

THIS OCEAN OF TEXTS:
THE HISTORY OF BLACKOUT POETRY

<https://www.thehistoryofblackoutpoetry.org>

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BY

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to Dr. Katie McWain, Spiderweb Salon, and Golden Boy Coffee Co.

ABSTRACT

EMILY RAMSER

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MAY 2020

Blackout poetry is an independent category of poetry from erasure poetry; however, a majority of current literature does not acknowledge this. The conflation of the two has led to blackout poetry being minimally covered in academic scholarship and misidentified. This project identifies blackout poetry's hundred-year history, tracing its contemporary inspirations and through modern-day publications, including seminal works such as Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (1970), Austin Kleon's *Newspaper Blackout* (2010), and Isobel O'Hare's *all this can be yours* (2018). In separating erasure and blackout poetry in this history, it also identifies the aesthetic, political, and methodological differences between erasure and blackout poetry.

Accessible at <https://www.thehistoryofblackoutpoetry.org>.

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

Poetry

[What is Blackout Poetry?](#) [The Politics of Blackout Academic Coverage](#) [The DIY Movement](#)

Blacking Out The History of Blackout Poetry

Though blackout poetry is a fairly contemporary category of poetry, it has a far reaching history. The sections below break down the history chronologically by identifying particular pieces, both poetry and art, and movements that made blackout poetry what it is today. To learn more about what happened during a particular time period, simply click the title.

+ The 1920s

Each time I look to identify the first blackout poem, I stumble across an earlier one. This project does not seek to identify the genesis of blackout poetry necessarily, but I do hope to identify some of the works that spurred the contemporary blackout poetry genre into creation. For instance, we should likely consider Man Ray's 1924 piece in the Dada artists' Journal 391 as one of the predecessors of the contemporary category of poetry.

Scholars like Michael G. Powell are hesitant to call the piece a poem outright, as it does not include any words, but it does resemble what we would consider today a blackout poem, minus the words. The piece is composed of thick black lines that look almost like Morse code with some shorter and some longer. They are arranged to look like a poem with a title and then 17 lines divided into four stanzas.

In his [history of redaction](#), Powell claims the work is a result of Man Ray's involvement with the Dadaist movement. He suggests Man Ray's goal was to "deconstruct, experiment with, and possibly even destroy meaning, laying bare the nature of our customs of reading and writing." It is possible that in this goal of deconstruction is where blackout poetry first came forth. However, while one of the earliest movements that have appeared to influence blackout poetry directly, it is neither the first, nor perhaps even the most impactful.

+ The 1950s

One of the most often mentioned pieces in conversations about the history of erasure and blackout poetry is Rober Rauschenberg's 1953 Erased de Kooning Drawing. [According to Sarah Roberts of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#), the project arose out of Rauschenberg's desire to "discover a way to make a drawing with an eraser." He found erasing his own drawings unsatisfactory and approached popular painter Willem de Kooning to ask for a drawing of his to erase. Upon receiving the drawing, he returned to his studio and erased it so completely that we no longer know what de Kooning originally drew.

Art and literary movements often grow together. Though Rauschenberg's piece is not a poem, it likely influenced erasure poetry and thus blackout poetry due to the two's unique interconnectedness in their early days. In his [history of erasure poetics](#), blackout poet Travis Macdonald suggested that blackout and erasure poetry was "spurred in no small part by similar gestures in the visual arts." This is especially true when we consider that contemporary erasure poets like David Dodd Lee have noted their first experience with erasure as being Rauschenberg's erased drawing.

Roughly six years after Rauschenberg erased deKooning's drawing, the Beat generation began drawing attention to another form of found poetry that would later influence blackout and erasure poets, cut-up poetry. In 1959 Beat poet and painter Brion Gysin expanded upon the cut-up method introduced some thirty years earlier by Tristan Tzara in the 1920s when he pulled words out of what he called a poem at a surrealist rally. While working on a project, Gysin had placed newspapers on his table to keep it from being damaged as he cut papers atop it with a razor blade. As he cut, the newspapers came out into pieces as well, and Gysin began rearranging them in new ways. He, Sinclair Belies, William Burroughs and Gregory Corso later went on to publish a book of these cut-up poems entitled *Minutes to Go* (1968). Gysin and Burroughs further published throughout the 60s and 70s. Whereas blackout poetry does not require the cutting up of a source text, it does use a similar physical manipulation, as poets cover portions of the source text. In some cases, poets make merge cut up and blackout methodology. Many poets will cut their source text into a smaller, more easy to manage section, for example. In doing so, they may cut off words mid sentence and even lines halfway. Additionally, cut-up poems are often credited as being one of the predecessors to blackout poems in interviews with blackout poets and in popular contemporary blackout poet Austin Kleon's Ted Talk "Sneak Like An Artist."

+ The 1960s

In the 1960s, a few people began playing with blackout poetry across the world. While the rest of this history predominantly focuses on the history of this category of poetry in the United States, the lack of things happening specifically in the U.S. at this time makes it difficult to narrow the scope that specifically, especially since many of these poets and projects went on to inspire American blackout and erasure poets.

The most influential poet of this time is likely Tom Phillips, as he began his almost fifty year long book-length project in London 1967. Blackout poet Mary Ruefle even suggests in her [essay "On Erasure"](#) that "the aesthetic ends of erasure, everyone agrees, begin with Tom Phillips." Though she says erasure here, the essay itself deals with the practice of creating blackout poetry, which cements the idea as well that Phillips has a deep connection with blackout poetry and perhaps erasure due to the academic conflation of the two categories of poetry.

However, as I stated above, Phillips was not the only one creating blackout poetry at this time. For instance Austrian concrete poet Gerhard Rühm created one of the first blackout poems using a newspaper as a source text in 1962. He painted over the front page of the daily paper *Österreichische Neue Tageszeitung* for six consecutive days from August 7th to August 12th 1972. He only left the word "und" ("and") exposed. [According to the Generali Foundation](#), he did so in order to comment on how he felt the paper added to the news rather than just reporting it. However, fewer know of this project in comparison to some of Rühm's more popular pieces.

Two years later and a little south in Italy, journalist turned poet Emili Isgrò made his first canellatura (cancellation) by blacking out excerpts of a newspaper, leaving just a few words visible. He went on to incorporate a greater variety of source texts from novels to encyclopedias to even the Italian constitution. In Italy, his works have been credited as greatly influencing visual and conceptual poetry in the country. Due to this, his poems are generally lumped in with visual poetry rather than being specifically defined as blackout poetry, even though with their thick dark lines, they look just like most contemporary blackout poetry today. Despite beginning his canellatura project before Phillips began *A Humument* and continuing his project for an even longer same time span, Isgrò has not received nearly as much attention, particularly in the U.S. [Alastair Smart](#) noted that even though Isgrò has inspired numerous projects, including Caludio Cutugno's 2015 Milan Fashion Week series, "outside his native land Isgrò is hardly a household name."

The next year, in 1965, American artist Doris Cross began her "Found Word" series, which Lis Bensely, in an [article on Cross's life's work](#), describes as "a body of work of manipulated dictionary columns that transport words beyond their linguistic territory to create visual/visceral redefinitions." Cross took her childhood dictionary and manipulated fifty pages within it by taking the source text and whiting it out, covering it in masking tape, painting over it, and drawing over it with both crayon and pencil. She described her process as opening the dictionary and then "certain words just came out and they worked. I began to get images of presentations - very large columns - related to each other yet not related." However, she didn't think of herself as creating poetry. Instead, [Cross says](#) she is "making connections, not writing poetry." Despite not considering herself a poet, there are those such as Jenn Shapland who credit her as the first practitioner of erasure and blackout poetry.

Right around this time, Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers began undertaking a similar project. He took Stéphane Mallarmé's poem "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard" (1914) and covered every line with black stripes. He left no word visible. Mallarmé's poem already had an experimental typographical style with numerous white spaces. As a result, Broodthaers's work looks like a mixture between an erasure and blackout poem with black lines floating in white space; however, it is neither, as the project was not a poem but an artistic experiment. After several years working on it, Broodthaers published the project under the same title as Mallarmé's poem, *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard*, in 1969.

