

Splintered Archives -- Versions and Versioning through Erasure Arts and Poetry

Mahshid Mayar

ABSTRACT

A predominantly twenty-first-century, textual-visual practice in othering and versioning documents, erasure (arts and poetry) is the outcome of a variety of disruptive techniques such as black-out, white-out, or strike-through of segments of the “pre-text,” text-that-is-already-there. Erasure thus bridges *and* separates the “original” (however we may define and understand the term) to *and* from the subsequent versions of the original that are erased out of it by the same or subsequent authors. A study of two single works of erasure by Niina [Pollari](#) and Jenny [Holzer](#) in order to showcase some of the ways creative works of erasure “version” documents and “splinter” archives, this essay examines erasure poetry and arts as a creative activist response to the documental crises of US empire in the present century.

KEYWORDS

creative activism, erasure poetry, erasure art, US Empire, versions and versioning, literature and history, archival politics

1. Emerging from, yet remaining in a skin-close correspondence with, documents in terms of form, language, and the textual space it occupies, erasure poetry is a sub-genre of what Michael Leong calls “documental poetry” (2). Both document and *not* (indeed document and *more*), it is therefore a unique example of what arises at the interplay between poetry and “its generic others” (Ramazani 5). On the rise in the past twenty years, this increasingly popular, inter-generic poetic form has roots in earlier, experimental writerly and artistic practices of the twentieth century, such as

collaging, pastiche, copying, transcribing, citing, and ready-making – practices that Kornelia Freitag identifies as formalistic attempts at “unsettling language” (3).

open the book. *The Ferguson Report. Yellow Rain. all this can be yours. The O Mission Repo. Look. Sand Opera. Zong!*¹ watch out for what’s left behind to (un-)read. watch out for the rites of versioning. listen to versions. look for the layers – brimming with the ineffable, re-birthed by erasure. they confirm: erasure is the multiplication of meaning in the aftermath of textual de-construction: layer upon layer upon layer of splinters stacked on top of one another. commemorative of individuals perished at the hands of the merciless, erasure is a poetic act of arrival, partial yet pointed.

In terms of form, erasure can be the outcome of a variety of intently unsettling versioning techniques such as black-out, white-out, or strike-through of segments of the “pre-text,” text-that-is-already-there. Employing such techniques, erasure thus bridges *and* separates the “original” (however we may define and understand the term) to *and* from the subsequent versions of the original that are erased out of it by the same or subsequent authors. In this sense, then, erasure emerges out of two practices: Beginning with (1) versioning (i.e., splintering the textual-visual body of the original into a whole with holes and cracks in it), it is immediately completed by (2) layering (i.e., putting the splinters together in a new order). The outcome? The fractured, veiled body of the original posited not only *under* its second, third, ..., umpteenth editions but also *against* its various versions through acts of layering. Adapting and depending on this generative, two-step serial attitude, erasure (poetry and visual arts) splinters, stains, and thus multiplies the original, right on the spot, into various versions of it – versions foreseeable *and*, more pointedly and even controversially, versions *unforeseeable*: versions that are expected, envisioned, celebrated, or endorsed, as well as versions that are dreaded, negated, excluded, even averted. My focus in the present essay is on the latter in two works of erasure that engage with, intrude, and do unwelcome but urgently necessary things to the documents of empire in the twenty-first century.

2. Niina Pollari’s erasure poems (which happen to be the first examples of erasure poetry that I encountered several years ago) were first published in *New York Tyrant* in 2017. Pollari’s “Form N-400 Erasures” (Figure 2) are monumental not in terms of size but in the degree to which they employ blackout to the “USCIS Form N-400” (Figure 1), a run-of-the-mill naturalization form that “eligible” individuals who wish

¹ This is but a short sub-list of a much longer and ever-growing list of literary and artistic works of erasure that have been published in North America in the past ca. 20 years in response to recent but also older ongoing documental chaos and crisis. For further examples of erasure literature and arts (political and otherwise), both that pursue an activist agenda and who focus on erasure’s creative potential, see the respective pages at the New York Public Library and the Academy of American Poets.

