# A Present Absence: Reading Redaction Poetry

Andy Zuliani

**Abstract**

This article is an examination of an emergent form of contemporary literature, referred to here as 'redaction poetry.' This poetic practice, an extension of earlier modes of 'erasure' poetry, undertakes a radical effacement of existing texts—often drawn from non-literary, and especially governmental, contexts—in order to carve out of this substrate its own, highly subversive meanings. As a result of this highly visual and often material practice, redaction poetry is uniquely poised between competing media and genres. This article argues that while this blurring of boundaries might make these works unstable, and difficult to categorize and preserve, it also renders them uniquely able to invade and disrupt the textual and media economies of the present.

## Introduction

Erasure poetry—poems created by effacing an existing document—are inherently unstable texts. This appropriative process does more than simply trouble the abstract notions of authorship and expression: as the cut-ups and white-outs of pre-digital erasure poems make especially clear, excavating language in this manner profoundly undermines its material structure, and produces a text that is constantly at risk of coming apart, of disaggregating. This instability, too, marks contemporary poetries of redaction.

Redaction poetry is a recent variant of erasure poetry, which produces its material not by 'whiting out' the original document, thus turning text into negative space, but instead by 'blacking out' its source text. This intervention makes the visual footprint of redaction poetry unique, and uniquely troublesome. Erasure poetry can be quoted in much the same way as conventional 'written' poetry, but scholarship of redaction poetry faces a particular challenge. Visual poetry is often marginalized because it cannot inhabit purely textual channels and, as visual poetry, redaction poetry warps context, distorts genre, inverts the polarity of the graphical mark—turns, in a sense, the sign into the substrate, the substrate into the sign. A work of poetry produced by *positive* rather than *negative* erasure finds itself shunted partway through the threshold dividing literary and visual art, caught in a no-man's-land of contaminated form. These works are not only poetry, not only image, but instead are hybrid objects, liminal cases. This, of course, makes their study and preservation only more vital. The present work is an attempt to develop a critical methodology with which to read redaction poetry, and to reconfigure our sense of erasure poetics to account for these particularly charged texts—poems which engage in the logics of obstruction and censure in a direct, and disorienting, manner.

## No Such Agency

It is then fitting that this study of boundary-blurring poetry starts not with a poem, but with a building—or, rather, with a photograph of a building. The structure in question is the headquarters of the National

Security Agency (NSA), in Fort Meade, Maryland. The photograph's provenance is ambiguous: though it is circulated by the agency as a current image of their offices, Julia Bryan-Wilson, an art historian at Berkeley, asserts that the cars in its parking lot are at least half a century old (*Phaidon*). This anachronism is state-mandated, as the airspace around the facilities is rigorously controlled; with the exception of a snapshot taken at great risk by artist-activist Trevor Paglen in 2013, no other civilian access has been tolerated. This photograph—uploaded in a post on the *Phaidon* blog titled with the rich double-entendre "Don't Shoot!"—depicts a squat, glass-encased building, isolated in a vast parking complex. This structure, which houses most of the nation's surveillance operations, is a conspicuously reflective black prism, mirroring its surroundings while failing to wholly blend into them. In the background of the shot is bizarrely pristine forest, stretching from the margins of the complex to the horizon. As the story goes, operatives at the NSA vowed that the acronym stood for "No Such Agency"—a witticism that seems to disclose the truth. It is difficult to trace this statement back to any specific source, but that the origins of this story are apocryphal is exactly the point: this speech act is an elaborate disavowal, one that effaces not only the statement but also the issuer of the statement itself.

The 'present absence' of the NSA becomes a fitting allegory of redaction. If erasure is invisible, redaction—the superimposition of black lines on text or image—is a visible process, one which obscures its target but leaves this obscuration itself highly evident. To redact, then, is to attempt to hide something in plain sight, to perform a concealment that leaves its mechanisms naked to the eye. That the entire operative structure of the NSA is based on such a self-aware obfuscation turns the attempted redaction of their own headquarters into something of a constitutive gesture: a sui generis stunt performed in front of a global audience, a vanishing act that paradoxically brings them into being.

It takes immense power to put something this large, this monumental, under erasure. Yet one might, following Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, state instead that this power is in fact *produced* by the erasure, and not the other way around—that this "constitutive erasure" of

the sign is the gesture that brings power into being, not as a moment of destruction but of transcendental creation (61, 109). In this sense, to destroy one meaning is to create another, and to control the production of meaning itself. One finds in redaction poetry a mirroring of this disappearing act, and the creation of a new order of meaning through subversive concealment and textual obstruction.