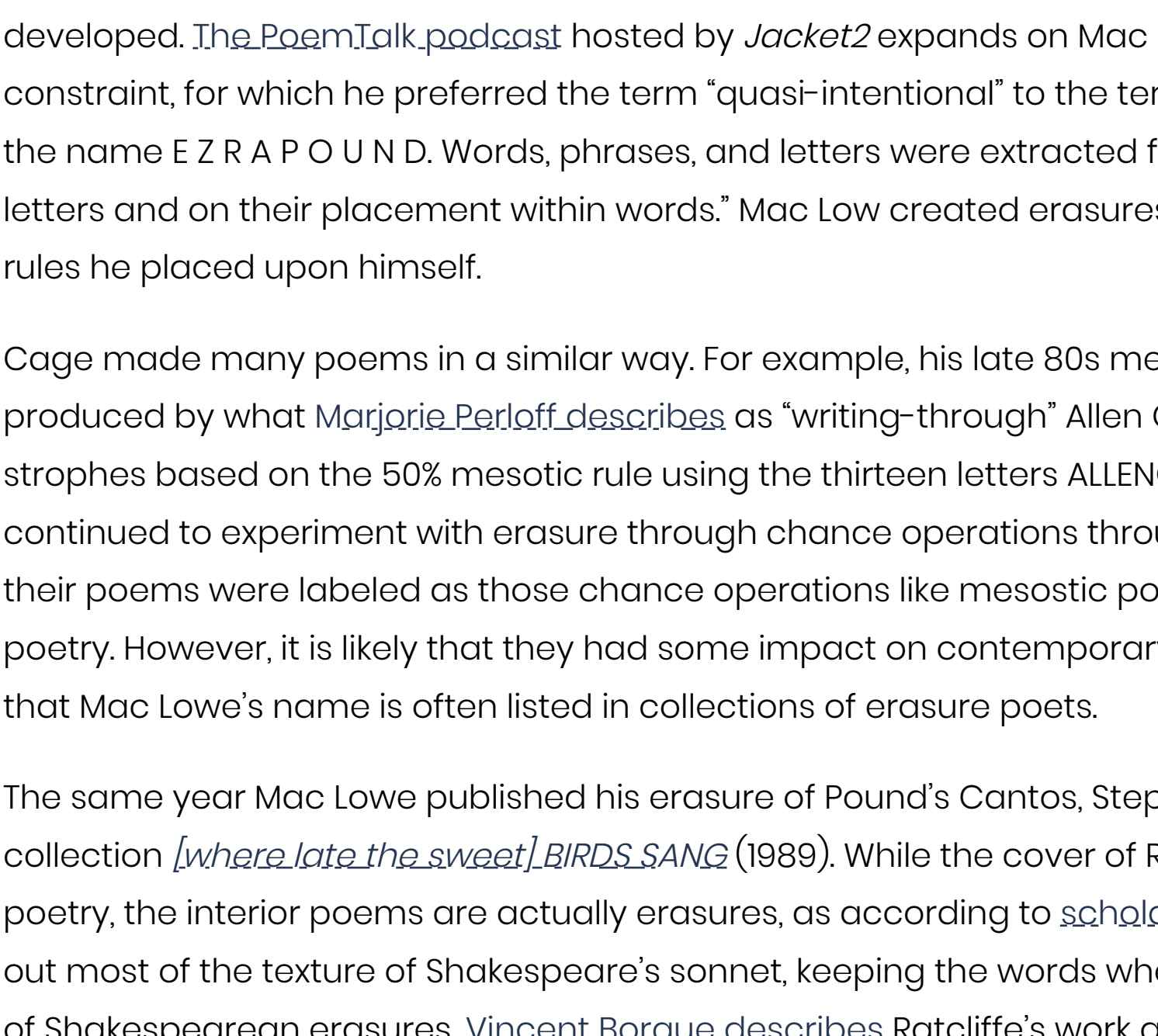
+ The Late 1960s and 70s

Soon after, the [L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E](#) and Oulipo movements laid further groundwork for blackout poetry. In his essay "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics," blackout and erasure poet Travis Macdonald credits Oulipo for increasing the acceptance of found poetry. He mentions that because of Oulipo, "the use of appropriation as a poetic tool has moved from the outskirts of object plagiarism to semi-accepted practice." He also describes the [L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E](#) poets as having "repeatedly challenging and extending the boundaries of both page and composition in their respective attempts to harness, exploit and reveal the material nature of language itself." Together, these two groups opened space for blackout poets to play with page and physical representation of a source text through their blacking out. [L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E](#) poet Lyn Hejinian even went on to create a book of erasure poetry *The Endlist* (2003) by erasing her own correspondence.

Also around the same time the Fluxus community began and started producing more. This group was less focused on literature than [L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E](#) and Oulipo, but it included two members who are often referenced as being influential in the birth of the erasure poetry, which as we know has been historically tied closely with blackout poetry: poet and artist Jackson Mac Low and avant-garde composer John Cage.

Cage and Mac Low began working together in 1954 when they began creating using "chance operations," methods that transform texts beyond the intent of the author. One of Mac Low's first chance operations texts *5 Biblical Poems* (1954-1955) is heralded by those like Travis Macdonald in his essay "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics" as being one of the predecessors to the contemporary erasure poetry movement. However, Macdonald purposefully identifies Mac Low's series not as an erasure poem but rather as a found poem. To make the book, Mac Low erased Hebrew scripture and then added slashes to indicate rhythmic silences. He determined the number of words and silences per line by rolling a die. According to Macdonald, Mac Low, in line with Fluxus, "concerns himself primarily with how these absences are to function alongside their textual counterparts." It is this focus on the how that opened doors for erasure poetry moving forward, as it helped emphasize how the presentation of a found poem impacts the meaning.

Cage's 4'33", a musical score that instructs players to not play their instruments throughout the entire three movement piece, resulting in four minutes and 33 seconds of silence or mostly silence, is also worth noting here. [According to Cage](#), the music was meant to be "whatever sounds the audience heard in the background. Silence... does not exist, when one listens carefully." He effectively erased the music from his musical score. Cage also went on to produce erasure poems using mesostics, but his musical erasure is often cited more as an influence on contemporary erasure poetry.



+ The Late 1970s

While not fully blackout poetry, it is also important to consider Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os* (1977) when looking at the history of blackout poetry. [Travis Macdonald describes Radi Os](#) as "an elaborate poetic erasure" of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). His erasure is so in-depth that [Eric Sallinger describes it](#) as "rewriting-by-excision." Most of the book is clearly erasure, with a handful of Milton's words floating on mostly blank pages, the rest of the source text having been removed. However, portions of it are done in a blackout style with the thick dark lines obscuring portions of the source text. In his essay on erasure poetics, Macdonald suggests that "By carefully and selectively muting Milton, Johnson draws his own unique constellations from the old bard's "stars." In effect discovering the once "invisible" poems of Radi os and, by extension, a fledgling poetic form." Since Macdonald is specifically writing about erasure poetics, the "fledgling poetic form" he refers to is erasure, but his comment could be applied to both erasure and blackout poetry, as the project operates within both categories.

Radi Os was published in 1977, seven years after Phillips had published the first edition of *A Humument*. However, it is unlikely that either knew of one another due to the small print runs of their respective books and geographical separation, as Johnson was in San Francisco, California and Phillips in the UK. The books received very different attention. Whereas Phillips's *A Humument* went on to receive substantial academic coverage, Johnson received less. In fact, [Sallinger accounts](#) that it was described as a "failed experiment, written by gimmick, fit only to be salvaged in scraps for future efforts." Over time, more began reading it and in a collaborative 2012 interview, several blackout and erasure poets noted that it partially inspired their own projects or that it was one of their first experiences with either erasure or blackout poetry.

+ The 1980s and 90s

In 1982, Jesse Glass published *Man's Wows*, a short collection of erasure poems made from John George Hohmann's 1855 book *Pow-Wows, or Long Lost Friend: A Collection of Mysterious and Invaluable Arts and Remedies, for Man as Well as Animals*. The book was originally published in a limited edition run of 128 copies on special papers printed by Charles Alexander's Black Mesa Press. Though Glass was a fairly popular experimental poet, *Man's Wows* is one of his lesser known works. However, his work is occasionally brought up as an example of erasure poetry, alongside older works like Johnson's *Radi Os* and Phillips's *A Humument*.

