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Reading Redaction: Symptomatic Metadata, Erasure Poetry, and Mark Blacklock's *I'm Jack*

Martin Paul Eve

English and Humanities, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

ABSTRACT

In this article, through a reading of Mark Blacklock's 2015 novel, *I'm Jack*, alongside the history of erasure poetry, I suggest that an apt literary-critical metaphor for reading redaction in contemporary literature comes from the term "metadata." This article schematizes the ways in which redaction can work in literary contexts and points to the modalities through which supposedly blank surfaces are, in fact, textured depths that can be read.

The past few decades of contemporary literary criticism have witnessed an ongoing argument about depth and surface in our reading practices. Althusserian-derived symptomatic reading, which poses a text-behind-the-text and the presupposition of "the existence of two texts" with a "different text present as a necessary absence in the first," has indeed come under attack (Althusser et al. 32). Dissatisfied with the predictability of much symptomatic reading, Rita Felski follows Cathy N. Davidson and David Theo Goldberg, N. Katherine Hayles, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, and Bruno Latour, among many others, in asking whether critique has had its day (Felski; Davidson and Goldberg 45; Hayles 59; Best and Marcus; Latour). Indeed, the paradigm of the reader as literary detective, encouraged to go "against the grain" or "beneath the surface" in the search of an underlying ideological truth, plundering the depths of the text to show what the work cannot itself know, can feel exhausted or even routinely paranoid.

A specific type of literary practice, however, that has existed since the birth of the novel and that persists to this day fostered and continues to invite close and deep reading methods that beckon to symptomatic approaches: the erasure of self-redaction or self-blanking. As a mode that self-consciously and ostentatiously withholds information from the reader through either the use of consecutive dashes or through a deliberate placement of a black "block" over text, it is difficult but to read redactions instituted by the author herself as unplumbed textual depths that should be excavated by the canny reader. The contrivance of redaction has a long history within the novel, pertaining in particular to names and addresses in the nineteenth century; *Jane Eyre* (1847), for instance, is replete with reference to "–shire," while *The Professor* (1857) refers to the "borough of X––," to take but two examples from Charlotte Brontë's oeuvre. Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1767) famously contains an obliterated black page. We might also consider Heinrich von Kleist's 1808 novella, *The Marquise of O–*, where even the title itself contains redaction. Such redaction, however, is more extreme even than the Heideggerian or Derridean descriptions of writing *sous rature*. Instead, as John Barth notes in his playful *Lost in the Funhouse* (1968), these redactions or blanks often serve as an artificial realist device that blur the distinction between the fiction and some underlying facticity: "Initials, blanks, or both were often substituted for proper names in nineteenth-century fiction to enhance the illusion of reality. It is as if

CONTACT Martin Paul Eve ✉ martin.eve@bbk.ac.uk 🖺 English and Humanities, Birkbeck, University of London, 43 Gordon Square, WC1H 0PD, London

the author felt it necessary to delete the names for reasons of tact or legal liability. Interestingly, as with other aspects of realism, it is an *illusion* that is being enhanced, by purely artificial means" (73).

That said, there is surprisingly little scholarship on redaction in the novel. There are readings by Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Barbara Johnson in the late 1970s of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (1844) that come close, arguing about the meaning of the absent content of the letter. There are also pre-histories of the novel that note the interplay of socio-legal responsibility, historiography, and the mimetic depictions within literary works, all of which are relevant for thinking about the reasons for literary redaction, particularly in the *roman à clef* (McKeon 54, 93; Latham 21–42). However, the most thorough analysis of redaction comes from Lisa Gitelman, although the work is still only a tiny portion of her *Paper Knowledge* (2014), and she notes that "it would probably be fruitless to search for the precise origins of this kind of blank" (27–28).

Gitelman, following a similar argument to Lennard J. Davis, ascribes at least some redaction in the eighteenth century to the threat of libel and legal consequences (Davis 42–70, 85–101). Gitelman, for instance, quotes Jonathan Swift's pronouncement that "we are careful never to print a man's name out at length." However, the fact that "everybody alive" will know to whom Swift refers introduces a historical frame to this type of redaction. Although the fame of the individuals in question is now faded in the twenty-first century, for Swift's contemporaries, as Gitelman notes, these blanks are merely nominal; "they are not really blank but only virtually so," and they are "sites of transaction between a knowing author and a knowing reader" (27). In such cases, the reader is supposed to be able to deduce what lies beneath. Yet in other cases, it is clear that the blanks are *not* meant to be uncovered or even lack a real-world referent, implying a proto-facticity of the sort that Barth noted.

