

Craft Chaps Vol. 1

Lessons on Erasure

By Ángel García



MEDITATIONS ON ERASURE

ÁNGEL GARCÍA

I composed the following essay on erasure poetry as a meditation. It includes narrative reflections (personal, political, and poetic) that attempt to understand why and how poets of color are engaging in the dialogue of erasure and the importance of the form as a methodology. Though the terms—erase, efface, and erasure—have similar roots, it is my intent to express the ways in which *erase* as a verb and *erasure* as a noun are different things entirely. At the root of this difference is the complexity of language and temporality. Also included are micro-reviews of Solmaz Sharif's collection *Look* and Layli Long Soldier's *Whereas*. These reviews highlight how these poets of color are engaging in craft to make something new, something that might move us beyond the pain and trauma. This essay, I hope, serves as an offering—not a prescription—because I am as uncertain now as I was at the end of this essay about what it means to heal.

Erase / ə 'rās /: 1) rub out or remove (writing or marks)

I stood in front of a chalkboard—teacher's pet or troublemaker—it didn't matter. What was meant to be praise or punishment, to me, was power. In front of the day's lessons, I picked up the foot-long eraser with its felt handle and in one gentle swipe erased whole portions of what I was supposed to learn. What was written in chalk, the white, careful cursive of a white grade school teacher whose responsibility it was to teach us, should have been important or mattered. It didn't. There, alone or in front of a classroom audience, I watched every word and sentence fall to the floor in showers of dust. Before me, in front of the class, was a chalkboard ready to be filled again. But not by me. I was not allowed to write on that board, only erase it. I was not allowed to leave my mark on that board; I was to be marked by the talc. Even when I sat back down at my desk, the white chalk lingered on my brown hands and arms—its residue.

Erase / ə 'rās /: 2) remove all traces of (a thought, feeling, or memory)

As a young reader, I sought narratives that provided a representation of who I was. I paged through the tissue-thin Scholastic catalogues in the main branch of the local library and in the occasional, but unaffordable, bookstore. I was a young Mexican-American boy living in the United States. Moving, head tilted to read title after title, through aisle after aisle, flipping page over page, I found little. I was disheartened. Still, I read whatever I could get my hands on. I was hungry for language and I was hungrier for stories to which I could relate. Reading story after story, choosing my own adventures. Reading novel after novel, I knew that while it was never explicitly stated, these characters were different than me, or rather, that I was different from those characters. I was not white. The experiences they had, their thoughts, their feelings, their memories, their challenges and problems were different than my own. Even within the private spaces of my imagination, I only watched. Observed. From a distance, in the simple plot lines, I was a tourist. An outsider. I was Other. What I knew to be true of my life experiences was not true in the pages I read. Outside the confines of my home and the small circles of my community, there was little evidence of my existence.

Erase / ə' rās |: 3) *scrape out, scrape off, shave; abolish, remove*

The tests on which we performed poorly in class were easy to dismiss. The tests we took outside of class mattered most. Participation was voluntary. Standing in a circle of classmates, beneath the shade of an elm tree on the outskirts of the concrete schoolyard, I determined how I wanted to be accepted and understood. With a Pink Pearl eraser, I abraded the back of my hand until it bled; the color of the eraser slowly turning from pink to red. Despite the pain, I kept erasing. This was my enactment of being. This was me marking my own existence to myself and the others who stood in the circle alongside me.

Efface / ə' fās |: 2) *make oneself appear insignificant or inconspicuous.*

As someone who has always been hungry for language, I consider the ways it has been used against me. By me I mean we. By we I mean us. By us I mean people of color. The complexities of our existence are constantly effaced. What remains are the tropes, the words used to make people of color feel less than:

and . Sadly, the list goes on and on. *Rapists, criminals, terrorists, illegals* are just a few of the contemporary terms being wielded by those in power to espouse hate and make people of color subhuman.