In the late 80s, both Mac Low and Cage started publishing more and more erasure poems. In 1989, for instance, Mac Low published *Words n Ends* from Ez (1989). In [the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 193: American Poets Since World War II](#), Bruce Campbell describes *Words n Ends* from Ez as "a diastic reading through Ezra Pound's Cantos that yields a flux of letters, words, and syllables." Diastic poetry was something Mac Low developed. [The PoemTalk podcast](#) hosted by *Jacket2* expands on Mac Low's diastic methodology. "Mac Low's constraint, for which he preferred the term "quasi-intentional" to the term "chance," involved the letters forming the name E Z R A P O U N D. Words, phrases, and letters were extracted from the original cantos based on those letters and on their placement within words." Mac Low created erasures in this time that were constrained by rules he placed upon himself.

Cage made many poems in a similar way. For example, his late 80s mesostic poem "Writing through Hawk" was produced by what [Marjorie Perloff describes](#) as "writing-through" Allen Ginsberg's "Hawk." He erased Ginsberg's strophes based on the 50% mesostic rule using the thirteen letters ALLENGINSBERG. Both Cage and Mac Low continued to experiment with erasure through chance operations throughout the entirety of their careers, but their poems were labeled as those chance operations like mesostic poetry or diastic poetry rather than erasure poetry. However, it is likely that they had some impact on contemporary erasure poetry, especially considering that Mac Lowe's name is often listed in collections of erasure poets.

The same year Mac Lowe published his erasure of Pound's Cantos, Stephen Ratcliffe published his erasure poetry collection [\[where late the sweet\] BIRDS SANG](#) (1989). According to Ratcliffe's book suggests that it is blackout poetry, the interior poems are actually erasures, as while to a scholarship on the book, Ratcliffe has "rubbed out most of the texture of Shakespeare's sonnet, keeping the words where they originally were in the line." Scholar of Shakespearean erasures, Vincent [Burque describes](#) Ratcliffe's work as "much more a composition-with than a destruction of Shakespeare's text" as he has having "Burque also asserts that "Ratcliffe's lines are inheritors of Mallarmé's poetics of the spatial page," referring to the same poem that Broodthaers blacked out in the 1960s.

Ratcliffe's [\[where late the sweet\] BIRDS SANG](#) was one of the first in the trend of erasing, blacking out, and manipulating Shakespeare's sonnets to create found poems, which eventually included more contemporary blackout poets Jen Bervin's *Nets* (2006).

In the mid-90s, Chris Piuma joined this trend with his erasure poetry book *The Constellated Sonnets* (1995), a series of 150 poems in which Piuma erases all the words in each line except for one while maintaining all of Shakespeare's original punctuation. [According to his blog](#), he selected the words at random by "Rolling a d10; if a six came up, using the sixth word, and if there was no sixth word in that line, reolling." Despite using the same source text, Piuma claims he had no knowledge of Ratcliffe's project published six years before and only found out about Ratcliffe's book "by stumbling upon his book in the Strand" years later.

Around the same time as Piuma, artist Ann Hamilton, like Broodthaer and Joseph Kosuth's 1986 "Zero & Not," exhibit, began creating art pieces that look like blackout poems but without the words. She made her works in front of visitors as a part of her 1993 installation tropes at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York. [According to her website](#), "in a room with a floor covered in horsehair, an attendant read each line of text silently while at the same time, with an electric burner in hand, [Hamilton] burned each line from the book as it was read, causing the air to fill with acrid smoke." Her source texts were books without any chapter headings, titles or authors listed that had been purchased by Hamilton from *The Strand*, New York's landmark secondhand bookstore, the same bookstore Piuma later discovered Ratcliffe's book. Unlike Piuma and Ratcliffe, Hamilton did not choose her books for their content but rather just the feel of their pages. Although Hamilton's work does not claim to be poetry or leave any words of the source text unburnt, the aesthetic comparison of it with contemporary blackout poetry is striking.

Also in New York in 1993, David Dia began experimenting with blackout poetry techniques in his paintings. He silk-screened pages from art magazines that discussed his work onto two of his large paintings from the 1970s and then with red ink, crossed out the author's name and wrote in his own. Both Dia and Hamilton's works were collected in the "Under Erasure" exhibit in late 2018 that collected examples of erasure being used as both an artistic and poetic tactic.

+ The Early 2000s

Around the late 1990s and early 2000s, the conceptual poetry movement began emerging as an evolution of Oulipo. According to Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place in *Notes on Conceptualisms*, ideally conceptual poetry "negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense—[one does not need to read](#) the work as much as think about the idea of the work." The goal of the movement was to create pieces in which the idea of the piece and the process of making were more important than the final piece itself. Additionally, Thomas H. Ford noted in his essay "Conceptual Poetry, Nonconceptual Poetry, and Postconceptual Poetry" that conceptual poems require "the rigorous application of conceptual constraints or procedures to language" similar to the rules Oulipo placed on its poets.

Blackout poetry cannot be considered a part of the conceptual poetry movement because it derives meaning from both the process of blacking out and from the final version. However, conceptual poetry did influence the blackout poetry significantly, particularly by normalizing appropriation within the poetry world.

Conceptual poets were the ones who really began taking others' texts and modifying them and calling them their own. For instance, take Kenneth Goldsmith's poetry collection *Dayz* (2003). He rewrote an entire issue of *The New York Times*, but he stripped it of conventional typographical distinctions such as separations between title and article or even between the articles, advertisements, and paratextual apparatuses. Ford describes it as a "startling defamiliarisation of one our most familiar textual objects." Blackout poets do something similar in that they do what we have all been taught not to do in a book: write in it. They appropriate source texts similar to Goldsmith and other conceptual poets, but how they do it is a bit different.

+ Mid to Late 2000s

A year after Goldsmith published *Day*, Jen Bervin released her poetry collection *Nets* in 2004. Nets holds a special place in the history of blackout poetry because it is a difficult book to place in the context of erasure and blackout. Unlike Phillips or Johnson, Bervin leaves every word of her source text, William Shakespeare's sonnets, visible. She just greys out those that are not a part of her new poem. In his review in *Jacket Magazine*, Philip Metres compares Bervin's work to "rubbing of old slate gravestones whose original names and dates have faded into near-obscurity; the poet, the pencil etcher, wants to retain the artifact through a kind of representation of it. However, through time and weather, it is possible only to have a partial version." We can still see everything, there are just some pieces we can see better than others.

Additionally, *Nets* allows us to trace a distinct historical connection between blackout and erasure poets. Bervin opens the book by thanking Stephen Ratcliffe who created erasures of the same sonnets in the late 80s. Several works including Burque's essay, Andy Frazee's essay "The Transcendence of Transcendence of Shakespeare's [where late the sweet] BIRDS SANG" and Jen Bervin's *NETS*," and Genevieve Kaplan's dissertation "Reclaiming the Book's Object: Appropriate Text in 21st Century Poetry," place these works and Chris Piuma's *The Constellated Sonnets* (1995) in conversation with one another and suggest there is a historical connection between the three that we can use to start tracking how blackout and erasure poetry has grown and evolved.

In 2006, a year later, Mary Ruefle released *A Little White Shadow*, a blackout poetry project created from Emily Malbone Morgan's 1889 novel by the same name. Ruefle's is more obviously blackout poetry than those I have previously mentioned here. She covered Morgan's words with white paint, obscuring them while leaving them on the page. Unlike Johnson, she does not remove the words permanently, and unlike Bervin, she does not leave the source text readable. As a part of the *Found Poetry Review's* Book Review Series, Douglas Luman reviewed Ruefle's book in 2014, almost eight years after its publication because it was considered to be an important text to the history of found poetry. However, it has not received much academic or popular media coverage. This could be due to length, as it is only 48 pages long, which is short compared to other blackout poetry projects. Its source text could be to blame as well, as more popular blackout poetry projects such as Isabel O'Hare's *all this can be yours* (2018) and Austin Kleon's *Newspaper Blackouts* (2010) have gained popularity in part because of what they have used as their source material. Regardless, Ruefle's has simply not received the same critical acclaim. Her nonblackout poetry has garnered much more attention.

Two years later, Bervin published a blackout poetry book titled *The Desert*. Unlike her Shakespeare erasures, this book is specifically in the style of blackout poetry. However, she does not paint or draw over the source text, John Van Dyke's *The Desert*. Instead, she physically stitches over the source text's words with pale blue thread. [According to Gregory Barks](#), the entire book is a single poem that "forms its own elemental landscape and shares Van Dyke's poetic attention to visual phenomena." Only 40 editions of the book were released, which means it has not been very accessible for the public and, therefore, has not been widely read.