The degree of inference that is logically possible for a reader encountering a literary redaction depends, I will here argue, not only on historico-contextual elements but on more proximate textual-structural aspects. In this article, through a reading of Mark Blacklock's 2015 novel *I'm Jack*, alongside the history of erasure poetry, I suggest that an apt literary-critical metaphor for reading such redaction comes from the term "metadata." In the practice of literary redaction in the contemporary novel I argue that one can see an amplification of standard symptomatic reading practices in which the text before us becomes second-order metadata that points to a sub-textual surface and offers clues to its decryption. In this way, metadata—like paratexts and as with other formal or material modes of structuration (such as the codex form)—provides a worthwhile meta-phor for semantic contexts for reading. Certainly, if the reader is any form of detective, then the use of metadata is well-catalogued in the forensic investigation units of police stations. It is also the case, though, that our blanks are not actually as formless or empty as we often think, and darkness does not cover the surface of the deep. For in following the surface-reading invitation of a literary redaction, we use these surrounding textual contexts as though they were cartographic metadata that give texture and depth to seemingly blank surfaces. Thus to read redactions on the surface is to accept an invitation to explore the deep, using the available contexts, be they historical and symptomatic or otherwise.

Metadata and *I'm Jack*

The term "metadata" was coined in the 1960s but began to be more broadly used in Database Management Systems (DBMSs) of the 1970s (Vellucci). The term generally refers to "structured information that describes, explains, locates, or otherwise makes it easier to retrieve, use, or manage an information resource." Further, "metadata is often called data about data or information about information" and can be classified as either structural or descriptive (National Information Standards Organization 1). However, such definitions can carry us only so far. To describe metadata as "data about data" requires a more rigorous definition of "data." For instance, descriptive metadata can be described by structural metadata, which can itself be described by further structural metadata,

and so on to an infinite regress. Indeed, "what counts as second-order [data], depends on the boundaries of the first order" (Mueller and Unsworth).

Certainly, data can refer to literary and cultural artifacts. Those working on quantitative approaches to the study of literature, such as Matt Jockers, Ted Underwood, and Franco Moretti (among many others), treat literary texts as data (Jockers; Moretti). Librarians catalogue works of fiction as data—as objects that should be filed under the correct location according to their metadata. Publishers working with XML-first workflows must consider paragraphs as forms of data to be injected within tags. Even normal or critical acts of reading are types of processing that involve a contextualization of sensory input data that is then subjected to a set of interpretative moves. Of course, referring to works of fiction as "data" can provoke strong resistance. The apparent quanti-fication of literary artworks that such terminology implies is certainly far from unproblematic and resurrects a first-generation Frankfurt School-esque suspicion about the role of scientific methods in the realm of aesthetics. Yet one can see how, already, the terminologies of data and metadata are present and used within our understandings of literature.

Known generic forms and structuration principles texture and color the valid interpretative pathways for redacted text. That is, knowing the conventions of specific generic forms (a type of metadata) helps us to retrieve information from beneath redacted surfaces that was not present at the surface level. Brontë's "–shire" denotes an English county by the common suffix and by its situation within the English realist tradition; Kleist's "Marquise of O–" yields a place and/or a name. Yet how far are we guided by such contextual metadata?

I'm Jack is an apt novel to act as an exemplar of both metaphorical and literal metadata within literary reading practices. For when we think of metadata in the early twenty-first century, the most prominent context within which the term is situated pertains to the widespread collection of telephone and Internet records by the US's National Security Agency (NSA), but also elsewhere around the world. Premised on the notion that metadata is innocuous compared to the content of messages, but nonetheless useful to law enforcement agencies, many politicians have defended this practice with analogy to postal communication. For example, in Australia on August 6, 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott announced of his data retention initiative that it was important to "be clear about what this so-called metadata is. It's not the content of the letter, it's what is on the envelope" (Duckett). This is, however, a pernicious way of thinking about privacy; merely writing letters to specific individuals would be sufficient cause for profiling under many contemporary state security apparatuses. It is also the case, though, that "envelopes" on the Internet (surrounding the analo-gously named "packets") are much richer in their content than the pre-digital addressing systems to which Abbott compares them. Finally, it is also true that, in the digital space, most often the full message content can be found, openly, within the metadata.

Beyond envelopes, writing, web addresses and e-mails, though, there was another system of communication that was closely monitored at the metadata level by law-enforcement agencies from the mid-twentieth century onward: phone records. While modern mobile devices are, in fact, full computing units in themselves, capable of sending text messages and e-mails and visiting websites, the more traditional mode for telephones, which we do still sometimes use, here pertains to voice.

