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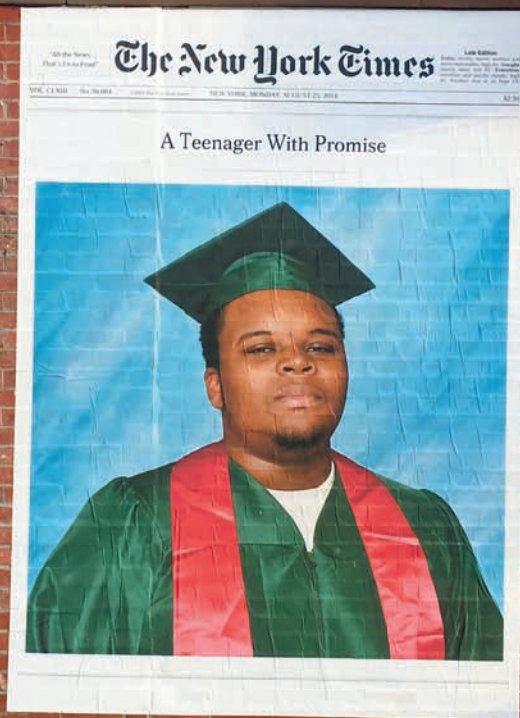
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Alexandra Bell, *A Teenager With Promise*, 2017, inkjet print on bond paper, 96 x 144 in. (243.8 x 365.8 cm), installation view, Brooklyn (artwork © Alexandra Bell; photograph provided by the artist)

Editing the Archive: Alexandra Bell's Annotation, Redaction, and Epistemic Resistance in *Counternarratives*

Sookyung “Vero” Chai

In the final chapter of *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (2018), the historian Zeb Tortorici tells an anecdote that is at once mundane and compelling. Perusing the archival database in search of the vestiges of sexual minorities imprisoned in the Palacio de Lecumberri, which functioned as a penitentiary and a torture chamber in Mexico City between 1900 and 1976 before it was recommissioned to house the Archivo General de la Nación

(General Archive of the Nation), he found no explicit mention but a glimmering trace of their presence from the partly crossed out index labeling the damaged acetate negatives of the Lecumberri inmates—“*jotos (maricones) homosexuales*,” which translates as “*fags (queers) homosexuals*.”¹ Although when, by whom, or why those corrections were made remain unknown, Tortorici regards this finding as an indication that it is the task of scholars undertaking archival research to locate and read beyond the “illegibility”

and absence within the very language of the archive.² In light of the proliferation of artist-researchers or artist-historians, contemporary artists are not exempt from this task; some who have assumed these new roles radically alter and reassess their archival materials by directly writing over them. And as the relabeled negatives at Archivo General imply, perhaps such a noncompliant reading to recuperate the otherwise unreadable suggests something about the contemporary artists’ urge to edit found documents.

The use of documents in contemporary art, of course, is hardly a novel concept. Such a tendency has been broadly theorized by an array of art historians and critics with now-ubiquitous terms like “archival impulse” (Hal Foster), “Archive Fever” (Okwui Enwezor alluding to Jacques Derrida), and “a turn to the archive” (Charles Merewether).³ The so-called archival turn has been attributed to Michel Foucault, whose 1969 treatise *The Archaeology of Knowledge* redefined the archive—conventionally viewed as a static repository of facts—as a discursive system of power, “the law of what can be said.”⁴ Artists under the umbrella term of “archival” destabilize the boundaries of the sayable, either by re-presenting found documents and artifacts to anatomize their contents and meanings or by forging new architectures of knowledge to exteriorize imagined histories. In so doing, they visualize the narratives that have been silenced, overridden, and marginalized by their official and institutional counterparts. To encapsulate it in Foster’s words, archival art is “a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory.”⁵ Such a gesture continues to animate contemporary art practices and discourses today. But rarely discussed in conversations about the artistic reuse of documents are the specifically editorial interventions exerted onto those documents.

The artists employing editorial modes focus on the specification and technicality of textual and visual language as key sites to exhume and interpret the desires that constitute the archive. Through an acute inspection and marking of those elements, they seek to demystify the skewed system that overarches the construction, organization, and preservation of official documents. Their marks thus function as signposts to orient the viewers to turn to those details, disrupting their comfort and neutrality, their distant and passive gaze that tacitly condones

1. Zeb Tortorici, *Sins against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 236.

2. *Ibid.*, 236–47.

3. See Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2004); Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: Steidl, 2008); and Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive* (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2006).

4. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 129.

5. Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 4.

the imposed myth and dogma of the agents behind the archive. In editorial artists' work, the source materials are not simply recontextualized through the techniques of reproduction and juxtaposition but are physically, literarily transformed through their own inscriptions and erasures, which allow room for the conception of the subdued and precluded narratives. Working from the themes of archival art, editorial artists approach countermemory as defined by George Lipsitz: "a way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal."⁶ A sense of immediacy from the direct, handwritten response to the document lays bare each artist's defiant positionality against the ideological and affective desires that drive its making. The work of Alexandra Bell, who is among the artists best exemplifying the salient tendency to edit the archive, offers a nuanced picture of the interplay between the archival and the editorial and the subversive potentiality of text revision.

Despite her reference to the news coverage primarily within the 2010s, Bell does not necessarily regard her materials as current.⁷ Rather, she describes her refashioning of the near-past issues of the mainstream print media to ferret out the symptoms of racism as "'mining' of the archives . . . to go back and actually change the history of something, to create something that could stand as a new record," emphasizing the historical lens she applies in addressing anti-Blackness, which spans hundreds of years from slavery to the present.⁸ Her disposition and method as an artist-researcher epitomize what Christina Sharpe refers to as "wake work." In her trenchant book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), Sharpe demands "new modes and methods of research and teaching; new ways of entering and leaving the archives of slavery"—that is, to imagine Black narratives in excess of "the accumulated erasures, projections, fabrications, and misnamings" as the praxis of the "wake work," an act of undisciplining oneself from the episteme wrought by anti-Blackness.⁹ Bell's inquiry into the framework of classification that demarcates Black individuals under the implicit rules of white supremacy in dominant media manifests the epistemic resistance of the wake work, which is always conditioned by the consciousness, inheritance, and experience of Black subjection and exclusion that are both historical and ongoing, both catastrophic and quotidian. The exchange between the past and the present here follows Saidiya Hartman's reckoning with the "afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment," the lived experiences of Black people "still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago."¹⁰ Situating contemporary news media in contact with colonial archives breaches the reigning narrative of linear progress and further underscores the persistent infringement on and dispossession of Black citizenship.

In her theorization of the archive as a "a process and powerful technology of rule" and fact production, Ann Laura Stoler argues that scholars should read not only against but "along the archival grain"—in other words, "to read for [the archive's] regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake."¹¹ Bell and the artist-editors perform this ethnographic observation of the archive via hands-on evaluation and revision, which distinguish their creative practice from the broader adoption of documents as artistic mediums. Attending to the centrality of language in the structural and institutional enforcement of meaning and figuration

6. George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 213.

7. Alexandra Bell, "Alexandra Bell," interview by Claudia Rankine, *The Racial Imaginary Institute*, accessed March 30, 2020, <https://theracialimaginary.org/issue/the-whiteness-issue/alexandra-bell/>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 12–18.

10. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

11. Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 100.

of racial profiles,¹² Bell interposes her insurgent edits onto found documents to expose the regimes of white supremacy and anti-Blackness that remain operative. She relentlessly investigates and challenges the words and images embedded in newspapers and tabloids to disrupt the subliminal messages that presuppose and propagate racist stereotypes. Her editorial process entails making multiple copies of a problematic news article, wherein she locates visual and textual vocabulary and syntax that work to racialize and distort the event, followed by exhaustively scrutinizing the printed copies by note-taking, highlighting, underlining, bracketing, circling, and crossing out with red and yellow markers and index flags.

