

# A THOUSAND PAPER CUTS

US EMPIRE AND  
THE BUREAUCRATIC LIFE OF WAR

ANJALI NATH

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# A THOUSAND PAPER CUTS

US EMPIRE AND THE BUREAUCRATIC LIFE OF WAR

Anjali Nath

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## INTRODUCTION PAPER TIGERS AND IMPERIAL SECRETS

I believe the United States is nothing but a *paper tiger* . . . outwardly a tiger, [America] is made of paper, unable to withstand the wind and the rain.

—MAO TSE-TUNG, “U.S. Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger”

On February 22, 2017, an intern at the Department of Homeland Security sent an email up the chain to their supervising analyst for a first-level review of a document referred to in the subject line as simply the “Race Paper.” The analyst responded with a laudatory note a few days later, couching editorial comments on the draft with enthusiasm for the project: “As you can see, there’s a lot to chew on here. I honestly think this is going to turn out to be a really solid paper (no, I’m not blowing smoke up your asses).”<sup>1</sup> The intern attended to the edits with their cowriter, and shot the document back with a request to talk through the new draft. “I’ll come by in a sec,” the analyst replied, attaching a file named “RaceDTIA \_1st levelsecondlook.docx,” and ending the email exchange with what one might reasonably infer was a cubicle visit to their supervisee.

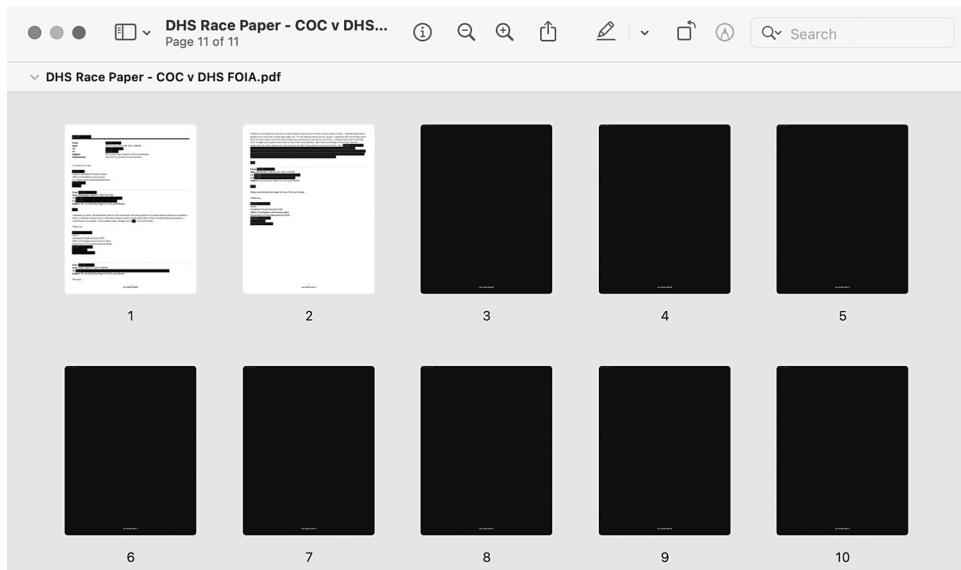
This banal, bureaucratic exchange would be forgettable if not for a few menacing peculiarities: the location of the exchange (the Internal Threats Division of the Office of Intelligence and Analysis); the process by which the emails arrived in the public sphere (a request for public records issued through the Freedom of Information Act); and, most ominously, the appearance of the “Race

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Paper” itself (a nine-page attachment, completely blacked out from margin to margin, censored beyond comprehension). In other words, this otherwise unremarkable email exchange presented the only window into this “Race Paper,” which appears (from context) to be a government-requisitioned position paper on race-based surveillance and monitoring of social movements in the United States. As of the writing of this book, the “Race Paper” remains fully redacted, its title and contents withheld from the public.<sup>2</sup>

Activists composed this public records request that unearthed the “Race Paper” in the midst of popular uprisings against police violence, calling on nearly a dozen federal offices to release “records detailing policies and actions involving the monitoring and surveillance of public protests surrounding police violence, policing reform, racial justice, and the Black Lives Matter movement.”<sup>3</sup> The request, drafted by the media activist organization Color of Change (CoC) and longtime civil rights organization Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), pinpointed the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Department of Homeland Security and their affiliate departments and programs, in an attempt to return a surveilling gaze at a repressive state whose watchful eyes were a constant presence.<sup>4</sup> Activists and abolitionists engaged in mobilizations precipitated by the murders of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, and other victims of racist violence had long known their movements were being surveilled and infiltrated. Journalists and civil rights organizations confirmed these suspicions, mining government and private security firm documents that they had procured through litigation alongside those voluntarily released by agencies themselves.<sup>5</sup> The government had been using military-grade technologies and militarized counterinsurgent strategies against the racial justice movement, drawing on federally funded “counterterrorism” programs to monitor the activities and whereabouts of protesters and to intimidate them. CoC and CCR’s public records request letter contextualized their demands by writing their concerns about these surveillance activities in detail.

The Internal Threats Division produced hundreds of papers in response to this public records request, including the email and its mysterious blacked-out nine-page “Race Paper” attachment. The CCR and CoC took particular pause at this release. “Considering the documents are all fully black[ed] out,” they wrote in a briefing guide on the case, “we are thus left to speculate, as to why DHS would prepare a document it refers to only as the ‘Race Paper’ and then closely guard its contents, even to the point of concealing its actual title and a basic



I.1 Contact sheet of Department of Homeland Security “Race Paper” PDF disclosure, released under the Freedom of Information Act in 2019 under the *Color of Change v. Department of Homeland Security and Federal Bureau of Investigation* legal case.

description.”<sup>6</sup> Running atop the left edge of each blacked-out page of the fully censored “Race Paper” was a cluster of red letters and numbers: “(b)(5),(b)(3).” The code referred to the specific legally permissible exemptions to the disclosure of government documents under the Freedom of Information Act. Reading the margins, exclusions, and censor’s mark was practically limiting, yet speculatively profound. Even the name *Race Paper* gestured toward a form of knowledge more grandiose than its surveillant utility, pointing toward the idea that paper itself might form a racial and imperial infrastructure. Let us begin with paper, as the most basic unit of a surveillant, archiving, war-making police state.

This book is an attempt to make sense of not just of this correspondence but also the mechanism by which one might write a letter to the state demanding to see its files. What is the political, intellectual, and media history whereby papers can be requested for public viewing, only to be censored or denied? Why does the Freedom of Information Act—or any other public records act—exist? By

which process are formerly classified documents censored—or, as the censoring of paper records is known, redacted? Further, what are the visual politics of such redacted documents, living in the public sphere as *images* that invite shock and speculative awe? Rather than a singular event, the “Race Paper” episode is but one in a repeating pattern in which people struggle to wrest papers from the state, to variable outcomes. From the paper trails of the FBI’s infamous Counter-intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) to the dark archives of US covert actions in the Global South, to whistleblower document exposés like those spearheaded by Daniel Ellsberg or Edward Snowden, the struggle to access informational files is stitched to a shadow archive. Moreover, the aesthetic of the redacted motifs that emerge from such repetitive encounters echo across a variety of social and political spaces of contestation.

My fascination with the entanglements of paper and power began in the midst of the War on Terror, during a period of suffering that was both spectacular in its imagery and patently hidden from view. I sought to understand, precisely, the visual politics at work in the security state, in an attempt to make sense of an emergent configuration of power that was at once familiar and disorienting. Like others, I found myself drawn to the aesthetic dimensions of redaction as they appeared in the numerous “Torture Memos,” leaked and released in censored form during the presidency of George W. Bush. This cache of legal memos and correspondence mapped a real-time project of dispossession and disappearance, and the flimsy attempt to justify unlawful detention and cruel and unusual punishment. But their redacted appearance mirrored their patchy appearance in the public sphere, as the spectacle of their censored release belied a sinister regulation on sight into the labyrinth of US military detention centers and black sites. These years of post-9/11 endless war generated an experientially paradoxical relationship to visuality. On one hand, the possibility of seeing and being seen was everywhere; images of planes crashing endlessly into New York City skyscrapers looped endlessly to the point of ubiquity, and flak-jacketed embedded reporting emerged as the new media standard of journalism. Yet at the same time, the War on Terror proliferated in shadows, far from public eyes, with explicit declaration from Vice President Dick Cheney that the imperial machine would covertly operate in such a “dark side.” There was an ironic public acknowledgment, in other words, of the role that secrecy would play in the imperial war. As lawyers and civil rights groups sought information about the secretive operations taking place in this clandestine, postmodern, net-

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worked theater of permanent war, the *look* of redaction became an attendant and incessant ghastly presence.