Indeed, it turns out that the collection of metadata around voice calls can be an extremely fertile source for police and others. The triangulation of a caller's location via cell towers, the length and frequency of calls, the dates and times of connections, and so forth prove to be useful in revealing a caller's identities, locations, and motivations. We may be able to guess, with some accuracy, the behavior of a man who calls his wife, then an escort agency, and then a hotel, simply from the metadata. Blacklock's novel locates itself at the crossroads of documentary fiction, the historical novel, the importance of voice and accents, and metadata collection around telephone records and epistolary missives. At once an epistolary novel, a detective fiction, and an experimental archive, one that emerged from the performance collective group "Neither Am I," Blacklock's novel is also a fascinating take on how the localized politics of accents intersects with broader, global concerns

around metadata, even while it uses techniques of redaction and blanking to achieve this. Indeed, to write about localized accents and the collection of telephone records in the 1970s in a novel published in the age of mass interception and digital tracking is to invite commentary on the shift from the minute, community environment (local accents) to a now-globalized world of broad travel and communication.

Given the particularly British context of Blacklock's novel, a small amount of upfront summary and historical explication for a global audience is necessary, despite work by David Peace, Gordon Burn, and Pat Barker on the same subject. From 1975–1980 in Yorkshire, in the North of England, in a high-profile crime case, a man named Peter Sutcliffe went on a serial killing spree in which he murdered thirteen women. There were also seven other victims who survived Sutcliffe's attempted murders. The British tabloid press—never known for its restraint, balance, or tact—dubbed Sutcliffe the "Yorkshire Ripper," after the famous Victorian spree-killer of prostitutes. Sutcliffe was eventually apprehended and as of 2019 remains incarcerated, having spent the majority of his whole-life tariff in Broadmoor, one of three high-security psychiatric hospitals in the UK.

Blacklock's novel is bound up with the case of the Yorkshire Ripper, but it is not primarily concerned with Sutcliffe. Instead, the novel centers on one of the grimmest hoaxes of the police force in British history: that of John Samuel Humble, dubbed Wearside Jack. Between 1978 and 1979, Humble sent three letters to the West Yorkshire police and the newspaper *The Daily Mirror* impersonating "the ripper" in which he accused the police of incompetence and of being unable to catch him. One of the items that Humble sent to the police was an audio tape in which he "confesses" to the killings but tells the police chief, George Oldfield, that he is unlikely ever to catch him. The letters are signed "Jack the Ripper." Most importantly, though, the audio tape that was sent revealed an accent from the Wearside area of Sunderland. This caused the police to divert their investigation away from the West Yorkshire area, despite the fact that they had even already questioned Sutcliffe himself (who did not have a Wearside accent). In turn, Sutcliffe was then free to murder a further three women, mostly due to Humble's contamination of the investigation. Humble was eventually caught, 25 years after the events in 2006, and served an eight-year sentence for perverting the course of justice.

Given its subject matter, it is hardly surprising that *I'm Jack* is a novel that is primarily about impersonation. Reimagining Humble's life leading up to his acts and then recounting the events via letters from prison to a (now-deceased) George Oldfield, the text itself is actually named after another, nonfiction book: Peter Kinsley's *I'm Jack: The Police Hunt for the Yorkshire Ripper* (1980) (Kinsley). That is, Blacklock's novel shares its metadata with and usurps the metadata of another work. This act of archival/factual imitation sits well with the book's theme and formal mode and is itself a type of redaction; the novel quietly redacts a purported factual and historical work in favor of its own fictionalized history. For *I'm Jack* presents its fictionalized narrative through a collage of research material. Reconstructed police documents from Humble's earlier spat with the police, for example, form part of the back narrative of the text. By shadowing Kinsley's book, which is explicitly referenced in Blacklock's novel, *I'm Jack* makes clear the archival game that it is playing (107). In many ways, of course, this is just another turn from the Hayden White school of postmodern historiography, in which the only difference between fiction and history is the claim to truth (93–97). However, there is a more sophisticated take at play here, since Blacklock's novel subtly but explicitly signposts its fictionality, never claiming the truth that history possesses, yet maintaining an accuracy throughout. Blacklock's work is not full of showy, self-reflexive gimmicks but is rather concerned with how narrative can emerge from the formal mechanism of documentary parataxis.

