



Redact to React: Deconstructing Justice with Erasure Poetry

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to consider the philosophy, form and function underpinning erasure poetry. Erasure is a creative practice involving redaction or the striking through of certain words, phrases, or paragraphs in found documents and materials. The poetic form is comprised of what is left behind. The form has grown in popularity in recent years due to the advent of social media and the fact that erasure poems' pictorial format is easily shared online. This article suggests that the post-structuralist philosophy underpinning the form is also key to its traction insofar as it enables poets to expose the fallacy of justice communicated by official documents such as court transcripts and government reports. In examining traditional conceptions of the page as interface and the authority of inscription, I will explore the extent to which erasure poetry heralds a new collaborative and democratic form of poetics. By conducting a close reading of two erasure texts—M NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* and Nicole Sealey's 'Pages 1–4', an excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*—I will argue that erasure poetry has the potential to reinvigorate postcolonial studies, drawing parallels between erasure and the censorship of black lives.

Keywords Erasure · Redaction · Poetry · Deconstruction · Democracy · Postcolonialism

Introduction

Erasure poetry is having a moment. As a 'period-defining technique for an era when the conventions of lyric autobiography have been challenged,'¹ erasure poems' frequently short and pictorial format has led to a surge of do-it-yourself erasures on social media. Many critics attribute this trend to the 2010 publication of Austin Kleon's *Newspaper Blackout*,² a guide to creating erasure poetry from newspaper

¹ Hammer (2017), p. 30.

² Kleon (2010a).

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clippings, and his follow-up, *Steal Like an Artist*,³ which quelled fears about the nature of creativity by emphasizing that ‘nothing is original.’⁴ With the method broadly conceived as using a pen to redact or ‘strike-through’ certain words, phrases, or paragraphs, the poetic form is comprised of what is left behind. As Sharif explains, ‘[e]rasure means obliteration. The Latin root of obliteration (*ob-* against and *lit(t)era-* letter) means the striking out of text.’⁵ Multimedia approaches are common, with many compositions featuring collages and painted artworks framed around the remaining text.

Despite its proliferation, the academic study of erasure poetry has been negligible. At present, coverage has mainly been limited to literary magazines based in the United States, such as *The Kenyon Review*, and the poetic journals *Evening Will Come* and *Jacket2*, alongside podcasts and blog posts. Most traction continues to take place on social media, via ‘self-uploads’ of the poems themselves, with the Instagram hashtag #erasurepoetry fetching over 36,000 posts,⁶ and #blackoutpoetry generating almost 205,000.⁷ In 2021, Nicole Sealey’s ‘Pages 22–29’, an excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure* (a sample from a larger project) received the Best Single Poem award at the Forward Prizes for Poetry. Whilst prizes are not the touchstone of literary excellence, this demonstrates the entry of erasure poetry into the cultural marketplace, rendering the lack of sustained academic engagement with the form all the more shameful. It is hoped that this article will cease the drought by illustrating the potential of erasure poetry to engender a more democratic form of poetics and to deconstruct the dogmatism of ‘justice’ that legal and official documents purport to provide.

The inherent links between poetry and philosophy have been well documented and poststructuralism is a common theme within literary criticism. This article situates erasure poetry within Derridean deconstruction, exploring how its *philosophy* means that it can be conceptualized as a ‘collaborative’ medium. This will entail a focus on Derrida’s concept of placing signs (words) *sous rature* (‘under erasure’) to indicate their simultaneous inadequacy and indispensability. As an extension of Heidegger’s concept of the ‘strike-through,’ initially, *sous rature* seems uniquely fitting to what can be termed the ‘palimpsest’ form of erasure poetry. Palimpsest forms are those that strikethrough or ‘fade’ parts of a text (for example, by using a smaller font or paler typeface) but still leave it at least partially visible. In doing so, they can be theorized as undoing the opposition between present and absent words; between those supposedly suitable and those which have been found wanting. Some online commentators argue that the palimpsest form should be differentiated from black-out poetry which practices a more permanent erasure.⁸ The latter occurs when a poet takes a found document and ‘crosses out a majority of the existing text, leaving

³ Kleon (2012a).

⁴ Kleon (2012a), p. 6.

⁵ Sharif (2013).

⁶ Instagram (2023a).

⁷ Instagram (2023b).

⁸ This Ocean of Texts (2020).

visible only the words that comprise his or her poem; thereby revealing an entirely new work of literature birthed from an existing one.’⁹ Whilst public experimentation has shown that blackout poems can use any source text (fiction or non-fiction), the method of using a black, permanent marker pen to blot out words completely so that they can no longer be read undoubtedly renders the result more decisive than its palimpsest counterpart. For some, this also means that it is uniquely suited to therapeutic or politicized contexts. Commenting on her collection of blackout poems made from sexual abusers’ apology letters, Isobel O’Hare remarked, ‘I just really wanted to erase their words. So, I grabbed a sharpie and went to work.’¹⁰

Despite these differences, this article will employ the rubric of ‘erasure poetry’ to cover both forms. This is because it considers their philosophical foundations, materiality, and themes as largely identical. Any inferences that relate specifically to either palimpsest or blackout poetry will be specified as such. The article will conduct case studies of two erasure poems: M NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* And Nicole Sealey’s ‘Pages 1–4’, an excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*. The analysis will take place within an overall examination of how erasure poetry can comment on key social justice issues; and issues of race and postcolonialism in particular. The relationship between erasure and the postcolonial will be offered as a microcosm through which to frame this article’s belief in the power of erasure poetics. This is predicated on similarities between the philosophy of erasure and the postcolonial process of mimicry, and between erasure as appropriation/redaction, and the state’s censorship of black lives.

Erasure as Deconstruction: Towards a Collaborative Poetics?

It seems fair to say that the online explosion of erasure poetry in recent years has occurred largely without reference to, or perhaps even without knowledge of, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of erasure. Yet even if Derrida’s concept of writing under erasure goes unconsidered by many erasure poets, I suggest that retrospective associations between erasure and the deconstructive method are valid and will facilitate a better understanding of the place erasure poetry holds in the contemporary imagination. The cluster of French philosophical and critical perspectives characterized as poststructuralism has been linked to literary criticism since the 1960s. In accepting fundamental tenets of structuralist theory predicated on language, ‘poststructuralism’ does not mean ‘after’ structuralism, but a refinement of the humanist foundationalism which had gone before it. The best illustration of this is to be found in Derrida’s deconstruction of the Saussurean sign. Saussure’s *Course in General Linguistics* (1906),¹¹ made clear that meaning resided in the sign and nowhere else.¹² He divided the sign into two components: the signifier (sound or visual appearance of the word) and signified (its meaning). Neither element determines

⁹ Ce Miller (2017).

¹⁰ O’Hare (2019).

¹¹ de Saussure (2013).