Censorship was so enmeshed in the project of rendition (and the War on Terror in general) that it became impossible to disentangle the aesthetics of redaction from the practices of state violence. One contention of this book is that the redacted document—and the aesthetic of redaction—must be understood as a particular kind of militarized view, in relation to other militarized views: aerial views, the actuarial gaze, the infographic and data visualization, soldier-produced videos and police bodycams, biometric views, spectacular views, and more.<sup>7</sup> The redacted document lives as an image within an economy of ever-present, easily tradable images, what Susan Sontag once critically, and presciently, appraised as an attempt at the *imprisonment* of reality in the image-form.<sup>8</sup> Yet the censored document is also information, emerging from a bureaucratic apparatus that manages and disseminates paper in both digital and print forms. Another idea of this book is that a cultural history of information can also be a visual study in imperial forms of knowledge. The ideals of transparency, the implementation of public access laws like FOIA, and dialectics of concealment and disclosure must be relationally positioned to other forms of knowing and the impossibility of seeing in totality.

Rob Nixon, elaborating on the visual dimension of nuclear colonialism and other forms of what he terms “slow violence” perpetrated against the wretched of the earth asks: “How do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible?”<sup>9</sup> Secret nuclear testing, in fact, provided the backdrop for key precedent-setting legal cases under the Freedom of Information Act in its early years, as communities fought to make visible government documents to index the harms of nuclear proliferation on their communities. The political practice of transparency emerges from a structural opposition between what Nicholas Mirzoeff has called “the Right to Look,” and the limits of the beheld object to illustrate the violence of actuality.<sup>10</sup> Yet government documents do not tell us what they profess to, precisely because of the authority they represent. This can be one starting point, but certainly not an end.

*A Thousand Paper Cuts* dwells in this dialectical contradiction of visual objects—papers, documents—as produced out of racialized and uneven encounters, managed by imperial information regimes yet nevertheless made meaningful through political struggles to seize them. This book arcs around a cultural history of FOIA. I begin with a broad discussion of transparency to situ-

ate the Freedom of Information Act within an intellectual landscape of the Cold War. I do so in order to place declassified documents and their aesthetics within a political and social history that emerges from the contradictions of capitalism in its Cold War form. From there, I examine activist contestations to imperialism through FOIA, the aesthetic dimensions of the redacted document and the lifeworlds they conjure, and conclude with a reflection on the place of redaction art within a militarized landscape. The structure of the book foregrounds my investment in tethering the now-ubiquitous redacted aesthetic back to the political and cultural conditions that made it possible.

#### **FREEDOM OF INFORMATION AND IMPERIALISM**

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) was passed in 1966, amid global movements against colonialism and racism, and in a newly nuclearized world both discursively and materially split in three through violence. FOIA emerged from these world-breaking and -remaking phenomena, as a tempered response to the kinds of secret archives that proliferated in the tense shadows of the Cold War, advancing “transparency” as a natural extension of American exceptionalism. Within certain parameters, the law allowed everyday people to request information from the federal government, with the assumption that documents should be presumptively accessible to the general public. The law thus reversed previous operating norms, thereby forcing the government to prove why a document should be withheld, rather than evaluating the legitimacy of a person’s request for information. It is worth emphasizing that historically, FOIA is inextricable from this security bureaucracy that was exponentially producing more and more pages of classified material as the Cold War dragged on. Surveillance files collected in the midst of a McCarthyite campaign against the left were innumerable voluminous. Critical studies of surveillance must reckon with the central role that documents play in the making of the security state as critical infrastructure of the intelligence world. Paper is the grist of state violence.

Though FOIA is not presently the only law to govern the disclosure of paper, many pieces of legislation were authored *after* FOIA, modeled in tandem with, in likeness of, and in response to the law. Since 1966, all US states have adopted open records laws, and in 1974 the federal government passed the Privacy Act, which addressed access to files of individuals. Document withholding, censorship, and redaction occur under these numerous laws, and within the theater of the court or in legal proceedings between different agencies. However, FOIA

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remains the most important and best-known piece of transparency legislation in America, one around which people organized, and one, as well, that has its own aesthetic and political cultures that were precedent setting. FOIA in many ways has been an unlikely and unexpected, if not ironic, protagonist in struggles against US state violence.

Since 1966, FOIA has been amended numerous times and its parameters debated both in the courts and in the public sphere. FOIA's purview includes federal documents, but there exist nine exemptions, nine categories of information that are not required to be released, and three exclusions that are also not required to be released.<sup>11</sup> These exemptions cover national security, trade secrets, personnel files, personal privacy, and privileged communications, but they are hardly straightforward. For instance, in 2015 Nate Jones, director of the FOIA Project of the National Security Archive, testified in Congress about the specific overuse of Exemption Five (privileged communication), which he argued was being unfairly marshalled to "censor embarrassing or inconvenient information that should be released."<sup>12</sup> The National Security Archive, an incredible physical and virtual repository of government documents founded in 1985 by transparency advocates, had by Jones's account more than fifty thousand FOIA requests in their history, and figure prominently in historic, legal, and ethical conversations around government document accessibility. Jones and other critics underscored that Exemption Five, delineating possible exemptions of inter- and intraoffice memoranda, had been used as pretext to preemptively withhold information that might paint the requisitioned agency in a bad light, but not information that was inherently sensitive or otherwise excludable in some way.<sup>13</sup> These contested parameters of nondisclosure exist within a political struggle over information access.

My critique of transparency resonates with Chandan Reddy's elaborations of the intimacies between imperial notions of *freedom* and the attendant regimes of violence that such a notion welcomes. As Reddy writes of the United States, "Every effective expression of universal freedom arrives with the materially produced network of repressive and ideological institutions whose provisional unity is the basis of the state's claim to a monopoly violence." In other words, a serious examination of FOIA must account for precisely the kinds of imperial pathways and ideas that made it possible. Reddy insists that "freedom with violence" summons how "socially and institutionally produced forms of emancipation remain regulatively and constitutively tied to the nation-state form."<sup>14</sup>

The *Freedom of Information Act* is ethically, discursively, and materially tied to the violence of the state, paradoxically as a seeming defense against such violence yet also an ancillary of it. As I explore in chapter 1, some of the vociferous supporters of transparency legislation were often silent about the United States and its participation in racialized and anticommunist violence and, in other contexts, participated in its forward imperial march.<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, FOIA has become an indispensable tool in the writing of critical histories of the state, its surveillance practices, and its histories of abuse and neglect. And in its first years it presented a new horizon of possibility. For instance, in 1974, a young Cedric Robinson, while at his first tenure-track job at SUNY Binghamton, issued a FOIA request for the history of the Communist Party in South Africa. At the time FOIA, still relatively new, was in the process of being amended and had debuted in the public sphere as a tool by which to challenge the authority of state power.<sup>16</sup> Robinson's request produced a few responsive documents, though, as most were simply publications or broadcasts that the CIA had on file, not their own internal memoranda. Still, I highlight Robinson's use of the then-new law to indicate a broader desire to make a nascent FOIA useful for critical scholarly inquiry. There was a curiosity about the kind of work FOIA might do in the service of social justice movements and students of left history. Noting the importance of the new law, the American Historical Association at the time had a Freedom of Information Committee, one that included members like feminist scholar Blanche Wiesen Cook, who advocated for the political and methodological necessity of document access in writing women's histories and history from below.<sup>17</sup> Many of these members would shortly thereafter be involved with a political organization, the Fund for Open Information and Accountability, Inc. (FOIA Inc.), who were protagonists in the world of radical transparency activism I detail in chapter 2. Athan Theoharis and Angus MacKenzie were some of the earliest chroniclers of FOIA's significance, though MacKenzie's work in particular remains relatively forgotten.<sup>18</sup> These historians simultaneously advocated for the importance of FOIA for radical histories and while working with activists in New York City (primarily) to challenge workplace conditions, police violence, and counterintelligence more broadly through transparency laws.

In the same period, Columbia University professor Sigmund Diamond submitted a FOIA request to obtain his file from the FBI based on his experiences as a student at Harvard. While a graduate student (and later administrative

Approved For Release 2005/07/22 : CIA-RDP80B01495R000300070011-3

file DCI  
[Signature]

DDI-334-71  
14 NOV 1974

Professor Cedric Robinson  
Department of Afro-American Studies  
State University of New York at  
Binghamton  
Binghamton, New York 13901

Dear Professor Robinson:

The results of the search of Agency files for unclassified data on the history of the Communist party in the Republic of South Africa are enclosed. The data include:

- a. Two foreign broadcasts on the party that provide some insight into the development and history of the party.
- b. A JPRS translation of an interview in Czechoslovakia of Yusuf Muhammad Dadoo, Chairman of the Communist party of South Africa.
- c. A short reading list of recent books and governmental studies on the South African Communist party that might be of value in developing your course.