Finally in early 2011, Srikanth Reddy published *Voyager* (2011), an erasure project of former SS officer Kurt Waldheim's memoir *In the Eye of the Storm*. Even though it is not blackout poetry, I mention it here because it is one of the more popular contemporary erasure works that is often referenced in academic scholarship in conjunction with blackout poems. The book is divided into three sections that Reddy refers to as books that each tackle a different part of Waldheim's story. Reviews of *Voyager* like John Ruffa's ask, "Who is speaking throughout the text? Some philosopher? Waldheim himself through Reddy's eyes?" However, Reddy is quick to say that "I didn't write it" when asked about *Voyager*. He claims that all the words belong to Waldheim and that he only "composed this text by deleting words from Waldheim's memoir" and then "visually arranging the resulting word-sequences into the 'step-down' tercets that William Carlos Williams used for his poetic sequence on the underworld." [Reddy has also remarked](#) that "I don't think I'll ever try my hand at literary erasure again. Deleting this passage into existence was one of the most difficult things I've attempted as a writer, and now that it's done, I'm glad I did it—but now I'd like to try speaking for myself, for a change." While his work is not blackout poetry, Reddy's poems are important to consider within the context of blackout poetry because *Voyager* started bringing more attention to the question of authorship for found poems. This conversation is ongoing and is something even poets themselves discuss with one another.

+ The 2010s and Onwards

Following these late 2000s to early 2010s projects, blackout poetry began becoming more solidified as a category. We began developing a collective understanding of what blackout and erasure poetry are and how they are different due to scholars beginning to write about these categories of poetry. Additionally, towards the end of the 2000s, blackout poetry began to take on new life as a result of several poets receiving attention from newspapers and other popular media sources or even just from social media. The poets below brought unprecedented attention to this category of poetry; read more about their specific contributions by clicking their names:

- [Cliffing blackout poetry](#)
- [Educational outreach in classrooms and community workshops](#)
- [Social media poets](#)
- [Blacking out newspapers](#)
- [Addressing political issues including:](#)
 - [US warfare with the Middle East](#)
 - [Donald Trump's presidency](#)
 - [The #MeToo movement](#)

The above poets and movements are not a complete list. This project is on-going and ever-growing. As more scholarship about blackout poetry emerges, so will this website. However, right now, it is limited by the lack of work that has been done to trace trends within the blackout poetry community and the lack of attention given to blackout poets.

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This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

Poetry

[What is Blackout Poetry?](#)

[The Politics of Blackout](#)

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Blacking out Victorian Literature: The Beginning of Blackout Poetry

In 1966, a man named Tom Phillips started making *A Humument*, which is arguably one of the most well known works of blackout poetry today, because of a bet. He walked into a furniture shop with fellow artist R. B. Kitaj and [declared](#), “the first book I can find for threepence, I’ll work on for the rest of my life.” As they were wondering the store, they stumbled across *A Human Document*, a small yellow Victorian novel by W. H. Mallock. When he picked up the book, Kitaj told him “If it’s a dime . . . that’s your book: and I’m your witness” and that was that.

Inspired by William Burroughs and John Cage, without even reading the book, Phillips began “treating” the book with “painting, painting, collage, and cut-up techniques” that obscure a majority of Mallock’s original words. At first Phillips “merely scored out unwanted words with ink leaving some (often too many) to stand and the rest more or less readable beneath rapidograph hatching.” Over time, his methods evolved and became more in-depth, even going so far as to collage a photo of Mallock’s grave onto one of the pages. He employed numerous methods, but all of those methods focused on adding something over physically removing part of the book through erasing. After he finished treating every page, he published *A Humument*, pronounced “a hew-mew-ment,” in 1970 as an altered book that resembles blackout poems.

Phillips has gone on to publish five additional editions of the book over the past half century with the most recent coming out in 2016. Each time he reaches the end of the book, he turns to the beginning and attempts to rework the page. Some pages resisted reworking, so he did not create six different versions of each page, but each edition of the book is significantly different than the previous. Additionally, he also created a digital version of the book for iPads and iPhones in 2010. The app, however, stopped being available for download in the mid 2010s.

Because of the uniqueness of the project, *A Humument* continues to draw attention from readers, academics, and journalists alike even half a century after its initial publication. It has garnered more attention from academics, in fact, than most other erasure or blackout poetry projects. Scholars such as Courtney Pfahl in “[after the / Unauthor: Fragmented Author Functions in Tom Phillips’s A Humument](#)” and Tammy Lai-Ming Ho in “[Book-eating Book: Tom Phillips’s A Humument \(1966–\)](#)” have discussed his methodologies and the impact of the book on the art and writing worlds.



Is Phillips a Blackout Poet?

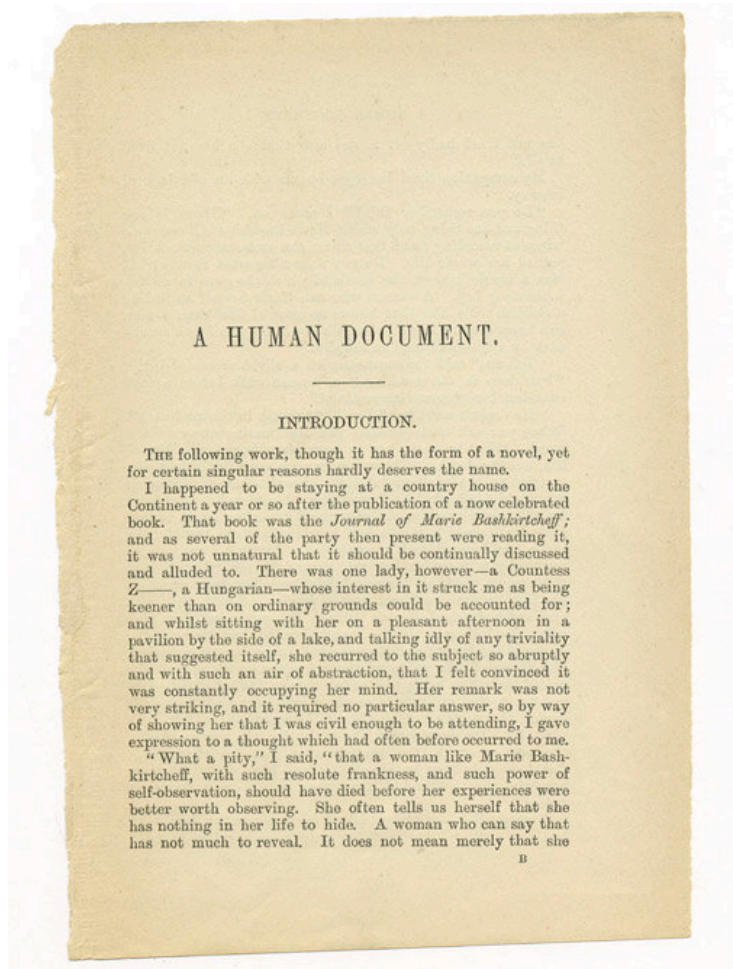
Phillips’s popularity has caused him to become almost synonymous with blackout poetry. However, the identification of *A Humument* is questionable at best. While Phillips treated the book in a way that is comparable to traditional blackout poets’s methodologies in regards to how he covered portions of the source text, *A Humument* is not necessarily poetry. In discussing his project, [Phillips states](#) that he has “so far extracted from [Mallock’s] book well over a thousand segments of poetry and prose.” Phillips does not describe his work as poetry or prose. Rather he only says there are elements of both that he included in the book.

One argument against *A Humument’s* status as blackout poetry is that the project has more of a narrative quality to it than is typical of the genre. As he was writing, Phillips says characters emerged on their own to interact with Mallock’s protagonists. He calls the main character of *A Humument* its “hidden hero” and describes him as “the downmarket and blokeish . . . Bill Toge,” pronounced Bill “Toe-dge.” Phillips creates a whole story around Bill, but the narrative is fairly non-linear and not always cohesive, as Bill only appears when Phillips’s personal rules allow. Phillips placed numerous restrictions on himself including that Bill had to appear “wherever the words ‘together’ or ‘altogether’ occurred.” This extended narrativity is more indicative of prose than poetry.

