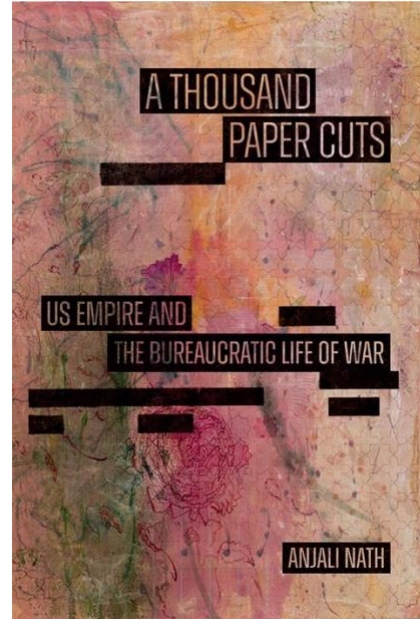


Anjali Nath, **A Thousand Paper Cuts: US Empire and the Bureaucratic Life of War**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2025, 224 pp., \$23.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Taya Ismail
Concordia University

As kids, we fear the dark, but that fear carries on well into adulthood within the abyss of black boxes against white sheets. Anjali Nath's book **A Thousand Paper Cuts: US Empire and the Bureaucratic Life of War** breaks down the pervasiveness of paper violence, its histories, and the surveillance documents' consequences as media objects. Nath, an assistant professor at the institute of Communication, Culture, Information and Technology at the University of Toronto Mississauga, has a special interest in considerations of transparency and bureaucratic archives. Nath had previously published the third chapter of this book, inspired by the continued effort to get a hold of War on Terror Era torture documents through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) (p. 121). The ensuing book strives to explore how the racialized surveillance and American Imperialism are perpetuated through paper by the land of the "free" and how the quest for accountability is obstructed by the bureaucratic institutions that will go to great lengths to withhold and censor the said information.



Though the text reads as a cohesive narrative, each chapter of the book can be read individually to complement a given researcher's interest. This book can be read by anyone who is particularly interested in American surveillance and censorship, with the stipulation that the said person be aware of the more traditional communication theory. Nath uses many case studies to interpret theory, each example becoming a reoccurring theme within the book's subsequent chapters. Throughout the book, Nath employs a "contrapuntal" reading technique¹ (p. 94) as a way to take primary government sources with a grain of salt and compare them against activist archives to paint a broader picture of the conflicts of the 1950s to the early 2000s.

Opening with "Paper Tigers and Imperial Secrets," Nath successfully conveys the grotesqueness of the first Trump administration's fully redacted report titled the "Race Paper." In "Secrecy is for Losers," the FOIA is born, and the push and pull of transparency and restriction begin anew in a paper-based battlefield that mirrors the nuclear tensions of the Cold War. Tactics are introduced in "How to Free Information" when the FOIA is redefined in the hands of activists as a tool against government imperialism. "On Redacted Documents" brings us into the early 2000s, where the Bush/Cheney administration operates further in the dark. In "Paper and the Art of Censorship" Nath deconstructs how the imagery of redaction can be

¹ Nath borrows "contrapuntal" from Edward Said as a way to put sides of a conflict in conversation with each other (p. 94).

successfully reconfigured and how it breaks down when it fails. The epilogue "Letters From Guantánamo" shows the journey of Mohamadou Ould Slahi's detention without trial and his personal letters, where the power of redaction and its consequences are distilled.

When put together, these chapters work as highlights on a (not strictly linear) timeline; each offering more context to the next. A snowball effect is formed, building from one piece of history to the next. By getting into the weeds of each chapter's specific theme, Nath is able to connect the larger issues of surveillance and abuse of power through concrete, cited evidence: 20th-century paper trails about campus surveillance and license plate tracking evolve into destroyed torture tapes and memos. *Paper Cuts* works effectively as a historical text, but Nath's references to theory heighten the impact of what she references. Anti-surveillance film kits become intrinsic to McKinney's notions on transparency within histories of queer archives and activists, providing a theoretical framework to explain the tactics of activists utilizing the FOIA (p. 63).² While the internet is only beginning to impact surveillance in the book, the progression of what freedom of information means and to whom is enlightening.