¹² Belsey (2002), 11.

the other: the signifier does not ‘express’ the meaning, nor does the signified ‘resemble’ the sound.¹³ Since ‘all the available terms are purely linguistic,’¹⁴ Derrida concluded that ‘there is nothing outside the text.’¹⁵ Semiotologists like Saussure identified that all texts are structured on binary oppositions, for example, speech/writing, mind/body, inside/outside, presence/absence. Yet for Derrida, they crucially failed to realize that these binary oppositions were organized *hierarchically*; the first term is seen as higher than or better than, the second.¹⁶

Derrida saw the irony in this. Even when a text tries to privilege speech as immediacy, it cannot eliminate the fact that speech is based on a *différance* between the signifier and signified inherent in the sign, just as writing is. Derrida’s neologism *différance* is based on the dual meanings of the word difference in French meaning both to differ and to *defer*.¹⁷ Whilst to ‘differ’ is spatial; based on signs’ meaning in relation to their proximity to other signs; to ‘defer’ is temporal. The difference in the sign itself postpones its claim to meaning. Derrida’s concern lay with this tendency of the verbal sign to ‘slip’ from the concept it is supposed to designate.¹⁸ If we cannot get to the essence of reality through language, reality itself must be *textual*.¹⁹

If language is unstable, the fact that *logocentrism* (the privilege of speech as self-present meaning) sits at the cornerstone of Western culture becomes problematic. Whereas Western philosophy saw writing in Plato’s *Phaedrus* as being an orphan, unable to communicate knowledge, Derrida found evidence for a *deconstruction* of this view, elucidating writing instead as ‘an inscription of truth in the soul.’²⁰ Derrida called this sort of writing the *trace*, which can be seen as the dynamic source of both speech and external writing.²¹ Critically, the *trace* can undo the hierarchy imposed by language’s binary oppositions by exposing their reliance on a sign which is not present.²² The *trace* becomes about simultaneously erasing inscription, and inscribing erasure.²³ The boundary between presence and absence becomes *deconstructed*, the latter being the analytical process by which we can investigate the *trace*, differentiating the other into the *selfsame*.²⁴

This concept has obvious relevance to erasure poetry, where the physical act of erasure suspends a word in the gap between sign and gesture, effectively figuring the trace.²⁵ Yet Derrida took the concept further. In 1967, he published *Of Grammatology*, in which he placed the word ‘Being’ *sous rature* (‘under erasure’) by layering

¹³ Belsey (2002), 10.

¹⁴ Barry (2002), 44.

¹⁵ Derrida (1997), 158.

¹⁶ Johnson (1981), x.

¹⁷ Derrida (2013), 474.

¹⁸ Derrida (2013), xv.

¹⁹ Barry (2002), 52.

²⁰ Derrida (1981a), 163.

²¹ Coward (1991), 146.

²² Derrida (1981b), 26.

²³ Brennan (2012).

²⁴ Derrida (1988), 53.

²⁵ Rubinstein (2018).

it with a typographic X.²⁶ Importantly, this technique allowed both the word and the deletion to stand. The concept of erasure as removal was first developed in Heidegger's seminal work *Being and Time* (1927), a text which employed the use of strikethroughs to conceptualize the inarticulate nature of the meaning of being.²⁷ For Derrida, the duality of putting the word 'Being' under erasure constituted 'a condensed instance of deconstruction, the self-un-doing of language, the way in which every philosophical contains its own unravelling.'²⁸ Derrida placed signs under erasure to denounce the 'presence' that is supposed to exist behind a word in order. The relationality of every word means that there will always be an accumulated meaning that we cannot account for, and which will be contested. It follows that the whole system of signification is placed 'under erasure.'²⁹ Writing *sous rature* therefore became Derrida's way of using the only available language, 'a mode of operating according to the vocabulary of the very thing he is delimiting.'³⁰ Little wonder then, he later remarked that the 'most giving' signature is the one which knows 'how to efface itself.'³¹

This knowledge changes the nature of reading from a passive experience to an active and *reproductive* one. Deconstruction accepts that reading must subvert the authoritarian claim to definitive knowledge and that meaning is never fixed.³² If deconstructing a text is to carefully tease out its warning forces of signification,³³ this presupposes acceptance that a given text does not coincide with its graphic surface but is 'haunted' by *traces*, a concept known as 'hauntology.'³⁴ Yet, in order to describe traces, 'the language of presence and absence, the metaphysical discourse of phenomenology, is inadequate.'³⁵ Words cannot represent the *trace* element. It follows then, that writing *sous rature* becomes a way of exposing the *trace*; a deconstructive method elucidating presence *despite* absence, rather than a merely figurative element inviting deconstructive readings, as some critics have suggested.³⁶ As such, erasure poetry becomes a valuable tool by which literature can simultaneously unravel the instability of language and its propensity towards falsehoods, yet work within its 'necessary' confines.

In this way, deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of the text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.³⁷ Acknowledging the fundamental 'slippage' between traditional binary structures such as man/woman, black/white,

²⁶ Rubinstein (2018).

²⁷ Heidegger (1967).

²⁸ Rubinstein (2018).

²⁹ Taylor and Winquist (2001), 113.

³⁰ Orton (1989), 39.

³¹ Derrida (1986), 26.

³² Kearney (1986), 9.

³³ Johnson (1980), 5.

³⁴ Derrida (1994).

³⁵ Derrida (1982), 21.

³⁶ Galpin (1998).

³⁷ Hillis Miller (1991), 126.

and sex/gender has been praised for its ‘dehellenization of literary criticism,’³⁸ in allowing various counter-hegemonic narratives, such as feminist, post-colonial, and queer histories, to be taken into account. As a deconstructive method, erasure poetry has been vital in reinvigorating postcolonial literary studies, as will be explored in due course. Such potential comes through recognizing that the supposed temporal distance between the original inscription and subsequent erasure is also a myth. If poststructuralism elucidates that there is no such thing as an authoritative ‘truth’ or ‘meaning,’ then inscriptions proclaiming to be such effectively erase themselves. Erasure poetry materializes this process. For McHale, the *topos* of erasure in post-modern poetry is directly linked to our era’s history (the legacy of the Holocaust) and the threat of nuclear war (the ‘ultimate erasure’³⁹). Jean-Luc Godard similarly referenced art’s inability to represent the Holocaust as evidencing that ‘only the hand that erases can write.’⁴⁰ This references erasure’s power in resisting totalising metanarratives, which can only ever deceive and suppress. As Cusset summarised, ‘[w]here interpretation is obvious, where it is not a question, power reigns supreme; where it is wavering, flickering, opening its uncertainty to unpredictable uses, empowerment of the powerless may be finally possible.’⁴¹

Of course, this presupposes not only that a text may not be saying what it seems to be saying, but also, that it may not be saying what the *author* intended. For Roland Barthes, the ‘birth of the reader, must be at the cost of the death of the author,’ precisely because, a ‘text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures, and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation.’⁴² If texts only have meaning in relation to other texts, then it follows that all texts reference others simultaneously in endless acts of ‘intertextuality.’⁴³ Practicing erasure deconstructs the author/reader binary, firmly positing every work within an ongoing lineage of thought, idea, and text. This would appear to suggest that all texts are, or could be, subject to perpetual *collaborative* editing. If all texts are intertextual and authorless, what is to stop others from making their own modifications, additions, and indeed *erasures* indefinitely? Where erasure poetry is concerned, this idea of collaboration has been associated with attempts to ‘update’ texts in conjunction with changing social attitudes or to ‘treat’ official sources to bring their contents closer to perceived reality. Indeed, on social media, erasure poetry’s popularity can partially be attributed to its literalized collaboration process. Photographs of erasure poems are frequently uploaded and shared completely unattributed, with no indication given either to the original text or to the poet or ‘eraser’ at work. Without discounting the ethical and copyright issues at play, this anonymity, accentuated by the handles used in the online sphere more generally, does imbue the ‘death of the author’ with a greater profundity. Certainly, there seems to be an implied understanding that

³⁸ Atkins (1983), 34.