I have also reproduced the frontispiece of the journal, *The African Communist*, which is distributed by Inkululeko Publications, 39 Goodge Street, London, W.I. This journal may be available in your university library. If not, the reproduced title page gives you information on subscription costs and how you may order the journal.

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Sincerely,

/s/ Angus MacLean Thuermer  
Angus MacLean Thuermer  
Assistant to the Director

Enclosures

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1.2 Letter to Professor Cedric Robinson from Angus MacLean Thuermer, November 14, 1974; released by the CIA on July 7, 2005.

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worker) at Harvard in the 1950s, McGeorge Bundy, dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, had asked about Diamond's associations with the Communist Party. Diamond's FOIA, filed in 1977, led to documentation revealing Harvard University's close ties with US intelligence agencies on the part of administrators, students, and staff during the Second Red Scare, which he detailed in the 1992 book *Compromised Campus: The Collaboration of Universities with the Intelligence Community, 1945–1955*.<sup>19</sup> Diamond's book inaugurated a specific kind of inquiry into the collaborations between institutions of higher education and the intelligence world. Most notably, Diamond's use of FOIA to uncover on-campus abuse inspired anthropologist David Price's exacting trilogy of books detailing the history of anthropology's ties to the national security state.<sup>20</sup>

In both the academic and trade press, entire books have been dedicated to reprinting the FBI files of particular individuals and communities. For instance, *Che Guevara and the FBI: The U.S. Political Police Dossier on the Latin American Revolutionary*, edited by radical lawyers Michael Ratner and Michael Steven Smith, contained over a hundred surveillance documents from the FBI and CIA on Guevara. For students of ethnic studies, *The Cointelpro Papers: Documents from the FBI's Secret Wars Against Dissent in the United States*, edited by Jim Vanderwall and Ward Churchill, since its publication in 1990 by the leftist, cooperatively run South End Press, has been an indispensable sourcebook for those looking for primary texts on US government infiltration and spying on activist groups from the early Cold War period through the 1970s.<sup>21</sup> The files of James Baldwin, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X, among others, have been published as standalone books.<sup>22</sup> As I account for in chapter 2, in the 1970s and 1980s, the efforts to secure such files emerged from within activist and community spaces, as everyday people as well as social movement lawyers sought to bring public scrutiny to secret documents. Before the possibility of electronic file-sharing, these sourcebooks, filled with the primary texts of imperial power, were themselves a political endeavor, as exemplified by texts like Christy Macy and Susan Kaplan's book *Documents: A Shocking Collection of Memoranda, Letters, and Telexes from the Secret Files of the American Intelligence Community*, published in 1980 on behalf of the Center for National Security Studies. These sorts of publications, both past and present, reproduce papers with an indexical fidelity to the originals, in order to create broader community access to the primary sources that archive state repression. More recently, MIT Press has partnered with the information activist organization MuckRock on a

series of books—*Activists Under Surveillance*, *Scientists Under Surveillance*, and *Writers Under Surveillance*—that curate a set of documents relating to the security files of specific figures.

In addition to such annotated collections of the security archive’s primary texts, declassified and redacted documents by necessity figure centrally in writing the histories of state power, racialized communities, and activism on the left, particularly in accounts that oppose the brutality of state violence.<sup>23</sup> Recent works focused on the long traces of American war in the Pacific, scrutinize the document in their thorough accounting of racialized violence. For instance, Ma Vang’s work on Hmong refugee lives and epistemologies, insists on critically reckoning with the work of redaction in the security archives of the United States’ so-called secret war in Laos. She argues that a focus on missing things in the archives reveals the structural particularity of secrecy in the making of US imperialism, as such exclusions manifest in Hmong life alongside the document productions of resettlement case files, CIA ID cards, and the like.<sup>24</sup> Monica Kim attends to another weaponization of paper in the Korean War. She highlights the dual aerial bombardments of paper and napalm over Korean landscapes to illuminate a broader intervention: “Paper was also a weapon of war,” she writes.<sup>25</sup> While attending to the formerly secret interrogation archives of the US Counterintelligence Corps (released through FOIA) and other official government documentation, Kim carefully considers the circulation of such papers, the designs for more paper production that interrogation itself compelled, and the way oral histories and against-the-grain readings might more fully capture such weaponizations of paper.<sup>26</sup> Kim highlights the centrality of these newly FOIA released documents in the theorizing of this paper infrastructure. Such recent accountings of the paper archive point to the specific character of such pulp productions in the making of imperial history.

The continued struggle over the memory and meaning of social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and their subsequent decimation, is inextricable from the life of secret government documents, and their use has not been without controversy. When Bay Area journalist Seth Rosenfeld published *Subversives: The FBI’s War on Student Radicals, and Reagan’s Rise to Power* in 2013, his book alleged that that Japanese American activist Richard Aoki—known for his participation with a then-incipient Black Panther Party—was a likely FBI informant. Rosenfeld’s discovery hinged on an excavation of FOIA files that spanned over thirty years, 300,000 documents, and several FOIA cases in court.<sup>27</sup> Reading

around redactions and through unique **FBI** codes, Rosenberg argued that Aoki (who he argues was known as “T-2” in the files) had been recruited by the **FBI** in the 1950s. He released 221 pages from a **FOIA** disclosure alongside his assertions, after his claim angered community activists and those who admired Aoki’s legacy.<sup>28</sup> Fred Ho—Asian American activist, musician, and close comrade of Aoki—came to the immediate public defense of his deceased friend, arguing in two op-eds that these disclosures had been misrepresented.<sup>29</sup> In a line-by-line rereading of the most controversial passages from the files Rosenfeld had procured, Ho argues that *Subversives* willfully misconstrues the true history of Asian American radical activism by projecting falsehood into redacted spaces and accepting the veracity of the **FBI**’s account:

I read each page of the mostly redacted 221 pages of the files that the **FBI** released to Seth Rosenfeld on the subject of Richard Aoki (and many multiple names with varying versions of first, middle and surnames, including the supposed code name Richard Ford). The only thing that I believe can be confirmed by these heavily redacted files is that the **FBI** *believed* it had an informant. The files begin in the early 1960s and go to the fall of 1977. No files seem to exist after 1977, so any allegation or intimation of on-going contact with the **FBI** is non-existent. Let’s for the sake of argument assume that the **FBI** “had their man” (as Rosenfeld concludes) in one Richard Aoki. In their vetting of Aoki, they do a background check including the possibility that Aoki might even be a “plant,” the **FBI** word for an infiltrator into the **FBI**! There is no conclusion or methodology revealed as to how they vetted that question of Aoki possibly being such a “plant.” We read page after page of repetitive bureaucratic corroboration that Aoki is indeed a quality informant. Of course, due to the redactions, nothing is revealed as how valuable was his information and service to “the Bureau.”<sup>30</sup>

Ho’s defense hinged on a rereading of documents, most of which were produced in the moment in which Aoki lived. Regardless of Aoki’s guilt or innocence, Ho’s argument illustrates to a palpable suspicion of state paper that complicates readings of redacted documents. Further, it points to the ironic centrality of **FOIA** in the writing of the radical history of twentieth-century America. This is a history, as I show, that may have been challenged by the very people who supported the legislation in the first place.

