

# FORUM:

## INSCRIPTION IN THE EXPANDED FIELD

### REDACTION AS SYMPTOM

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I've spent the last decade studying documents from the war on terror. It's pretty solitary work. My days are spent in front of a screen, staring at pages that often contain only a single line of text.<sup>1</sup>

To read these texts is to traverse an obstacle course strewn with rectangular black boulders and the arcane acronyms used by the U.S. intelligence services, which render the visible prose of the documents almost as incomprehensible as the black of the redactions. For many years, I hunted amid these absences for the presence of the state. From facts lodged in stray sentences, I hoped to make sense of the fragmented stories of extraordinary renditions and extraterritorial prisons that were slowly emerging from the U.S. government thanks to leaks and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests. My research constituted only a very minor part of what was effectively a collective project to chronicle and contest the war on terror, undertaken by activists, journalists, and lawyers.<sup>2</sup>

We treated the redacted documents as crime scenes, which, if we were perspicacious, would contain the clues that would allow us to piece together the shattered tales of men and women whose lives had been destroyed by the U.S. war on terror. The publication of these stories mattered. After a few years of research and writing, however, I came to see that the way we presented our findings came at a cost. Our actual experience of reading redacted documents would vanish from the newspaper articles and books that we published. The uncanny pages of government documents, in which redacted subjects did unmentionable things to redacted objects, would find no place in our three-paragraph news stories. Instead, we scanned the redacted documents for information, retrieved a few facts, and left the process of inquiry, along with the redactions, on the cutting room floor. What we didn't know formed no part of our reporting. We were trained to see presences and not absences. This was part of a collaboration between us and the government. That we did not speak about the absences of these documents meant that the government's selective patterns of redaction were allowed to shape the news agenda. If the only unredacted word in a tranche of documents about Enhanced Interrogation Techniques (EITs)

~~TOP SECRET~~

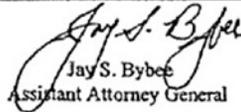
[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Your review of the literature uncovered no empirical data on the use of these procedures, with the exception [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

  
Jay S. Bybee  
Assistant Attorney General

~~TOP SECRET~~

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**Figure 1.**

Page eighteen of an August 1, 2002 memorandum written by the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel, regarding the interrogation of Abu Zubaydah. Almost the entire document is redacted. This memorandum—the “Bybee memo”—was one of a series of legal memoranda largely drafted by John Yoo, then deputy assistant attorney general, and signed by assistant attorney general Jay Bybee, which became known as the “torture memos,” and that attempted to provide a legal justification for the use of torture by U.S. agents in the interrogation of detainees. An unredacted version of the memorandum was later released.

was “waterboard,” then it was only the waterboard that was reported.

The omissions of the documents, I came to see, paralleled the omissions to be found in the U.S. public sphere. At the beginning of the war on terror, rather than concrete discussions of the situation of prisoners subjected to forced rectal rehydration, we heard from the heads of recently created terrorism studies departments, who appeared on nightly news shows to explain why, in a ticking bomb scenario (one fantasy of a U.S. political imaginary dominated by the temporalities of television), waterboarding might prove to be a rational, logical, even *scientific* necessity. As researchers, we ended up complicit in the government’s narratives. We wrote about what they chose to make visible. Increasingly, what I wanted to show readers was the black. That, I thought, is where one could reveal the presence of the state.

Dissatisfaction with my research led to me take a distance from journalism and find a new form for my inquiries. I wrote an essay, “A Grammar of Redaction,” which I exhibited at the New Museum in 2014.<sup>3</sup> “Grammar” treated the absences of the redacted documents as presences that constituted a language all their own. The redactions, I argued, were a form of inscription that—if one were but attentive to the documents—allowed one to trace the internal logic of state practice. My essay was a study in unnamed men, hidden black sites, and the narrative functions of omission and obfuscation. I wanted to show the reader what it was like to contemplate these

documents in visceral detail. There might, I thought, be an ethics of such contemplation.