Most importantly, though, various parts of the surface of Blacklock's narrative consist of attempts to decipher or interpret specific forms of writing; the novel is a detective metatext about reading. In Blacklock's fictionalized, but researched, graphological analysis section of *I'm Jack*, the analyst (most likely based on Diane Simpson, the founder of the British Institute of Graphologists and, at that time, a lecturer at Loughborough University (Lavelle 177, 187)) decomposes the task into readings of form (legibility, speed, aesthetic qualities, rhythm); size of writing; speed; zones; baseline; slant; pressure;

spacing (margins, between lines, between words); connections (connection stroke width, angularity of connection strokes, word endings); specific features of letters (I dot, T bar, D, lower loops, capitals, lowercase); and personal pronoun and signature (Blacklock 102–05). And the term "analyst" here is strongly merited. For Blacklock, the pseudoscientific art of graphology (and, by extension, critical reading) is to be presented as a Freudian process in which the physical manifestations betray a buried subconscious to be revealed through an "interpretation." For instance, a "dominant middle zone" is interpreted to mean that the individual writing has "intense self-involvement, drive to be at the front." The pun here rests on a notion of centrality (a "dominant middle zone") leading to a diagnosis of a self-centered individual in which the physical/spatial correlates to a mental state. This becomes even more psychoanalytic in its mode of operation when we consider, though, that such analysis only "works" through the mediation of language. It is, of course, a central tenet of Freudian thought that language can reveal the unconscious. In the case of Blacklock's graphology, however, it can be seen that the similitude and resemblance that enable this form are also mediated by language. For it is the two meanings of the word "center" that make this reading possible. The physical centrality in the writing is presupposed to correlate to a centrality of subjectivity. Yet these terms are performing different roles in each context, an element that the graphology section of *I'm Jack* thoroughly exploits.

A further example of graphology as psychoanalysis—or perhaps as its even earlier predecessor, physiognomy—is given in the final interpretation of Blacklock's handwriting expert. The graphologist in *I'm Jack* concludes that "[t]he writer is highly aggressive and prone to violent outbursts. There is a conflict between his publicly and privately presented personas and he is prone to mood swings. He has problems differentiating between reality and fiction." This is deduced from the fact that the "expert" perceives the personal pronoun ("I") to be "lightly left-slanting in contrast to slightly right-slanting signature"; handwriting becomes a form of metadata that allows us to extract information about an individual. This conclusion/diagnosis rests on the assumption that writing is an unconscious/subconscious activity in which performative elements of the self will be revealed in the stylistics of the handwriting. Since the "I" is a supposedly self-constitutive linguistic construct, whereas a name and signature are an outward-facing performance, Blacklock here has his analyst draw conclusions from the differing styles (although having examined the original Wearside Jack letters, it does not appear to me to be the case that there is such a difference in Humble's handwriting in reality).

But this is not all. While, in Blacklock's playful text, handwriting becomes a metadata form that reveals generic personality traits, he eventually widens the structure to near meaninglessness. For in the final section of the graphological analysis, Blacklock writes of the "assessment of honesty of writer": "there are none of the signs in this sample of what one would expect to indicate that the writer is aiming to deceive." This fits, in some ways, with the narrative that the police wanted—that the "Ripper" wrote the letters, that he has a dual life, but that the letters are honest. On the other hand, though, if a person has "a conflict between his publicly and privately presented personas" and, more importantly, "has problems differentiating between reality and fiction," how can a diagnosis of honesty and sincerity be tenable? (For more on sincerity in recent fiction, see Eve; Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," "The New Sincerity," "David Foster Wallace and New Sincerity Aesthetics.") Indeed, surely an ability to know what is true and what is fiction is a prerequisite for "honesty"? But, of course, Blacklock is here toying with the reader, through an interpretation of the enveloping metadata of the letter and its handwriting; in his part-documentary, part-factual novel, it is the reader who cannot distinguish between fact and fiction, much as the police struggled to find Sutcliffe. In a twist on the postmodern detective fiction stance, the reader here becomes complicit and is cast as the culprit, hunted through graphological metadata. Indeed, a later part of the book, with direct address to the "subject," requests a re-performance of handwriting for comparison (Blacklock 169). Humbling the reader is the aim of this diagnostic exercise in interpretation, conducted through metadata.

Yours Sincerely, ▮▮▮ the Ripper

Clearly, *I'm Jack* contains many forms of metadata that are central to its narrative. The argument that I have implicitly begun to sketch out above, though, is that the presentation of the metadata structures surrounding the content of the letters in Blacklock's novel interpellates the reader into various roles: as writer at various points—and thereby either Ripper or hoaxer—or as the (dead) recipient at other times; or as the detective, George Oldfield. A further aspect of Blacklock's novel, however, points more conclusively toward the latter reading, thereby supplementing the extensive literature that correlates the detective and reader as pursuing the same goals or even as synonymous: redaction (see Hühn; Rzepka).