~

The act of effacement by racist terminology to describe our bodies or origins of color, though painful, is only the beginning of the ways in which language harms. Language too, is wielded by those in power as praxis: to inflict violence, genocide, displacement, disenfranchisement, repression, incarceration, separation, control, and confinement. *English Only. No dogs, No Negroes, No Mexicans. Colored Entrance Only. Japs Keep Moving. America First. God Bless America.* This harm, this violence is inherent in agendas, memos, articles, acts, policies, laws and treaties. We have been effaced from this nation, History, race, tradition, culture, ethnicity, language, access and civil rights, justice and equality. Think: COINTELPRO. Think: forced sterilizations. Think: the Sleepy Lagoon Trial. Think: redlining. Think: Tuskegee experiments. Think: Japanese internment camps. Think: lynching in the South and Southwest. Think: Operation Wetback. Think: Mexican-American war. Think: Chinese Exclusion Act. Think: CA Prop 216. With a pen and a black permanent marker, we have been written into language only to be deleted—our lives and our experiences made non-existent, our claims to injustice made non-existent, and our emotions based on that injustice made non-existent.

Redact / rə'dakt /:

Redaction is a violent act. It obscures. It hides. It disappears. It keeps knowledge from a curious and desirous body that seeks information for the purpose of clarity and fulfillment. My histories and my experiences as a person of color have been redacted. I/we/us have been eliminated from art, literature, theory, canons, media, and institutions (academic and otherwise), and as a result we have been denied knowledge of ourselves.

~

Where we are represented occasionally, in galleries and museums, we are kept behind glass or behind velvet ropes. When we are represented in media, we are caricatures of stereotypes and tropes, stripped of our humanity. When we are represented in literature, we are categorized as ethnic, taught at the end of the course as a testament to difference. When we are represented in theory, we are described and defined by racist ideologies. All of this representation, inevitably, is misrepresentation curated under the guise of objectivity. But objectivity is a realm of power and privilege. Beneath this lens our existence is made artifact, static, dioramic, as if we are not still alive and present in the world. As if we can't speak from our own experiences, we are made into history with a capital H. True. Infallible. Intact. True. Our existence becomes extinct. This redaction from our own history, ripe with violence, is a theft of monstrous proportions not because it is historical, but because that pain and trauma are perhaps never truly healed but lived through over and over again as a means of survival.

~

Through other methods and forms, people are redacted from our own knowledge of injustice. Government agencies, forced to be more transparent about their actions, give us redacted documents. A matter of national security, or protection, we are denied the knowledge of how intentionally and purposefully our government, and its agencies have been used to harm people of color. We are "protected" from fully knowing how we have been harmed. Even our pain is redacted. Even our trauma reduced to nothing.

Scab / skab /: a dry, rough, protective crust that forms over a cut or wound during healing

Unable to find meaning for myself has caused harm, despite my inability to qualify and quantify the damage. I know and feel this in my body. Redaction cuts and wounds. However, as James Baldwin suggests, "You must understand that your pain is trivial except insofar as you can use it to connect with other people's pain; and insofar as you can do that with your own pain, you can be released from it, and then hopefully it works the other way around too; insofar as I can tell you what it is to suffer, perhaps I can help you to suffer less." This for me, is the purpose of poetry: to serve as a process of healing, for myself and others.

Aware of the multiple ways in which I have hurt, I too want to know how others have been hurt. In order to heal, I have also needed to dig and uncover. The scab, while protective, assumes finality. Just as I have had to pick at the scabs, I have had to parse through language, uncover it, dig out what is beneath the words. For me, and I assume many other people of color, this led to anger. All the hours I spent in classes, as a child and young man, learning

literature and history, did little to prepare me for learning about my own literature and history and the narratives of truth. What was presented as static and part of the past, was now, when reading stories and poems by people of color, histories written by people of color, both a relief and a wound.

Erasure / ə' rāSHər | : a form wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures

a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains

The objective with the Pink Pearl eraser, however, was not to erase myself. The objective was to prove my strength. From my pain, I could prove my power. What developed days later were scabs, and weeks later, the scars I would show off and compare: evidence of who I was. While I'm certain that at the time this was just a rite of passage, I can't help now but feel this act, and others like it, represent a larger metaphor for how I felt. Through the literature I was reading and the television I was watching I was accustomed to feeling erased. By this act of erasure, a process in which pain and power were intermingled, I could reinvent myself. The scabs and scars were evidence not only of my pain, but of my existence. I could prove to the world that I was real and that I had power to exert my being; my enactment of erasure allowed me to tell a world that otherwise said I did not exist, that indeed I did.