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Indeed, encounters with FOIA are so notable in their irregularity that journalists and academics alike often comment on the bizarre experience of requesting and receiving (or not receiving documents), and strategies for requesting and interpreting these materials.<sup>31</sup> Simone Browne opens *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, a book that reshaped the landscape of surveillance studies through an exacting history of racialized ways of looking, with a brief vignette about FOIA. Browne submitted a FOIA request for Frantz Fanon's file to the FBI, which they produced only minimally responsive documents. Browne attributes the scanty response to the ability of a surveillant state to disappear evidence.<sup>32</sup> (File destruction is a routine exercise of power; the transparency activists of the 1970s and 1980s I discuss in chapter 2 galvanized against such destruction of FBI and police papers.) Browne's book addresses how surveillant technologies are inextricably and historically tied with the policing of Black life, but the focus of her opening vignette resonates with how FOIA shapes a politics of knowing, seeing, and looking back. Labor historian William Pratt's 1992 article "Using FBI Records in Writing Regional Labor History" reflects on the writing of radical history in the American Midwest through the security archive. Pratt's article provides an account of his experiences using FOIA that is also intended as a methodological guide for left scholarship. Gaps in the record, Pratt notes, follow the strategic and regional interests of the FBI; for instance, he was able to find records regarding communist and farmer-labor organizing in Montana before 1940, whereas the Bureau had little analogous material on the Dakotas in the same period. In Pratt's account, the FBI's quarterly reports on regional communist organizing alongside their surveillance files were rich in biographical data and useful for mapping political communities, though they often provided inaccurate, misleading, or incomplete information. For this reason, he concludes: "It cannot be stressed too strongly: FBI materials, useful as they may be, are only one kind of source, and the historian who utilizes them to the neglect of more conventional materials acts at his or her peril."<sup>33</sup>

Despite the obvious contradictions of using such documentation to map a people's history, the Freedom of Information Act has nevertheless played a key role in the material politics of knowledge production. How do we approach this contradiction? Files were, of course, filled with lies, speculations, and observations inflected through a racist, sexist, homophobic frame. In her canonical feminist analysis, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellec-

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tuals,” Carol Cohn illuminates the bizarre, untethered, and sexually inflected languages developed in the militarized context as experienced during her time participant-observing a defense institute.<sup>34</sup> Defense intellectuals, she argues, rely on sanitized language, sexual metaphor, and acronym, to discuss the intricacies of war without summoning its consequences: from *clean bombs* to *surgical strikes* to *peacekeeping missiles*, to the language of thrust, penetration, and virginity. It is this language that lives on the pages of secret reports on nuclearization and warfare, where a structured militarized thinking distances the weapon from its existential purpose to kill or maim. In the papers that proliferate in the security archive, it is *this* writing that rewrites the world, its people, and its resources in an imperial form.

Yet the contents of the government file can also produce oddly vivid portraits, or those which can be meaningful for their strange pattern of counter-revolutionary lies and unlikely observations. Teishan Latner’s work closely examined the FBI files of Veneceremos Brigade, the most significant and long-lasting Cuban solidarity organization in United States. He reveals how despite the attempts to criminalize the Veneceremos Brigade, the material documented in the voluminous twenty-three thousand pages of surveillance files defies the logic of the archive. That is, “files on the Venceremos Brigade illustrate the manner in which counternarratives can surface even within the body of the state’s archives on grassroots political movements, narratives that are potent enough to challenge the power of the state’s evidence deployed against them.”<sup>35</sup> Latner details how literary analyses of radical material, information drawn from the public domain, the presence of anti-imperial voices, and even the material accounted for through direct surveillance resists the intent to criminalize and discredit the organization.<sup>36</sup> Yet another example of the surveillance archive’s peculiarity emerges from William Maxwell’s chronicle of the FBI’s spying on Black modernist writers. Through an extensive FOIA search, Maxwell unexpectedly found that the Bureau not only focused on the biographical sketches and physical whereabouts of writers but also engaged in literary criticism and close study of Black writing.<sup>37</sup> That is, the files show a relentless denigration and pursuit of the authors, and a simultaneous parsing of their words and texts.

This is not to privilege the government document but, rather, in the words of Orisanmi Burton, to “analyze [them] as hostile sources through a rebellious and disloyal interpretive paradigm.”<sup>38</sup> The work of Burton and others scholars working with counterinsurgent archives attends to the structuring conditions

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of the paper, just as much as their content: Were they dropped as aerial warfare from the sky? Where and how do these files exist? Can their existence illuminate a physical map of counterinsurgency? How does their vocabulary reveal a racialized and sexual politics to the state? What do their omissions, classifications, and gaps reveal about the exertions of the state? Of course, histories of US government surveillance against dissidents live not only in documentary records but also in the embodied memories of everyday people who have long lived under—and resisted—US racialized violence and surveillance.<sup>39</sup> In his work on the Attica Rebellion, Burton offers an approach to the carceral archive through a method he terms “archival war,” a “simultaneous reading of carceral and Black radical sources” that recognizes and amplifies the inherent animus between the security archive and its subjects.<sup>40</sup> The struggle over papers and documents is made meaningful within this context: not as a disembodied and authoritative look but, rather, as a particular view from a violent state that is best understood through social movement and in the context of community struggle.<sup>41</sup> The *race paper* account is so compelling precisely because it makes visible a familiar pattern of brute suppression and mundane violence, and the conscription of paper *qua* paper in an imperial project. These nine completely redacted pages distill into a chilling shorthand what we know, *what we've always known*, about the machinations of the imperial state.

#### **PAPER AND POWER**

A censored sheet, blacked out and edited, is a paper *cut*. The soft fleshy bits of a finger that wrestle with documents develop improbably painful *paper cuts*. In Viet Nguyen's novel *The Sympathizer*, a protagonist Vietnamese spy embedded in the landscape of Southern California, laments his boring filing job in an academic Department of Oriental Studies, noting that “these things . . . amounted to *death by a thousand paper cuts*” (emphasis mine).<sup>42</sup> An intimacy exists between the cut (or censored) paper and the power of paper to cut, wound, kill. Martin Espada, civil rights lawyer and poet, penned a piece titled “Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper,” a first-person reflection on working in a legal pad printing as a teenager. On the workshop floor after hours of work, “hands would slide along suddenly sharp paper, and gather slits thinner than the crevices,” as critical steps of assembling the legal pads were done gloveless.<sup>43</sup> Espada's poem culminates in a final stanza in which the invisibilized labor of paper manufacture surges through the present:

Ten years later, in law school,  
I knew that every legal pad  
was glued with the sting of hidden cuts,  
that every open lawbook  
was a pair of hands  
upturned and burning.

Espada's poem brings the politics of paper to light in at least two ways: First, the poem draws the reader into the embodied, material world necessarily mobilized to produce paper as a commodity under capitalism. A related second dimension to Espada's poem is the gesture toward an always already-present subaltern story written into a text or an object—this sense that paper itself might have a counterhistory, or might point toward a history from below. *Every legal pad was glued with the sting of hidden cuts*. In her exploration of neoliberal subject-making, Imani Perry draws on Espada's poem to underscore the extractive nature of the global economy, wherein even objects like paper, thought of only as mediating technologies, can illustrate the violence of the world-system. Paper is itself a product of capitalist production, at least the papers on which the American Cold War was composed. The industrial production of paper invented the possibility of printing such voluminous reams. It is not without irony that inscription of histories and ideas happen on such a commodity. "Like the word, it [paper] is the surface on which life and death are written," Perry writes.<sup>44</sup>

The redaction of paper—like a jump cut in cinema—lays bare an editorial process that creates discordant visual objects. Visual cuts assert authoritatively the limits on sight imposed by the state. In popular culture, censored paper is a constant, yet rarely commented on, recurring motif: the partially redacted document sent in a manila envelope to a plucky journalist; the secret file casually tossed across the desk of a corrupt government official; the PDF cache scoured by a rogue intelligence officer using stolen login credentials. Beyond just the appearance of paper-as-prop, manifold films and TV series revolve around the politics of secrecy and whistleblowing, centering paper as an actor in the social and material world. A number of recent political thrillers are based on real stories of whistleblowing, and hinge on the exposé of internal memoranda and other secret documents to public news outlets. For instance, Gavin Hood's *Official Secrets* (2019), a British drama starring Keira Knightley, is about the exposure of British intelligence plans to secretly manipulate the UN Security Council

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into supporting war on Iraq in 2003. Based on the true story of Katherine Gun, a translator for the Government Communications Headquarters, the story follows the government's prosecution of Gun under the Official Secrets Act; in early scenes, the viewer, with bated breath, watches Knightley—in her role as Gun—transform into a whistleblower at work. She copies and pastes a secret memo into a Word document, saves the file to a zip drive, and anxiously saunters into the copy room to print the material surreptitiously. Similarly, Steven Spielberg's *The Post* (2017) dramatizes the publication of the Pentagon Papers in print news, begins with a reenactment of Daniel Ellsberg's photocopying of the pages, including close-ups of hands and documents illuminated as if copied: the material practice of cutting off top secret demarcations on these Xerox copies.

Beyond the cinematic motif of the document, real FOIA requests have revealed real-life collusions between Hollywood and the military, the former providing platform for the latter as a broad part of a propaganda apparatus. For instance, the CIA consulted on Kathryn Bigelow's film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), a gritty film glorifying the covert operation to assassinate Osama Bin Laden, as did the Marines on the sci-fi blockbuster *Avatar* (2009).<sup>45</sup> *Zero Dark Thirty*, publicized with redacted billboards and advertisements, made intense uses of shadows and negative space to conjure censored materials. Secret papers thematically and semiotically appear in cinematic story worlds, and they can also tell us about the relationship between the entertainment industry and military.