Indeed, the letters, "court documents," and other official/archival objects that Blacklock assembles are peppered with blank spaces, with redactions, seemingly placed to protect the innocent (or even the guilty). Redactions in the text are relatively sparse, with eighteen words in total obliterated over the course of 235 pages. At approximately 250 words per page of the novel (conducted on a random sample and average basis), this comes to just 0.02 percent that is redacted. Nevertheless, although this technique is used sparingly throughout the text—probably for the better—it also features prominently, mostly due to the ostentation of the device.

It is within this tradition that many of *I'm Jack*'s redactions can be read. Indeed, three of the redactions in the text are clearly addresses: "▮▮▮ Road Sunderland," in two instances, or "▮▮▮ Road" in another (Blacklock 12, 22–23). Other occasions pertain to the names of newspapers, and these can often be easily reconstructed. For instance, Blacklock's Humble writes that "This week in ▮▮▮ ▮▮▮ there is an article telling of the letter peter [*sic*] Sutcliffe wrote to me through the inter-postal prison service" (71). A little sleuthing reveals that this instance must be "*Daily Mirror*" since this is where this original exclusive appeared on the April 3, 2006 (while the corresponding letter in Blacklock's text is dated the April 21, 2006) ("Exclusive: Ripper's Amazing Letter to Hoaxer Wearside Jack"). There also appears to be a reference to "*The Sun*" newspaper under redaction in the text, which can be deduced because of the shortened length of the blanks (which perhaps we might call "redactemes" to signify individual units of reaction): "all the prisoners who read ▮▮▮ ▮▮▮" (Blacklock 72). Finally, some instances are names of people. The final, closing page of the book references (under redaction) Humble's supposed new name, more on which below. Other names include: "▮▮▮ says I used to go prowling around at night" and "if pretending to be peter [*sic*] Sutcliffe is a crime then ▮▮▮ should be locked up" (Blacklock 68, 72).

In many ways, these instances of redaction are supposed to perform the function described by Barth in the nineteenth-century novel. Through artifice they aim to enhance a realism by acting, albeit coyly, as though it is necessary to protect these aspects that lie under erasure (in a more hidden vein than even Derrida's version of this term). In another sense, though, this artifice is transparent, and the knowingness of the reader creates a type of "hall of mirrors" effect, signaling a metafictive mode. Perhaps even more interestingly, the real challenge lies in the fact that many of these instances of redaction are given in unredacted form in the novel itself anyway, thus negating the very image of protection/censorship that the redaction was meant to summon.

Consider, for example, the instance just covered pertaining to *The Sun* newspaper. While this is redacted on page 72, just a few pages earlier in the text, Blacklock's Humble writes that "Vikki has sold her soul to the sun [*sic*]," in reference to a piece run in *The Sun* on the March 21, 2006 (Blacklock 67; Parker et al.). On the other hand, while many addresses are removed from the text, as above, "26 Hawarden Crescent, Sunderland" remains unredacted. Furthermore, there are a number of silent redactions throughout Blacklock's novel. Take the aforementioned Vikki, whom we are told is Humble's "ex-wife" (Blacklock 67). Yet an article in *The Telegraph* (the name of which fits the redaction length for the second block on page 71, although it could also just be "the tabloids") tells us that Humble's wife (and not really an "ex-wife" since they did not divorce) is called "Anne Mason" (Stokes). In fact, it appears here that the instances that are explicitly redacted are often easy

to uncover—since they advertise themselves as sites of depth—while more subtle historical aberrations/falsehoods are seemingly innocuously printed in plain sight.

These redactions and alterations are all the more fascinating when considered within a theoretical framework of metadata. As with my introductory section with the blotted title page, by obscuring content while leaving structural form, redaction acts as a metafictional signpost of genre. In Blacklock's text, this focus is achieved through a double method. First, by replacing plain-sight instances with new names—"Vikki"/"Anne Mason" and "Norris Downing"/"Noel O'Gara" (the latter of whom is, some might say, a ripper conspiracy theorist)—Blacklock begins to signal the substitutability of figures within this text. The specificity of the individual is erased, which is apt for a novel that plays with ideas of impersonation. In other words, it is the structure and peripheries of the individual, rather than the content of the name and the uniqueness of the person, that is signposted as important in *I'm Jack*. People become, in a way, like metadata in this novel. Second, however, it is only because of the contexts within which redaction appears that this phenomenon can emerge. Indeed, in light of the plain-text alterations, when the reader comes to the "true" redactions there is already a contextual frame within which to read them. This occurs at both the narrative and linguistic levels.