Look

In Solmaz Sharif's collection we are introduced to the ways in which language, particularly a language of power, of military regime, is meant to obfuscate and harm, essentially creating a power dynamic between "us" and "them." Immersed in the language of war, of xenophobia and racism, Sharif documents how language has and continues to hold power. But challenging the idea of who can own and use language, the poet translates and reappropriates that language as an act of resistance and empowerment. In the opening line of the collection, in the title poem "Look", the speaker declares, "It matters what you call a thing." Here the poet both speaks to the ways in which institutional structures have the power to label someone a terrorist, and how the poet can use that language to rearticulate the struggles and experiences of someone "labeled."

This coded language is used to explain the everyday, the tense moments between two lovers, the microaggressions one encounters in conversation. The speaker, and perhaps the poet, is interested in accessibility. This access is not merely linguistic, but also deemed necessary to understand experience created by that language. We begin to understand this viciousness of war, or exile, of imprisonment. But what is said in regards to or as a result of must be spoken plainly. In the poem "Family of Scattered Mines" the speaker states, "And when she asks / *does this mean he will die? I say yes* / without worrying it will break her" almost as, in if dealing with language that is set out to deceive one can only afford the truth.

This happens as well in the ways in which language, or communication, is changed and omitted. In the poem "Reaching Guantánamo," in the process and procedure of redaction, the poet has made clear decisions on what is of importance. Words and phrases, usually turned black with a permanent marker, are now made invisible. On the page, what happens is the words that remain are prioritized, almost highlighted, refusing to mean

anything other than what the writer intended them to mean. In this refusal to be deleted, in this ability to work through that deletion, the writer of these letters controls her own narrative.

She states in letter four, “Sometimes, I write you / letters I don’t send. I don’t mean [] / to cause alarm. I just want the ones [] / you open to [] / [] like a hill of poppies.” The verb here is omitted, but in that omission lies the possibility to create another narrative, or perhaps the counter narrative. Similarly, in the poem, “Personal Effects,” the speaker names this creation, “I am attempting my own / myth-making” and elsewhere, “Daily I sit / with the language / they’ve made / of our language.” In this counternarrative, the speaker and poet arrive at the “other” truth. Told from inside a war-torn country and from thousands of miles away, both are true simultaneously. It is the language of the front lines.

Scar / skār /: a mark left on the skin or within body tissue where a wound, burn, or sore has not healed completely and fibrous connective tissue has developed

				scars	
healing.			cuts	wounds.	sores
uncovered.		more			words pages
		my anger			scar.
skin	tissue	contain	more.	palimpsest.	

Whereas

Mired in the language of United States policies and treaties, documents that have historically been used to regulate and displace and murder people, Layli Long Soldier, in her first collection *Whereas* is invested in appropriating or reappropriating language to make new meaning. As much as this is a political statement, it does not claim to be so. Instead, the speaker of these poems is driven by a more personal connection to language, a desire to do the work of recovery, “what have I / done / what / now / to do / *why*thisimpulse / to / shake the dead.”

These poems are crafted from erasure. They are built upon the language that has been used to erase histories, erase cultures, erase languages, and erase peoples. Indigenous peoples and women are some of the more obvious victims. However, many of the poems tackle language itself. They ask to make new meaning by playing with syntax, by dropping the line between words so that words are given new meaning. Take, for example, a section in “Diction,” “a per / son on / the far / left side / of the / poli / tical / spectrum / not mere / ly lib / eral / but more / radi / cal in / support / of so / cial / change to / create / ega / litar / ian / society / its left / ist left.” Here we are given a common assumption about political ideologies. A person who is considered liberal is considered leftist, but pushing the language and playing with the line endings, maybe there is more to be understood. Perhaps this simple assumption is too simple. But how Long Soldier challenges these easy ideas is by shifting the language. The political message is not clear, but our reading is challenged, and so too may our understanding of this simple notion be challenged. In another section of “Diction” Long Soldier pushes lan-

guage on the right side of the page, or only includes language that is on the right side of the page. This is another way of changing our reading. Typically, white space on the page equals silence. Typically, that language is on the left side of the page. But Soldier fills that white space with language. She fills the silences with alternate histories that have been, in certain respects, silenced.