## Reframed power, subverted expression

To reframe censure as paradoxically *productive* of meaning is not only the goal of governmental censorship: it is likewise the aim of erasure and redaction poetry, albeit employed to drastically different ends. Its earliest precedents, such as Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (1970) and Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os* (1977), were effectively 're-writings' of other texts—William Hurrell Mallock's Victorian novel *A Human Document* and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, respectively—and their effacements served to produce a new work from the disaggregated material of another. Theirs was a pointed repurposing, and while certainly the canonical heft of Milton lends a particular charge to Johnson's subversion, contemporary poetries of redaction and erasure take aim at more directly manifested sources of power.

Erasure poetry, especially that which makes use of redaction, has experienced something of a renaissance during the Trump administration.[1] In moments of extreme political and analytical fatigue, these documentary-driven modes of poetic practice can serve as a valuable resource for witnessing and record-making. Under critique in these recent works is the manifestation of state power through overt rhetorical feints, and the subsequent hollowing-out of language that this produces in the public sphere. Erasure poetry categorically positions itself *against* expression and is often a response to the failure of other more 'expressive' modes of articulacy: the think-piece, the blog post, the campaign speech. This genre of poetry frequently takes the form of hacking up

[1] For a highly insightful account of this poetic "boom," see Rachel Stone's "The Trump Era Boom in Erasure Poetry," published by *The New Republic* on 23 Oct. 2017, as well as the online compendium *This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry.*

and reworking the very material of governmental discourse, as is the case with jayy dodd's erasure of a poem written to mark the occasion of Trump's commencement of office. The target of erasure is Joseph Charles MacKenzie's "Pibroch of the Domhnall," written in service both of Trump and 'classical' poetic ideals; its opening couplet reads, with no apparent sense of irony, "Come out for the Domhnall, ye brave men and proud / The scion of Torquil and best of MacLeod!".[2] dodd's "Inaugural Poem for [REDACTED]" (2017), posted and extensively circulated on Twitter, is issued from the vantage point of margins that are, paradoxically, central—from the gaps and elisions created by the abuse of state power:

he came
a tyrant

threatened
voices silenced as misery [...]

But for all

a luster

a blasphemous lie [...] (dodd, 2017)

dodd's poem performs a double-negative, a negation of the negatory power of the state, and through this arrives at a something of a positive: a space, however under threat, from which to make a declaration, from which to posit. This work excavates the 'luster,' and bluster, of the Trump-supporting poetic apparatus, and finds within it the material with which to mount a defense. In doing so, it yokes the radical aesthetics of erasure poetry to a fittingly radical political stance.

[2] The literary and indeed authorial authenticity of "Pibroch of the Domhnall" poem has been contested. Like much else in the contemporary American political climate, its status as fact or fiction is unclear; sources diverge as to whether the poem is sincere, or a parody, and indeed whether MacKenzie is a real human being or an elaborate fabrication. For an interview with the ostensible poet, see Evan Mantyk Q&A, posted on the Society of Classical Poets website.

If for Derrida the text under erasure is the very origin of hegemonic power (61, 109), redaction and erasure poetry can be viewed as an attempt to subvert this erasing power, and to harness it for diametrically opposed ideological ends. Poetry that redacts the speeches and tweets of Trump's presidency refigures, and often inverts, the rhetorical charge of its content, reframing this storehouse of sovereign language so that it can instead be made to speak truth to power. Yet works like "Inaugural Poem for [REDACTED]" do more than simply render their source text in scare quotes, or otherwise cash in on the easy payout of comic appropriation, satisfying though these outcomes may be.[3] Instead, this black-and-white sense of critical distance is itself under critique. The strength of dodd's approach is in its variety of attack, and in the tension rendered visible between source text and poetic *détournement*—its push-and-pull between ventriloquism and quotation, between fragmentation and continuity, and the manner with which each of these oscillations indicate not a steady binary between sincerity and irony but instead different, warring modes of sincerity. The context of both the white-nationalist source text and its poetic variation are, so to speak, deadly serious: dodd's poem, then, is an act of lexical reconnaissance into enemy ground, a terrain of malice and menace from which the poet returns with a battery of repurposed signifiers.