There is also, in this book, a relationship being sketched between the paper document and the documentary film; or, to be more precise, the book in some ways has sprung forth from the tensions between (and similarities among) the document and the documentary. These tensions and relations flash up throughout this work: in the use of a documentary titled *The Intelligence Network* (1978) produced by the Campaign for Political Rights as an organizing tool for FOIA activism to liberate and demand access to government paper; in the visual summoning of redacted documents within War on Terror detention documentaries as spectacles of state violence; in the destruction of the paper trail leading to the infamous CIA torture videos; and in the eerie, thrilling, and beautiful auto-ethnographic film *The Feeling of Being Watched* (2018), on Assia Boundaoui's fight to access the thousands of FBI surveillance files on her Arab American community in Chicago. This is not to say we should speak of cinema and paper together, nor as extensions of one another. Rather, when we consider both as media which attempt to translate an actuality, their mutually tenuous relation-

ships to the evidentiary becomes clear.<sup>46</sup> The documents this book covers are largely those penned by the government that justify, catalogue, and organize the bureaucracy of national security. On the other hand, documentary films, particularly those I attend to in this work, largely present critiques of the state, and the disclosure of information is woven into their narrative form. In other words, documentary accountings, in both senses of the word, mobilize the evidentiary to display and circulate information in a public/counterpublic sphere.

My approach to thinking about the evidentiary nature of documents, and the public sphere within which they circulate, borrows from the critical work of scholars like Cait McKinney, who, in *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, illuminates the collective political labors of compiling and sharing material within queer and feminist spaces. McKinney's frame resonates with the work of transparency advocates who used and shared materials in hopes of reclaiming freedom of information for liberatory ends: "Information work gives ground to nascent counterpublics by establishing new terms of reference and building shared infrastructures for encountering information."<sup>47</sup> Their work on feminist information-sharing networks emphasizes how a document is an object of material struggle that both informs and creates what Nancy Fraser termed "subaltern counterpublics."<sup>48</sup>

A document is, of course, a site of information and disinformation, and an authoritative performance of what is considered information at all. Further, a document is a visual object and an elemental unit of subject-making under state power. To possess documents affords particular kinds of rights, as the brutal realities of an undocumented life reveal. In her eponymous 1951 essay *What Is Documentation?*, Suzanne Briet asked the question nearly a decade and a half before Andre Bazin published "What Is Cinema?" in *Cahiers du Cinema*. Briet argued for both a discursive and social answer to her question, highlighting that documents might only be understood in comparative relation to other documents, and moreover that documentation as such should be understood as interdocumentary: "intimately tied to the life of a team of workers or scientists or scholars," and creatively produced "through the juxtaposition, selection, and comparison of documents and the production of auxiliary documents."<sup>49</sup> These auxiliary documents, in the case of the security archives in addition to the standard accompanying identifying information, might include the Vaughn Index or other documentation specific to the FOIA litigation, as I discuss in chapter 1. But Briet, writing for a social interpretation of the document as a "new cultural

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technique,” in the aftermath of World War II, pushed back against the emergent new scientific secrecy regimes. “Secret documentation,” she argued, “is an insult inflicted upon documentation.”<sup>50</sup> While this book does not argue that secret archives are an aberrant formation, Briet’s response nonetheless sheds light on the conceptual and material force that secret documents had, even in the very beginnings of the Cold War. In other words, they must be understood as centrally part of postwar American bureaucracy, even if as a constitutive other, a secret-sharer if you will, that constitutes the public sphere.

Before I continue, I offer a rough distillation of these terms for the reader: Paper is the grist of violence, of racialized state violence, of violence in the form of capital accumulation. Paper has a material and social history. As midcentury media theorist Harold Innis reminds us, paper should be understood as a space-time media that lends itself to large, centralized authorities and a system of imperial expansion.<sup>51</sup> That is, the portability of paper and the possibility of its inscription itself epitomizes the endlessly bloated and self-proliferating nature of imperialism. Paper is the precondition for the document which, following Briet, exists only discursively and intertextually. Even in the digital age, our desires for the paper remain, or the expectations for what it means to possess and produce documents in the context of the state.<sup>52</sup> The document exists in relation to other documents as a network of authorizing statements that records, produces, and performs information.<sup>53</sup> Inherently, the document occurs in an organizing infrastructure of files, indexes, and archives; an ecosystem which gives meaning to the document in the social and political world. Racial capitalism authorizes itself through the file (the land becomes property, the person becomes a slave, a prisoner, a worker, a landlord) and rewrites the world through an incoherent and sometimes clandestine frame (the security archive, the carceral archive, the defense industry, the intelligence world). Of course these transformations could not happen without the gun, the missile, or the soldier, but it is the paper that authorizes them. Out of this ecosystem, regulation of the contents of information becomes meaningful, the state asserts power with a confidential stamp on a file, the ideas of the so-called intelligence community dwell. Out of this ecosystem, media like “the rap sheet” cohere, or the possibility of a person as “undocumented.” David Graeber elaborates this media theory: “Police are bureaucrats with weapons.”<sup>54</sup>

Of course, there are tactical distinctions in the work of the police, intelligence agencies, and the military. I do not intend to flatten these. But Graeber

expands an important dimension; the rise of midcentury bureaucracies must be linked with the practice of policing. Police work involves enforcing code and law through paperwork. Filling out, pushing, and authorizing forms for death, burglary, assault present a far greater proportion of policework than acknowledged, particularly as they interface with other large bureaucratic institutions like stage agencies or insurance companies.<sup>55</sup> Policing is largely paperwork, and even the violent abuses of policing often emerge as moments of bureaucratic enforcement. *License and registration, please; or, Can I see some identification?* For Graeber, the idea of the faceless disembodied bureaucrat does not adequately capture bureaucratic enforcement under capitalism; instead, we must think about the union between the muscle of the state and its regimes of information. It is *this* that produces the force of law.

In this book I use the terms *security archives* or *secret documents*, but without naturalizing their existence across an information landscape. These papers are not simply records of violence; their existence, proliferation, and organization is itself a form of violence. They should not exist: Their existence testifies to the crushing, well-capitalized tactics of a security state and a bureaucracy fashioned around the organization and production of militarized, surveillant, and policing power. It is within the context of this security bureaucracy that secrecy and transparency become key political practices. If paper is a basic, inherent media of the imperial state, the circulation of paper makes political meaning. Circulation, for security archives, always already implies noncirculation: secrecy. A dialectic of secrecy and transparency, of disclosure and nondisclosure is inherent to the power of the security file. It is this *dialectic* that is important, as it produces the possibilities and actualities of state violence as *state* violence.

Indeed, studying the histories of these papers, and of bureaucratic organization more broadly, presents an opportunity to “unlearn imperialism,” as Ariella Azoulay suggests.<sup>56</sup> Recent work on the history of paper and files sheds light on the ideological and cultural modalities that produce and organize paperwork.<sup>57</sup> Through the vertical filing cabinet, as Craig Robertson shows, one might glean an entire history of capitalist ideas of hierarchy, efficiency, and the feminization of organizing labor.<sup>58</sup> Though the physical organization of government files is not the focus of this book, it is significant that the architecture of the archive reveals the logics and labors of capital accumulation and militarized knowledge. For instance, FOIA activists of both present and past often share their law-use skills as an act of solidarity and capacity building. Activists demystify the orga-

nizational structure of policing and intelligence units to increase the efficacy of requests, as I discuss in chapter 2. These tactics points to the way the seemingly mundane organizational logics and practices can illuminate the contours of state power. A powerful example of this can be found in the historical work of Kirsten Weld, who reveals how after the US-backed coup against Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala, the American government materially supported the “modernization” of police files through information management training programs (including modernizing individual surveillance files, property records, police reports, use of notecards) and the physical import of vertical filing cabinets to house them.<sup>59</sup> The surveillance, disappearance, and murders of left activists in Guatemala City during the decades-long civil war were a direct result of the seemingly benign new filing systems that had been implemented.