In the case of her breakthrough series *Counternarratives* (2017), Bell reconstructed the pages of the *New York Times* (which she refers to as “the official record”¹³) entirely from scratch—appropriating the iconic masthead and rewriting and laying out the columns based on her estimation of the newspaper’s typography and design to match the original—with Adobe InDesign, converting the hard copies into easily accessible, alterable, savable, and reproducible digital formats. The use of a design-making application to transfer the *Times*’s articles to her computer screen is particularly effective for Bell’s distinct process, in which she passes through numerous drafts of revisions (usually more than a dozen), frequently revisiting the digital files to relocate or black out the paragraphs and resize or replace the images within the page. By writing out the existing *Times* articles via InDesign, rather than merely duplicating them by xerography or other means, Bell secures greater authorial control of the archive, which Derrida deems obligatory for access to political power,¹⁴ even before applying her annotations by hand. Bell’s seizure of the *Times* through her laborious re-creation of it anchors her editing power and subjectivity as a gay Black woman, whose community is the constant target of systemic discrimination, displacement, state-sponsored brutality, and overdetermined media portrayals every day.

Journalism as a discursive machine impregnated with racialized rhetoric is a crucial object of scrutiny for Bell in addressing those institutionalized inequities. According to Glenn Ligon, whose archival and text-based work has considerably influenced Bell, “Literature has been a treacherous site for black Americans because literary production has been so tied with the project of proving [their] humanity through the act of writing.”¹⁵ Given that, historically, words have been mobilized as vehicles of racist propaganda, print media is an eminently observable domain to desecrate the anti-Black motives at play in documenting “facts.” As Bell asserts, “Everything is about race.”¹⁶ And Safiya Henderson-Holmes and Ellen J. Goldner propose that “in a society that so often avoids naming racism,” one of the ways to advance the conversation around race is “to address the language and the patterns of cultural imagery within which we speak.”¹⁷ Bell does exactly that; while the artist clarifies that her work is not a Black Lives Matter endeavor, she punctuates the patterns of obfuscation, dilution, misidentification, and circumvention palpable in the jargons of institutional journalism to catalyze the pressing concern about the media depictions and potential counterarticulations of Black personhood. Her art demonstrates that closely, nonconformingly reading and translating the given image and text specifically through revisionary inscription and deletion can assume a form of activism and social engagement.

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12. See Stuart Hall, ed., *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

13. Alexandra Bell, “Alexandra Bell: Counternarratives,” filmed April 19, 2019, MoMA PS1, Long Island City, NY, YouTube video, 31:12 min., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ovLoVFU9_M&feature=emb_title.

14. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4.

15. Glenn Ligon, “Neo-Archival and Textual Mode of Production: An Interview with Glenn Ligon,” interview by Lauri Firstenberg, *Art Journal* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 43.

16. Alexandra Bell, “2018 ICP Infinity Awards: Applied—Alexandra Bell,” *MediaStorm*, March 12, 2018, Vimeo video, 8:51 min., <https://vimeo.com/259758899>.

17. Safiya Henderson-Holmes and Ellen J. Goldner, ed., *Racing and (E)Racing Language: Living with the Color of Our World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 1–4.

Ironically, Bell's editorial practice, which involves correctional mark making to call out racism in news media, parallels the task of a newsroom editor. Consider the image of the *Atlantic's* research chief's fact-checking process in her 2018 article "How to Fact Check *The Atlantic*" and its striking resemblance to Bell's annotated pages.¹⁸ Although Bell's materials are not hot off the press, she nevertheless assumes the role of a fact-checker, which makes her editorial intervention just as much about correcting the given interpretation of the present before it enters the archival database as it is about looking back to the past to rectify the way it is remembered. The duality as an artist-editor is unsurprising, owing to her training at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism. However, keenly aware of the limits of the public press, Bell counterweaponizes her insider's knowledge to disinter and critique the racial prejudices that permeate American journalism. The years she was enrolled in Columbia were plagued with the heightened visibility of police brutality against Black people, notably the shooting of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen-year-old. Distraught by the deeply entrenched racism across news media in reporting these atrocities and traumas, Bell grew increasingly perceptive to what was being neglected, understated, and hyperbolized to shape the appearance of the events depending on the source's affiliation and interest.¹⁹ Her unremitting probe into these gaps and partialities evolved into her much-heralded series *Counternarratives*, in which she interfered with the *Times's* articles to reveal that white racial sovereignty still presides over even the most esteemed source of information on current events. Each iteration of her "revisional resistance" in this series uniquely exemplifies the role of editing in shifting the reader's gaze and overturning the inequitable narrative upheld by the purportedly disinterested institution.²⁰ The first installment of *Counternarratives*, *A Teenager With Promise* (2017; see page 54) reimagines the 2014 front-page coverage of the murder of unarmed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown by officer Darren Wilson, who was later acquitted. The present-day absolution of state-sanctioned anti-Black crimes as instanced by Wilson's acquittal descends from the justified homicides and batteries dating back to the Atlantic slave trade. As Hartman affirms, in analyzing the 1792 trial record of a slave ship captain who killed two enslaved women, "The archive is inseparable from the play of power that murdered Venus and her shipmate and exonerated the captain."²¹ *A Teenager* thus premises that "the play of power" that killed Brown and pardoned Wilson cannot be severed from the basis of the *Times's* discursive enterprise.

The *Times's* front page in question was published on August 25, 2014, coinciding with the day of Brown's funeral. Titled "Two Lives at Crossroads in Ferguson," the two-column piece paralleled Brown and Wilson, which caught Bell's attention as an instance of false equivalency. According to Bell, the paper speciously adhered to the journalistic principle of objectivity, which obligates that every person involved be judged equally. Through evasive verbiage and a split layout displaying their biographies side by side, the *Times* erroneously equated the "two lives," an unarmed boy and a strong-arm agent of the law, who, in reality, did not share the same background, status, living conditions, or responsibilities. The media's deceptive negation of the power imbalance between the two figures and its general, glaring reluctance to see Black youth as innocent and unprotected are inextricable from the grand jury's decision to release Wilson and countless other

18. Yvonne Rolzhausen, "How to Fact Check *The Atlantic*," *Atlantic*, January 25, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2018/01/how-to-fact-check-the-atlantic/551477/>.

19. Bell, "Counternarratives."

20. *Ibid.*

21. Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11.

offenders whose terror upon Black lives is unchecked. In Brown's profile under the subheading "A Teenager Grappling With Problems and Promise," the journalist characterized the victim as an unruly individual, specifically "no angel," obliquely rationalizing the killer's action. A mere one sentence mentioning Brown's shooting death was buried in the sensationalized biography—accompanied by a grainy, cropped photograph of him in streetwear—involving drugs, alcohol, and rap music with "vulgar" lyrics, painting the late teen's ordinary turbulent development as unnatural and pathological. In the profile on Wilson, the fact that he fatally shot unarmed Brown did not appear until the second half of the page, after two paragraphs accentuating the shooter's achievement in the preceding year. The *Times* also selected a pixelated image of Wilson, seemingly safeguarding him from further exposure. Through these foul and deceitful depictions, the article reinforced the racist fables of Black criminality and white purity, the mythical constructs that abetted the murder of the teenager.