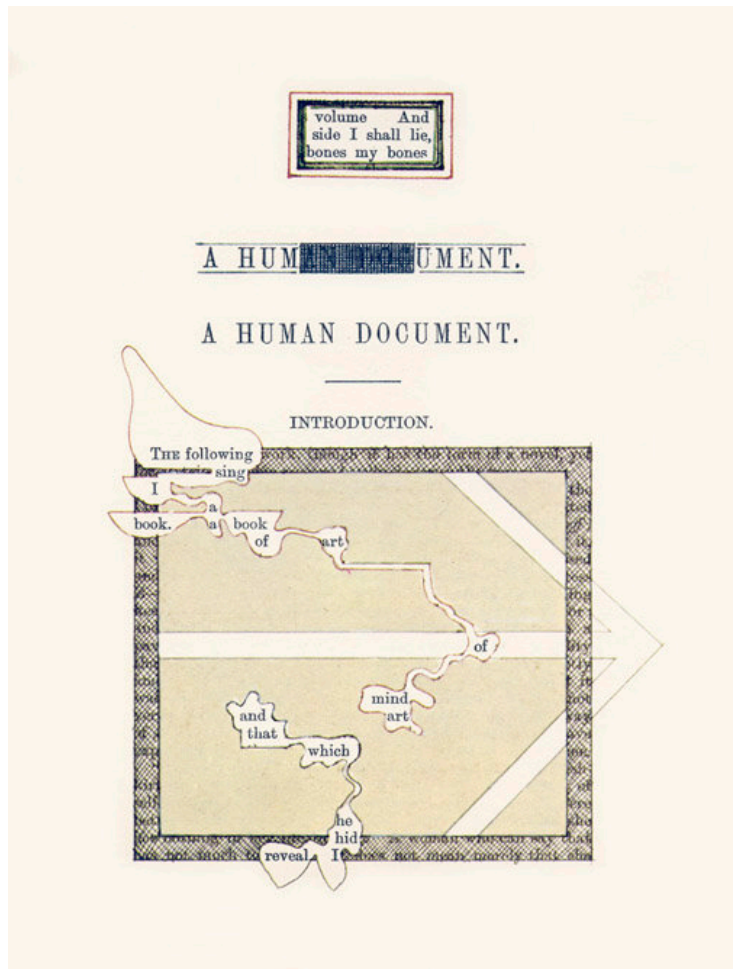
Numerous erasure and blackout poetry projects have incorporated this same kind of narrative structuring, such as Janet Holmes’s 2009 erasure poetry collection *The Ms of M Y Kin* and Travis Macdonald’s 2008 erasure and blackout project *The O Mission Repa*. Reviews of the two often compare them to Phillips because of this similarity in narrative structure. However, collections published after Holmes’s and Macdonald’s utilize less of narrative structure and focus instead more on a particular theme or type of source text. Today a majority of blackout poetry collections have forgone this narrative structure, which suggests it should not be considered a necessary characteristic for something to be referred to as blackout poetry.

Though many hold *A Humument* and Phillips as synonymous with blackout poetry, it may be more accurate to describe *A Humument* as an altered book, a book that has been changed from its original form into a new one by an artist. This would mean that it would thereby also be more accurate to refer to Phillips as an artist rather than a blackout poet. On the “[About](#)” page of his website, Phillips is described as “an artist” and his work on *A Humument* is referred to as Phillips “dedicat[ing] himself to making art out of the first secondhand book he could find.” Nowhere does he mention poetry or refer to himself as a poet.

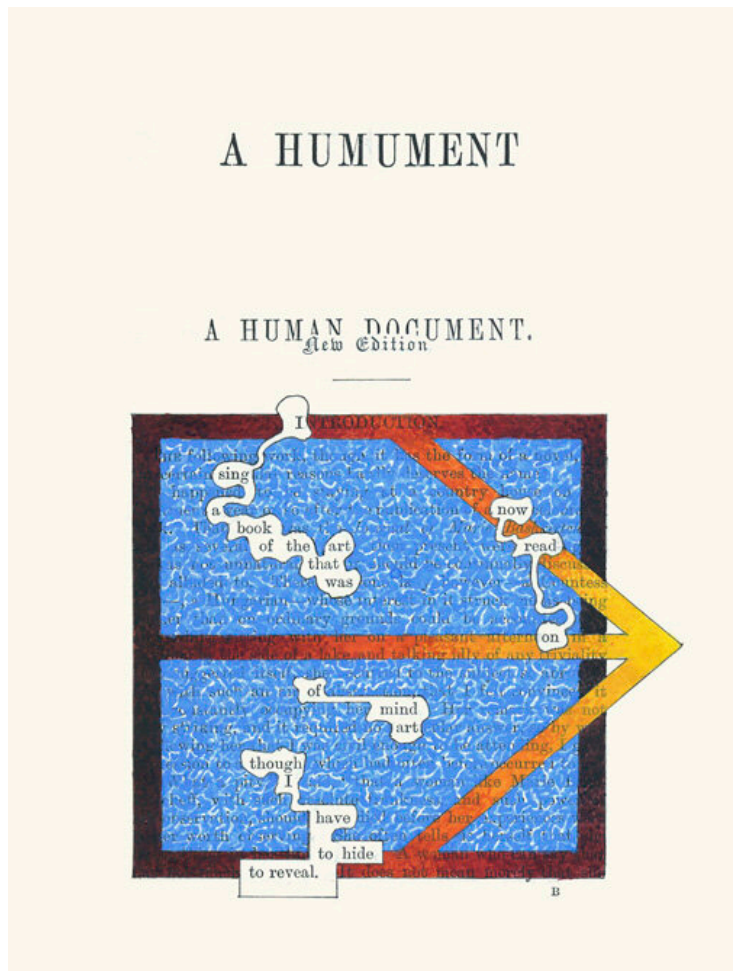
Though he may not be a blackout poet, Phillips is still an important part of the contemporary history of blackout poetry. His work has inspired numerous blackout and erasure poets from Travis Macdonald to Srikanth Reddy to Matthea Harvey. [Macdonald credits](#) Phillips as having “opened my eyes to the physical possibilities of erasure as something *applied* to the text rather than *removed* from it.” Phillips opened the door for this idea of adding to create a poem, which is what separates blackout poetry from erasure. Due to this, it is not inaccurate to suggest that he is one of the grandfathers of the category, but it would be inaccurate to call him the founder of the category.



Original page of the first page





First version 1973



Second version 2010

Listen to A Humument:





Thames & Hudson

A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel 1966-2016, read by Tom Phillips

SOUNDCLOUD

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4.8K

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry?	The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage	The DIY Movement

Blacking Out the Future: Where Do We Go From Here?

In his dissertation on erasure poetry, [John Nyman states](#) “I propose that both the theoretical structure of erasure’s double/cross and the actual plurality of strategies employed by erasure-based works makes any attempt to define fixed characteristics of the genre, or even to fix it as a genre at all, futile.” I would argue, however, that it is not futile to define erasure and blackout as individual categories of poetry. In fact, people are already doing so.

As of mid April 2020, videos on the social media platform Tik Tok that are tagged with the hashtag “[#blackoutpoetry](#)” have been viewed over 730,000 times and these videos feature poets covering source texts with paint, markers, pencil and more. People are developing a community knowledge of what blackout poetry is and is not. For instance, if I were to hand one of my high school English students an erasure poem and call it a blackout poem, they would tell me what I had given them is not a blackout poem. They have made enough of their own blackout poems and read each other’s enough to be able determine what makes a blackout poem a blackout poem. If the public is already creating these mental lists of characteristics of blackout poetry, why are we not attempting to do the same in academia?

Blackout poetry is constantly evolving and it will only continue to do so, just as all categories of poetry do. It has moved from artists’ studios like Tom Phillips in the 60s on to social media platforms like Tik Tok. Those making it have changed as well. Whereas originally the field was dominated predominately by white cisgender men like Tom Phillips and Ronald Johnson, female and nonbinary poets and poets of color have been increasingly taking over the blackout poetry community. Rather than experimenting with rephrasing classical works, poets who are coming from marginalized communities are beginning to take back their voices from oppressors through blackout and erasure poetry. Whether through erasing the words of a conservative president or blacking out the words of false apologies by sexual abusers, these poets are changing how and why they are creating blackout and erasure poetry. The makeup of blackout poets and poetry as a category of poetry is changing rapidly and will likely only continue to grow and morph over time.