"Inaugural Poem for [REDACTED]" has, in its widespread circulation, exceeded or even superseded its poetic source. As a work of satire, its subversive pastiche is highly effective: one can hardly believe that these utterances were embedded in the original; it seems inconceivable to the point of farce that the conservative political-poetic establishment would 'out' itself in this manner. Indeed, one of the more satisfying moves that dodd's poem makes is an aesthetic critique of the conservatism of 'state poetry' itself, and its reliance on pointedly nostalgic literary forms. We see in MacKenzie's poem a clear example of this political poetics, in the buttressing of its nationalist content with staunchly traditional rhyme and meter, as well as suitably antique

[3] An entire poetic economy exists around the redaction and erasure of Donald Trump's tweets, a crown jewel being a hacked-to-pieces missive reassembled into an aching, Keatsian ode to the most majestic of birds: "o, the Pelican," it reads, "so / smoothly doth / he crest. a wind god!"

rhetoric: its invocations to "ye brave men and proud," and, of course, to the subject of the ode itself, who is apotheosized into the mytho-patriarchal "the Domnhall." dodd's variation on the poem undermines these formal signifiers by chipping away at their smooth and forceful presentation. As Brian McHale notes in his seminal study, "Poetry under Erasure," the mechanisms of this poetic practice make it indeed exemplary of postmodern poetry as a whole. Writing through excavation produces works of pronounced "spaciness," in which the poetic text undergoes a "progressive infiltration by ever greater volumes of white space": a sparseness and lightness that aligns works of erasure poetry with the minimalist and fragmentary footprint of postwar poetic practices (McHale 278).

However, overemphasizing the formal similarities between erasure poetry and a general sense of postmodern poetic practice might understate the stakes of this particular form. While McHale's analysis begins with a selection of materially-charged texts—including the canonical precedent of Phillips' *A Humument*—most of his case studies feature poems that thematize erasure rather than directly engage with it as a material practice, the latter being characteristic of erasure poetry. This is largely a product of McHale's own critical wheelhouse: the critic efficiently dematerializes 'erasure' in order to allow it to serve as a model for more abstract forms of poetic self-cancellation in the works of, for example, John Ashbery and various Language poets. This is also a matter of medium: presumably, the resolute materiality of erasure makes it incompatible with venues of criticism that rely on the poetic text as liquid, as a quotable and conventionally close-readable document.

Such incompatibility is especially prominent when erasure poems take the form not of 'whiting out'—which, as noted above, might indeed make the poem more legible to this kind of criticism—but that of 'blacking out'—which has the opposite effect. This distinction remains largely unexplored in much of the study of erasure poetry, a genre which skews both in its production and criticism towards an exploration of negative space. The result of this focus is an impressive expansion of the valences of textual silence, especially seen in Travis Macdonald's "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics"—a keen account of erasure poetry

from which redaction or 'blackout' poetry, however, is excluded, most likely because of its yet-emergent status.[4] Yet, Macdonald's analysis of 'white-out' poetry, in its foregrounding of *form* and of the material footprint of different modes of erasure, is highly valuable to a study of this later blackout variant. His strikingly material account of Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* (2006) productively draws attention to the poet's use of correction fluid—a viscous substance that resists the two-dimensionality of the page, and produces, even in facsimile, a distinct three-dimensional effect: "white shadows" that seem to hover above the text, effacing without wholly erasing (Macdonald 99).

This attention to the specific materiality of effacement might lead us to rethink the particularity of Derrida's *sous rature*, the constitutive destruction of meaning which is rendered in Spivak's translation as a crossed-out word, an "ill-named ~~thing~~" (31). This scribbled-over sign is language as a provisional force: "Since the word is inaccurate," Spivak writes, "it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible" (xiv). The visibility of the erased is, following Macdonald, produced by the specific medium at work—here, that of pen and paper, or typewriter and page—and erasure is executed by a supplementary graphical mark that does not wholly obscure that which is beneath. The offending word remains present and readable. Were Derrida to have been writing with an eraser-tipped pencil, or on a computer screen, this signifying 'trace' may have been transfigured or even outright eradicated. The constitutive charge of erasure surely must vary between these different modalities of the invisible: a text struck out is distinct from one that is erased, and again from one that is inked over entirely—and this is to say nothing of the substrate itself, which will greatly vary in its ability to carry traces of the effaced sign.