In the linguistic strata, we have already seen how the structural formation of address lines and names conditions the reader's expectations and presuppositions of the unseen content. While these vary from country to country, it is apparent to most readers that a redaction before a place name is likely to be a specific street address. As just another example, one might consider this with reference to the opening to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866) in which the first sentence yields "S. Place [or lane]" ("С–ая переулка") and "K. bridge" ("К–ый мост"). Likewise, the linguistic cues provided by a change of name form or adjacent third-person pronouns signal that the redaction is a person's name. Those redactions in the novel that refer to newspapers occur within sentences about "reporting," with the surrounding text acting as a type of conditioning metadata that constrain the valid modes of interpretation, thereby allowing recovery of the blanks. Indeed, there is no instance of redaction within Blacklock's novel where the reader cannot infer the type of content that is under erasure. This is a type of *generic function* at the linguistic level. Through pre-given and socially codified conventions of language and form, a reader comes to know the policed boundaries of the forms that can appear below a redaction.

At the level of thematic preoccupations—which, of course, are linked to and conveyed through language—a reader can also understand the function of redaction through the history of legal libel and through the recent changes to detective fiction. There are, therefore, several forms of generic codification at play from the metadata in *I'm Jack* that provide contextual cues for valid interpretations of redactions and of their uses more broadly:

(1) as limited linguistic structures; only certain types of term can fall into a redaction due to context (such as addresses);

(2) as spatially limited; signified by the size of the redacted block and the correlative length of the underlying word ("*The Sun*" newspaper, composed of two short redactemes, for example);

(3) as legal signifier; implying an underlying truth/falsity dichotomy ("it may be true, but we might be sued for it being untrue") and a conspiratorial environment that would be repressed if expressed *in toto* (redaction of names);

(4) as part of novelistic tradition; implicitly demonstrating the fictionality of the device through the tradition dating back to at least the eighteenth century;

(5) as postmodern signifier of detective work allied to literary interpretation; an artifice that signals the reader's role in attempting to uncover what lies beneath;

(6) as invitation to contextual or symptomatic reading; a way of signaling that the text is withholding contextual information that must be supplied by a reader.

While these constitute the main forms and functions of redaction within Blacklock's novel—and within prose fiction more generally—there are also various types of literary redaction that have been common practice, but that are so far removed from the type of redaction as to seem incommensurate. The foremost type here that strikes me is erasure poetry.

Yet in many ways much erasure poetry is the opposite of the type of redaction that has here taken the focus. In erasure poetry—where the majority of an original work is erased to leave a new, emergent poem—the redaction is contextualized by the metadata of the erased object but less by its contextual form. For instance, the "Erasing Infinite" series by Jenni B. Baker takes its cue from David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* (1996), whose pages it sequentially erases. The poems are sparse, with one, for example from page 305, simply reading "years […] become […] undone balloons," despite the base text comprising many hundreds of words (Baker). The blanks proliferate far beyond the scope of the text that remains, but they nonetheless retain their spatial layout, deriving from the traditions of concrete poetry, but also making more explicit the redacted contexts. Of course, erasure poetry works in the opposite direction as redaction in most novels; it is the majority of the text, in such cases, that is usually redacted. In the cases of erasure poetry, usually, it is the vast blank spaces (and our knowledge or otherwise of what they conceal) that determines our readings of the sparse text that remains visible.

The history of erasure poetry, at least as it is traced by Travis Macdonald, stretches back into the constraint techniques of the Oulipo group and the textual politics of appropriation. Indeed, in the "prosthetic repair" approaches of Oulipo techniques such as N + 7 (in which all nouns are replaced by those seven entries below them in the dictionary), Macdonald claims that a "subtle decay takes root" in which "the proliferation of the written word ultimately engender[s] its own dissolution" (39). Tracing this lineage of a postmodern overwriting and overriding of the romantic lyric then leads through works such as Ronald Johnson's 1977 *Radi Os* (a revision of Milton's "*Pa[radi]se L[os] t*") and to artists' books, including Tom Phillips's well-known *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (famously erasing Mallock's *A Human Document*). The ways in which the actual erasures of such work have been read are varied. In the case of Johnson's work, for example, Eric Selinger focuses primarily on the interplay between source text and erasure poem, noting that there is a type of authenticity at labor here. For Selinger, the reader of the erasure poem, *Radi Os*, is recovering a readerly version of him- or herself that is also Johnson: one in which the "claims the poem makes for its hero's agency" must "be, instead, interpolated by the reader in an exegetical act not unlike the one Johnson, in his etching, has already performed." Importantly, though, Selinger asks: "isn't this how we *really* read Milton's epic […] extracting our own story of human achievement […]?" (70). Erasure poetry here becomes a representation of the truth of reading methods that were suppressed by the tradition of the romantic lyric, which becomes the metadata context within which we read such work, allowing us to understand its forms.