Sharpe's call for "the new modes of writing, new modes of making-sensible" speaks to Bell's annotations, which draw attention to and puncture these myth-making prescriptions of Blackness.²² Sharpe asserts that, by securing the second autopsy on Brown, his family "added their own annotations" in order to "come up with his body's harms as seen through their eyes" and "disrupt the dysgraphia that wrote a version of events that was riven with antiblackness."²³ She proposes specifically "Black annotation" as a mode of "imagining otherwise," against and in excess of the oppressive fictions of the archive.²⁴ In *A Teenager*, Bell enacts this countervisual force of Black annotation through her bold and dynamic handwriting, which occupies the paper's margin and pierces through the fabric of grammar mechanically inscribed and coordinated in Georgia typeface. The regular pattern and uniformity of the letters tellingly echo the recurrence of meticulously orchestrated state violence that is committed to jeopardizing and disposing Black lives. These marks excoriate the *Times*'s unjust leveling of Wilson and Brown, which was propped up by disingenuous wording and picture selections, thereby contesting the discursive network of power that prescribes and cements racial stereotypes.

Ligon's monumental piece *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93) foretells Bell's marginalia in relation to her subjectivity. For this piece, Ligon hung in two rows framed pages from *The Black Book* (1986)—Robert Mapplethorpe's polemical photobook of fetishizing, homoerotic nude studies of African American men—and interpolated in the intervals (the margin) between those frames text panels of quotes drawn from various thinkers, including Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall, and Audre Lorde. Kate Eichhorn's deconstruction of the concept of the margin elaborates the emplacement of these commentaries outside the edges of the picture frames in *Notes on the Margin*:

In the 1980s and early 1990s, the margin was evoked in the name of undergrounds and diasporas, subcultures and subalterns. While it was sometimes used to refer to actual places (e.g., refugee claimant hotels, suburban mosques, and cruising spots for gay men), the margin was also synonymous with more abstract forms of alterity and displacement . . . proponents of identity politics continued to shore up the margin as a strategic vantage point from which to fire critiques at the "center." . . . The margin paradoxically became synonymous with infinite potentiality and absolute lack.²⁵

22. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 113.

23. *Ibid.*, 123–24.

24. *Ibid.*, 124.

25. Kate Eichhorn, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art, and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* (London: MIT Press, 2016), 21–22.

The margin, the location of the text panels, then, signifies Ligon's both physical and conceptual viewpoint in confronting the sociocultural meaning, essence, and positionality of Blackness that congeals through the mainstream "center" lens. To borrow from Enwezor, Ligon's critical recontextualization of Black effigies by the white photographer is therefore "against the grain, setting [the images] off-kilter, placing *The Black Book* in archival remand."²⁶ Such insurgent reading and archival remand, as well as the view from the margin, are active in Bell's annotation, which uncovers "how a turn of a phrase or a misplaced photo has real consequences for people at the margins who are still suffering under the weight of unfair and biased representation."²⁷ However, her own handwritten commentaries and markings must be distinguished from the citational text insertion in *Notes on the Margin*.

Bell's handwriting, furnished with bright red circles, arrows, question marks, and exclamation points, carries sensory effects beyond the visual; it is emphatic and interrogative, as if to speak directly to the *Times's* writers, as well as to the readers whose dispassionate and uncritical gaze makes them equally complicit in perpetuating those fictive projections. The marginalia perform what Judith Butler calls "insurrectionary speech," mimicking and reterritorializing the proscriptive, peremptory voice of the official texts.²⁸ Allan Sekula asserts that archives are fundamentally tendentious, because they embody the "power inherent in the command of the lexicon and rules of a language."²⁹ Indeed, while Bell's imperatives mainly function as editorial instructions for herself, the deliberately brusque and authoritative phrases like "Change title," "Remove photo," "Redo caption," "Move to center," "Make smaller," or just simply "Change!" also work to countermand the interpellation of Black personhood by the epistemic sovereign that is the *Times*.

Consider the axiomatic order of the police, "Move along! There's nothing to see here!," which Jacques Rancière uses to delineate the logic of visibility, the regulatory policing of vision and thought in public spaces,³⁰ and the reifying denomination "Look! A Negro!," which Fanon evokes to illustrate the induration of ontological Blackness "in the eyes of the white man."³¹ The imperative form of speech has been an emblem of coercive appellation, automation, and discipline. These commands, which dictate what can be sensed and thought, appear even in images; Sharpe maintains that when photographs of Black suffering travel across various publics, they "function as a hail to the non Black person in the Althusserian sense. That is, these images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged."³² And if, as Nicholas Mirzoeff argues, "to claim the right to look" means to defy "'visuality,' that authority to tell us to move on," Bell's countercommands express direct opposition to that which is made to "seem right and hence aesthetic" by the *Times*.³³ By harnessing the conventions and tropes of visibility precisely to undermine them, Bell orients the public's gaze to the sweeping force of anti-Blackness presiding over the institutional articulation that protests its own innocence and exclaims at the readers to move along. She declares that the established episteme that feigns its incorruptibility is inadequate in accounting for Black lives. This subversive appropriation lies not only in the form and content of Bell's annotations, but also in the very act of mark making itself.

Life magazine's 1941 article "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese" attests to the fact that dissecting an image by overwriting it has historically been an utterance of

26. Enwezor, *Archive Fever*, 43.

27. Alexandra Bell, quoted in Sandra Stevenson, "Analyzing Race and Gender Bias amid All the News That's Fit to Print," *New York Times*, December 07, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/07/arts/design/artist-alexandra-bell-dissects-the-new-york-times.html> (emphasis added).

28. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 158.

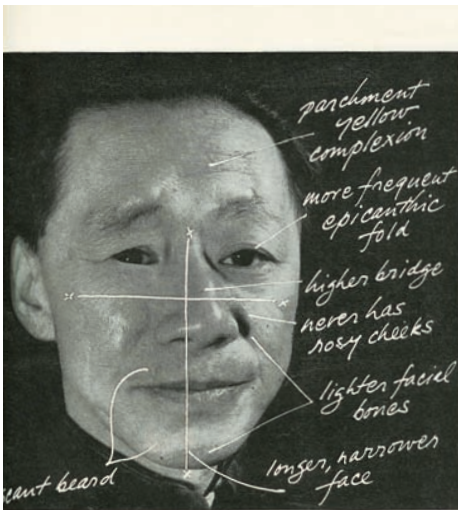
29. Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2002), 446 (emphasis added).

30. Jacques Rancière, "Ten Theses on Politics," in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 45.

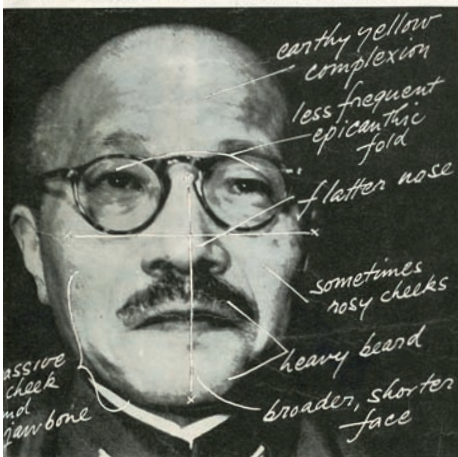
31. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89–91.

32. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 116.

33. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 2–3.



MR. PUBLIC SERVANT, Ong Wen-hua, is representative of Chinese anthropological group with long, fine-boned or must beard. Epicanthic fold of skin above eyelid is 95% of Chinese. Southern Chinese have round, broad faces, not as massively boned as the Japanese. Except that their skin is darker, this description fits Filipinos who are often mistaken for Japs. Chinese sometimes pass for Europeans, but Japs more often approach Western types.



MR. WARRIOR, General Hsueh Tsiu, current Premier, is not, closer to type of burly Jap than highbrow Imperial Household. Typical are his heavy beard, cheek and jaw bones. Peasant Jap is squat Mongoloid, with flat, knob nose. An often sounder clue is facial expression, shaped by culture, not anthropological factors. Chinese were rational calm of tolerant realists. Japs, like General Tsiu, show homeless intensity of ruthless mystics.