My interest in reading redacted documents as an ethical practice prompted a series of collaborations with U.S. conceptual artist Jenny Holzer, who has been painting redacted documents as long as I have been writing about them.<sup>4</sup> Her paintings, I suggest, address a curious short circuit. There are innumerable publicly available redacted documents from the war on terror, but the public does not read them. That is a task left to specialists. At best, the public encounters a summary of such documents in newspapers, via the sort of stories I used to write, in which the erasures of the redactions are themselves erased. Holzer’s paintings suggest that there is a content to these documents above and beyond any information that journalists and researchers might glean from amid the redactions. In painting CIA interrogation files and legal memos about torture, Holzer transforms words into images and, in so doing, makes the viewer stop and actually read the documents. I have watched people in galleries clutch themselves uncertainly as they stare at her silk-screened versions of CIA reports, pausing over the cold impersonality of the acronyms and the violence of redactions that erase the names of Guantanamo detainees already erased from the world—rendered to black sites and disappeared. The violence of these documents cannot be reduced to a summary of their contents. The documents themselves reveal something of the bureaucratic violence of the U.S. state, and such revelations are available

only to those willing to really look. The space of the artwork, I hoped, might produce a space of contemplation outside the fast cycles of an information economy that discarded these documents as soon as they had been mined for information.

Looking back, I can see that my work was undergirded by a basically liberal hope: In reading the documents for ourselves, we would come to know what the U.S. government was doing, and come, through understanding, to new forms of resistance and politics. Underneath my work was a Kantian injunction. *Sapere Aude!* Think for yourself! Resist the summaries of the newspaper and gaze at the state. Humanities scholars, of course, like this message. Reading might save us.

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After Trump came to power in 2016, some of my friends looked askance at my research. From the Senate Intelligence Committee Report on Torture, finally published in 2014, we learned about most of the EITs that had previously been hidden in the redactions of earlier documents.<sup>5</sup> At the University of Chicago, where I was teaching, my students struggled to remember if the U.S. had invaded Afghanistan or Iraq first. My friends asked me: Surely this project is over now? That shameful chapter of U.S. history is closed and a new one beginning. The enemy, they said, is right in front of us: loud, clear, and visible. He even had a Twitter feed. Staring at my redacted

documents, I suddenly felt part of another world. My friends looked at me as if I were an object of inquiry rather than an inquirer. Why is he still messing around with all those redacted documents?

Their distance seemed to change with the publication of the Mueller report.<sup>6</sup> I knew D.C. lawyers who spent the night after its release poring over its pages, obsessed with the redactions. My Twitter feed was full of screen grabs of suggestive omissions. In one account of a meeting at Trump Tower, all the names are redacted, leaving the reader's imagination free to fill in the blanks with Russian agents or duplicitous Democrats, depending on one's taste in choose-your-own-adventure politics.

I was ready to dust off my old techniques for reading redactions as narrative devices, but something held me back. Over the years, I had become less and less certain of my own obsession with redactions, which I began to see as a symptom of a broader problem. As I thought about the Mueller report, I wondered: Might I be interested in redactions not because knowledge might make a difference (knowledge, say, of the content behind the redactions), but because I knew that knowledge makes no difference at all?

The D.C. lawyers would be appalled by such an intuition. They spent all night reading the Mueller report because they were convinced the reverse was true. The report promised revelations. They hoped to finally find out the

truth about Trump (there was the same sentiment whenever a new memoir by someone close to the president was released). With each publication, each report, there was the hope that *this* revelation will bring with it the difference that makes a difference and creates political change. It seemed to me, though, that this desire for new facts was a misrecognition of itself; it was a desire for political change expressed as a desire for knowledge, as if we no longer had the capacity to think about collective politics and couldn't quite shake our conviction that if only everyone knew the facts, the information, the full story, then Trump would somehow, magically, leave office.

If there is one thing that contemporary U.S. does not lack, it is information about the government. Today, one can potentially know more about state secrets than at any time in history. It is simply overwhelming how much information is available. You could—and I do not exaggerate—spend your entire life reading redacted files from the war on terror, and it would not exhaust the archive of texts that the government released in response to FOIA requests from 2001 to 2021. Our difficulty consists not in finding absent information but in choosing what to read and why. Such a dilemma parallels a more general problem in our knowledge economy: almost everything is accessible. We live with the constant immanent capacity for mastery of all things.

Our contemporary situation parallels that which Weber describes in one of the most

famous paragraphs of his essay “Science as a Vocation:”

[I]ncreasing intellectualization and rationalization *do not*, therefore, indicate an increased and general knowledge of the conditions under which one lives. It means something else, namely, the knowledge or belief that if one but wishes one *could* learn anything at any time. Hence, it means that principally there are no mysterious incalculable forces that come into play, but rather, that one can, in principle, master all things. . . . This means that the world is disenchanted.<sup>7</sup>

Nothing contains any secrets. Any magic. There is no forbidden knowledge in the hands of the priests. In theory, one could learn anything. But only in theory. For who has time for any of that? Who can read all the torture memos from the war on terror?

