, Emily Jacir, Avalon Kalin and Matt McCormick, William Kentridge, David King, David T. Little, Travis MacDonald, Jackson MacLow, Jill Magid, Neven Mrgan and James Moore, Mimi Onuoha, Trevor Paglen, Rosana Paulino, Susan Philipsz, Tom Phillips, Robert Rauschenberg, Lucia Rebolino, Justin Remes, Mary Ruefle, Jonathan Safran Foer, Tina Satter, Jordan Scott, Tim Sherratt, Jason Starnes, Kristine Stolle, Jonathan Swift, Fred Tomaselli, Naomi Uman, Stacy Lynn Waddell, and Julia Weist.