A redacted or 'blacked-out' text is, then, aesthetically distinct from other forms of erasure poetry: this manner of 'infiltration' poses a threat not only to the content of the poem, but to its very status as text and to the supposed stability of its materiality.

[4] Macdonald's study indeed ends with a fleeting and tantalizing mention of Austin Kleon's then-upcoming *Newspaper Blackout* in its closing paragraph; Kleon's work was published the following year.

## A space of negativity

If redaction poems take words on loan from the enemy, Niina Pollari's "Form N-400 Erasures" (Figure 1) borrow not only these words but the very surface upon which this writing and effacement is undertaken. Pollari's aggressively material poems take as their substrate the Application for Naturalization forms which regulate and restrict immigrants' access to American citizenship, and upon them perform an exhaustive and violent redaction. The government forms now reveal their implicit threat and prejudice: "Have you been in / total / terror," they read; "Do you / Have / awful / association / s" (Pollari). The bounds of these poems are determined by the constraints of the document, much of which stands as a particularly charged negative space. Here, we see the subtractive tendency of erasure poetry taken to the brink of its vanishing point, in which the process of redaction is a painstaking near-total annihilation of their source—a source largely reduced to vestiges, shadows, a muted but not entirely silent lexical background.

As a result of their material specificity, Pollari's poems occupy an uneasy territory somewhere between parody and reenactment. One would not, after all, confuse dodd's visually inventive poem with the literary fodder of the Trump administration; the poems of "Form N-400 Erasures," however, are visually indistinguishable from the material of governmental suppression.

These texts share a visual footprint with the public edition of the Mueller report (Figure 2), whose timeline of composition and massively redacted publication neatly brackets Pollari's project.[5] In this direct mirroring of government operating procedure, Pollari's "Erasures" engage in a fraught kind of performance—or, rather, a re-performance, in which the physical and material gesture of redaction is subjected to repetition with difference.[6]

[5] This report was undertaken by the U.S. Department of Justice to determine whether Donald Trump and the Republican Party colluded with outside political agents to influence the results of the 2016 presidential election.

[6] One is indeed tempted to imagine both redactors at work, blacking out their respective texts in unison, line by line; the interpretative lure of such a temporal overlap is difficult to resist.