³⁹ McHale (2005), 279.

⁴⁰ Godard (2011).

⁴¹ Cusset (2008), xx.

⁴² Barthes (1977), 148.

⁴³ Kristeva (1986), 34.

partaking in erasure practice is the beginning, not the end of a conversation, and, insofar as the range of sources and potential inspirations are ultimately limitless, so too are the contributors.

Conceptualizing erasure as literally collaborative in this way is analogous to conceptualizing it primarily as ‘addition’ rather than subtraction (even though, theoretically, it constitutes both simultaneously). Erasure eliminates words, yet in Derrida’s formulation, it adds understanding to the page, which accretes meaning.⁴⁴ As Couch remarks, this resonates with the root of the word *rature*, derived from the Latin *radere*, meaning to shave or scrape, an action that eliminates and reshapes at the same time.⁴⁵ Whilst every generation inherits a ‘messy’ language and erasure could be postulated as ‘one way of dealing with such impositions,’⁴⁶ how can we be sure that erasure does not lead to the implosion of meaning altogether? Anderson has sought to counter such problems associated with poststructuralism by formulating a concept of ‘ethics under erasure.’⁴⁷ This refers to how ‘Derrida’s deconstruction enables us to rethink or move away from the binary choice-making and decision-taking characteristic of metaphysical and normative ethics, but *without rejecting* metaphysical ethics.’⁴⁸ Indeed, we have already considered Derrida’s *sous rature* as demonstrating a word’s inadequacy of meaning. Anderson clarifies that this does not *deny* meaning or intention but reveals the ‘metaphysical assumptions underlying a word or concept’s meaning so as to expose the contextuality and alterity of language.’⁴⁹

In this way, deconstruction does not mean *destruction*, but *repositioning*. Thus, when Derrida famously stated ‘there is nothing outside the text,’ what he actually meant is ‘there is nothing outside context.’⁵⁰ Whilst Derrida argues that the sign can be *limited* by context, ‘by virtue of its essential *iterability*, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given *without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning*.’⁵¹ In other words, it can be placed into another semantic chain where it can operate as a signifying mark.⁵² ‘Iterability’ as a “‘differential structure” escapes the dialectical opposition of presence and absence, and instead “implies both identity and difference.””⁵³ I believe that erasure poetry is a powerful representation of this. By appropriating certain words and phrases, the poet ‘detaches’ them from the original semantic chain and re-contextualizes them within a new one. Whilst the new chain of language will have the same ontological inadequacies as the original, poetic intention and meaning are nevertheless re-contextualized in a way that should become clear to readers.

⁴⁴ Diaz Couch (2018), 668.

⁴⁵ Diaz Couch (2018), 688.

⁴⁶ Rubinstein (2018).

⁴⁷ Anderson (2011).

⁴⁸ Anderson (2011), 3. Emphasis added..

⁴⁹ Anderson (2011), 4.

⁵⁰ Anderson (2011), 4.

⁵¹ Derrida (1988), 9. Emphasis added.

⁵² Derrida (1988), 12.

⁵³ Derrida (1988), 53. Anderson (2011), 7.

Democratizing the Page

*'When we write poems, the history of poetry is with us, pre-inscribed in the white of the page; when we read or write poems, we do it with or against this palimpsest.'*⁵⁴

Tension between the concrete materiality of writing and the possibility of a transcendental 'trace' of expression will likely remain for some time. Erasure poetry confronts this tension directly by exposing the inadequacy of words in the most literal of senses; through engaging in a performative praxis of 'correction' or redaction and leaving the text full of 'ghosts' as a result. Yet in doing so, erasure poetry risks legitimizing the power inherent in the hierarchies it seeks to dismantle. By fading or crossing out certain text and leaving other words and paragraphs untouched, are we to assume that the foregrounded, unblemished words are to be the *final* words on a given subject matter? This section will begin by contextualizing erasure poetry's techniques within the long tradition of 'found poetry' forms. It will then examine erasure poetry's assault on the authority of inscription. Terms such as plundering, repurposing, and splicing are often used interchangeably to describe techniques of 'appropriation,' yet divergent political, ecological, and technological models inform these practices.⁵⁵ This will entail an interdisciplinary consideration of the page as interface, to consider the extent to which erasure poetry can herald a democratic practice.

Delineated into four categories, 'found poetry' entails one or several of the following methods: cut up (physically re-arranging text to form a new piece), cento (combining lines from one work into a new poem), the free form mixing of texts, and erasure. In the 1960s, William S Burroughs pioneered the growth of cut-up poetry in the United States, slicing up newspapers, manuscripts, and other mixed media to re-arrange words and phrases into hybrid texts. Building on the spontaneity of avant-garde art movements including Dadaism and Surrealism, Burroughs took an ironic, random approach, believing 'when you cut into the present, the future leaks out.'⁵⁶ In 2016, a new part-cento, part-erasure form called the 'Golden Shovel poem,' was devised by Terrance Hayes in homage to Gwendolyn Brooks. The last words of each line in a Golden Shovel are, in order, words from a line or lines taken often from a Brooks poem.⁵⁷ As Hayes explained the process; '[w]here do forms come from if not other forms?'⁵⁸ Interestingly, this metaphor of two poetic forms in one body, one text 'cannibalising'⁵⁹ the other, is applied by Tom Phillips, when referring to his seminal erasure work *A Humument* (1966 and revs.). *A Humument* is perhaps the first 'treated novel,' taking W.H. Mallock's obscure Victorian novel *A Human Document* (1892) as its source text. Phillips treated every page by hand,

⁵⁴ Bevin (2009).

⁵⁵ Joyce (2011), 421.

⁵⁶ Gysin (2011), 21.

⁵⁷ Share (2017).

⁵⁸ Kahn (2019).

⁵⁹ Lai-Ming Ho (2016), 288.

cutting, painting, pasting, and drawing across various editions to create an ongoing layering and composition project, which both effaces yet remains in constant conversation with the original text.⁶⁰

As Bachelard put it, ‘time was when the poetic arts codified the licenses to be permitted [...] [n]ow poetry appears as a phenomenon of freedom.’⁶¹ Yet there can be a hidden agenda to this practice of ‘freedom.’ James Grantham Turner’s research has uncovered John Milton’s frequent allusions to the processes of elision and erasure in *Paradise Lost* (1667),⁶² something that is particularly ironic, considering that one of the early forerunners of modern erasure work, Ronald Johnson’s *Radi os* (1976), redacted it. Milton associated erasure with the fundamental processes of creation and uncreation—both of which are concentrated in the power of the divine. He was also fascinated with being (like the fallen angels) ‘blotted out and ras’d’ from the great book.⁶³ This offers a framework within which to view erasure as a unique tool, able to challenge and deface the authority of inscription as a ‘quasi-religious textual-material amalgam.’⁶⁴

As we have seen, poststructuralism conceptualizes the text as an open-ended universe where the interpreter can discover infinite interconnections.⁶⁵ Yet terms such as ‘form,’ ‘expression,’ ‘material,’ ‘intention,’ and ‘version’ continue to have a hold over textual scholarship.⁶⁶ Greetham has explicated the varying historical approaches taken to textual records in the ancient cities of Alexandria and Pergamum. The Pergamum approach accepted the idea of *anomaly* but aimed to select a ‘best text’ that ‘could at least represent an actual historical moment rather than veering off into an idealism for which no concrete demonstration could be made.’⁶⁷ In contrast, the Alexandrians pioneered *collation*, where different copies of the same text were laid side by side for comparison. Instead of elucidating a particular copy as the most authentic, they used the idea of the ‘remains’ of a text in the extant documents ‘to reach beyond the concrete and the actual into an ‘ideal’ form not available in any individual state.’⁶⁸ This was known as *analogy*.