That said, more recent work by Brian C. Cooney has taken issue with the claimed homogeneity of the term "erasure poetry," instead insisting that we probe the form's functions along two discrete axes: so-called complete erasure poems and palimpsests. For Cooney, "The 'complete' erasure poem entirely effaces the source work, while the palimpsest poem, rather than actually erasing, uses typographical gestures—bold font, cross outs or perhaps the collage work of poets like Susan Howe or Anne Carson, gestures that suggest visually that, as DuPlessis writes of Howe, 'the ground can never be cleared of the prior'" (18). Such a distinction is helpful—with, as Cooney notes, *Radi Os* falling into the former category and others such as Jen Bervin's *Nets* (2014) or Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (2011) in the latter—since it allows us to clarify the type of textual labor that the conspicuous redaction more frequently seen in prose fiction may take.

For the redaction of the type that is used in Blacklock's novel constitutes both a "complete" erasure and a palimpsest, an ostentatious readerly attention magnet that draws notice to the erasure while also completely deleting the source work. In Blacklock's case—and in the case of much other prose fiction—the other curious feature here is that the "original" that is being placed under erasure is also a fictional fabrication of the same author's devising. The type of textual interplay between the

choice of using a canonical source work against a lesser known work, and then even a fictional nonexistent source, is far from negligible. As Cooney puts it, "choices poets make of canonical or marginal works as sources and the related manner in which they employ the 'presence' of those sources function in quite different ways" (20). In the case of Blacklock's novel, the reader is asked to interpolate details from the popular press, intricacies from Kinsley's history, and obscure web paranoia/conspiracy forums. Such real sources are far from canonical. However, the text is also explicit in its fabrication of documents. In such cases, there can be no interplay between a real but erased source text, and, instead, the reader is reliant on linguistic cues to signal how such blanks can be read.

Clearly, redaction plays various roles in different contexts and media forms; John Cage's *4′33″* springs to mind. There is, however, another aspect of the practice that is often overlooked during its study in fiction: the role of redaction as part of the performance of subject formation. Indeed, as Zizi Papacharissi and Emily Easton note in the context of the new media dynamics of social media, "Redaction enables the bringing together and editing of identity traces, to form and frame coherent performances of sociality and self-expression [...] Self-editing has always been a part of how we present the self to others" (Papacharissi and Easton 180). We are all accustomed to acts of self-censorship, to pondering how our actions and speech will be received and interpreted, surfacing various personal metadata for others to read while concealing other elements. It is, indeed, a fundamental requirement of communicative participants to anticipate how a discourse community will respond to speech acts, an aspect that requires imagination, empathy, and then judicious application of what to say *and what to withhold*. This can take the form of pre-censorship, but it can also be a post hoc redaction. Deleting an ill-advised tweet moments after posting is a common practice (it seems that such communications are easier to appraise once they are externalized, and regretful participants on the social networking site Twitter often immediately change their minds).

The final page of *I'm Jack* presents such a case study on redaction as part of subject identity and performance. On "[c]ompassionate" grounds, the reader is told, via a "PUMVS 11" form, that Humble has changed his name while in prison. In the United Kingdom, according to Prison Service Order 4455, "[a]lthough there is no legal limitation on the right of prisoners to change their name, the Prison Service is under no obligation to acknowledge a new name." "However," the document goes on to note, "Governors have discretion to refuse to recognise a name change if they have good reason. This is an important safeguard against frequent, disruptive name changes, or where issues such as public and victim protection, prison security or good order and discipline may be affected" (*Prison Service Order 4455*). *It is interesting to note that the prison service holds no jurisdiction over whether prisoners may legally change their names—even to those that may be disruptive or present challenges to public and victim protection, prison security, good order, and discipline—but rather it is whether or not this is "officially recognized" by the service.*

Humble's final act of changing his name—a supposition on Blacklock's part in the novel—would not be without good cause. Humble's sister, Jean, was reported as saying that "[w]e had windows smashed and were abused in the street. Even after he got out of prison, he [Humble] was beaten up three times," although this does throw Blacklock's timeline somewhat (since Humble's name change happens while in prison in the text) (Armstrong and Thornton). Yet in the novel's final twist, Blacklock redacts Humble's "new name" to ███ ██████ ██████████. This redaction combines two curious functions that act like structural metadata. Since the redaction occurs during a change of name form, the reader will correctly surmise of the structure that there is a new name. The form is not designed to remove names, to erase them, but to signal the mutability of address and identification. Nonetheless, the function of the redaction is to place the structural metadata context under strain; by redacting the name, the "change of name" form acts as a "deletion of name" form. It becomes, as the writer Tom McCarthy put it in his endorsement of *I'm Jack*, a "study in self-invention—and, ultimately, self-erasure" (McCarthy).