This is the “information overload” that is the subject of countless lifestyle columns in the *Gray Lady*. This is where the experts come in. We have the time—which is to say, we are paid, however badly—to read all the redacted documents and transform those obscure military acronyms, as mysterious as hieroglyphs, into intelligible prose. The experts inform the journalists or become journalists themselves. In either case, the process of research and interpretation is elided in publication. Doubt is transmuted into certainty by the alchemy of the media. For the public to gain access to

what is publicly available requires a new set of priests.

This dilemma is one of the continuities that links the redacted documents of the war on terror, the endless revelations of the Trump regime, and the steady flow of scientific papers in the pandemic era. Few of us have actually read the Imperial College report by the team around Neil Ferguson that pushed much of the Global North to adopt lockdown as a containment strategy for SARS-CoV-2. Living in a highly technical, specialized age of knowledge production has created a paradoxical need for greater and greater amounts of faith. While knowledge, *pace* Weber, might be disenchanting, this disenchantment has produced its own enchanted institutions, its high priests and magicians, who interpret the data we have neither the time nor the capacity to read, and issue edicts. All we can do is trust.

My approach to each of these historical phenomena was identical: we need to read the Imperial College report, the Mueller report, the redacted reports. Don't trust the priests. Read the reports! Dare to know the world. However, when I read the Imperial College report, and breathlessly told my friends about it, they responded: Who has time for all that? Lately, staring once again at the Mueller report, I have started to doubt their excuse. We all spend too much time on Twitter, or else locked down on the couch, watching one series after another. The reason we don't read reports is not about a surplus of documents and a dearth of time.

In the last few years, I've noticed a pattern among some of my friends, which began when Trump was elected, and has only accelerated with the spread of COVID. They stopped reading the news. Their worlds closed in around their houses and families. At best, they scan the *New York Times* for virus figures and forest fires: signs of the coming catastrophe. When I ask them why they have stopped following situations they once avidly tracked—the crisis in Venezuela or the war in South Sudan—they shrug, exhausted, and all respond in the same way: What difference would it make?

I think it's a pretty profound question. What difference might understanding make to the world? By and large, the answer that the U.S. public has given is: not much. The public is not pressed for time; it is rather an astute user of the hours of the day. Why read documents that do not make a difference? Why accumulate useless information?

The pandemic era has intensified a crisis in faith in the technocratic form of governance that typifies much of the Global North. The basic claim of a technocracy is that experts make decisions on the basis of knowledge. (Knowing, in this case, does seem to make a difference.) The aporia that contemporary technocracy reveals is that all the decisions that are seemingly made following reasoned judgments are actually based on entirely other considerations—re-election, for instance, or how a certain policy will play in the polls—that are nowhere acknowledged in the official

technocratic frameworks of, say, public health. This is the aporia of our politics, and it produces the understandably common sentiment that our politicians are lying to us.

For all the recent claims that we should “trust the science” of the pandemic (as if science spoke with one voice or agreed on any one thing) and for all President Biden’s calls to “listen to the scientists,” if you actually read the Imperial College report, the Nature articles, and the pre-prints, it is strikingly clear that “science” is not a blueprint for political action, and that while scientific knowledge might be the discursive framework in which a variety of political claims are made, the deployment of scientific knowledge by institutional political entities (like the Democratic Party) is largely due to considerations and frameworks that are nowhere to be found in scientific discourse itself.

This, I think, explains why we are so distrustful of experts and the knowledge on which they purport to rely. They claim to be speaking from a position of scientific knowledge, but in actuality, such knowledge is never a judgment, never a decision. The decision always occurs in the other scene—outside the framework of a discursive set of judgments about warranted knowledge. It is a testament to the political alienation of our age that people do not think that the source of politicians’ decisions might be in their own will. When one stares at political decisions, one does not find the peoples’ political will reflected, in some Rousseau-like fashion, in the government they have constituted.

Rather than living in a dull age of disenchantment, as Weber promised us, we live in an age of *cynical enchantment*. What is on the table can’t actually be the stakes of the political game. Nothing is to be taken at face value. No one is to be believed. Conspiracy theories blossom in the space left between knowledge and decision. It’s an era of intense skepticism about language and its efficacy. During the 2016 presidential debates, Trump stalked behind Hillary Clinton as she spoke and entreated us to remember: “It’s only words, folks, only words.” The truth isn’t in the words; the words have failed us.