HOW TO TELL JAPS FROM THE CHINESE

ANGRY CITIZENS VICTIMIZE ALLIES WITH EMOTIONAL OUTBURST AT ENEMY

In the first discharge of emotions touched off by the Japanese assaults on their nation, U. S. citizens have been demonstrating a distressing ignorance on the delicate question of how to tell a Chinese from a Jap. Innocent victims in cities all over the country are many of the 75,000 U. S. Chinese, whose homeland is our staunch ally. So serious were the consequences threatened, that the Chinese consulate last week prepared to tag their nationals with identification buttons. To dispel some of this confusion, LIFE's new address a rub-of-thumb from the anthropometric conformations that distinguish friendly Chinese from enemy alien Japs.

To physical anthropologists, devoted debunkers of race myths, the difference between Chinese and Japs is measurable in millimeters. Both are related to the Eskimo and North American Indian. The modern Jap is the descendant of Mongoloids who invaded the Japanese archipelago back in the mists of prehistory, and of the native aborigines who possessed the islands before them. Physical anthropology, in consequence, finds Japs and Chinese as closely related as Germans and English. It can, however, set apart the special types of each national group.

The typical Northern Chinese, represented by Ong Wen-hua, Chungking's Minister of Economic Affairs (left, above), is relatively tall and slenderly built. His complexion is parchment yellow, his face long and delicately boned, his nose more finely bridged. Representative of the Japanese people as a whole is Premier and General Hsueh Tsiu (left, below), who betrays aboriginal antecedents in a squat, long-torsoed build, a broader, more massively boned head and face, flat, often pug, nose, yellow-ocher skin and heavier beard. From this average type, aristocratic Japs, who claim kinship to the Imperial Household, diverge sharply. They are prone to approximate the patrician lines of the Northern Chinese.



CHINESE JOURNALIST, Joo Chiang, found it necessary to advertise his nationality to gain admittance to White House press conference. Under Immigration Act of 1924, Japs and Chinese, as members of the "yellow race," are barred from immigration and naturalization.

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE 81

ONLY ZENITH HAS THIS!

ZENITH WAVEMAGNET PORTABLE

U. S. PATENT No. 2164251

WAVEMAGNET

BUILT-IN MOVABLE FOR RECEIVING IN TRAMPS, PLACES, AUTOS

A NEW INVENTION—IT'S DIFFERENT

THE PORTABLE RADIO GUARANTEED TO PLAY WHERE OTHER PORTABLES FAIL... OR YOUR MONEY BACK

AT HOME OR AWAY, THE YEAR ROUND COMPANION

A most remarkable invention... the Patent Movable Wavemagnet... built in this new portable radio... which you can carry in one hand, self-powered with a light, open-pouch battery pack. Ordinarily it works without outside aerials, outside wires or ground.

LIFETIME WHILE YOU TRAVEL... PLAY... OR WORK

Take this wonderful portable where ordinary portables will not work efficiently in a train, airplane, bus, ship, auto or any windowed building where metal constructions block or restrict. The secret of why it works while others fail is the Patent Movable Wavemagnet, exclusive with Zenith.

Check up on your next radio trip. See how many Zeniths are starting to go... and how many others are left to do so. Your money back if Zenith fails.

Works on Light Socket or Battery

If you want to save your battery, plug into any light socket... 110 volt AC or DC.

Under the Other Name But Zenith

... can you obtain this radio on a portable that is big and then an easy changed Patent Wavemagnet... built in your portable... combination battery and lighting control operation—handy and simple reproduction—adjustable to varying conditions—reception at home or traveling. Don't buy until you see and hear the Zenith Universal Portable at authorized Zenith Dealers everywhere.

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IF IT HASN'T A WAVEMAGNET — IT ISN'T A ZENITH

Made in America, Italy, Japan and Great Britain. Sold by All Major and Specialty Dealers.

AGAIN A YEAR AHEAD

ZENITH RADIO

AMERICA'S OLDEST MANUFACTURER OF FINE RADIOS FOR THE HOME

Tall and slender

long legs

short and squat

longer torso

shorter legs

Japs and Chinese (continued)

Tall Chinese brothers, full length, show lanky, like build of northern anthropological group that has suffered most in China's recent history from flood, famine and war with Japs. Average height of Northern Chinese is 5 ft. 7 in., sometimes exceeds 6 ft. Most Chinese in America come from southern and coastal cities, Canton and Shanghai. They are shorter than Northern Chinese, but retain the slight proportions of the young men shown here. When middle-aged and fat, they look more like Japs.

Short Japanese admirals, full length, exhibit the squat, solid, long torso and short stocky legs of the most numerous Japanese anthropological group. Since Navy is relatively new and junior service, Jap naval officer corps members fewer Sumner, has more of the round-faced, flat-nosed peasant type. Over 6 ft. tall, Admiral Nomura shows traits of the big, fair-skinned hairy Aino, aborigines who still live on reservations in Northern Japan. Special emissary Kurusu, also atypical, looks European.

“How to Tell Japs from the Chinese: Angry Citizens Victimize Allies with Emotional Outburst at Enemy,” *Life*, December 22, 1941, 81–82 (photograph provided by Washington State University Libraries; published under fair use)

35. Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 188.

36. Tortorici, *Sins against Nature*, 8.

White,” Haraway avers, “mythically inscribes all the marked bodies . . . to represent while escaping representation.”³⁵ Under this unmarked oversight, the registration and intelligibility of the corporeal self is contingent upon its discursive formation. The etymology of the word “corpus” that Tortorici outlines reveals that physical bodies, documents, texts, and archives are curiously interlaced:

“Corpus” comes from Latin and originally denoted a human or animal body. It only later came to signify a collection of written texts. The term, as used here, thus describes both a collection or body of texts as well as the archived human/animal/divine body as it is represented within the archival document, the archive’s finding aids, and the historiographical literature.³⁶

Human anatomy is also a determining factor of the standard shape, size, proportion, and characters-per-line of a book, and the rectangularity of paper succeeds parchment, a writing surface made out of sheep-, calf-, or goatskin, which, when

removed of excess tissue and stretched out, is rectangular in form. These uncanny overlaps between bodies and documents corroborate that the normative markings on the Chinese and Japanese effigies in the *Life* article signify both symbolic and physical invasion, surveillance, control, alienation, and the inferiorization of racial minorities.

Among Bell's contemporaries, the artist Wendy Red Star appropriates the tactics of marking most definitively. In her 2014 series *1880 Crow Peace Delegation*, Red Star annotated the portraits of her ancestors, Medicine Crow and five other chiefs of the Crow (Apsáalooke) tribe, taken by the white photographer Charles Milton Bell at the 1880 Crow Peace Delegation, for which those noblemen traveled to Washington, DC, to negotiate Crow territory and land rights with US government officials. The late nineteenth century was also the era when the camera was deployed as a verifying apparatus for racist scientists to advocate pseudoscientific rationales such as eugenics, as well as a romanticized, white-savior tool for social scientists and cosmopolitans to witness what they perceived as the vanishing civilizations, both means yielding dehumanizing archetypes, from zoological specimen to noble savage. Jennifer González maintains that the circulation of these Native images in popular culture and consciousness has "creat[ed] a pervasive and persistent 'truth effect' of innate 'Indian-ness' that has become part of the underlying visual sediment upon which more extreme forms of racial stereotyping are built."³⁷ Contemporary Indigenous artists have been reckoning with and deconstructing the anthropological gaze of those Native depictions in their work to illuminate the reality that such exotifying displays and spectacularization of "Indian-ness" is still prevalent across the United States.³⁸ In fact, the portraits of the Crow leaders of the highest rank and honor, readily available online, frequently reemerge as popular reproductions for decorative and commercial purposes, like tea product packaging. Such a dissemination isolates the static images from the referents' identity, culture, and heritage, leaving them as mere objects of exploitative consumption and voyeurism. Because "the process of looking that underlies the reading of the portrait may be constrained by culturally sanctioned, institutionally supported categories of race and ethnicity,"³⁹ those estranged likenesses shore up the presumption of Western superiority and the invented truths of the colonized. Aware of this, Red Star intercalated in red ink contextualizing information pertaining to the sitters' titles, accomplishments, and the significance of each of their regalia, in order to educate the viewers and counteract culturally insensitive uses of Indigenous iconographies. Composed of lines, arrows, and personalized descriptions, the aesthetics of her annotations strikingly echo those in the racist diagrams of the *Life* article, but her version reverses the evacuating and subordinating function of marking to restore instead the photographic subjects' dignities and individualities. The redemptive possibility of annotation as seen in *1880 Crow Peace Delegation* and the dialectical intertwining of body and text speak to Bell's revisional resistance in *Counternarratives*.