Perhaps the act of creating poetry from a pre-existing text can be considered on these terms. Whilst erasures often proceed from a desire to ‘find a voice’ that was not present in the original text (analogy), they could also be conceptualised as engaging with sources to ‘complete’ them (anomaly). Writing has always been political, initiating and sustaining ‘intrinsically new forms of social relationship.’⁶⁹ Erasure, as a form of ‘re-writing’ or ‘refraction,’⁷⁰ could therefore be theorized as

⁶⁰ Le Cor (2016), 305.

⁶¹ Bachelard (1994), xvii.

⁶² Turner (1996), 27.

⁶³ Milton (1967), 1.361–63.

⁶⁴ Starre (2017), 30.

⁶⁵ Eco (2010), 39.

⁶⁶ Greetham (2013), 19.

⁶⁷ Greetham (2017), 22.

⁶⁸ Greetham (2017), 21.

⁶⁹ Panofsky (1938).

⁷⁰ Cheng (2016b).

doubly political. Sharif argues that the ‘proliferation of erasure as a poetic tactic in the United States is happening alongside a proliferation of our awareness of it as a state tactic.’⁷¹ She outlines how governments erase the histories, voices, and lives of anyone whom they perceive to be ‘Other’ in official documents. Examining the state-redacted FBI file of the American poet Muriel Dukeyser, Sharif concludes that a key objective is ‘to render information illegible to make the reader aware of her/his position as one who will never access a truth that does, by state accounts, exist.’⁷²

In this sense, appropriating the act of erasure through poetry may be an attempt to harness the means of state control, and to expose the fallacy of any truth as ‘a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified.’⁷³ Commenting on his erasure of ex-United Nations Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim’s memoir, Srinketh Reddy remarked, ‘I [...] deleted language from the book, like a government censor blacking out words in a letter from an internal dissident.’⁷⁴ An escalation in online erasure poetry was reported in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election as the 45th president of the United States, with many believing that erasing Trump’s language ‘provides the particular satisfaction of watching Trump say exactly what he means, stripped of bombast.’⁷⁵ This conception of erasure is consonant with visual artist Emilio Isgro’s view, that erasure is not to destroy the word ‘but to preserve it, by interrupting the way in which it was emptied of meaning.’⁷⁶ Perhaps then, erasure can be conceived as a democratic act – breaking open the text to allow the plethora of meanings that reside there to be exposed, rather than authenticating one particular viewpoint or perception of events (an anomaly) over another.

Yet if the power of erasure lies in the ambiguous space of creation and subtraction, then it follows that erasure must, at some level, foreclose aspects of the text that it amends. Indeed, many contemporary erasure poets argue that their erased versions ‘fix’ the supposed shortfalls of original sources. This would seemingly perpetuate, rather than undermine, the myth that an authoritative truth exists. Yedda Morrison’s poetic work *Darkness* (2012) ‘whites out’ large swathes of Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novel *Heart of Darkness*, for example, leaving only words and passages which describe the natural world. In this way, Morrison avoids the thorny issues that have plagued the novel: namely whether it is ‘bloody racist,’ as Chinua Achebe suggested,⁷⁷ or whether it depicted racist views with a view to undermining them. Similarly, M NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* (2008), explored in detail below, has been praised for correcting the ‘material memory’⁷⁸ of the 1781 Zong massacre whose corresponding legal case neglected the victims’ narrative. Such authors conceive of their process as finding an ‘ideal text,’ not in the sense of fidelity to the original, but the one most palatable to contemporary attitudes. This would posit erasure as

⁷¹ Sharif (2013).

⁷² Sharif (2013).

⁷³ Nietzsche (1873).

⁷⁴ Reddy (2011), 3.

⁷⁵ Stone (2017).

⁷⁶ Isgro (1969).

⁷⁷ Achebe (1977), 782.

⁷⁸ Fink (2020), 22.

practising its own brand of textual scholarship. Yet this carries serious ethical implications. Like criticism itself, erasure risks assuming authority for itself via displacement, with a primary discourse overwritten by an explanatory discourse designed to repress it. If erasure is deconstruction, what is the use in uprooting the fallacy of a supposed ‘authority’, only to replace it anew? Similar ethical issues apply to translation, where a ‘second-order’ discourse takes the place of a ‘first-order’ writing.

Of course, this would suggest that the source text always remains primary, and erasures are to be conceived as ‘secondary’ responses to it. This will not always be so. In her discussion of *A Humument*, Partington believes that *A Human Document* as source text, though written first, is likely to be encountered second by contemporary readers. Such readers then reprioritize the texts within their own micro-chronologies of reading, so that *A Humument* becomes the ‘primary’ text⁷⁹ This is a powerful suggestion, particularly as Phillip’s ‘treatment’ of *A Human Document* has evolved into seven different published editions, combining erasure, visual art, and collage, across fifty years. If this is so, it reveals erasure poetics to be able to harness a prognostic power, akin to Milton’s concept of the divine; speaking into the future, yet simultaneously obliterating the past. In the case of *A Humument*, this conceals the true status of *A Human Document* as an antisemitic and racist text. Whilst this was undoubtedly Phillip’s intention (he remarked in an interview that reshaping the text and covering the rest with art meant that he could turn an artifact of hatred into something beautiful)⁸⁰ it is problematic for the historical record and W.H. Mallock’s role within it.

Whilst the adage ‘History is written by the victors’ is normally employed as a warning of the skewed interpretation of events, masking or performatively ‘undoing’ history via erasure methods is not a viable solution. Of course, one could argue that this matters less where our perception of certain historical events is so deeply entrenched that erasure will not upset the balance but will only demonstrate alternative viewpoints and experiences. In such cases, the method of erasure itself will be particularly powerful in the visual and ontological senses enabling the text to bear a different kind of ‘inscription, bearing the mark or scar of what was seen and grasped.’⁸¹ Indeed, Cheng conceptualizes erasure as an inherently violent act and the removal of language as defacing or disremembering.⁸² It is surely true that erasure ruptures the textual line and bends it toward an intuitively assembled language.⁸³ Yet, for McHugh, ‘[a]ll poetry is fragment: it is shaped by its breakages, at every turn. It is the very art of turnings, toward the white frame of the page, toward the unsung, toward the vacancy made visible.’⁸⁴ In all written texts, the spaces between chapters, headings and paragraphs normally express structural hierarchies and create

⁷⁹ Partington (2013), 67–8.