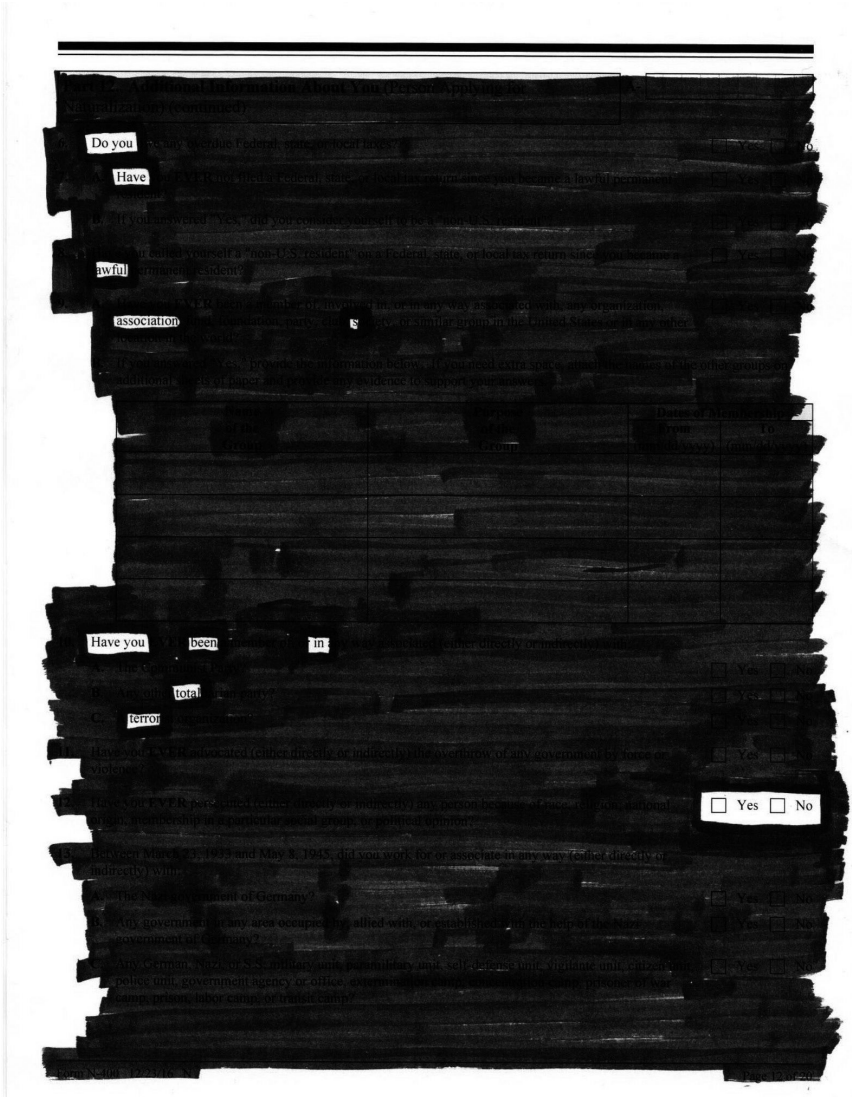
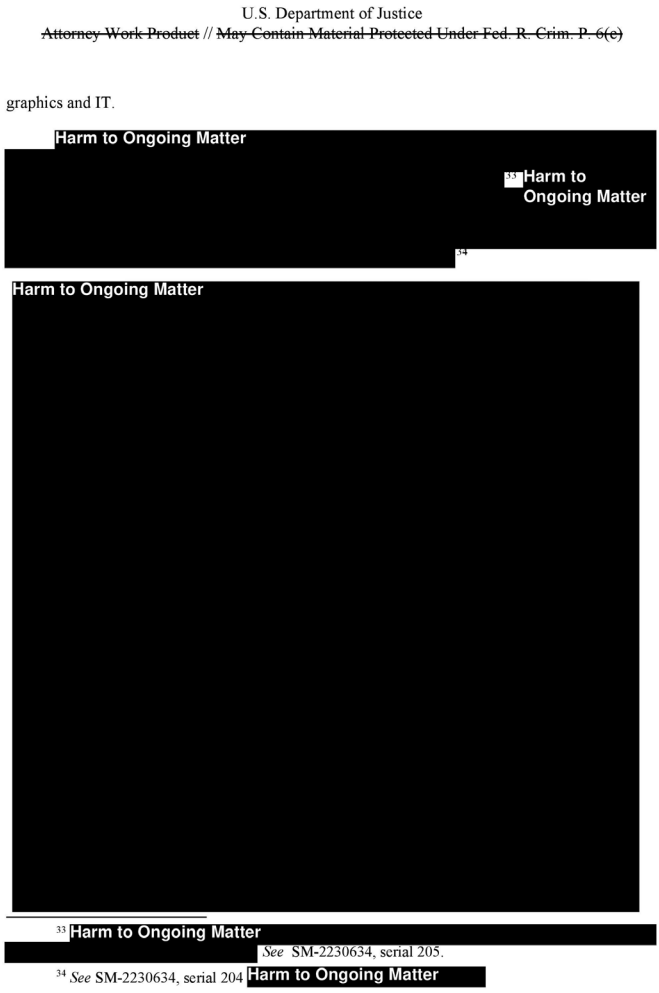



**Figure 1.** Niina Pollari. "Form N-400 Erasures" (2017), *Tyrant Books*, courtesy of the artist.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*See* SM-2230634, serial 205.

[34] *See* SM-2230634, serial 204 Harm to Ongoing Matter

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**Figure 2.** *Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election* (Mueller 20).

By inserting itself at the very site of redaction, "Form N-400 Erasures" exposes both the stakes of redaction poetry's intervention into state power—the real, and "total / terror" of the Trump administration's 2017 immigration and travel bans—as well as the inherently fictitious and textual nature of this power itself.

Redaction poems can be read as works of satire which play up the capricious artifice of the censor's brushstroke and critique the apparent ease of this textual violence. What redaction poetry knows about redaction itself is that this power is always provisional, always partial—it is necessarily compromised as a gesture. A 'leak,' after all, is always proof of a point of weakness, and redaction poetry attempts to exploit these slippages, these failures to withhold, to save face. Redaction poetry knows, furthermore, that this bid at erasure is always fantastical. As a category of utterance, false disclosure is inherently self-aware, even tongue-in-cheek—and thus is always partially a ruse, and a bald-faced one at that. One might instead say *bold-faced*, in order to better indicate the particular typographical charge of such a gesture. Where redaction differs from erasure is in the visibility of its deletions, rendered on the page as an unignorable graphical mark. Like the obdurate bulk of the NSA building, the elongate bar of redaction is a material witness of monolithic proportions. If it is a present absence, a "No Such Text," this is an absence which can only divulge the weight of its concealed presence: to cover up something is to leave the cover itself bare to scrutiny.