In taking stock of her theoretical approach, there's no stone left unturned. McLuhanist sentiments ground the redacted document itself as a message, with its meaning inherent in its so-called lack of textual narrative (p. 68).³ Hall's *Deconstructing the Popular* is evoked in the circulation of redacted documents on and surrounding former Guantánamo prisoner Mohamedou Ould Slahi and his torture; Nath parallels the unintended results of what a popular culture picks up when redacted documents are restricted versus filled in (p. 158). Browne,⁴ Foucault, and Mbembe are put into conversation with each other on surveillance, biopolitics, and necropolitics, respectively, to demonstrate the progression of Foucault's notions on population surveillance in a heightened and violent surveillance system (pp. 33, 99). As a contribution to the field, Nath grounds the book in the above canon of media scholars while also demonstrating that the redacted document is a media item unto itself, and a particularly loaded one at that. While the document is not the flashiest (as far as black boxes go, it is the opposite), Nath makes the case that not only is the redacted document a media object but it is also emblematic of the larger lexicon of American Imperialism at a foundational level. That paper serves as both a violent weapon and its own arena.

Paper Cuts is a strong showing. Nath mixes metaphorical language with an academic tone to strike a chord with an audience that would not already be familiar with either American or Media Studies, putting them on an even playing field. A given reader may find themselves constantly writing in the margins and underlining, proof of an engaging text. Her structure of case study, historical context, further evidence, followed by theoretical grounding, proved consistent. Weaving through a not-so-bipartisan history, Nath largely abstains from calling out sides and instead homes in on key players and events. This both helps her

² Mainly "information activism," as an organizing tool for activists (p. 63).

³ Nath asks us to look beyond the message behind redactions and view the redacted document as a media object with a meaning of its own (p. 68), a thought inspired by McLuhan's (1965) seminal text *Understanding Media*.

⁴ Browne is more accurately referenced in how surveillance is weaponized against Black people in America; their sentiments on biopower are interconnected.

arguments stay focused and, while not writing an apolitical text by any means, avoids political polarization in favor of condemning actions and policies, not wholesale parties.

Nath's combination of theoretical backing and against-the-grain reading makes for a successful translation of her goals into the arguments laid out in the book. A limitation for some readers may be their own level of knowledge of American politics going in; specific case studies from the Cold War are used with an understanding that the reader be familiar with them. Even still, Nath's arguments are well-referenced, supported, and argued to the point where even a lack of recognition of the specifics can be overlooked for the flow of the text. Her examination of media objects and activist histories is also formidable. There is a loose thread from Chapter 3 on the digitalization of the redacted document and its potential visual affect that would benefit from being explored more in future (p. 117).

Paper Cuts as a whole is engaging for researchers interested in the imagery of redaction, the "right-to-know," and the violent potential of the mundane media that operates all around us—paper being the grist of this violence.⁵ Chapter 4, "Paper and the Art of Censorship", is a must-read for any research-creation/artist practitioner working with redaction aesthetics as well as anyone experienced with redacted archives. This is also a timely text in its own right for those concerned with notions of freedom at the intersection with and against policy. Today's activists are experiencing some of the most targeted and weaponized versions of FOIA and surveillance technology (p. 88).⁶ What Nath has demonstrated is that there is a wealth of information to find within the withheld spaces.

References

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⁵ Grist means the grain or the "matter of interest or value to the story" according to Merriam-Webster (2025).

⁶ Nath speaks on this directly at the end of chapter 2 (pp. 88). Additionally, Cornell was one of the many universities agreeing to forgo student safety since publication (Saul & Blinder, 2025).