

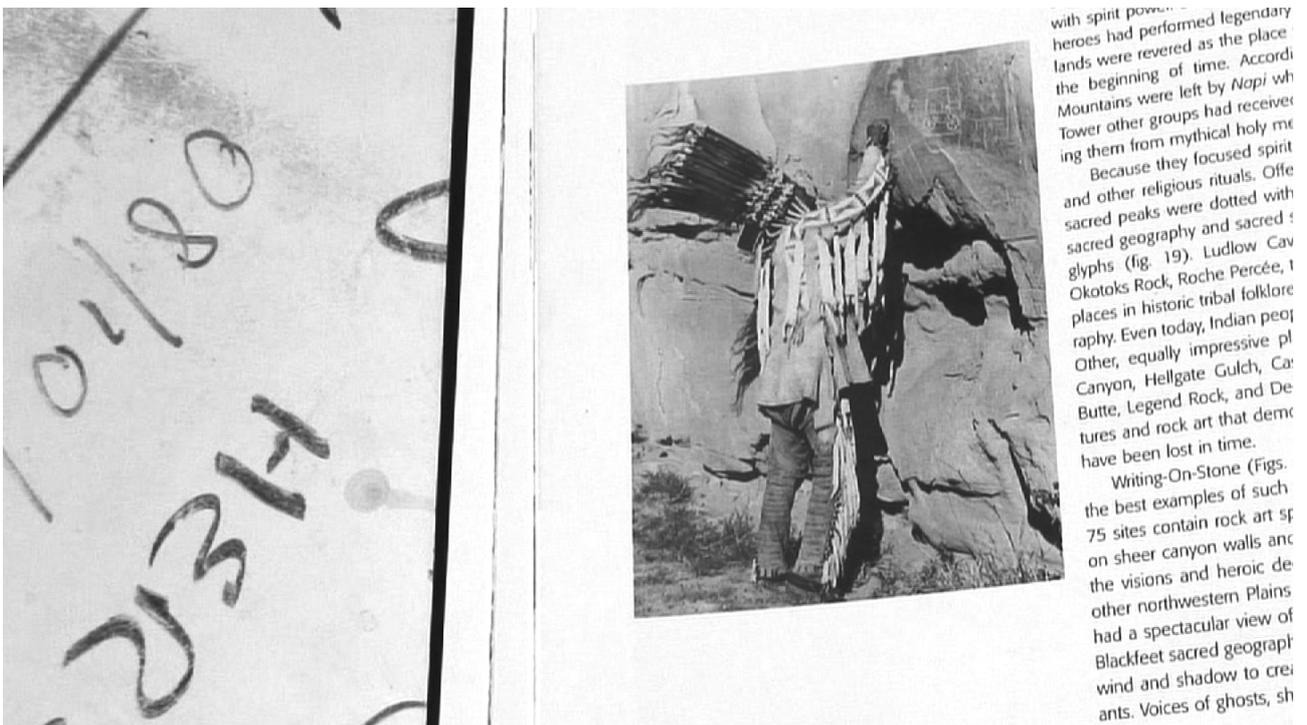
## A response to *Movable Type: Under Erasure*

by Gary Zhexi Zhang

A route is always an act of violence. It reflects a compulsion to inscribe—to authorise, to cut up, to invent order out of noise. As Gayatri Spivak reminds us in Karen Cunningham’s film, *via rupta*, the Latin phrase from which the word ‘route’ is derived, refers literally to a ‘road’ or a ‘way’ that has been ‘broken open’. Phonetically, we retain the latter half of the Latin, which also gives us the word ‘rupture’. This can now give us some perspective. A opening becomes a route over the course of many crossings, inscriptions and re-inscriptions, paving the way to new territories, establishing new orders. But an opening up for one is always a rupturing for another; as in all systems, the creation of order displaces the noise elsewhere, entropy always follows the arrow of time. Always an act of violence, like I say.

When Cunningham approached Spivak with a voiceover script for *Movable Type: Under Erasure*, the legendary postcolonial scholar chose not to read over the film—to speak *for* it—but instead to speak *alongside* it, speaking at once to Cunningham’s images, her original script, and the objects themselves. Given the nature of the subject, these prepositions are quite important. Cunningham has not edited the monologue in any way. The film centres around the petroglyphs at Writing-On-Stone, Alberta, Canada, one of the largest concentrations of biographic aboriginal rock art in the world, alongside a more recent history of colonial autographs.

The Blackfoot Piegan elder Bird Rattle grew up near Writing-On-Stone, and recalls the great victory at the “Retreat Up the Hill” battle of 1866. A petroglyph recording the scene of the battle is the amongst the most complex of all the carvings. According to Bird Rattle, the ‘writings’ were in fact supernatural warnings interpreted by medicine men *before* the battle, from which the Piegan emerged victorious. (1) Such is the dual nature of these inscriptions, at once historical recordings and living prophesies; routes which, once broken open, are followed again and again.



(still from *Movable Type: Under Erasure*)

A different petroglyph occupies *Movable Type: Under Erasure*. In 1924, the aged Bird Rattle took a car journey up to Writing-On-Stone with Roland H. Willcomb, a young American engineer he had befriended, who was at the time overseeing the construction of new highways across the Blackfeet reservation in Montana, in the mid-1920s. Alongside the many carvings already present, a photograph shows Bird Rattle in ceremonial garb, inscribing an image of two motorcars into the cliff, commemorating his return to the sacred place and anointing the men's journey with medicinal power.

In Cunningham's film, the bare lines of Bird Rattle's drawing forms part of a densely layered network of inscription. Her iPhone reframes the original photograph of Bird Rattle to bring a previously unseen shadow into view. It is the broad-rimmed hat of his American friend, a darkly silhouetted presence which resonates with Spivak's injunction not to empathise 'ignorantly', but to 'other actively'.

Impassive wide shots of the highway show a cloven landscape, reminding us of Willcomb's profession as a road engineer, and the idiosyncratic story of their friendship. Even today, the man-made landscape of the U.S. highway system carves out distinct lines of racial segregation across its cities. Many of these delineations date back to 19<sup>th</sup> century railroad networks, some of which remain—more a century later, newly constructed routes continue to perpetuate old displacements. (2) Like the petroglyphs, these markings foretell as well as inscribe.

In the *Phaedrus*, writing is condemned as a *pharmakon*—a supplement, a poison which is also an antidote. (3) A rock carving, movable type, a digital cursor, they are extensions of experience by way of its exteriorisation, but each extension is also an amputation. Supposedly, during the 1924 trip to Writing-On-Stone, Bird Rattle may have also "rubbed-out" another inscription, making a diagonal abrasion across the figure of a warrior, possibly marking a death. Periodically throughout the film, Cunningham's shot dissolves into the noisy moiré pattern of a blank electronic screen, across which a moving cursor gestures towards the writings on the cliff, or the repeated horizontal lines of erasure. The constantly refreshing flicker of the RGB matrix is a far cry from Bird Rattle's durable inscriptions, suggestive of an altogether different kind of violence.

Gary Zhexi Zhang

*Movable Type: Under Erasure* (2016) 13 min. 20 sec. HD Colour video with sound is a video work by the Glasgow based artist Karen Cunningham which was commissioned by Legion TV. It's first screening was at The Showroom in London on 15<sup>th</sup> October 2016.

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Notes:

1. James D. Keyser and Michael Klassen, *Plains Indian Rock Art* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2001), 253
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2015/07/16/how-railroads-highways-and-other-man-made-lines-rationally-divide-americas-cities/>
3. Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy' in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1981), 65.