In many ways, though, this self-erasure follows the same pattern as the structural whole of Blacklock's anti-novel. This is because, even as Blacklock invents and reconstructs Humble's acts of impersonation

and hoaxing, his own authorial identity is erased. To an extent, Blacklock is himself a hoaxer, or at least a ventriloquist, of Humble. The pattern through which his work is constructed—a montage of official documents juxtaposed with stream-of-consciousness thought—leaves little room for the author's own voice. Certainly, we expect no direct address—"reader, I impersonated him"—but, even so, an informed reader is aware of the fourth wall of historical metadata, continually being punctured by Blacklock's manufactured documents. Yet this last redaction yields a final possibility, given how extensively *I'm Jack* plays with notions of readership, detection, impersonation, and hoaxing. For the spacing of the three redactemes ▆▆ ▆▆▆ ▆▆▆▆▆ sits uncannily well with "Mark James Blacklock."

Signs and Symptoms

Redactions appear as unknown textual surfaces *par excellence*. Clearly invested with a withheld information content, such blanks serve as invitations to readers to interpret, constrain, and ascertain the conditions of possibility for unwritten textual forms—that is, in a Kantian sense, the very meaning of *critique*.

While Kantian critique focused on the boundaries of anthropological sensibility, texts that employ deliberate auto-redaction ask readers to make judgments as to the bounds of permissible evidence (metadata). As I have shown through this case study of Blacklock's contemporary novel, with a sideways glance at erasure poetics, permissible evidence often consists of proximate textual statements but can also extend to historical contexts. This leads, though, to a paradox for the debates between surface and close reading that I charted at the beginning of this piece.

As Fredric Jameson saw it, interpretation should seek to uncover those aspects that "remain unrealized in the surface of the text" (40). Certainly, both referential and context-dependent models of linguistic understanding already contain the suggestion that we must look beyond a word to grasp its meaning. Yet what does it mean when the surface of a literary text is a deliberate withholding of promised information? Best and Marcus describe several types of surface: as materiality; as the structure of literary language; as an ethical or affective engagement; as a practice of critical description; as the site of cross-cutting patterns of a literary work; and as literal meaning (9–13). The closest that the redaction-as-surface comes to these examples is the penultimate: the point of patterning. But it does more than this since its temporality is that of the promise; the lure of the deferred deep. For if we wish to "describe texts accurately" as a surface-reading paradigm, the blank asks us not to describe its acts of obliteration, but to catalogue the possibilities of its non-information space through reference to surrounding metadata. This does not necessarily have to be framed in either psychoanalytic or Marxist terms—a move away from which is clearly part of the intent of the anti-symptomatic movement—but it is to note that some surfaces imply depth, and the bounds of validity are conditioned by more than the surface can yield.

Which historical metadata contexts are valid for Blacklock's work? Surely the ongoing political situations of violence against women that are as relevant to the 1970s Ripper case as to, say, Roberto Bolaño's femicides in *2666* (2004). Surely also the ongoing circumstances of mass surveillance by governments around the world. Certainly, the continued assaults on the welfare state that plague Blacklock's working-class anti-hero. All of these contexts can help us to fill in the blanks.

In any case, Blacklock's novel plays out this tension between surface and depth. For in writing a book where the existence of a censored narrative relies precisely on an invitation to deep interpretative reading, the metaphor of metadata can help us to consider the contexts that are valid. It may be important to "be clear about what this so-called metadata is." For even if metadata are "not the content of the letter" but "what is on the envelope," we can be sure of one thing. It did not, in the end, matter what was in Humble's envelopes. The content was false and ignored. His content-level protestations in his phone calls to disregard the metadata fell on

deaf ears. Instead, Humble was caught by the metadata DNA from his saliva, bringing at last the premise of Blacklock's novel to a close, both providing the grounds for the novel's authorship (the revelation of Humble's identity) and the novel's negation (the technology that arrived too late but that would have made Humble and *I'm Jack* a non-story: digital messaging). Of course, where the DNA was found matters for our thinking about metadata. For the saliva was located—where else?—on the envelope.

Disclosure statement

The author works with and knows Mark Blacklock, the author of the novel discussed in this article.

Notes on Contributor

Martin Paul Eve is Professor of Literature, Technology, and Publishing at Birkbeck, University of London. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Sussex and is the author of five books, most recently *Close Reading with Computers* with Stanford University Press.

ORCID

Martin Paul Eve 🆔 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5589-8511

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