It’s in the context of the failure of public language that redactions have taken on almost physical properties and have become a sort of Kantian noumena created by the political class. When they are made public, redacted documents have the form: “I have something to tell you BLACK.” Redactions are the traces of government power that remain as documents move from one sphere to another, from top secret to publicly available. Redactions deprive the revealed language of content and place all the emphasis on the concealed object. We hope that it’s the absence that will provide the truth—the basis for political decisions—if only we could get access to it.

In a knowledge economy run by technocrats who claim to be making decisions based on scientific expertise, it makes sense that we look to hidden information—to redactions—to provide the hidden key to our politics. This, I think, is the misrecognition that makes

my obsession with redactions a symptom rather than an inquiry. I look for knowledge that will make a difference. Contemporary liberal obsessions with redactions—such as my own—are the strict parallel of right-wing conspiracy theories (QAnon, et al.). In a knowledge economy, we are all looking for that hidden knowledge that will help us make sense of the world. Such knowledge is unavailable, because what is hidden is not knowledge but the awareness that knowledge alone will not make a difference.

I suspect we know this, deep down. That's why we fluctuate so wildly between total indifference—not reading the news, not looking at the documents—and obsessively scanning for the secret trace, the redaction, that will help us make sense of the world and

our own lack of political capacity to change it. Not reading documents and reading them as if they were magical texts are two sides of the same phenomenon. Our words, our public words, aren't working, and it is that, I want to suggest, that is the disease. Politics is elsewhere. Our obsession with redaction is only a symptom.

I still stare at Holzer's paintings, but now I look at them differently. Beholding them, I don't hope that I will find the U.S. state, or become a better citizen. Rather, I look at them as one might peer at a mirror, to take a measure of my own obsessions with the blank spaces on the canvas. I think a lot of our new forms of inscription are ways of giving form and motion to the political impasses of our current moment and, in particular, the limits



**Figure 2.**  
*Trump signs a blank page on October 3, 2020, at the Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.*  
(© Joyce N. Boghosian/The White House, via AP).

of our faith in a technocratic politics and the discursive regimes it has instituted. Our memes and emoticons, the redacted poetry of Solmaz Sharif, and the paintings of Jenny Holzer, all allow us to look at our own time and its obsessions as if looking at a still life. They suspend the suspensions of our own political language and allow us to gaze at our own aporias. Through them, we can see the photograph that Trump released on October 3, 2020. He sits at a desk in Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, and he is busy at work, signing an empty page. Look at the blank page.

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<sup>1</sup> For accounts of these documents, see, among others, Philippe Sands, *Torture Team: Rumsfeld's Memo and the Betrayal of American Values* (London: St Martin's Press, 2008); David Cole, *The Torture Memos: Rationalizing the Unthinkable* (New York: New Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Among other projects, Meg Stalcup and I worked (2008–2010) with The Nation Investigative Reporting Institute (now Type Investigations) to research the way U.S. law enforcement officials were trained in counterterrorism. Our investigation was published in 2010 in the *Washington Monthly*, and was cited in a subsequent Senate inquiry into counterterrorism training. Meg Stalcup and Joshua Craze, “How We Train Our Cops to Fear Islam,” *Washington Monthly*, March/April 2011, <https://washingtonmonthly.com/2011/03/09/how-we-train-our-cops-to-fear-islam>.

<sup>3</sup> My “Grammar of Redaction” was exhibited at the New Museum in New York in Fall 2014 as part of the Temporary Center for Translation, and

is available to read here: <https://www.joshuacraze.com/s/A-Grammar-of-Redaction-Joshua-Craze-fj56.pdf>. An excerpt from this grammar was published in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I. B. Tauris/Ibraaz, 2015), 385–400.

<sup>4</sup> I wrote the catalog essay for Jenny Holzer's exhibition at the Venice Biennale, “In the Dead Letter Office,” in *Jenny Holzer: War Paintings*, ed. Thomas Kellein (Cologne, Germany: Walther König, September 29, 2015), and we collaborated on a book-box, which we made together: “The Secret's Signature” was the name of the essay I wrote for *Belligerent* (New York: Ivorypress, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Select Comm. on Intelligence, Committee Study of the Central Intelligence Agency's Detention and Interrogation Program, S. Report 113–288 (2014), 100n584, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/sites/default/files/publications/CRPT-113srpt288.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Special Counsel Robert S. Mueller III, Report on the Investigation into Russian Interference in the 2016 Presidential Election (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice, 2019), <https://www.justice.gov/archives/sco/file/1373816/download>.

<sup>7</sup> Max Weber, “Sciences as a Vocation,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. Hans Heinrich Gerth and Charles Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 139.

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