For compelling reasons, critics of transparency and the punitively structured surveillant gaze have turned toward Édouard Glissant’s assertion of “the right to opacity,” as a counterpoint to naive celebrations of transparency.<sup>60</sup> As a tool of the state, transparency is but a ruse that endlessly promises a rights-bearing subject while in reality the state wages permanent wars, unhindered, and punitively discards the lives of most. In this way, the idea of *opacity* as a *right* suggests that lifeworlds that exist beyond the “extractive viewpoint,” to draw from Macarena Gómez-Barris, are sites of fugitive possibility, political solidarity, and a different kind of futurity.<sup>61</sup> To be sure, the political and aesthetic interventions through a frame that disavows transparency are delightfully plenty; opacity can lead us toward a capacious, unruly, ungovernable understanding of life and our relations to each other.<sup>62</sup> My argument, while distinct from this line of critique, runs parallel to it. In suggesting an intellectual and aesthetic approach to transparency, this book seeks not to salvage it from liberal forms of governmentality but, rather, to think dialectically and locate it within a contested political terrain. The kiln of the state fires the possibilities of opacity into the tactics of disappearance, surveillance, clandestine operations. But the hands of the people can also transmute transparency from regulatory mechanism of the state into something else. In other words, what possibilities can the transparency / secrecy dialectic produce? The histories of anti-imperialism and antifascism clearly also demonstrate the unruliness of transparency, which extends beyond what opacity can conceptually account for. The seizure and reappropriation of government documents for various political ends has been a common if not an inherent theme: from the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 to the struggles over land in contemporary



**I.3** Egyptian revolutionaries go through State Security Police reports, amid bags of shredded documents, in an underground garage on March 5, 2011. Photo courtesy of Hossam El-Hamalawy.

Paraguay, from the movements to wrest counterinsurgency files from American “intelligence” agencies to the high-profile prosecution of military whistleblowers.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, is there a state without papers? Or a law without documents? A revolution without the seizure of files, the storming of the embassy or the intelligence building? Or a modern military without secrets?<sup>64</sup> Secrecy and transparency are concepts, discourses, and ideas, not normative states of being, made meaningful through a fundamental contradiction between labor and capital, oppressed and oppressor, colonized and colonizer. I understand paper as a material battleground that emerges from such antagonisms.

#### A PAPER TIGER

In the early days of the Cold War, Mao Tse-tung famously proclaimed the United States and its atomic bombs to be no serious threat. He commented, “I believe the United States is nothing but a *paper tiger*,” adding to his earlier contention that “outwardly a tiger, [America] is made of paper, unable to withstand the wind and the rain.”<sup>65</sup> From the perch of the present, sifting through the volumes

of decaying, frayed, and photocopied paperwork produced in the offices of the Cold War, Mao's words paradoxically ring true, though in a different register. Paperwork crafted the Cold War state, as bureaucracy, in turn, crafted a paper tiger, as curious researchers who request government documents, dwell on their redactions, and ponder the secrets they reveal can corroborate. The Cold War, indeed, produced this paper tiger, this paper bureaucracy: classified memos detailing clandestine operations, files and filing systems to document subversives, and complex systems of classification to determine which eyes could see which files. Cold War blocs were built from reams of pressed pulp.

This book—itself now an artifact of print culture—is an attempt to think through paper politics with Mao's unintentionally astute observations in mind. That is, the repressive state and its lawfare hinges on the production of particular papers, some of which are classified, some of which are not. *A Thousand Paper Cuts* draws from this rereading of Mao's words in staging the key interventions into the history of military bureaucracy, and the visual politics of transparency. Militarization produces both particular files and particular subjects, two phenomena that are profoundly interconnected. The book arcs around the cultural history of FOIA, beginning with a broad discussion of transparency within the intellectual landscape of the Cold War, and from there examines activist contestations to imperialism through FOIA, the aesthetic dimensions of redacted documents and the lifeworlds they build, and concludes with a reflection on the place of redaction art within a militarized landscape. The structure of the book foregrounds my investment in tethering the now-ubiquitous redacted aesthetic back to the political and cultural conditions that made it possible.

Chapter 1, “Secrecy Is for Losers: Freedom of Information and Cold War Politics,” examines the cultural history of freedom of information in America. On the Fourth of July in 1966 and with no reporters present, Lyndon Johnson quietly signed into law the most powerful piece of information legislation in American history, the Freedom of Information Act. FOIA was a response to a particular transnational American formation, a paranoid Cold War politics that mobilized state secrecy and produced copious amounts of documents, most of which were classified. Using a critical ethnic studies lens, I analyze the history of three key figures who were prominent protagonists of transparency: John Moss, the plucky and somewhat obscure congressman from Sacramento who was the driving force behind FOIA, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who wrote prolifically about transparency after the end of the Cold War, and the sociologist

Edward Shils, the canonical modernization theorist who wrote one of the first texts on American secrecy during the Cold War. Though these men represented varying political ideologies, each of their calls for transparency emerged from profound anxieties about communism and a racialized logic of the good citizen-subject. These politicians and intellectuals saw no contradiction between the denuded brutality of American counterinsurgency at home and abroad and calls for an end to government secrecy. In his passionate defense of transparency and his advocacy for a more robust implementation of FOIA, Moynihan summoned the Soviet gulags and the specter of Stalinism as his foil. “Secrecy,” he argued, “is for losers.” In other words, transparency *toward* a more perfect union, not *against* the racialized practices of a settler colonial and imperial republic. This chapter engages against-the-grain readings of archival papers, published primary sources, and legislative sources, alongside news articles that were published at the time to trace a counterhistory of FOIA.

Despite FOIA’s deeply patriotic genesis, subversives and activists of all varieties seized the opportunity to request documents from the state that might provide evidence of their persecution. Chapter 2, “How to Free Information: Counterinsurgency and Radical Transparency,” deepens a critical understanding of transparency through the work of radical transparency advocates in the period immediately after FOIA’s passage. I examine this ethos of countersurveillance in the 1970s and 1980s through the histories of three organizations—the Center for Political Rights (CPR), the Center for National Security Studies (CNSS), and the Fund for Open Access and Accountability, Inc. (FOIA Inc.)—that sought to challenge the American imperial state. Unlike the earliest advocates of FOIA, for these leftists, radical transparency was a primarily critique of American exceptionalism, rather than a defense of it.<sup>66</sup> I trace these organizations through their prolific publications based on the declassified documents they were able to procure. While it may be tempting to situate FOIA as foil to document stealing, whistleblowing, and other unsanctioned acts of radical transparency, the historical record reveals that FOIA was but one in a continuum of tools. During this era, disparate parties wrote urgently to various agencies to request documentation that would help explain the political phenomena they saw unfolding around them: from imprisoned people to celebrities, from anti-nuclear activists to members of the Black Panther Party. While chapter 1 reveals how transparency embodied liberal American exceptionalism, chapter 2 asks how a radical praxis of transparency looked like for activists in the 1970s? I ar-

gue that this ethos of countersurveillance exemplifies a layered visual politics, thick with contradiction and struggles over the politics of seeing and sight.<sup>67</sup>

In chapter 3, “On Redacted Documents and the Visual Politics of Transparency,” I suggest an aesthetic and materialist analysis of document redaction. During the presidency of George W. Bush, increased secrecy and noncompliance with FOIA requests allowed the Rendition, Detention, and Interrogation (RDI) program to function with systematic efficiency. Often, Torture Memos and other documents related to detention that were procured through FOIA requests were produced extraordinarily redacted and nearly unreadable. Though challenges to militarized imprisonment often attempt to “make visible” unseen practices, the “transparency” of these documents does not actually enunciate the detainee’s social and experiential worlds. Instead, the visual politics of redaction offer a point of entry that allow us to read these documents as more than simply the failure of transparency. I examine how redacted spaces—typically censored with black-and-white boxes—are visual images that often paradoxically signal the innate impossibilities of recording and witnessing violence; borrowing from Edward Said, I argue that we paradoxically find a “contrapuntal” aesthetic to redaction. I examine materials produced around the imprisonment of Zayn al-Abidin Muhammad Husayn (commonly known as Abu Zubaydah) in US black sites: one of the infamous Torture Memos from 2002 legally justifying torture and documents detailing the secret destruction of ninety-two CIA detainee interrogation videos in 2005. I reconsider the evidentiary status of the interrogation tape as well as the corresponding claims against their destruction. I argue that by focusing on hidden yet spectacular acts of violence, the mundane and originary violence of detention becomes naturalized as part of the security landscape. My analysis centers around documents produced and released in accordance with the *ACLU v. Department of Defense* court case, presided over by Judge Alvin Hellerstein, and the corresponding FOIA request.