## Black highlighter

How can one learn to read redaction itself—not the remaining text, but the blacked-out void? This is the "accursed share" of redaction poetry, to borrow Georges Bataille's term; it is the problematic leftover that retroactively defines the whole. A work of redaction poetry composed solely of this waste material would be an inverse of dodd's "Inaugural Poem for [REDACTED]"; it would, extending the approach of Pollari's poems, counter this open field of text with an abyssal sheet of ink.

This graphical abyss is explored with great efficacy in James Bridle's "Every Redaction" (2015), a video work which presents, as the title

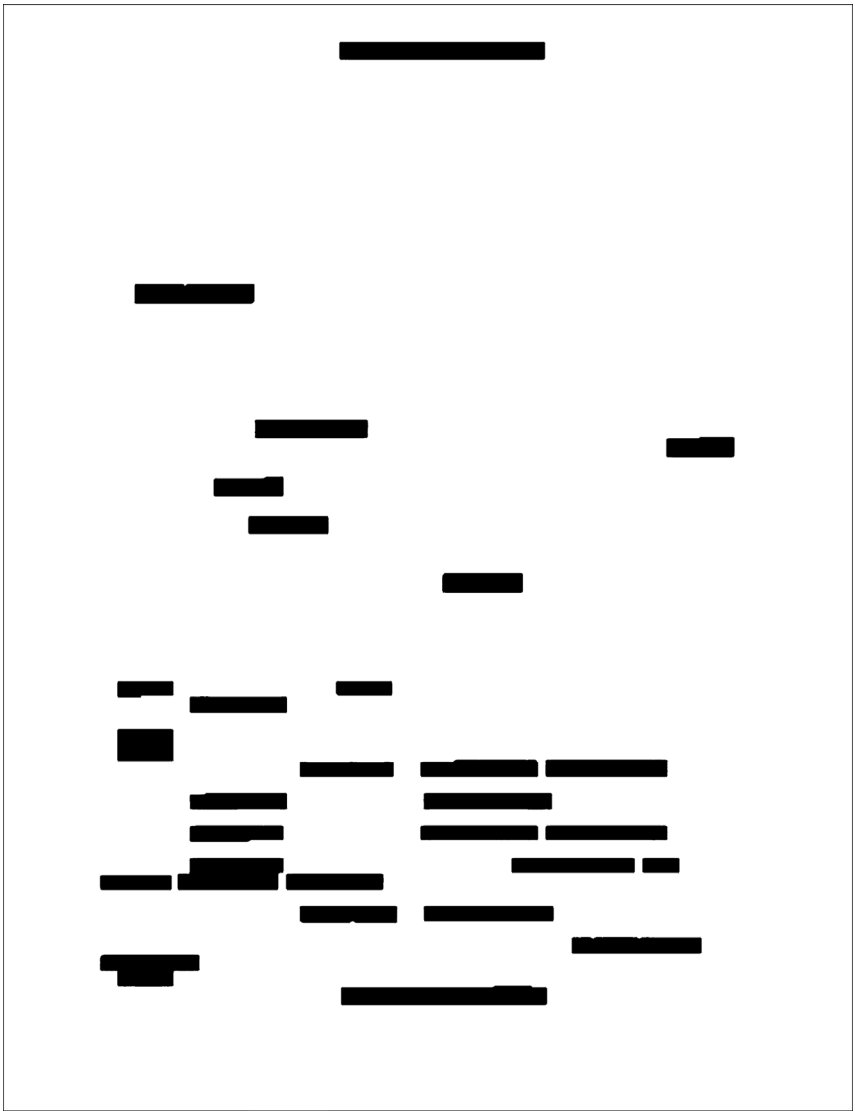

**Figure 3.** James Bridle. "Every Redaction" (2015), still from video, courtesy of the artist / jamesbridle.com

suggests, every bar of censure in the Senate Intelligence Committee's report on CIA uses of torture (Figure 3). What makes Bridle's decidedly visual 'poem' distinct from Pollari's blacked-out redactions is that it completely strips the page of its lexical content, effectively inverting the polarity of signs: with textual foreground spirited away, the ostensible background of erasure is promoted to the status of a new and obscure language.