⁸⁰ Hawley (2019).

⁸¹ McHugh (2011).

⁸² Cheng (2016a).

⁸³ Cheng (2016a).

⁸⁴ McHugh (2011), 75.

semantic groupings.⁸⁵ With poetry, the function of spaces between words, verses, and stanzas is more complex, with most readers decoding the line-break as the most obvious visual characteristic that a literary work is indeed ‘poetry.’⁸⁶ To what extent then, can erasure poetry be theorized as radical in *form*?

The art critic Johanna Drucker has demonstrated that interpretative engagement with printed texts ‘can integrate word, material, and image, even as it builds on the contingencies of semiosis that poststructuralism exposed.’⁸⁷ This involves conceptualizing the page as an interface. For Laurel, the ‘interface’ is a surface where the necessary contact between interactors and tasks allows functions to be performed. These surfaces act as sites of power and control.⁸⁸ An interface is a dynamic space, a zone in which reading takes place. We do not look rather through it or past it; interface is what we read and how we read combined through our engagement.⁸⁹ Thus, the white surface of the page has the same capacity to elicit sensory experience as anything printed on it (i.e., in the sense that whiteness, in contrast to pure transparency, can be seen). Perhaps the most famous modern text to raise questions about the function of empty spaces in literary texts was French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé’s poem *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolitra le hazard* [*A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*]. This was a long, gnomic, free-verse poem, full of symbolism and disjointed syntax, which freely broke from typographical conventions, such as flush-left alignment and uniform type.⁹⁰ Some words and phrases were emphasized through larger font, or via italics. Mallarmé provided a preface that explicitly directed the reader towards an awareness not only of the spaces between words but of the entire space of the printed page – ‘les “blancs,” en effet, assume l’importance, frappent d’abord,’ [‘the ‘blanks’ take on importance and are what is the most immediately striking.’]⁹¹ In this way, the authoritative status of the conventional black typeface was robustly challenged.

Knowles et al. have situated Mallarmé’s work in terms of its subsequent development by erasure poets in generating new ‘spatio-temporal modes of apprehension in readers.’⁹² Whilst McHale notes that the ubiquitous white spaces of postmodernist poetry signify that something has been lost or placed *sous rature*,⁹³ erasure take the concept further, by encroaching on space and literally figuring the erased text itself. As Drucker explains, the ‘study of visual elements and systems in formal terms gets augmented when it meets the analysis of narrative sequences and editing practices.’⁹⁴ As editing relies on narrative theory, the *image* of an erasure poem becomes an interface; acquiring a third meaning through what has occurred across the image,

⁸⁵ Knowles et al (2012), 75.

⁸⁶ Chivers (2012).

⁸⁷ Drucker (1994). Starre (2017), 35.

⁸⁸ Laurel (1990).

⁸⁹ Drucker (2011).

⁹⁰ Glazier (2015).

⁹¹ Mallarmé (1956), 391.

⁹² Knowles et al (2012), 78.

⁹³ McHale (2005), 278.

⁹⁴ Drucker (2014), 45.

rather than simply within it.⁹⁵ In other words, it becomes multi-modal through bearing the ‘trace’ of the creative process, alongside its outcome.

For certain erasures then, the act of reading becomes as performative as the text itself, as readers are left to navigate textual ordering, including whether we read conventionally left to right or through a different alignment (top-to-bottom, for example). In many cases, this will be directed by the poet via connecting lines or other textual flourishes, but occasionally the power will lie with readers’ eyes alone. Crucially, however, the question of how much attention readers should pay to erased text versus the foregrounded typeface (including whether it should even be read at all) is more common. Whilst blackout poetry removes this problem by completely redacting the source text, many palimpsest erasures derive their very identity through the modes of interaction they initiate with the original sources.

In contrast to the practices of modernist poets such as Pound or Eliot, who sampled sources by borrowing a phrase or a paragraph marked by quoted speech marks, many erasure poets take their source texts apart in a completely random way. On teaching erasure poetry in classrooms, Allen and Simon explain that they encouraged students to erase just by selecting words or phrases that ‘stood out to them.’⁹⁶ This haphazard fashion may account for the frequently anonymized nature of erasure poems, and Kleon’s pronouncement that ‘creativity is subtraction.’⁹⁷ In this respect, erasures have the power to create an interface ‘that is meant to expose and support the activity of interpretation, rather than to display finished forms.’⁹⁸ Indeed, if erasures are predicated on using the canon to disrupt the canon,⁹⁹ then it seems correct to assume that this disruption could continue as a sculptural process, with successive authors inscribing and re-inscribing their interpretation indefinitely. As such, there will come a point where erasures are made of erasures, with the authority of the ‘original’ text largely destabilised. As erasure poet Mary Ruefle put it:

If it is an appropriation, it is an appropriation of every life that has preceded your own, just as those in the future will appropriate yours; they will appropriate your very needs, your desires, your gestures, your questions, your words. Or so I believe. And I am glad. What is the alternative? A blank page.¹⁰⁰

Erasure and Postcolonialism: Setting the Record Straight? Two Case Studies

A true assessment of erasure poetry cannot be made until we examine its practical operation. Given the trend of appropriating official documents, I will consider M NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* – a 180-page work composed entirely from the words of a

⁹⁵ Barthes (1977), 44.

⁹⁶ Allen and Simon (2021), 44.

⁹⁷ Kleon (2010b).

⁹⁸ Druker (2014), 179.

⁹⁹ Bell Hooks (1994), 167.

¹⁰⁰ Ruefle (2010).

legal case – and Nicole Sealey’s *Pages 1–4: an excerpt from The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*. These works will be considered in the context of their respective aims to decolonize the historical record and problematize the systemic racism inherent in twenty-first-century society. Conceptualizing erasure poetry within this overt goal will entail an examination of the similarities between deconstruction and decolonisation and between appropriation and the concept of ‘mimicry.’ In this way, ethical discussions will be broadened to consider the line between erasure and plagiarism.

Following Sharif’s elucidation of what she sees as the inherent link between state censorship and erasure poetry, the leap to conceptualizing erasure as entailing post-colonial implications is not difficult to make. For Cheng, they are ‘so near: how governments, colonizers, and those who write history erase the bodies, voices, histories, lives of the colonized, the marginalized, the Other.’¹⁰¹ As such, it is unsurprising that political and personal interest in erasure poetry comes at a moment when focus is also on how language can be reclaimed, and how imbalances in the historical record can be addressed (the movements to decolonize the curriculum and to remove tributes to slave traders and colonialists in the United Kingdom, for example).