From the aesthetic dimensions of censorship, I turn in the final chapter, “Paper and the Art of Censorship,” to contemporary redaction art and the stakes of transparency in our state of permanent war. I situate this art in the longer history of contestations around transparency, asking how these new emergent art practices might articulate contemporary political, visual stakes in government transparency. Redaction art crystallizes in relation to the digital age, corresponding to an increase in document dumps and online activism. Censored aesthetics have become particularly legible in an era of digital file transfer and are used by artists

for varying political or conceptual reasons. Broadly, I trace how redacted documents are used by artists in one of two ways—either to explore personal and community memories of histories that have been willfully denied or obscured, or to express liberal shock that fails to fully account for the imperial tableau they represent. I consider the possibilities of redacted documents in the telling of personal, intimate histories as refracted through the broader state technology of information classification. By examining Sadie Barnette's work on the FBI file of her father while he was active in the Black Panthers, Voluspa Jarpa's installations of CIA documents detailing the excesses of Operation Condor in Chile, Bahar Behbahani's *Garden Coup* series, and Jenny Holzer's *Redaction Paintings*, among others, I show how subjective renderings of bureaucratic documents can reveal the inherent tensions in FOIA as a government technology itself.

*A Thousand Paper Cuts* ends with a brief epilogue reflecting on the redacted memoirs of Mohamedou Ould Slahi, who from 2001 until October 2016 was detained in Guantánamo Bay Naval Base (GTMO). In the first years of his fifteen-year imprisonment, the Mauritanian-born Slahi taught himself English and meticulously wrote a 466-page account of his capture and detention with pen and paper, which was classified for many years. Two public versions of *Guantánamo Diary* have been published to date: the original version (2015), edited by the writer Larry Siems, which maintains the heavy redactions even in its published form; and a “restored” version of the memoir in which Slahi and Siems worked together to fill in the missing parts. In this “restored” publication, the original redactions remain as gray highlights through which Slahi's recollections of the redacted parts appear. I consider what lessons *Guantánamo Diary* might present for thinking about the dialectics of secrecy and transparency, and the overall reckonings with these questions that must happen within a radical frame.

Paper is political. From the politics of being documented to the kind of bureaucratic warfare enacted on poor and marginalized people in America through mandated paperwork, to the secret surveillance files against activists, to the administrative violence of state documents for transgender and gender-nonconforming people, paper mediates and makes the world.<sup>68</sup> We each have voluminous files that follow us. Consumer advocate Ralph Nader wrote in a 1971 essay that “it is the rare American who does not live in the shadow of his dossier” and that “the law and technology have provided the ‘dossier industry’ with powerful tools to obtain and use information against people in an unjust

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way—whether knowingly or negligently. The defenseless citizen now requires specific rights to defend against and deter such invasions of privacy.”<sup>69</sup> Nader, unbelievably, was not writing about the FBI file. His essay, “The Dossier Invades the Home,” centered on secret credit files, which he explicitly likened in their invasiveness to that of the secretly assembled intelligence dossier. Though the erosion of privacy that Nader then bemoaned is now a foregone conclusion, his outrage illustrates the endless invention of the file form in a way that mirrors the security state and in the service of power. Nearly every measure of living exists in file form somewhere, hidden or public in varying degrees. *A Thousand Paper Cuts* offers a way of thinking about political struggle, imperial ideas, and aesthetic practices through the story of the document.

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# NOTES

## INTRODUCTION

Epigraph: Mao Tse-tung, “U.S. Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger,” 67.

- 1 Department of Homeland Security, “The Race Paper,” Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR), <https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/DHS%20Race%20Paper%20-%20COC%20v%20DHS%20FOIA.pdf>. A PDF of the DHS correspondence is available on the CCR website, along with more contextual information about the “Race Paper” FOIA: “DHS ‘Race Paper,’” Center for Constitutional Rights, May 22, 2019, <https://ccrjustice.org/dhs-race-paper>.
- 2 The corresponding CCR/CoC case was dismissed in court in 2018. See the order of dismissal at CCR, <https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2019/02/Dkt%2071%20-%20Signed%20Stipulation%20and%20Order%20of%20Partial%20Dismissal%20COC%20FOIA.pdf>.
- 3 Letter from Color of Change and Center for Constitutional Rights FOIA to DHS and FBI, July 5, 2016, [https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2019/04/COC\\_FOIA.pdf](https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2019/04/COC_FOIA.pdf).
- 4 The Center for Constitutional Rights and the Color of Change first sent this FOIA request in 2016.
- 5 Spencer, “Black Identity Extremists.”
- 6 Color of Change and Center for Constitutional Rights, “DHS ‘Race Paper’ Briefing Guide,” March 2018, <https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2018/03/COC%20FOIA%20-%20Race%20Paper%20Briefing%20Guide%20031918.pdf>.
- 7 Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths*; Feldman, “On the Actuarial Gaze”; Adelman, “One Apostate Run Over, Hundreds Repented”; Smith and McDonald, “Mundane to the Memorial”; Gates, “Policing as Digital Platform”; Browne, “Digital Epidermalization”; Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 19–42, 122–44.
- 8 Sontag, *On Photography*, 153–82.
- 9 Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 16. Nixon also discusses the “representational bias against slow violence,” which provides another visual paradox of the indexical impulse.

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10 Mirzoeff, *Right to Look*, 1–4; 25–29.

11 US Department of Justice, Office of Information Policy, “United States Department of Justice Guide to the Freedom of Information Act,” n.d., <https://www.justice.gov/oip/doj-guide-freedom-information-act-o>.

12 “Statement of Nate Jones, Director of the Freedom of Information Act Project of the National Security Archive, George Washington University Before the United States House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Government Reform on ‘Ensuring Transparency Through the Freedom of Information Act,’” June 2, 2015, <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/G000/20150602/103592/HHRG-114-G000-Wstate-JonesN-20150602.pdf>.

13 Schwellenbach and Moulton, “‘Most Abused’ Freedom of Information Act Exemption Still Needs to Be Reined In.”

14 Reddy, *Freedom with Violence*, 39.

15 Rault, “Window Walls and Other Tricks of Transparency.” Rault connects the settler colonial promises of accountability-through-transparency with the colonial and modern architectures of transparency that ravage the airspace for wild birds.

16 Letter to Professor Robinson from Angus MacLean Thuermer, November 14, 1974, released by CIA on July 7, 2005, <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/document/cia-rdp8obo1495r000300070011-3>.

17 Cook and Markowitz, “History in Shreds”; Wittner, “Blanche Weisen Cook and World Peace,” 92–93.

18 MacKenzie, *Secrets*; Theoharis, *From the Secret Files*; Theoharis, “FBI Surveillance During the Cold War Years”; Theoharis, “The FBI and FOIA”; Theoharis, “Researching the Intelligence Agencies.” MacKenzie’s work was posthumously published, and thus there isn’t a continued body of work looking at the evolving politics of FOIA. Theoharis was prolific in his writing; in addition to what I have cited there are many more dealing with intelligence abuse. Notably, he was not only writing about the FBI and FOIA, but as an early user of the transparency law, he was party to the debates around its implementation and served on the Church Committee. Also, some of his early texts point to the materiality of organization practices in the service of power. For instance, in “FBI Surveillance During the Cold War Years,” he details the minutiae of how J. Edgar Hoover avoided disclosure through personal and peculiar managerial treatments of paper; counterrevolution by file.

19 Diamond, *Compromised Campus*.

20 Price, “On Using Archives and Freedom of Information Act for Anthropological Research”; Price, *Cold War Anthropology*; Price, *Threatening Anthropology*; Price, *Weaponizing Anthropology*.

21 Churchill and Vander Wall, *The COINTELPRO Papers*; Churchill and Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression* made a profound impact on the writing of this history.

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22 Maxwell, *James Baldwin*; Ratner and Smith, *Che Guevara and the FBI*; Friedly and Gallen, *Martin Luther King Jr.*; Carson, *Malcolm X*.

23 I also want to emphasize the centrality of the redacted document to the left histories and histories of communities of color. These are critical to the method of writing our stories. Of course, oral history is one of the foundational methods of ethnic studies, but my contention is that reading the redacted document, too, must be understood as paramount to the ethnic studies project.

24 Vang, *History on the Run*, 84–90.

25 Kim, *Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War*, 18–19.

26 Kim, *Interrogation Rooms of the Korean War*, 23–24.

27 Kraut, “Marathon Freedom of Information Fight.”

28 Rosenfeld, “Activist Richard Aoki Named as Informant.”

29 Ho, “Fred Ho Refutes the Claim That Richard Aoki Was an FBI Informant” and “Analysis of Seth Rosenfeld’s FBI Files on Richard Aoki.”

30 Ho, “Analysis of Seth Rosenfeld’s FBI Files on Richard Aoki.”

31 Gilbert, “Keeping Secrets”; Monahan and Fisher, “Strategies for Obtaining Access to Secretive or Guarded Organizations”; Baker, *Baseless*; Kim, “Intelligence of Fools”; Chard, “Teaching with the FBI’s Science for the People File.”