Carefully crafted at the crossover between partializing violence and partial survival, erasure has been sometimes conceived (i.e., dismissed) as an example of writing *sans* originality, as text-generation *in spite of* and *past* the writer's block, and as writerly labor *sans* integrity – in sum, as a minor, coterie aesthetic movement under the umbrella of conceptual poetry and arts – that reveals a playful, indeed derisive obsession with the idea of the “original” and the power it wishes to exert and the grandiose degrees of loyalty it demands. And, yet, that is exactly why, with its proximity to pentimento and palimpsest, erasure works of art and poetry (especially subversive, politically invested examples such as Pollari's “Form N-400 Erasures”) distort *as well as* version the original to a degree that cannot be comprehended other than as “deformance.” Following Emily Dickinson's practice of “Backward Reading,” Lisa Samuels and Jerome J. McGann conceptualize deformance as a range of radical, disruptive reading strategies, including re-ordering the lines of a poem from the last to the first, re-writing in the form of prose, covering verbs or nouns in the body of a poem, and so on (McGann 35). In the present essay, I extend the usage of the term to make sense of a broader host of de-formative tools (including the insertion of gaps and pauses) that erasure activists employ in working with documents, works of art, and literature.

3. The unique-to-erasure, perforated de-formance that is at the heart of activist erasure poetry (and arts) is itself a borrowed method. Documentary redaction, often done to documents before they arrive at the archives of the state, precede its literary and artistic adaptations. Consider these relatively recent, widely-known series of examples between 2015 and 2019: In April 2019, the long-awaited 448-page Mueller Report reached the public with considerable sections redacted. It was a de-formed, perforated document that brimmed with gaps for reasons ranging from **Harm to Ongoing Matter** to **Personal Privacy**. In January of the same year, and while the Mueller investigation was still going on, faultily redacted documents were released by Paul Manafort's lawyers regarding ongoing backroom interactions between him and an alleged Russian spy. This was preceded by the publication of *Guantánamo Diary*, a diary written by the falsely accused Guantánamo detainee, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, that came out in 2015 only after it had been carefully and extensively de-formed by government agencies (A “restored” second edition of the national best-seller followed in 2017).

from archive box to archive box, blanks are left behind by redactors. archives are witness to centuries of them: to the left of the map, in the Atlantic; to the south, masking the memories and memoirs of the detainees in Guantánamo; to the right and to the north, behind the stack of N-400 forms in the US immigration office – scars etched onto stained surfaces, stains left on withered faces, faces held by threatened

throats. and, here, we, witness to the failures of the archived records, run into walls. and while we do, we'll have to be watchful of the labyrinth placed right behind them. or else, we get lost in the alleyways of redaction, of the un-said, of the un-written. whichever document we inspect, we'll need our archive gloves on, or else we might lose the right to touch and to trace. we'll need our gloves on or else splinters will make us bleed.

Redacted documents, such as these, are versions of the originals with which they co-habit and part of which they conceal. With their varying degrees of silencing and erasing (news censorship, documentary redaction, classification, and partial, case-based de-classification of documents), and despite their pretense to finality and formality, these examples attest to the ways redaction has helped empower, protect, and sustain political actors, systems, and discourses in and out of state politics.

Borrowing, yet distancing itself, from the violating grip of documentary redaction, erasure (in literature and visual arts) is often founded on a dual, decidedly subtractive/extractive serial attitude that insists both on systematically subtracting from the original (one word, one phrase, one entire line or paragraph or even an entire page at a time) and on gradually yet incrementally adding to the original's total length.² And in so doing, it both converses with and others the "original." In the end, works of erasure consist of an unevenly and asymmetrically layered assemblage of texts that exist at the same time in the same semantic space: the erased original text; the shorter, second edition consisting of the visible words and phrases (interrupted by black or white intervals); as well as a longer, multi-layered version that consists of both the visible bits and the redacted text, the *sous rature*, that is rendered (at least partly) invisible and illegible underneath it.