Scholars Marjorie Perloff and Kenneth Goldsmith both suggested that how we interact with literature as both writers and readers is changing due to the internet and the respective increase in literature. Blackout poetry is quickly asserting itself as one of the ways we are processing this change. In a world of texts, we may not wish to add more, as [Goldsmith once suggested](#), but we may want to modify those texts that already exist. Is the modification of a preexisting text, however, the creation of a new one?

That is one of the questions we as scholars need to answer as we move forward in our study of found poetry. There has been minimal academic work done on found poetry or any of its categories including erasure and blackout poetry in comparison to more traditional genres. We need to bridge this gap and begin investing in these lesser researched genres and categories academically. Doing so will enable us to clearly define what characteristics these categories should or should not have, thus making it easier to correctly determine what category a poem falls under. In turn, this would allow us to trace the greater impact on society by these respective genres.

While this project was initially completed as a part of a thesis and is thus limited in its scope, it is my intent for it to continue to grow. We still need to explore numerous avenues in the history of blackout poetry and even more that will likely emerge as how we interact with literature continues to change with the invention of new technologies. After all, when I started making blackout poetry in 2013, Tik Tok was not even available in the United States. When I first noticed poets were making blackout poems on Tik Tok in late March 2020, there were around 350,000 views on videos tagged “[#blackoutpoetry](#)” and then by mid April the number of views had almost doubled. As blackout poetry becomes more popular, we as scholars need to track its growth and explore why and how people are making poems in this way. Something about blackout poetry makes it interesting and accessible to those who have never so much as written a single poem before. The question we need to start answering is “why?”

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
[Academic Coverage](#) The DIY Movement

Understanding The Current Blackout Conversation

The academic conversation on blackout poetry has thus far been minimal, but there are a handful of individuals discussing some of the poems within the category. A majority of the coverage has been published in the literary magazine *The Kenyon Review* and poetics journals *Jacket2* and *Evening Will Come*. Those publications often interact with and cite one another, causing the conversation to become somewhat insular. In *her Jacket 2 essay series*, Jennifer Cheng directs readers to [Solmaz Sharif's essay in Evening Will Come](#). Meanwhile the most cited blackout and erasure poetry publication on *The Kenyon Review*, "[The Weight of What's Left \[Out\]: Six Contemporary Erasurists on Their Craft](#)," includes Travis Macdonald the author of "[A Brief History of Erasure Poetics](#)" published in *Jacket*, which *Jacket2* hosts.

In addition to these three publications, there are a small number of scholars such as [John Nyman](#), [Andrew David King](#), and [Douglas Luman](#) talking about some blackout poetry projects and found poetry overall. Due to the lack of specific scholarship on blackout poetry and the lack of definite characteristics of the category, numerous academic pieces, including Chen's essay series and King's essays on *The Kenyon Review*, mention blackout poetry and poems without ever using the phrase blackout poetry. This can make it difficult to determine how much coverage of the form there actually is. Certain popular blackout poems, however, have generated academic coverage.

[Tom Phillips' *A Humument*](#) (1970), for instance, has received significant academic attention, especially in the art world. There are several articles concerning his work in the context of art and artist's books rather than as poetry. Phillips' has collated a majority of the academic scholarship on his blackout poetry on his website. He lists twelve pieces, including one by Andrew David King in *The Kenyon Review*. He leaves off several that were either published after he last updated the website or were written without his knowledge, such as several graduate theses and dissertations.

One of the most significant pieces he leaves off is an essay titled "Broken English" in Heather McHugh's essay collection *Broken English: Poetry and Partiality* (1993). The essays originally started as a lecture series at the [MFA Program for Writers](#) at Warren Wilson College in Swannanoa, North Carolina. Several blackout and erasure poets attended or worked at Warren Wilson College, including [Janet Holmes](#) and [Matthea Harvey](#). However, McHugh does not focus on blackout poetry as a genre, but she looks at how Phillips fragments language. She puts his work in conversation with pre-Socratics works similar to how Macdonald places Phillips' work in conversation with Sappho's poems in his "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics." This focus on fragmentation aligns McHugh's scholarship more with erasure poetics scholarship, however, as she focuses primarily on what Phillips is taking away rather than what he is adding, which is the hallmark of blackout poetry.

There have also been a small number of MFA and doctoral students who have addressed blackout poetry as a part of their theses and dissertations. A majority of these include a minimal amount of academic scholarship because they are creative writing based thesis and dissertation projects, meaning that a large portion of the papers are focused on the writers' own poetry. For example, [Shelby Tansil's "Black Tie Poems: An Exploration of Formal Poetry"](#) includes a small section on blackout poetry. However, of that section only a paragraph is related to the history of the actual form and the rest looks at Tansil's experience creating it. Andrew Allport did something similar in his dissertation for his PhD in Literature and Creative Writing. He discussed Phillips' *A Humument*, as well as other blackout poetry collections including Mary Ruefle's *A Little White Shadow* and Ronald Johnson's *Radi Os* as a part of analyzing what he calls "fragment poems." He identifies the poems as being blackout poems and his analysis all leads up to his own fragment poem collection. Similarly Amanda Gaebel briefly addresses erasure and blackout poetry in [her MFA thesis "Palimpsest"](#) by comparing Phillips' *A Humument* and similar art pieces to palimpsests. Like Tansil, though, she centers most of the discussion in how she applied this to her own palimpsests.

Several academic publications have in fact connected blackout and erasure poetry to palimpsests. In "[Poetry Under Erasure](#)," Brian McHale suggests a connection between erasure and palimpsest. He discusses both Rachel Back's "writing-over," Michael Davidso's "palimptext" and Rachel Blau DuPlessis's analysis of Susan Howe's poetry as palimpsests. However, he refutes their analysis to an extent by stating that "occlusion or over-writing need not involve material erasure." Palimpsest originally referred to documents that had their surface scraped off in order to allow it to be used again. However, according to Gaebel, "fragments of the original document would accumulate in the borders where it was poorly erased." The term as now changed to include anything that "has changed over time which still shows evidence of its history." Due to the physical nature of partially erasing and then covering what is left by writing over it, palimpsest sit oddly in between erasure and blackout poetry. The intent of erasure and blackout poetry separate them from that original definition. Based on the original definition, palimpsests do not necessarily intend to engage with their source material to create something new; they simply do so out of necessity. Ideally the parchment would have been scrubbed clear after all. There is some bearing in continuing to analyze blackout and erasure poems as if they were palimpsests; however, I think there may be more value in deterring the differences between them and how our methodology and intent in creating these forms differs and why they do.

Many scholars, like Gaebel, lump Phillips' work under different genres. Several theses and dissertations have also looked at pieces of blackout poetry as a part of discussions over other genres. For instance, *A Humument* appears in [Mary Alden Schwartzburg's](#) dissertation "Reading in Four Dimensions: The Poetics of The Contemporary Experimental Book." Schwartzburg, though, never once mentions the phrase "blackout poetry" throughout the entirety of the 258 page dissertation.

John Nyman's dissertation "[Double/Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry](#)" comes closer to an analysis of the category as a whole, but it is still lacking. This is in part because Nyman misidentifies, as many scholars do, Phillips and Johnson's blackout poetry books as erasure. The predominant focus of the paper is analysing erasure and blackout poems through the context of Jacques Derrida's "writing under erasure." As such, his research is not as applicable because it focuses on the idea of erasure whereas blackout poetry focuses on adding rather than erasing.

Additionally, there have been a handful of individuals consistently writing book reviews of blackout and erasure poetry including Luman for *Found Poetry Review* and Elizabeth Robinson. As the magazine's Book Review Editor Luman created [the Found Poetry Review's Book Review series](#), which covered new and old found poetry publications alike. He did not, however, specifically cover blackout poetry. Most journals, in fact, do not cover blackout poetry publications with the same breadth of coverage as they do more traditional forms.

While there has not been much academic coverage of blackout poetry, there has been greater coverage by popular media and newspapers, especially following the rise in blackout poetry being posted to social media following the #MeToo movement and Donald J. Trump's election. Larger outlets such as *Vice*, *Bustle*, and *The New Republic* began covering blackout poetry in earnest in 2016 in line with this rise in social media posting. Most of these larger outlets cover blackout poetry in relation to the social issue blackout poets are addressing in their pieces rather than the form, however.