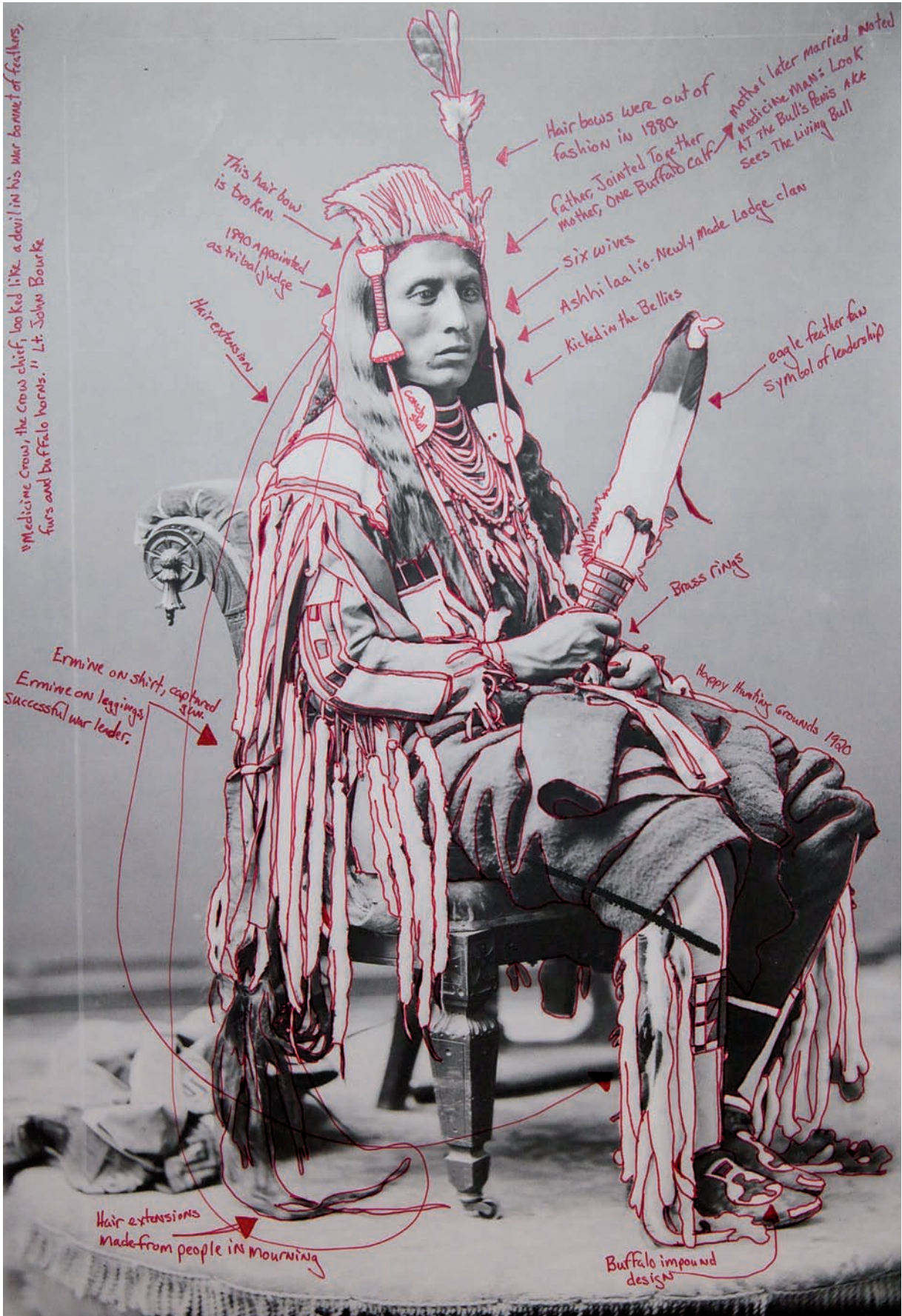
The corporeal resonance in documents suffuses the dominant mode of imaging and publicizing Blackness throughout history that encroaches upon the present. To Hartman, the archive of slavery is "a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhoea, a few lines about a whore's life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history."⁴⁰

37. Jennifer González, *Subject to Display* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 44.

38. *Ibid.*, 47.

39. *Ibid.*, 43.

40. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.



"Medicine Crow, the Crow chief, looked like a devil in his war bonnet of feathers, furs and buffalo horns." Lt. John Bourke

This hair bow is broken.

1890 appointed as tribal judge

Hair extensions

Hair bows were out of fashion in 1880

Father Jointed Together mother, One Buffalo calf

Six wives

Ashhi laa lio - Newly Made Lodge clan

Kicked in the Bellies

Mother later married noted medicine man's look AT The Bull's Penis AKA Sees The Living Bull

eagle feather fan symbol of leadership

Brass rings

Ermine on shirt, captured skin.
Ermine on leggings, successful war leader.

Happy Hunting Grounds 1930

Hair extensions made from people in mourning

Buffalo impound design

Wendy Red Star, *Peelatchiwaaxpaash / Medicine Crow (Raven)*, 2014, from the series *1880 Crow Peace Delegation*, pigment print on archival photo paper, 24 x 16. in. (61 x 41.9 cm) (artwork © Wendy Red Star; photograph provided by the artist)

Marisa J. Fuentes expands on this in her layered reading of an eighteenth-century runaway slave advertisement. As she examines the sentence detailing the fugitive's country and branding marks and stab wound, Fuentes contends that "the very description of this wounded 'flesh' represents one of the points at which black bodies became racialized objects."⁴¹ Physical marks of violence infiltrate the archival terrain, as the runaway's mutilated body stumbles into a document as a "textualized flesh."⁴² Fuentes reiterates the text's relationship to and embodiment of the recorded subject:

These scars turn into enslaved women's stories—symbols of the deep penetration of violence that mark the relationship between the body of the archive, the body in the archive, the material body, and the enslaved female body in space.⁴³

Huey Copeland also elucidates this reverberation of epistemic violence in his analysis of *Runaways* (1993), a lithographic series for which Ligon created missing person advertisements of himself, faithfully mimicking the format of the nineteenth-century runaway handbills: "Slave owners developed a complex lexicon of terms, both words on the page and inscriptions on the flesh, intended to telegraph the color, proportions, and persona of the runaway."⁴⁴ Attending to "the bodily qualities of the painting—the fragility of the medium as well as the instability of the text," Gregg Bordowitz also notes the blurred boundaries between the lexical and the corporeal in maintaining that Ligon's *Untitled (I Am a Man)* (1988), a painted signifier of the protest signs carried by African American sanitation workers on strike in Memphis in 1968, "uses the text itself as a body."⁴⁵ Bordowitz meditates particularly on *Condition Report*—a conservation lab evaluation of the painting's condition—to delineate how the report's marking of the painting's fragility, imperfection, and perishability renders visible "the text's embodiment in an object that is subject to the vicissitude of time and history."⁴⁶ The act of marking, in this light, simultaneously injures the marked surface and accentuates its vulnerability.