4. Jenny Holzer's visual erasures bring a somewhat different take to the hard-to-digest adaptation of documentary redaction as creative documental work: Without versioning the already redacted and classified state-generated documents – that is, documents that have been already versioned by an unnamed sensor officer in the context of the "War on Terror" – Jenny Holzer's installations grapple head-on with redaction as what the state does to its documents, particularly of a war that has been under erasure like no other before. Indeed, if we were to repeat what I did in the case of Pollari's erasure in Figures 1 and 2 (juxtaposing the original document and Pollari's erasure of it) and add the "source document" with which Holzer works to her painting of it, we would end up with two seemingly identical images, whose difference we

² Engaging with Mel Bochner's understanding of the term, I write about "the serial attitude" in *A Humument* and *Tree of Codes* in the forthcoming article "Erasure as Seriality: A Study of the 'Serial Attitude' in *A Humument* and *Tree of Codes*."

would only notice by closely reading the image caption (where differences in size, medium, and location are listed).

Transmogrifying redacted documents into investigative documentary art, what she does in the many exhibitions she has held in the United States, Germany, South Korea, Switzerland, and elsewhere is this: She transforms redacted documents, exactly as she finds them in the National Archives, into large-format art exhibition material. As she does so, she changes little more than the document's size and the material on which it appears (from ink on paper to oil on linen). In effect, what she does seems to be not so much production of art as it is the act of re-framing, enlarging, and projecting the un-aesthetic document *as if* it could be art. As we examine Holzer's redaction works such as "PALM, FINGERS & FINGERTIPS (RIGHT HAND) 000394," "Left Hand DOD-044401, 2007," and "PALM AND FINGERS + Fingertips, LEFT HAND 000052, 2007,"³ it is hardly possible to make any meaningful guesses as to what they are (about): Oversize x-ray sheets? Experimental art? Or redacted documents?

Once we realize that they are examples of the latter (that is, of documents that originally contained sensitive information about human rights violations done by the US Army personnel during the war on terror), we then can (and should) pause and ask ourselves a number of questions: What do we see? What do we *hope* to see? Will the act of seeing ever accomplish anything? And, if the subject is redacted documentary evidence about war crimes, evidence that has been "made available" to the public as a result of Freedom of Information Act requests by journalists, humanitarian organizations, and academics, then why is it presented to us in an art gallery and as art? In other words, what does the act of looking at, but not seeing much in, a document masqueraded as art hope to accomplish?

erasure implicates inquisitive staring, again, and again, and again. and in doing so, it discomfords not only cognitively but also affectively: in rage or awe, in terror or exasperation, staring, not blinking hurts. is erasure a blocking of the sensory or a reduction thereof? does it heighten the sensory effects of the erased text/object that asks for not only readership but also spectatorship? what kind of sensory relationships does it envision between the covered and the *discovered*? is it a reading experience that asks for not only reading by seeing, but also reading by touching and reading by listening? what does erasure do against the hegemony of the textual, of the alphabet-based act of expression? how do the invisible and the visible, the perceived and the interpreted, the written and the retouched come together in its multi-layered, splintered labyrinth?

³ Holzer gifted these works to National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., in 2010.

Joshua Craze makes an exceedingly significant point concerning the acts of thinking and writing about Holzer's documental paintings:

In painting [these documentary paintings], Holzer removes the documents from the media cycle and turns them into objects of contemplation. Her work refuses the journalistic reduction of these documents to mere sources of information and insists that there is something to be seen in the redactions themselves. Instead of filling gaps in our understanding, the paintings replicate the omissions of the documents. (61)

Holzer's removing of these documents out of the archives of the state and (occasionally out of) the media cycle and presenting them as large-format art installations, is an act of salvation. This re-placement delivers redacted documents from their common, reductionist readings as faulty, hardly legible sources of information. The need for this "versioning" itinerary, her installations seem to assert, is to depart from information (that isn't there) and to arrive at understanding (that needs to be arrived at). As Craze points out:

Holzer's paintings . . . insist that, despite all we know about the War on Terror, we have yet to understand. If the redacted documents that Holzer paints make the truth invisible - a series of heavy black marks on paper, obscuring dates and names - then Holzer's paintings of these documents make this invisibility visible and ask us to dwell in it. (61)

In effect, Holzer's redaction paintings - this shedding of light *on* the illegibility of what has been perennially shredded into unintelligibility, through the medium of painting - is an act of versioning despite the initial act of redaction that is in *aversion* to it: Her remarkably accurate reproductions of the documents, the changing of their size, the occasional addition of a solid background color, the shift in the representational mode (from documental to artistic), and the spaces where these otherwise obscure documents are held (from archives to art galleries) attempt to make sure that the art-intellectual onlookers do *not* simply skip over illegible documents for the sake of what *is* legible.

5. Re-thinking the enabling forces behind erasure in arts and poetry, it becomes evident that erasure is arduous labor, even obsessive, repetitive action that involves doctoring the source document as an act of versioning. Even when expected the least, versioning happens so that each layer of the versioned text is there precisely because it differs from the previous and the subsequent layers in the semantic labor it is meant to perform and also in the overall form and the materiality that it takes. And in many works of erasure (such as the examples examined in this essay), this versioning happens with the single purpose of re-drafting, underlining, and capturing both temporary loss *and* what is permanently lost.

words, erasure insists, are objects, have volume, can be taken out of the page, can be thrown into the void or their mass covered by a blanket of black ink. activist erasure, 21st-century literary and artistic examples of it amply confirm, delivers documents from their generic restraints; lets their words loose; sets them free. remove the blanket and we'll encounter the erratic, rebuffed, hidden "original," the "first edition." what is counterfeit? where is the place of the original? and who can say what has been delivered or distorted? removed or restored? left or lifted? shortened or shrouded?

On the one hand, versioning can be an act of preservation against disintegration, a vital attempt at summarizing and making digestible, a pleasurable pastime, an obsessive exercise in curiosity, or a critical commentary on consumerism. On the other hand, as Holzer's and Pollari's works attest, versions can be echoes of or glimpses into the original, a means to make sense of othering, of contradictions, of the aesthetics of insurgency, of resistance. In this essay, I have briefly engaged with the political career of and the insurgencies carried within the act of versioning of the contentious narratives of the US empire in the present century and at the cross-over between documents and creative, critical works of erasure, for there lies tensions that signal implosion (under the conditions of duress) rather than expansion and tenacity; that disclose disintegration, disagreement, and rot rather than unity, homogeneity, and universality of the seemingly "a-versional."

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About the Author

Mahshid Mayar [she/her] is an assistant professor of American Studies at the Department of American Studies, University of Innsbruck, Austria. She is the author of

Citizens and Rulers of the World: The American Child and the Cartographic Pedagogies of Empire (U of North Carolina P, 2022), which was awarded the Shelley Fisher Fishkin Prize for International Scholarship in Transnational American Studies (by the American Studies Association). Staying with the question of empire, Mayar's second-book/*Habilitation* project, is conceived at the crossover between literature and history. The project interrogates the politics and poetics of silence, absence, and histories of anti-imperial protest through "erasure poetry" by contemporary Asian and Indigenous American poets, such as Philip Metres, Solmaz Sharif, and Layli Long Soldier. Over the years, she has published extensively on American childhoods, cultural history and geography of the US empire, race and racialization, and, more recently, on silence and silencing and twenty-first-century US poetry. Together with Marion Schulte (University of Rostock), she has co-edited *Silence and Its Derivatives: Conversations across Disciplines* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022). Moreover, together with Mischa Honeck, Mayar is the co-editor of a handbook of US Empire, which is forthcoming with De Gruyter.

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