Whilst the postcolonial has traditionally identified its priorities as political or ideological, it has experienced a recent literary turn,¹⁰² which can be further enriched by considering how erasure poetry has engaged with racial issues. Indeed, Bhabha’s conception of the ‘Third Space’¹⁰³ – the liminal place in which the ruling subject and colonised interact, though not in the binary oppositions of master and slave, but in more intricate sparrings’¹⁰⁴ – has obvious similarities to the textual palimpsest or ‘white space’ of erasure poetics. Just as slippages in language work deconstructively against so-called ‘authoritative’ texts and binary structures are dismantled, Bhabha sees boundaries not as where matters stop, but where new social and cultural forms of resistance or exchange find their ‘presencing.’¹⁰⁵

In this sense, erasure can be conceptualized as *necessary* for postcolonialism. For Barrett, the continued exclusion of African Americans from systems of value in modern US society has created a need to ‘pursue novel or original access to meaning, voice, value and authority.’¹⁰⁶ Recently, experimental poetry works such as Rankine’s *Don’t Let Me Lonely* (2004) and *Citizen* (2014) have addressed the violence of language and employed ‘blank space’ as a way of materializing Zora Neale Hurston’s statement: ‘I feel most colored [sic] when I am thrown against a sharp white background.’¹⁰⁷ So too, a tradition of speculative slave narratives has arisen, attempting to release writers from ‘established protocols of racial representation in literature, freeing them to invent unexpected new futures.’¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ Cheng (2016b).

¹⁰² Chapman (2006), 7.

¹⁰³ Bhabha (1994).

¹⁰⁴ Chapman (2006), 9.

¹⁰⁵ Bhabha (1984), Chapman (2006) 9.

¹⁰⁶ Barrett (1999), 81.

¹⁰⁷ Neale Hurston (1928), 215.

¹⁰⁸ Dubey (2020), 779.

Whilst such forms are appropriative *in the abstract*, they frequently fall short of refracting the personal into the political, which erasure achieves through its *literal* appropriation of a source text. It is suggested that the deeply felt, yet ‘nearly intangible absence at the core of black life; experiences re/membered through the body’¹⁰⁹ can only truly be represented via erasure, with its unique ability to ‘trace’ alternate histories and turn erasure against itself to engage with what subtraction leaves behind.¹¹⁰ Both Philip and Sealey position erasure against ‘official’ texts, and against the material reality of the past.

Slavery and *Zong!*

Even today, slavery remains the American unrepresentable. It is the ‘perennial confession of the national conscience, perpetually on the verge of being made.’¹¹¹ The position is similarly murky in the UK, where British involvement in slavery was effectively mythologized as a cause for missionary expansion into Africa.¹¹² For Barthes, myth makes things ‘innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification.’¹¹³ In this respect, a work such as M. NourbeSe Philip’s *Zong!* undertakes a great task. If what happened aboard the *Zong* slave ship has been effectively mythologized through the narrative of the ship’s owner, by history, and by language, how can one construct a story ‘about a story about which there is no telling?’¹¹⁴ *Zong!* forms a response to the events of the 1781 *Zong* massacre in which the crew of the British slave ship *Zong* is thought to have deliberately killed 132 African slaves by throwing them overboard to claim back the losses on an insurance policy. Whilst the crew claimed that the killing was necessary to ration water, records show rainfall in the preceding days, suggesting they had been alert to the fact that insurance policies covered deaths by violence but not death by natural causes.¹¹⁵ Every word used in the poetry collection is derived from the judgment of the 1783 legal case, *Gregson v Gilbert*, which ensued when the insurance company refused to pay out. At no stage were the ship’s owners on trial for murder, as it was routinely accepted that the lost slaves were ‘cargo.’

Like the *Zong*’s unfortunate captives, Philip’s text goes through a typographical and linguistic journey, beginning with a preoccupation with water that is at once spiritual and non-sensical. Words are broken and letters fall apart through an erasure of the opening of *Gregson v Gilbert*, which had stated ‘this was an action on a policy of insurance to recover the value of certain slaves thrown overboard for want of water.’¹¹⁶ In *Notanda* (the book’s section detailing Philip’s thoughts on the project),

¹⁰⁹ Powell (2016), 254.

¹¹⁰ Omhovere (2019).

¹¹¹ Lucas (2016).

¹¹² Walvin (2011).

¹¹³ Barthes (1972), 143.

¹¹⁴ Philip (2008), 190.

¹¹⁵ Walvin (2011), 67.

¹¹⁶ Philip (2008), 210.

Philip considers that ‘always what is going on seems to be about water.’¹¹⁷ The text bears witness to the ‘resurfacing of the drowned and oppressed’¹¹⁸ whose stories continually bob up to the surface (materialized as disparate letter groupings) before sinking back down again. Seemingly, it is Philip’s intention that readers should be wrong-footed and confused when approaching the text of *Zong!* – after all, how can we derive sense from a maritime law that sanctioned the treatment of human beings as goods, no matter how altered it has become? She registers the irony that the only reason we have a small record of what occurred on the ship is because of the insurance case. As such, Philip must use *Gregson v Gilbert* as a ‘word store,’¹¹⁹ but is simultaneously ‘contaminated’¹²⁰ by its legal language, which cuts ‘through the emotions like a laser to seal off vessels oozing sadness, anger, and despair.’¹²¹ This recalls Adrienne Rich’s famous realisation: ‘this is the oppressor’s language, yet I need it to talk to you.’¹²² Philip’s only solution is to deconstruct (erase) language into its building blocks. This enables her to establish a new syntax to delineate new meanings. Therefore, although *Zong!* is not a palimpsest or ‘blackout’ – its erasure process is not visually evident in its textuality – *Gilbert v Grayson* is placed *sous rature* in the most literal of senses; its words are shown to be inadequate, though necessary as the only documentary record of a lived event. Yet whilst this may be so, *Zong!*’s frequent unintelligibility elucidates the myth that *Gregson v Gilbert* is the only *narrative* of the Zong massacre; the dead are present, despite their subsequent historical removal.

In this way, unlike legal cases and indeed, other literary forms, Philip’s erasure poetics are never totalizing. As Sharpe puts it, ‘Philip’s experimental poems do not tell a story so much as convey the ghostly presence of lives within a document that treats those lives as immaterial.’¹²³ Not only does she draw attention to an atrocity that has hitherto largely escaped public notice, but exemplifies how erasure can serve as a new method for representing the transatlantic slave trade. Philip recognized that ‘erasure is intrinsic to colonial and imperial forces. It’s an erasure that continues up to the present.’¹²⁴ By appropriating it, she can initiate a ‘wake [...] a work that employs memory in the service of mourning.’¹²⁵

¹¹⁷ Philip (2008), 195.

¹¹⁸ Philip (2008), 210.

¹¹⁹ Philip (2008), 198.

¹²⁰ Philip (2008), 191.

¹²¹ Philip (2008), 191.

¹²² Rich (1971).

¹²³ Sharpe (2014), 472.

¹²⁴ King (2012).

¹²⁵ Philip (2008), 202.