32 Browne, *Dark Matters*, 1–6. Notably, Browne also requested the CIA’s file on Fanon, but received nothing.

33 Pratt, “Using FBI Records in Writing Regional Labor History,” 481.

34 Cohn, “Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals.”

35 Latner, “Agrarians or Anarchists?,” 121–22.

36 Latner, “Agrarians or Anarchists?,” 128–32.

37 Maxwell, *F. B. Eyes*; Maxwell, “Ghostreaders and Diaspora-Writers,” 23–38. Maxwell’s work offers a substantive reading of the FBI’s attempts at literary criticism and readings of Black modernist writers. Interestingly, he places this reading in contrast with the kind of literary interpretation possible within the Ivy League–populated CIA. His readings of the FBI also suggest that the surveillance file provides an unexpected insight most profoundly on the bureau itself.

38 Burton, *Tip of the Spear*, 16.

39 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*. Spencer’s work, for instance, illuminates the counterintelligence program and its intimate history within the Black Panther Party as lived, particularly by party women.

40 Burton, *Tip of the Spear*, 15–16. I reproduce Burton’s discussion on archival war at length here to capture the revolutionary spirit that can be used to engage the carceral archive. He writes, “Just as the effective conduct of revolutionary war demands mobility, flexibility, and creativity, so too does its historical interpretation. I therefore deploy carceral sources—surveillance files, official investigations, prison records, police reports, and mainstream journalism—in varied ways

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depending on context. In some moments I cite them to corroborate what people have told me. In others, I invoke them to expose silences, distortions, and redactions in narratives of domination or to demystify the racist and patriarchal logics of the permanent war machine” (15–16).

- 41 Walby and Luscombe, “Freedom of Information Research”; Yaremko and Walby, “Social Movement Groups”; Luscombe et al., “Brokerizing Access Beyond the Border and in the Wild.” Luscombe et al., argue for an idea of “feral lawyering” as an unruly way to account for the practical, structural antagonisms in utilizing freedom of information laws in the United States and Canada to gain access to police department files.
- 42 Nguyen, *Sympathizer*, 61.
- 43 Espada, “Who Burns for the Perfection of Paper.”
- 44 Perry, *Vexy Thing*, 99. Though Perry’s work isn’t directly about the politics of paper, she uses Espada’s poem as an entry to critique modes of subject formation under neoliberalism, thinking about entrepreneurialism, consumerism, and labor.
- 45 Stahl, “Dispatches from the Militainment Empire,” 147–58; Birkhold, “Unclassified Fictions”; Berlin, “Let Freedom Ring”; Secker and Alford, “New Evidence for the Surprisingly Significant Propaganda Role.” It should be noted that Tom Secker and Matthew Alford documented at least 1,947 film and television productions that were assisted in some way by the Department of Defense, though, as they note, the real number is likely much higher.
- 46 Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*. Gitelman discusses the relationships between paper (as a material object) and the document (as a genre) and, importantly, argues that the idea of the document is an evidentiary genre that is fundamental to modernity and the knowledge regimes therein.
- 47 McKinney, *Information Activism*, 22.
- 48 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.”
- 49 Briet, *What Is Documentation?*, 16.
- 50 Briet, *What Is Documentation?*, 17.
- 51 Berland, *North of Empire*, 72–75.
- 52 Hayles, *Electronic Literature*; Gitelman, *Paper Knowledge*, 112–29; Bratich, “Adventures in the Public Secret Sphere,” 1120. A significant and important body of work exists thinking through questions of documentation, papers, and files in the digital public sphere, the networks of circulation and dissemination, and the specificity of the electronic form. My argument, though related, traces a different current, in thinking about the longer history of archives in a racial capitalist context as they interface with forms of militarism, intelligence, and policing.
- 53 Gitelman, *Paper Knowledges*, 1–7.
- 54 Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 73.

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55 Graeber, *Utopia of Rules*, 72–80. Though bureaucracy predates capitalism, Graeber notes it took on a uniquely important place in the social forms of the mid-twentieth century, and dually in the imagination of intellectuals and scholars. We might trace the rise of recordkeeping to the era of mass production, the moment of state secrecy, and the emergence of new possibilities of recordkeeping and administrative office work.

56 Azoulay, *Potential History*. I’m thinking alongside Azoulay’s suggestions to imagine the originary moments of violence present in looted objects, nonconsensual images, and other imperial debris while raising about possibilities of repair, restitution, reparation, and transformation.

57 I want to note here that there is work on paperwork and paper as media that is in relation to yet distinct from sociological theories of bureaucracy. Whereas scholars working in the Weberian context have critically appraised the social meanings of bureaucracy and the techniques of bureaucratic governance, a concurrent line has emerged, primarily in media studies, that looks at the media histories of paper, the circulation of paper and its social meanings, technologies of reproduction, etc.

58 Robertson, *Filing Cabinet*.

59 Weld, *Paper Cadavers*, 90–93.

60 Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*.

61 Gómez-Barris, *Extractive Zone*; Blas and Gaboury, “Biometrics and Opacity”; Stanley, “Anti-Trans Optics”; Dark Opacity Lab, *Dark Opacities Lab*; N. Lee, “Fold of Undetectable”; Birchall, *Radical Secrecy*; Galloway, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”

62 Blas, “Opacities”; Davis, “Politics of Édouard Glissant’s Right to Opacity”; McKittrick, “Dear April”; Monahan, *Crisis Vision*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 116–30.

63 Hetherington, *Guerrilla Auditors*; El Raggal, “Egyptian Revolution’s Fatal Mistake.”

64 Vismann, *Files*.

65 Mao, “U.S. Imperialism Is a Paper Tiger.” The comment was among those collected in the widely circulated *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (*The Little Red Book*) and purportedly made during a conversation with two Latin American visitors to China.

66 Birchall, “Radical Transparency?”

67 Monahan, *Surveillance in the Time of Insecurity*; Cho, *Mass Capture*; Browne, *Dark Matters*; Singh, “Decoding Dress”; McCoy, “Policing the Imperial Periphery.” Questions of countersurveillance are situated in relation to the racial and gendered politics of surveillance and the social histories of people who question, evade, and look back at the state. A partial genealogy can be gleaned from the above.

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68 Goodnough and Sanger-Katz, “Medicaid Covers a Million Fewer Children”; Spade, *Normal Life*, 137–62; Beauchamp, *Going Stealth*.

69 Nader, “Dossier Invades the Home.”

## 01 SECRECY IS FOR LOSERS

Epigraph: Daniel P. Moynihan, *Secrecy*, 227.

1 Richardson, *Bomb in Every Issue*.

2 Richardson, “Perilous Fight.”

3 Braden, “I’m Glad the C.I.A. Is ‘Immoral.’”

4 Stonor Saunders, *Cultural Cold War*, 80–81, 335–36. Stonor Saunders points out that Braden’s code name was not Warren Haskins but “Homer D. Hoskins,” adding to the theory that Braden’s revelations were actually done under the auspices of the CIA, for reasons still unknown.

5 Carew, *American Labour’s Cold War Abroad*, 90–91.

6 Stonor Saunders, *Cultural Cold War*, 129–30.

7 Stonor Saunders, *Cultural Cold War*, 335–36; De Vries, “1967 Central Intelligence Agency Scandal.” Stonor Saunders shows that Braden gave a very strange excuse for revealing these details: He claimed to have forgotten that he signed a secrecy agreement with the CIA, leading to some speculation that he drafted the account under the auspices of the CIA. De Vries shows that some of these details had already been circulating within the public sphere prior to the 1967 revelations, arguing that the 1967 revelations were in fact more about the publicity.

8 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 67.

9 Browne, *Dark Matters*, 9.

10 Chow, “How (the) Inscrutable Chinese Led to Globalized Theory,” 73.

11 Shils, “Color, the Universal Intellectual Community,” 279.

12 Shils, “Color, the Universal Intellectual Community,” 279–80.

13 Shils, “Culture of the Indian Intellectual,” 402.

14 Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” 1791.

15 Dyer, *White*, 47.

16 Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future*, 59–60.

17 Shils, “Prospect for Lebanese Civility.” For a corrective to this view see U. Makdisi, *Culture of Sectarianism*.

18 Hall, *Cultural Studies* 1983, 18.

19 Shils, *Torment of Secrecy*, 74–75, emphasis added.

20 Cheney-Lippold, “New Algorithmic Identity.”

21 Shils, *Torment of Secrecy*, 77.

22 Shils, *Torment of Secrecy*, 77–81.

23 Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*; Harris, “Whiteness as Property.” It is

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