The New York Times has been more purposeful in its coverage of the form, often addressing what [found poetry](#) in its National Poetry Month coverage and the paper's youth poetry contests. This coverage, in turn, has spawned additional coverage in local papers, as when youth poets win the contests, their hometown papers discuss their win. Additionally, local papers have also covered events relating to found poetry, which started becoming increasingly popular after 2010, and poets in their area started creating blackout poems. Like in pieces published in the larger publications, though, the scope of local papers is limited. They do not engage in debates on what blackout poetry is or its validity as a category.

While there has not been an exorbitant amount of coverage on blackout poetry by the popular media, there has been a significant amount. Typically popular media does not cover poetry. Yet, the rise in popularity amongst readers and the number of individuals creating online has made the popular media unable to ignore the category. Academic publications, however, have been surprisingly silent on blackout poetry in comparison. The three aforementioned publications, *The Kenyon Review*, *Jacket2*, and *Evening Will Come* have begun the conversation, but there is still more academic interrogation of the category needed in order to assert its importance in the ideas of critics and scholars.

Important Publications

The Kenyon Review

Jacket2 & Jacket Magazine

Evening Will Come Issue 28

In the early 2010s, blackout poet and scholar Andrew David King began writing about blackout poetry and poets for *The Kenyon Review*. As a part of his coverage, he interviewed six erasure and blackout poets in a collaborative interview "[The Weight of What's Left \[Out\]: Six Contemporary Erasurists on Their Craft](#)." While he and the poets involved misidentify blackout and erasure poetry in the interview, the piece has become one of the most widely cited articles in academic pieces discussing erasure and blackout poetry.

Jacket2 has the broadest range of coverage of the three, as multiple authors engage with blackout and erasure poetry in the publication, though they primarily discuss specific works rather than the category as a whole. However, there are two specific pieces that are integral to establishing blackout poetry's academic history: Jennifer Cheng's *essay series* on the poetics and politics of refraction and Travis Macdonald's "[A Brief History of Erasure Poetics](#)."

In April 2013, *Evening Will Come* published their 28th issue, titled "Erasure Issue," which dealt, as the title implies, with erasure poetry and poetics. The eight essays in the issue have become some of the most widely cited in the small amount of academic work on erasure poetics, particularly Solmaz Sharif's essay "[The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure](#)." A majority of the essays in the issue deal with the political connotations surrounding erasure poetry. Though they deal with erasure poetry, this political interrogation of the form is significant, as it actually helps separate blackout and erasure poetry by helping to define what erasure is.

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This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage The DIY Movement

The Need For Greater Academic Interrogation of Blackout Poetry

Blackout poetry has become increasingly popular since Tom Phillips and Srikanth Reddy first began publishing. On Google, searching the phrase “blackout poetry” yields over a million search results that include everything from poetry collections to tweets to teaching guides. Meanwhile an Instagram search of the hashtag “#blackoutpoetry” generates over 148,000 images, most of which are actual blackout poems. Thousands of people are writing blackout poems; however, there has not been this same surge of popularity in academia.

There have been many discussions of things that are tangentially connected or similar. For instance, popular poetics scholars like [Marjorie Perloff](#) and [Kenneth Goldsmith](#) have discussed in-depth the idea of “uncreative writing” when considering conceptual poetry and the appropriation involved in the form. Conceptual poetry is comparable to blackout poetry in how it can use others’ language to create a new piece, but I would argue black out poetry is not a part of the conceptual poetry movement. Whereas conceptual poetry is an intellectual aesthetic exercise that focuses on the importance of the idea of a piece over the final product, blackout poetry develops meaning both through its creation and its final product. It has specific political and activist intentions that conceptual poetry does not; therefore, it is inappropriate to lump it in with conceptual poetry academically and analyze it with the same interpretive framework we use on conceptual poetry.

The little work Perloff and Goldsmith have done that has been tangentially related to blackout poetry specifically has been minimal and at times even dismissive. [In a review of the sixth edition of Tom Phillips’s popular blackout poetry project *A Humument*](#), Perloff remarks “I find myself a bit weary of *A Humument*’s relentless parodying.” She compares it to what she calls “recent conceptual writing, like Kenneth Goldsmith’s [Traffic](#) or Susan Howe’s [Tom Tit Tot](#)” and suggests those works have gone to another level that Phillips’ has not. However, neither of those works are blackout poems. They function in different spaces under different rules of creation and hope to achieve different purposes as a result. Several other academics have written on *A Humument*, as evidenced by Phillips’ [A Humument Chronology](#), which lists every academic and news article written about him or his project, but like Perloff they focus solely on *A Humument* rather than looking at it as a piece of wider category.

As an academic collective, we have not yet established guidelines for recognizing what blackout poetry is and is not, much less analyzing it. This leads to us continuing to misidentify the blackouts as erasure poems even though there is a fundamental difference in how these poems are created and the meaning generated by the differences in their respective visual attributes.

Considering the current number of blackout poems available on the internet and how quickly the number of hashtags denoting blackout poetry are growing on social media, it is likely that the number of blackout poets and poems will only increase exponentially as time goes on. Therefore, it is critical that scholars start talking about blackout poetry as more than an isolated book or two like [A Humument](#) or Austin Kleon’s [Newspaper Blackout](#) and consider them as a part of a greater whole.

Additionally, there is a disconnect between the Perloff and Goldsmith’s scholarship on experimental poetry and blackout poetry. After reading Perloff and Goldsmith, Kleon wrote [a blog post](#) in which he remarks that he is after the exact opposite thing that Goldsmith is in his poetry. Whereas Goldsmith cares not for the readability of his poems, Kleon says “When I’m making my poems, readability is actually the thing foremost in my mind.” There is a fundamental disconnect between what Perloff calls “recent conceptual writing” and blackout poetry. It is not just in this difference between the desire of readability, though. It lays more in that blackout poets are often not creating blackout poetry with the intent of challenging the status-quo of originality. Many of those creating blackout poetry likely have not even read the theory Goldsmith so often discusses and if they do it is only after they have begun creating their own blackout poems like Kleon.

Conceptual poetry is created for the idea of the piece. The final product does not matter as much as what it means to create it. Yet, most blackout poets are not creating their blackout poems just for what it means to make them. They create them because they want to see that document marred by their hand. They want to expose the meaning they see within the text. Blackout poetry has become increasingly popular due to a lot of poets’ need to deal with emotion and documents, not necessarily out of a desire to be experimental. [In an interview with Vice](#), Goldsmith suggested that more and more people are turning towards found poetry because “people are angry and pissed off at documents.” In an age in which people are overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information and documents they are presented with each day, people have had to find new ways to process this anger Goldsmith suggests they have. For example, [popular blackout poet Isobel O’Hare said](#) they began their project of erasing the apologies of sexual abusers because “I just really wanted to erase their words. So I grabbed a sharpie and went to work.” O’Hare made their poems out of necessity, as a way to process their frustration not just to experiment.

That is not to say that Perloff and Goldsmith’s ideas are not applicable to blackout poetry. Rather, scholars need to start applying these theories to blackout poetry as a category. Doing so would give scholars an understanding of why poets are shifting from more traditional poetry forms to blackout and how this represents greater cultural shifts in the writing community.

The academic discourse of blackout poetry has also been muddled by a mistaken connection between the form and Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida’s concept “*sous rature*” or as it is often translated “under erasure.” We, as academics, often associate erasure poetry (and thus due to the persistent conflation of the two, blackout poetry) with this concept because they both focus on the idea of erasure. However, writing erasure and blackout poetry is not the same as writing under erasure. For instance, when discussing erasure and blackout poetry, [Brian McHale suggests](#) that “The ubiquitous white spaces of postmodernist poetry signify (among other things) that something has been lost or placed *sous rature*.” If we consider the translation at face value, perhaps this is correct. In an erasure poem, something has been erased after all.

However, [in her introduction to *Of Grammatology* \(1998\)](#), Gayatri Spivak states she translated *sous rature* as “under erasure” but that the phrase means “This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both the word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.” When we consider this definition, blackout poetry falls more in line with *sous rature* than erasure, but even still blackout poetry does not always allow the entirety of a source text to be legible. More often than not, it is rendered illegible by thick sharpie lines, which is quite different than the X that Derrida used to cross out words. While Heidegger and Derrida’s ideas here could have some value in our analysis of blackout and erasure poetry, it is important that we note there are differences between what poets in this form are doing and what these scholars describe.