'Pages 1–4': an excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure*

Two days after the Trump's inauguration, the experimental literary magazine *PANK* published an erasure of his inaugural speech.¹²⁶ Even more provocative was Niina Pollari's *Form N-400 Erasures*, published less than a month after Trump's infamous 'travel ban' prohibiting most people from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen from entering the United States. Featuring an almost entirely redacted US citizenship application, the erasure left only one question: 'Have you/been/in/total/terror? Check yes or no.'¹²⁷ It was within this politically charged atmosphere that Nicole Sealey began her erasure of the Ferguson Report, in 2017. The report was made by the US Department of Justice in 2015, following an investigation into police bias and court practices in Ferguson, Missouri. This had been initiated by the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old unarmed black man, by white police officer Darren Wilson, which took place there in 2014. Wilson was never convicted of either Brown's murder or manslaughter. However, the report found 'extensive, long-standing and institutionally accepted racism' in the Ferguson police department.¹²⁸

As part of the movement of erasure poetry that seeks to re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape American lives,¹²⁹ Sealey's appropriation of the entire report as a source text elucidates the power of language and the capacity for official documents to hold 'radically different consequences and meanings for different people.'¹³⁰ Whilst Sealey has published sections of her erasure (corresponding to page numbers in the report) incrementally, her treatment of the report's opening is of particular note in establishing the overall tone. Like Philip, Sealey splinters language, breaking it down into its constituent building blocks of letters. However, as a palimpsest erasure, Sealey provides a backdrop with faded typeface and a Heideggerian 'strikethrough,' suggesting an ironic dialogue. In contrast to Philip's suspension of words, Sealey's words seem jagged, sending a sarcastic riposte to the formalism of the original text rather than necessarily trying to uncover a story within it. The Ferguson report uncovered at least some evidence of the systemic racism inherent in the Ferguson police force, yet Sealey appears to take issue with its tone. The controlled and considered methodology of Sealey's palimpsestic references to the 'report summary,'¹³¹ which referred to 'Civil Rights',¹³² and quoted legal codes demonstrates that she views these instruments as hollow and superfluous to the simple truth that black people are voiceless in contemporary US society. Sealey's use of space forces the reader's eye to travel across the erased text slowly and awkwardly, materializing the waiting time, through history and through the present, that the black community endures on the path to true equality.

¹²⁶ Scharz (2017).

¹²⁷ Pollari (2017).

¹²⁸ United States Department of Justice (2015).

¹²⁹ Stone (2017).

¹³⁰ Stone (2017).

¹³¹ Sealey (2021).

¹³² Sealey (2021).

Sealey's work leaves little text remaining in comparison to the amount she erases. This symbolises the increasing exclusion of black people from 'white space.' Recent news reports have been awash with stories of racially biased 911 calls, where white people call the police to 'defend' them from black people who are performing perfectly normal social activities.¹³³ Like Philip, Sealey collapses time between the past and present – the visual interface of her erasure harks back to a time of legally sanctioned segregation. By employing more primal language, such as the words 'reflex' and 'urge,' at the poem's close, Sealey typifies the disjunct between the *de jure* and *de facto* of equality in what is supposedly a 'post-racial' world. Black life has been reduced to a fight for survival as that most basic right – the right to life – is by no means guaranteed.

In this sense, Sealey's erasure practices a radicalness in both textual symbolism and formatting – encompassing both facets of the power of erasure poetry identified in this article. Sealey eventually elucidates the word 'bereaved' in the final page of '*Pages 1–4*.' Spaced out so that it spans almost a whole line, readers are forced to trace the materiality of the word, underscoring its emphasis. Every black life is bereaved due to its inherited trauma: from the transatlantic slave trade, from state-sponsored segregation, and from the fact that no black life is safe in contemporary America. This returns us to the idea of presence *despite* absence in erasure poetics as a form of deconstruction. Derrida developed his concept of mourning from Marx, who believed that the 'tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.'¹³⁴ In a similar vein, Sealey's poetry can be seen as a literary elegy.

Perhaps most telling is Sealey's accompanying note: 'I began erasing The Ferguson Report in 2017, three years after the murder of Michael Brown by Ferguson police and three years prior to the murder of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police.'¹³⁵ Not only does this foreshadow the death of George Floyd which occurred a mere two months later, but positions Sealey's work as a challenge to the 'homogenous, empty time' of historical progression which has been used as a destructive myth to justify cruelty.¹³⁶ Whilst piecemeal placations may occasionally arise through reports or investigations, Sealey's poetry symbolizes how the black body continues to be 'under erasure' in US society.

For Bhabha, the 'I' who speaks and the 'I' who is spoken about never coincide.¹³⁷ It is suggested that Philip and Sealey's erasure work achieves some level of unification, by elucidating a poetic ('I') voice where one did not previously exist in official texts. We move from a situation where Literature (with a capital 'L') has the *potential* to be political to one in which the power existing within erasure poetics can be brought to the fore via its 'treatment' of *any* source. This corresponds to the more flexible interpretation of the 'literary' associated with postmodern thought, where

¹³³ Alexander (2019).

¹³⁴ Marx (1972), 245.

¹³⁵ Sealey (2012).

¹³⁶ Benjamin (1968), 257.

¹³⁷ Oxford Reference (2010).

distinctions between literary and non-literary discourses no longer held sway.¹³⁸ Indeed, whilst Harris has lauded poetry's potential to 'bring into play a figurative meaning beyond an apparently real world or prison of history',¹³⁹ it is erasure's appropriative *tactics* that can generate 'cultural meanings and political value when understood in relation to the activist projects that frame and enable them.'¹⁴⁰ To put it another way, Philip and Sealey's works demonstrate the literary hybridity that exists when erasure repurposes legal cases and government reports into poetry. This can be thought of as mirroring the geographical hybridity inherent in postcolonialism itself.

Some commentators have expressed concerns over the relationship between erasure poetics and the postcolonial practice of mimicry.¹⁴¹ Like erasure, Bhabha perceived mimicry as a subversive practice; the colonised deconstructing the systems of the coloniser by appropriating them.¹⁴² However, for Spivak, the 'subaltern' subject is multi-layered, therefore, harking after the supposed 'recovery' of their voice instead yields its ongoing displacement.¹⁴³ The problem is seemingly two-fold: unease arises through accepting Bhabha's mimicry as the philosophical transfer of the colonised from their peripheral space to the 'centre' of discourse (which he sees as central to deconstructing it).¹⁴⁴ Secondly, Spivak's argument is predicated on the idea that postcolonialism will always seek to retrieve a 'voice' that is simultaneously personal and collective. This need not be so. By examining how the intentional absenting of language attempts to succeed where its presence cannot,¹⁴⁵ it is argued that erasure poetics provides an alternative method of 'mimicry.'

Indeed, neither Philip nor Sealey attempt to obliterate the past, nor do they construct a utopian vision where black lives are foregrounded. Just as Sealey leaves the official report as a visible phantom, Philip's extensive notes on her approach to *Zong!* make numerous mentions of figures in the transatlantic slave trade, and justices in *Gregson v Gilbert*. Therefore, neither poet brings their subjects directly from the margins into the centre; Philip in particular makes use of the 'the many silences within the Silence of the text',¹⁴⁶ allowing *Zong!* to be an 'untelling.'¹⁴⁷ Whilst a formerly oppressed *poetic* voice has been retrieved, the subjectivity of literature means that no homogenising 'voice,' in the ideological or narrative senses, is attempted. In this way the nameless figures in both works become central to the poems yet simultaneously remain on the margins in the history they seek to describe. As erasure works, both occupy a space of radical openness,¹⁴⁸ recognising that the margin is

¹³⁸ Eagleton (2004), 15.

¹³⁹ Harris (1970), 8.

¹⁴⁰ Voyce (2011), 421.

¹⁴¹ Voyce (2011).

¹⁴² Bhabha (1984), 12.

¹⁴³ Spivak (1987), 247.

¹⁴⁴ Bhabha (1994), 203.

¹⁴⁵ Cheng (2016b).

¹⁴⁶ Philip (2008), 191.