But if these poems play with form, the poems also speak to experiences of the body. What is the body, if not a form? And in many of these poems the speaker lives through losses. In the section "Whereas" the speaker asks, "And because language is the immaterial I never could speak about the missing so perhaps I cried for the invisible, what I could not see, doubly. What is it to wish for the absence of nothing?" Whether it be the loss of a child, the loss of land, a dream of a baby left in a bathroom sink at a train station, the speaker must reconcile these losses. This reconciliation perhaps is memory, or as the speaker explains to the reader, "if I read you / what I wrote bear / in mind I wrote it / down only / so that / I remember."

Scar | skār | : a lasting effect of grief, fear, or other emotion left on a person's character by a traumatic experience.

A professor tells me that my obsession with timelessness is a result of addiction, episodes of blacking out, or trauma. Only now, does this make sense. Because trauma can manifest itself in new ways, because it too can transform, I experience it in my life in various ways, in new places, at unexpected times. So much of my memory of my own history is blacked out. It does not exist in dates and names and figures. My memory is marked by feeling, by emotion. As I worked through poem after poem, I attempted to stop time: to allow myself and my speaker to settle in the present, to hold on to what was present, to make the passing of time stand still, and in doing so, make memory recordable. But this was a process I had been taught. This was how History was made, through recording. It was made by facts. It was made by dating. What I know now is that my history and healing are not static, but fluid. They fluctuate daily. The scars I carry on my body and in my mind are true for me not because I can mark them in time, but because I live them in my ever-present body. My history is my present, is my body, is my mind, is fluid.

Erasure | ə'rāSHər | : a form wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures a large portion of the text, creating a wholly new work from what remains.

Inevitably, this process of erasure for people of color allows us to insert ourselves in the language that has been used to harm us. I find it interesting that both Sharif and Long Soldier, and the other poets suggested below, do not redact in black. Instead, these poets create blank spaces. This, to me, is a testament to how erasure combats the ways in which people of color have been erased. In those blank spaces, there is something to be inserted. Unlike erasing and black redaction, erasure using blank space allows us to create and converse with our own experiences. Around and inside those blank spaces we can reclaim and reappropriate. In the seemingly simple act of *taking back* the language of harm, from the language of harm, poets of color are able to make and insert new narratives of resilience. In this way, erasure too, becomes a form of code-switching with all its

historical connotations. Erasure is language translated and retranslated. It makes meaning new. In this new language—code-switched (but not coded)—we are allowed to resist by expressing dissent. We are able to dismantle and deconstruct the official language. From the legacies of trauma, we can find power. Erasure is an assertion of that power. Erasure is recovery. Erasure is resistance. Erasure is resilience. Erasure is political will. Erasure is empowerment. While I may never be truly healed, with scabs and scars to prove it, erasure gives poets of color a pathway to healing. My hope, during my lifetime, is to see more and more of us harnessing this form.

An Exercise of Dissention

dissent: the expression or holding of opinions at variance with those previously, commonly, or officially held.

“Think: COINTELPRO. Think: forced sterilizations. Think: the Sleepy Lagoon Trial. Think: redlining. Think: Tuskegee experiments. Think: Japanese internment camps. Think: lynching in the South and Southwest. Think: Operation Wetback. Think: Mexican-American war. Think: Chinese Exclusion Act. Think: CA Prop 216.”

Using the above models as examples of ways in which language has been used to harm people of color, do some research to uncover documents that are part of your own legacy of trauma. This can be found in literature itself, television and movie scripts, official governmental records, treaties, court transcripts, real estate policies, laws, etc. Thinking about these as textual artifacts, what might you do to curate a new text that is of a dissenting opinion? This opinion need not be logical, objective, or sanitized. It need only be true to your experience.

SUGGESTED READING

Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!* Wesleyan University Press, 2011.

Sharif, Solmaz. *Look: Poems*. Graywolf Press, 2016.

Smith, Tracy K. *Wade in the Water*. Penguin Books, 2018.

Long Soldier, Layli. *Whereas*. Graywolf Press, 2017.

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Ángel García, the proud son of Mexican immigrants, is the author of *Teeth Never Sleep* (University of Arkansas Press, 2018), winner of the 2018 CantoMundo Poetry Prize and finalist for the Pen America Open Book Award. His work can be found in *American Poetry Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Huizache*, *Miramar*, and *The Good Men Project*, among others. He currently lives, works, studies, and writes from the Midwest.

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