Think of the official autopsy of Brown, which concluded that he was shot at close range and had marijuana in his blood and urine to justify Wilson's racist imaginings that led him to shoot the unarmed teenager. The weight and force of language to concretize ontological Blackness therefore continues in contemporary documentations of Black deaths. To return to Sharpe's observation of the independent autopsy requested by the teen's family (which is analogous to the *Condition Report*), the second report served as "necessary annotations" to contradict the claims of the preceding document and to make legible, "in the face of the readily adopted language of black monstrosity," the grave wounds on Brown's head and body that testify that he was the one who was incapacitated and vulnerable.⁴⁷ Such is the crux of Bell's annotation in *A Teenager*: to repaint Brown as a "victim," the term that the mainstream media consciously avoids when it comes to identifying a Black person.

Redaction enters *Counternarratives* as a sequence and an integral part of annotation. As Sharpe explains, Black annotation and redaction are not opposites but "trans*verse and coextensive ways to imagine otherwise."⁴⁸ The asterisk tailing the prefix "trans" functions as an annotation, "a means to mark the ways the slave and the Black occupy what Saidiya Hartman calls the 'position of the

41. Marisa J. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 13–14.

42. *Ibid.*, 14.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Huey Copeland, "Glenn Ligon and Other Runaway Subjects," *Representations* 113, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 93.

45. Gregg Bordowitz, *Glenn Ligon: Untitled (I Am a Man)* (London: Afterall Books, 2018), 63.

46. *Ibid.*

47. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 82.

48. *Ibid.*, 115.

unthought.”⁴⁹ On the margin of the landscape of visibility are the “asterisked histories of slavery, of property, of thingification, and their afterlives.”⁵⁰ Alluding to Mirzoeff’s theory of countervisuality, Sharpe defines “Black redaction”—along with Black annotation—as an orthography toward finding that asterisk, “toward reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame; toward seeing something beyond a visibility” that is haunted by the legacies of slavery.⁵¹ She demonstrates this by redacting the *Times*’ article about Mikia Hutchings—a twelve-year-old Black girl whose frivolous scribble on a school bathroom wall led to an incommensurate juvenile criminal case that sought to transform her into a felon—in order to “hear what she has to say in her own defense in the midst of the ways she is made to appear only to be made to disappear.”⁵² Likewise, by casting bell hooks’s “oppositional gaze,” Bell engages in the “critical, interrogating black looks” that confront and defy the hegemonic optics through her redaction.⁵³ She attunes her and the viewers’ gaze precisely to that which is overshadowed by the verbosity of the *Times* by obliterating in black every line except for those that sustain the core of the incident: “Officer Darren Wilson fatally shot an unarmed black teenager named Michael Brown,” read the remaining words in between the black stripes.

Such a refocusing function of redaction in *Counternarratives* was anticipated by the artist Sarah Charlesworth, who had also informed Bell’s critical eye on print media. For her *Modern History* series (1977–79), subtitled *Second Reading*, Charlesworth masked out the entire text from photocopied newspaper front pages, leaving only the mastheads and images. The displacement of text or “unwriting” brings to the fore the conscious editorial decisions made by journalists in hierarchizing information, such as the overall arrangement of the photographs on a single page or the variations in cropping and sizing the same image across different sources. Charlesworth’s technique of masking evokes Foucault’s articulation of the “subjugated knowledges,” which subsume “historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systematization . . . blocks of historical knowledges that were present in the functional and systematic ensembles, but which were masked.”⁵⁴ Although Foucault’s use of the word is figurative, it nevertheless offers insight into Charlesworth’s literal masking. Her practice, in this sense, is not without irony, as she performs masking in order to foreground the otherwise invisible, rather than to negate it. Along these lines, Bell’s redaction of “Two Lives” suggests that to remove also means to reveal, as it reroutes the public’s attention back not only to the suppressed facts pertaining to Brown’s death but also to the redacted content, as the overwhelming repetition of black stripes brings into view the amount of fallacious and gratuitous information that the original article comprised. To argue that “putting something under erasure isn’t about making it disappear,” Raphael Rubinstein makes an obvious but important point about an act of erasure:

Whether it is a question of crossing-out, redaction, excision or over-writing to the point of illegibility, there must always be some preexisting mark for the eraser to engage. It’s impossible to erase *ex nihilo*. One consequence of this necessary condition of posteriority is that some kind of dialogue must happen between present and past. What came before must be acknowledged, if only as a target of assassination.⁵⁵

49. *Ibid.*, 30. See also Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Position of the Unthought: An Interview with Saidiya V. Hartman Conducted by Frank B. Wilderson, III,” *Qui Parle* 13, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 2003): 183–201.

50. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 29.

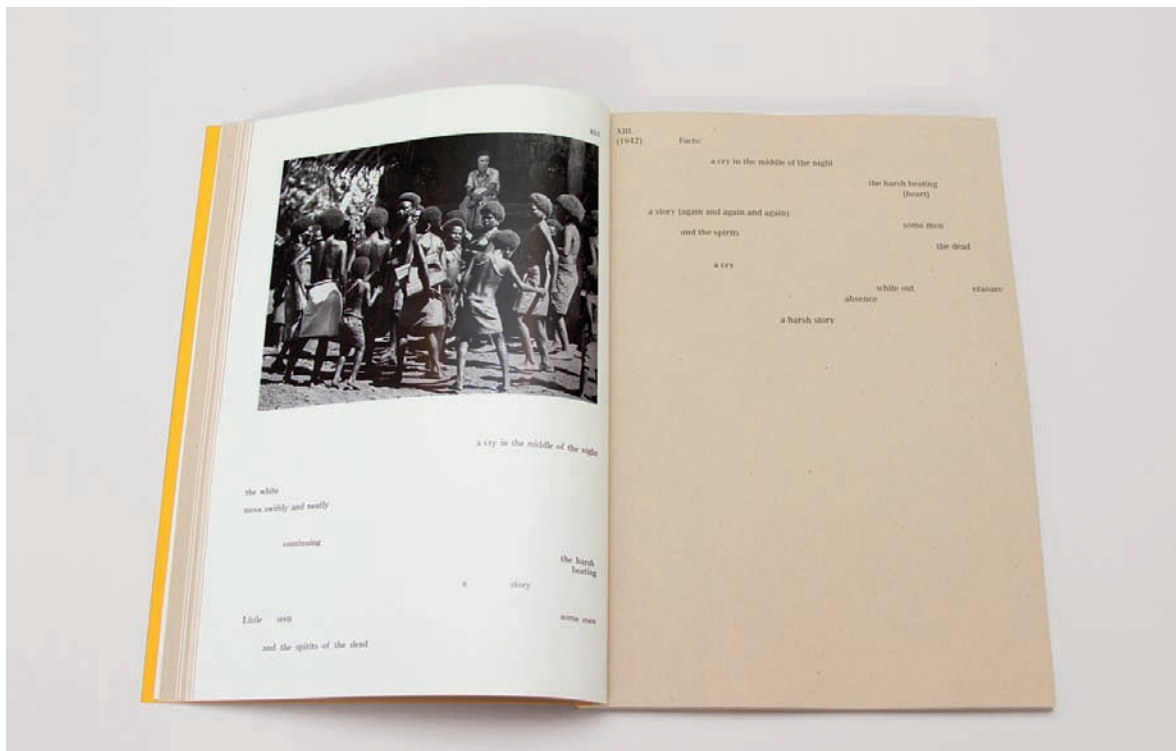
51. *Ibid.*, 117.