¹⁴⁷ Philip (2008), 208.

¹⁴⁸ Bell hooks (1990), 49.

not a place one wishes ‘to give up or surrender as part of moving into the centre’ but ‘a site one stays in [...] because it nourishes one’s capacity to resist.’¹⁴⁹

Whilst taking aim at society in this way is undoubtedly popular, it can create ethical problems. Cheng agrees that nuances change depending on the nature of the text being erased (fiction versus non-fiction) and, on the person, or entity doing the erasing.¹⁵⁰ A further qualification may be the ‘type’ of erasure employed. For a palimpsest like Sealey’s, the continuing visibility of the ‘erased’ text demonstrates that alternative readings are available. Even ‘blackout’ forms leave a visual clue to erasure. Philip’s work is potentially the most transgressive, insofar as it practices a ‘spatial erasure’ which bears very little resemblance to the original text. Nevertheless, it is surely true that all erasure poems, as appropriations, raise the question of where ‘erasure’ ends, and ‘plagiarism’ begins.

The obvious yet unsatisfying answer to this is that it depends on how much text has been erased. In the US, *Writer’s Digest* suggests that erasing more than fifty percent of the original text constitutes enough ‘critical decisions to create a new piece of art.’¹⁵¹ UK copyright law points towards a ‘fair use’ doctrine but cautions that this is highly subjective.¹⁵² In the US, fair use is equated with ‘transformative’ uses.¹⁵³ Transformative uses ‘are those that add something new, with a further purpose or different character, and do not substitute for the original use of the work.’¹⁵⁴ In general, it is good practice to credit the original source. How does this square with Kleon’s original imploration to ‘steal like an artist?’

Interestingly, Kleon has removed one of his early works stating, ‘Art is 99% robbery,’ from his social media platforms. This silent retraction (many blogs still reference the work and feature a broken link to Kleon’s website) epitomizes the murky waters of the internet when it comes to intellectual property. Indeed, Voyce considers that twenty-first-century experimental writing conceals a broader political project of open-source poetics for a shared cultural common online.¹⁵⁵ Despite similar online expanses in music sharing leading to a proliferation of music copyright cases in recent years, there has yet to be a UK or US case involving claims that an erasure poem was infringing the copyright of earlier source material.¹⁵⁶ Perhaps this legal indeterminacy befits the indeterminacy of poetry itself.

Indeed, Pettersson makes the point that a ‘fair amount of poetry does not depict actions in the way prose fiction usually does. It merely suggests that something may or may not have taken place. Any meaning stated or implied [...] may be put *under erasure*.’¹⁵⁷ For this reason, Flynn considers any act of erasing prose to create a

¹⁴⁹ Bell hooks (1990), 49.

¹⁵⁰ Cheng (2016a).

¹⁵¹ Brewer (2014).

¹⁵² UK Copyright Service (2007).

¹⁵³ U.S. Copyright Office (2023a).

¹⁵⁴ U.S. Copyright Office (2023b).

¹⁵⁵ Voyce (2011), 409.

¹⁵⁶ Flynn (2021).

¹⁵⁷ Pettersson (2017), 130. Emphasis added.

poem as sufficiently ‘transformative.’¹⁵⁸ Yet, this may be too simplistic. Certainly, the instinctive approach that is taken to detecting plagiarism or copyright infringement can be considered analogous to the creativity of erasure poetics. Perhaps then, ethical issues actually lie in reading as ‘[i]nner appropriation – the ultimate stage in the communication circuit.’¹⁵⁹ For Pindyck, the line between reading and writing is blurred with erasure – ‘reading becomes a matter of attunement to the creative possibilities of the page’s words and spaces.’¹⁶⁰

Indeed, erasure as reading-writing is precisely what makes it deconstruction. Perhaps, then, the line between appropriation and plagiarism that erasure traverses is a key, uncontrollable part of its character. In a similar vein to the examination of *sous rature*’s ethics, it is suggested that erasure poetry’s frequent confrontation of ethics at the very least ensures that it does not act *outside* them. Indeed, in his examination of Reddy’s work, Hammer problematises the very term ‘erasure:’ ‘it implies the silencing of a voice rather than appropriating and reanimating it, and it calls to mind negation and aggression rather than collaboration (Reddy has said he feels “profoundly indebted to Waldheim as a literary collaborator”).’¹⁶¹ Perhaps the ethical question could be reframed if we reframe erasure as creation rather than obliteration.

Conclusion

This article has sought to elucidate a coherent history and practice of erasure poetry that can assist an understanding of its popular appeal in the contemporary, politicized moment. It has posited the theory, form and content of erasure poetry as key to its political potential. Engaging with theory demonstrates how erasure-as-deconstruction can dismantle hierarchical binaries. These binaries can be societal – black/white, male/female – or textual, i.e., the binaries of author/reader and page/text. Building on the idea of collaborative poetics, erasure poetry emerges as a way of challenging traditional conceptions of the page as interface and the authority of inscription. Contextualised within the history of other ‘found poetry’ forms, I suggested that erasure poetry develops a new form of ‘democratic’ poetics.

Considering that erasure has been historically associated with state control and censorship, appropriating erasure techniques through poetry has the potential to enable artists to ‘speak back’ to figures of authority. However, this should be counterbalanced with knowledge of erasure’s tendency to assume authority for itself via textual displacement. Analysing two key erasure works which appropriated non-fiction materials – *Zong!* and ‘Pages 1–4’, an excerpt from *The Ferguson Report: An Erasure* – illuminated erasure’s potential to ‘trace’ hidden voices throughout history, and to expose the myth of a ‘post-racial’ state. Whilst the line between appropriation

¹⁵⁸ Flynn (2021).

¹⁵⁹ Darnton (1997).

¹⁶⁰ Pindyck (2019), 60.

¹⁶¹ Hammer (2017), 34.

and plagiarism may be blurred, erasure poetry's potential for energizing postcolonial literature is clear.

In investigating erasure poetry as a deconstructive method in the absence of much critical literature on erasure as a poetic form *itself*, this article was necessarily limited. This meant that the discussion primarily referred to more established erasure works to the neglect of 'public erasures,' such as those shared on social media. Engaging with the latter more fulsomely would yield further ways to conceptualise erasure's 'democratizing' process. Furthermore, time constraints meant that an exploration of the links between erasure and postcolonialism was similarly limited. Additional research on this is advisable, alongside an exploration of the role of erasure in uncovering queer and feminist narratives where they have previously been silenced. As a nascent field, there is yet no magic formula to ensure that erasure poetics do not travel into dubious ethical territory. Yet it is important to bear ethical issues in mind, given that they arise automatically as part of erasure's 'reading-writing' practice.

As public interest in erasure poetry shows no signs of dissipating, and the digital modalities through which it is disseminated continue to evolve, scholarship must evolve with it. It is therefore hoped that this article will mark the beginning, not the end of the conversation. At the very least, it is hoped that the present discussion has demystified the practice of erasure poetics, and encouraged their use in a range of theoretical and practical spheres. As an inherently theoretical practice, erasure poetry materializes poststructuralism's complexities in a way that strips away turgidity in favour of precision. This creates new ways to understand how the absenting of language can succeed where its presence cannot.¹⁶²

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¹⁶² Cheng (2016b).

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