"Every Redaction" moves through its source document at nearly a dozen pages per second, a rapid-fire cascade that transforms the dense and inert blocks of digital redaction into a dance of geometrical forms. This effect lifts us away from any specific section of text, and instead gives us a new perspective of *distribution*, of balance and weight. Particularly insistent redactions—especially those obscuring the document titles, subheadings, and, apparently, page numbers—are given a heightened sense of fixity against this flux.

Bridle's work, in its somewhat counter-intuitive orientation towards the redaction itself, lends the latter a presence which is both assertive and enigmatic. For, after all, what does redaction indicate but the most important, and thus the most obstructed, sections of a text? To think of redaction along these lines is to refigure it as the strongest, most vigorous 'highlighter' in the NSA desk drawer: it announces these moments of extreme significance by way of a declaration that is paradoxically overflowing with, and void of, meaning. Here, again, one finds the affective and hermeneutic charge of redaction, as both an avowal and a disavowal at once—or, indeed, some manner of 'hyperavowal,' an utterance of such signification that it effaces itself and leaves only the traces of its impact. To use Derrida's term, such a 'constitutive' utterance must be protected at all costs and, accordingly, even the paratextual apparatus of the Senate report is jealously guarded. Everything is a product and producer of power, and thus all is of an equally obliterative significance.

Johanna Drucker, in writing on Marcel Broodthaer's *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (1969)—a redaction of Stephane Mallarmé's proto-concrete poem of the same name which replaces each scattered line of text with a black bar of equal height and length—frames this

work as not an erasure but a *translation*. Broodthaers' redaction removes the semantic content of Mallarmé's poem, and as a result throws the poem's visual lexicon into sharp relief. If this redaction for Drucker "reduces" the poem to "its structure," and renders this visual layout "concrete, visible" and "almost tactile" (115), Bridle's rendition of the government text performs a similar foregrounding of form. Something is made uniquely visible through this vanishing act: "Every Redaction" cannot reverse the process of obstruction, but it can call our attention to the formal logic of this process. This abstraction makes concrete the patterning of concealment, the location of importance, the distribution of secrets.

## Conclusion: Reading redaction

Forays into the known unknowns are foundational to redaction poetics. If these works are products of a political impulse, it is one which aims to penetrate this obstructive overlay, to see what is underneath—and, in the absence of this possibility, to track the folding-back of the interpretative trajectory and account for its refractions along the surface of the text. Reading redaction is, then, a kind of surface reading, and one that orients itself towards a horizon of impossibility. Redaction poetry tries to reinsert itself at the moment of erasure, to interrupt these successive passes of the written and unwritten. That this process is largely imaginative does not discount its potential. In an era of government procedure in which such procedures are increasingly dematerialized and abstracted—and in which we are overwhelmed by a flood of documentation, whether leaked, produced under duress, or willingly sent forth as a defensive smoke-screen—these poetic practices model new kinds of attention, new modes of active engagement that challenge the status quo. Redaction poetics is an intervention into the textual surface of the present, and one which makes the contours and logics of this surface more legible. Its aesthetics of forgery and *détournement*, of re-appropriation and re-performance, produce a uniquely direct and destabilizing effect: these works are untethered from conventional literary platforms, and instead circulate within the same media landscapes

as their target texts. Their ambiguity of genre and form allows them to infiltrate and imitate with ease, in a counter-politics whose very strength is this amorphous flexibility.

If Macdonald's survey of erasure poetry depicts the media ecology of the early twenty-first century as a shifting, aqueous ground—an endless series of "tide-pools" which poets are forever "learning to navigate" (3)—this flux has only been intensified in the intervening decade. The political and aesthetic ground of the present is more unfixed, more destabilized than ever. Contemporary poetic practices such as redaction poetry might offer new modes of navigating this obstructive and disorienting surface.

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## Biography

Andy Zuliani is a writer and multimedia artist who lives in Vancouver, Canada. He is a doctoral candidate and McCracken Fellow in the Department of English Literature at New York University, where his research examines tropes of flatness, obstruction, and queered embodiment in postwar literature and visual art. His debut novel, *Last Tide*, will be published by NeWest Press in the fall of 2021.