52. *Ibid.*, 122–23.

53. bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

54. Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended”: *Lectures at the Collège de France*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 7 (emphasis added).

55. Raphael Rubinstein, ed., *UNDER ERASURE* (Milanville, PA: Nonprofessional Experiments, 2018), 17–21.



Latipa (formally Michelle Dizon) and Viêt Lê, from *White Gaze*, Saratoga, CA: Sming Sming Books, 2018, n.p. (photograph provided by the publisher)

One of the recent works that most resonate with this dual effect of redaction to simultaneously conceal and disclose in *A Teenager is White Gaze* (2018), a collaborative photobook by the artists Latipa (formally Michelle Dizon) and Viêt Lê, who deleted much of the text from archival issues of *National Geographic* to highlight the magazine's primitivizing, Western-centric view of nonwhite subjects.⁵⁶ While *White Gaze* and *Counternarratives* bear distinct aesthetics, they both manifest the political and racial implications of text redaction. The book re-presents the anthropological photographs, mostly of Black and Indigenous people by Anglo-American journalists, coupled with nearly vacant pages with scattered words intentionally left out from redaction, collectively forming a graphic poetry that unveils the imperialist underpinnings and worldview of past *National Geographic* publications. For Latipa, to resummon the fragments of images and rhetoric of colonial gaze more than half a century after their production is “to say that the violence of racism and the patriarchy that fill the pages of this volume are problems of the present.”⁵⁷

Bell underscores this enduring force of racism through her retrospect of documents from the further past in a newer project. In her 2018–19 series, *No Humans Involved: After Sylvia Wynter*, the subjects of redaction shift to the images and advertisements in the *Daily News*'s coverage of the 1989 Central Park jogger case. The title of the series derives from Sylvia Wynter's rigorous open letter to her colleagues in academia in response to the 1992 Los Angeles riots that erupted upon the acquittal of four white police officers after their videotaped beating of Rodney King. Wynter exhorts her fellow Black intellectuals to take responsibility as “the grammarians . . . of our present epistemological order” to labor toward the “mutation” of hegemonic knowledge that has been bracing the objectifying

56. Michelle Dizon and Viêt Lê, *White Gaze* (Saratoga, NY: Sming Sming Books, 2018), n.p.
57. *Ibid.*



Alexandra Bell, detail of *Friday, April 21, 1989—Front Page, 2018–19*, from the series *No Humans Involved: After Sylvia Wynter*, photolithograph and screenprint on paper, 22½ x 17 in. (57.2 x 43.2 cm) (artwork © Alexandra Bell; photograph provided by the artist)

58. Sylvia Wynter, “‘No Humans Involved’: An Open Letter to My Colleagues,” *Forum N. H. I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century* 1, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 42–71.

59. Walter Mignolo, “Sylvia Wynter: What Does It Mean to Be Human?,” in *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Katherine McKittrick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 106. 60. *Ibid.*, 108.

61. Wynter, “No Humans Involved,” 43–44 (emphasis in original).

logic of the “prescriptive categories” like the acronym NHI (No Humans Involved), routinely used by public officials of the judicial system “to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos.”⁵⁸ This entreaty points to her decolonizing project of what Walter Mignolo calls “epistemic disobedience,” the act of disengaging and unlearning the Western principles of knowing that designate white people as humans while denying Wynter humanity as a Black Caribbean woman.⁵⁹ Referring to the Fanonian notion of *les damnés*, the imperial constructs of non- or below-human, Mignolo argues that “the epistemologies of *les damnés* do not seek to arrive at a perfect or true definition of the Human, for there is no Human ‘out there’ beyond the Western imperial concept of Man/Human from the Renaissance on.”⁶⁰ In the prevailing epistemic framework that Wynter seeks to fracture, “to be both human and North American” means “to be White, of Euroamerican culture and descent, middle-class, college-educated and suburban,” logically ranking “the jobless and usually school drop-out/push-out category of young Black males” as “the Lack of the human, the Conceptual Other to being North American.”⁶¹ Channeling Wynter’s decolonial insurgence of divulging and mutinying against the colonial knowledge system, the image redaction of Bell’s *No Humans Involved* focuses more exclusively on the text, specifically on the use of overtly racist appellations like “wolf pack,” “savage,” and

“wilding” and more subtle, coded details to portray the falsely convicted Black and Brown youths as animal or subhuman. Once again, the act of redaction shows as much as it disguises, as the obscuring of images casts a magnifying glass on these racialized epithets.

Through redaction, Bell enables a way of seeing that reciprocates and subverts the imperial gaze. After blacking out the *Times*’s columns, she produced the final iteration of the article, letting a high-resolution reproduction of Brown’s graduation portrait reterritorialize—in the Deleuze-Guattarian sense—the entire front page under the masthead with the revamped headline “A Teenager With Promise,” effectively foregrounding his identity, which was previously overcast by the verbiage that characterized him as a threat and thereby exculpated his murderer and reinforced the hegemony of anti-Blackness.⁶² Like Sharpe’s redaction, which allowed Mikia Hutchings to come into sight as “the little girl who wrote ‘Hi’” and lacked financial resources to pay a restitution fee,⁶³ Bell’s revision reframes Brown as a victimized youth whose promise was halted by the state-sanctioned homicide; “Now you know he’s a kid, right?” says the artist.⁶⁴ Bell’s countervisualization of Brown, however, should not be construed as an effort to undo or repair the harm already done to the dead teenager through the demonizing representation by the press and the anti-Black crime committed by the police. Nothing can resurrect or indemnify the dead. “Rather,” as Sharpe rightly elaborates, “Black annotation and Black redaction are ways to make Black life visible; if only momentarily, through the optic of the door. Black annotation and redaction meet the Black anagrammatical and the failure of words and concepts to hold in and on Black flesh.”⁶⁵ Indeed, *Counternarratives* solicits radical divergence from the dominant paradigm that is determined to pin Black individuals to perpetual abjection.

If the *Times*’s “Two Lives” article refused to fathom a Black teenager as a victim, its coverage of “Lochtegate” refused to call a white man a criminal. The scandal was named after the United States swimmer Ryan Lochte, who attempted to cover up his teammates’ and his misconduct of vandalizing a gas station while intoxicated at Rio De Janeiro during the 2016 Summer Olympics by concocting a story that they had been robbed at gunpoint. Strangely, the *Times*’s front page on this controversy featured an irrelevant image of the Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt instead of the swim team—an egregious mistake or, as Bell surmised, a “willful” association between Black male imagery and a crime, even when the actual perpetrator is white.⁶⁶ To offset these ill-chosen words and images in her second installment of *Counternarratives*, *Olympic Threat* (2017), Bell substituted the photograph with that of Lochte and blacked out the majority of the article, while reworking the equivocal and sympathetic wording in the title, “Accused of Fabricating Robbery,” into a more explicit tag for Lochte’s wrongdoing, “Rio Gas Station Footage Reveals White-American Swimmers Were Offenders,” linking whiteness to the vocabulary that has been conventionally employed to relegate other races. Her biting critique on the media’s disinclination to name white offenders endures in *Charlottesville* (2017), which problematized the overall layout of the *Times*. On the front page, the coverage of the notorious “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August 2017 was sidelined and physically dwarfed by an unrelated three-column issue about undocumented immigrants that was instead positioned as the centerpiece, comparatively diminishing the gravity of

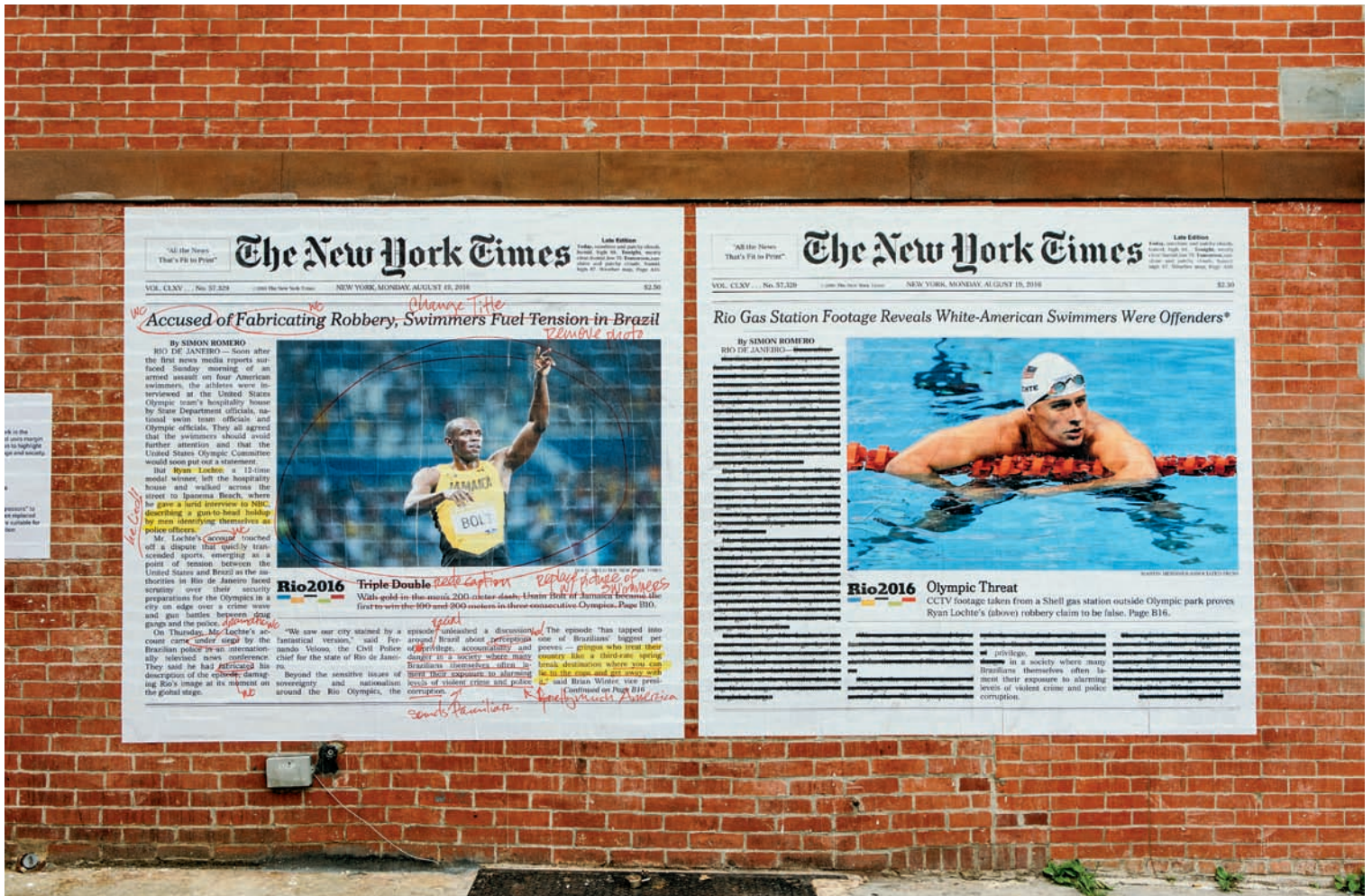
62. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 53–56, for the concept of deterritorialization, which is “a perfectly positive power that has degrees and thresholds (epistrata), is always relative, and has reterritorialization as its flipside or complement,” where “a new role” is assigned to restructure the territory.

63. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 120–23.

64. Bell, “2018 ICP Infinity Awards.”

65. Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 123.

66. Bell, “2018 ICP Infinity Awards.”



Alexandra Bell, *Olympic Threat*, 2017.
 inkjet print on bond paper, 72 x 180 in. (182.9 x 457.2 cm), installation view, Brooklyn (artwork © Alexandra Bell; photograph by We Are Not Pilgrims, provided by the artist)

the racist protest and violence by the white supremacists pervading the country. This time, Bell barely modified the text but drastically changed the layout by enlarging the Charlottesville article almost to the entire width of the newspaper, completely overturning the visual hierarchy originally conferred by the Times. Here, Bell's edits extend beyond annotation and redaction, but critical, revisional engagement with the given text remains as her main objective in *Counternarratives*.

To assay the title *Counternarratives*, the term “narrative” does not plainly denote a story or a verbal account of a thing or an event for Bell. The word in this context can be understood in light of Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s scholarship on the exclusionary process of historiography marked by systematic erasure and “silencing” of certain facts that do not align with the agendas of the arbiters and administrators of that procedure:

Narratives are necessarily emplotted in a way that life is not. Thus they necessarily distort life whether or not the evidence upon which they are based could be proved correct. Within that viewpoint, history becomes one among many types of narratives with no particular distinctions except for its pretense of truth.⁶⁷

67. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 6.

When it comes to knowledge of the past and the power associated with it, this battle involves resisting the “omissions” and distortions of official histories, returning to lost voices and forgotten experiences, relating to the past from the perspective of the present in an alternative (out-of-the-mainstream) way.⁷²

Bell’s work interrogates these “omissions” and “distortions” to illuminate that certain words and images are submerged and canceled in the advancement of those that are serviceable to the agents of the ruling culture, which is white. In *Counternarratives*, new commands override the original statements through the artist’s annotations and redactions, making sensible the uneven power dynamics in the institutional conduction of knowledge formation and promoting ethical looking practices for the viewers.

• • •

The *Counternarratives* series has been presented not only in galleries but also in public spaces as large-scale diptychs, to be read sequentially as a before-and-after, with the annotated and redacted copy of the original article on the left and Bell’s alternative version on the right. The blown-up scale gives an unusual monumentality to the article, inviting an engaged reading from the passersby on the streets and in subway stations. A sense of touch that the artist experiences as she inspects and directly overwrites the article is transferred onto the readers. *A Teenager* in particular induced a wider public engagement, as admirers of Bell’s work kept track of the installation in flux with the changeable environment and even took it upon themselves to circulate small copies. In many ways, *Counternarratives*, leaping out of closed space to occupy the streets and incite social interactions, occasioned a kind of a temporary deterritorialization of urban landscape, mediating and mobilizing the engaged citizens. Such a transgression emboldened Bell’s intent to encourage the viewers to peruse her notations closely and to resuscitate the denied and repressed bodies of Black experiences and memories.

Despite the far-reaching lineage of the archival turn to activate the “knowledges from below” in contemporary art,⁷³ the structural exclusion still extant in the field of art history has whitewashed this tendency into abstraction, trivializing the works of artists and cultural practitioners of color. Bell is certainly not just one more example of the archival artist, but her revisions in resistance to the archive brimming with racial codes and mandates shine a light on the unrepentant and obdurate force of white supremacy that percolates into the origins and workings of the epistemic canons. Bell’s revisions, especially in *A Teenager With Promise*, show that the act of editing—that is, defacing the found print media through the dialectics of writing and unwriting—can be purposed to communicate knowledge that is bound to escape the established paradigm. Harnessing the revisionary nature of annotation and redaction and the “from below” perspective of marginalia, Bell ruptures the interpretations of history imposed by the white epistemic gaze in order to resituate the displaced narratives of Black lives from the margin to the center.

72. José Medina, “Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and *Guerrilla Pluralism*,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 12 (October 2011): 23.
73. Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*,” 7.

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