In his dissertation, [John Nyman](#) begins to address this, but he fails to separate erasure and blackout poetry, which limits his analysis. He treats blackout as erasure and vice versa, though they are both made differently and have an aesthetically different final product. If he were to separate his analysis and treat these categories of poetry separately, perhaps we could more accurately apply Derrida’s philosophy. Any analysis that equates blackout and erasure as the same kind of poetry, however, is going to be flawed because they are not the same. Blackout poetry does not erase, as Nyman claims. It covers. The source text is still there, hiding under the marks the blackout poet has made. How does it change how we would apply Derrida’s ideas in an analysis?

There are many questions about blackout poetry that we have not answered and more will emerge over time as this category of poetry becomes more solidified academically and publicly. However, we must separate it from erasure poetry if we are to truly interrogate how and why it functions and the effects it has had and will have on poetry and culture. But to separate it, we must begin talking about it in academic spaces and calling it its name.

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

- What is Blackout Poetry?
- The Politics of Blackout
- Academic Coverage
- The DIY Movement

Blacking Out The Kenyon Review

A majority of the pieces written about blackout poetry published by *The Kenyon Review* were written by [Andrew David King](#) in the early to mid 2010s. In the [preface to one of his most popular interviews with erasure poets](#), King was inspired by erasure and blackout poets to “put down the pencil and pick up a black marker instead.” This suggests that he is not just a scholar but a blackout poet as well, which may be why he wrote so many pieces about it for *The Kenyon Review*. While he did write [a few pieces about erasure poetry](#) as a broader category, most of King’s articles were [interviews with found poets](#) or [reviews](#) of erasure and blackout poetry collections. These interviews provided previously undiscussed insights into the process of creating blackout and erasure poetry, however.

In 2012, King facilitated [a collaborative interview](#) between six contemporary blackout and erasure poets through a Google Doc. King provided initial questions but the poets were able to organically respond to one another at their leisure, building off one another’s answers without King’s influence or directing. He did this purposefully in order to allow the poets to guide the conversation and answer the questions “in the order they say fit and to the length they preferred.” To stay true to this methodology, King did not edit or erase any of their words for publication. He simply published the contents of the Google Doc with a brief introduction. This interview has become one of the most widely cited pieces of scholarship in discussions on erasure and blackout poetry because this organic conversation generated the first real recorded conversation on different methodologies, inspirations, and questions of authorship by blackout and erasure poets.

The poets King included are fairly well known within the found poetry community, but they are not as well known as Austin Kleon, Tom Phillips, or Isobel O’Hare:

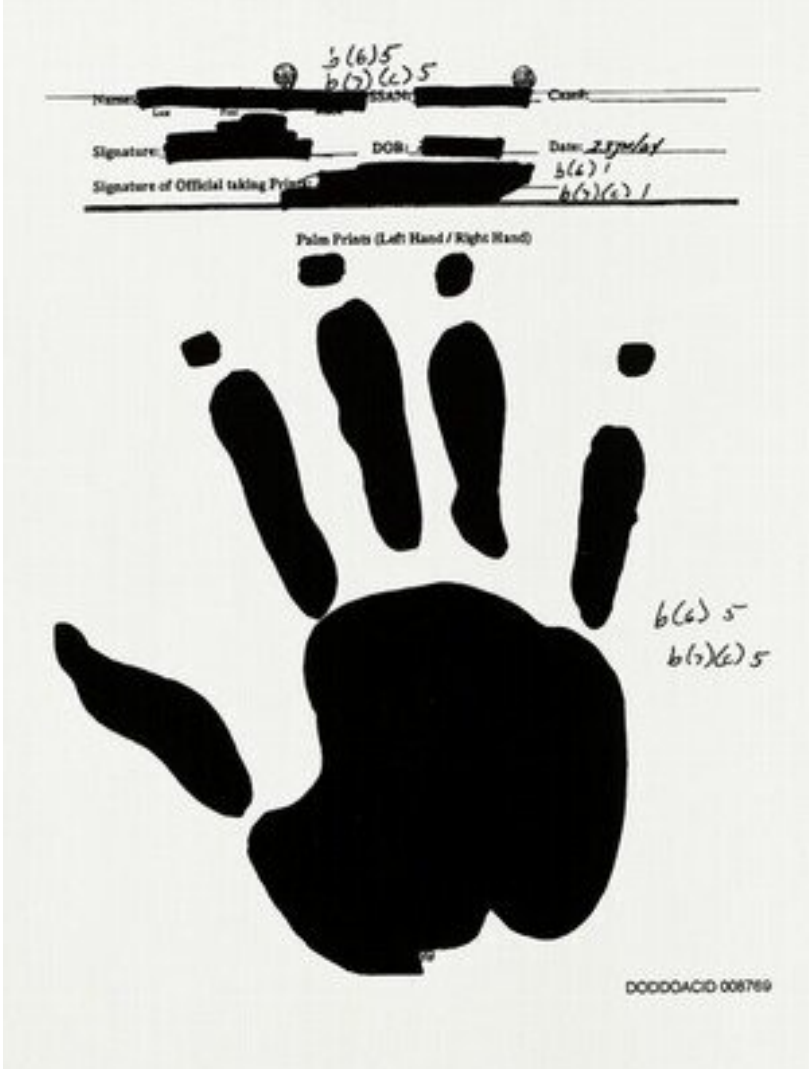
- Srikanth Reddy, author of [Voyager](#)
- Matthea Harvey, author of [Of Lamb](#)
- Janet Holmes, author of [The Ms of M Y Kin](#)
- M. NourbeSe Philip, author of [Zong!](#)
- David Dodd Lee, author of [Sky Booths in the Breath Somewhere](#),
- Travis Macdonald, author of [The O Mission Repo](#) and “[A Brief History of Erasure Poetics](#)”

Though those involved in the interview are a mixture of erasure and blackout poets, King refers to them all as erasurists. He misidentifies blackout poetry as erasure throughout the article and does not even use the word blackout once. The piece is still relevant to blackout poetry, though, as it helps to establish a history of contemporary blackout poetry by opening up a conversation regarding these poets’ inspiration and first interactions with the category.

Most of the poets interviewed mentioned Phillips’ *A Humument*, a blackout text composed from a Victorian novel, and Ronald Johnson’s [Radi os](#), an erasure of the first four books of *Paradise Lost*. Yet, they did not credit either Phillips or Johnson with necessarily having inspired them. Reddy mentioned that before starting on *Voyager* he had heard of both works, but he did not actually read either until after he had begun creating his own erasure poems. Several also mentioned Jen Bervin’s [Nets](#), an erasure of Shakespeare’s sonnets, and [Mary Ruefle’s “whiteout” poems](#), blackout poems that use whiteout to cover the source text.

Uniquely, Macdonald credits a fellow student at the [Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics](#) named Michael Koshkin with introducing him to erasure. Koshkin published an erasure poetry chapbook called [Parad e Rain](#) with Big Game Books in 2006, but did not go on to publish any other notable works of erasure or blackout. None of the other poets mentioned being familiar with him, either.

Lee stated his first experience with erasure was with visual art, specifically “Rauschenberg’s act, his erasing of a drawing by de Kooning,” which is inline with the experiences of many other blackout and erasure poets due to the popularity of [Rauschenberg’s](#) piece. Holmes also credited the art world as being one of her first introductions to blackout poetry, specifically [Jenny Holzer’s redaction paintings](#). Based on the lack of scholarship surrounding blackout poetry and lack of programs focused on writing within the category, it can be assumed that it is not discussed much in college creative writing courses. It is definitely not discussed to the level that art courses discuss pieces like Rauschenberg’s and Holzer’s. Therefore, it makes sense that poets like Lee and Holmes might be introduced to erasure in the art world before becoming accustomed to it in the literary world. This connection has been talked about minimally in any current histories of blackout poetry, however.



DODDOACID
Jenny Holzer

While these poets mention these different introductions to the form, they are careful to avoid saying any were the inspiration for their projects. As is common with blackout and erasure poets, most of the poets said it was something in their source text that convinced them to do their erasing or blacking out. Dodd recounts his experience with beginning to create *Sky Booths in the Breath Somewhere*:

“I’m not even sure what happened—it wasn’t a calculated decision at all—but I remember one night I was reading in my office after failing to write anything worthwhile, and the next thing I knew I was literally on the floor marking poems up with a pen and then typing them on the computer, erasing/writing what I immediately labeled Ashbery erasure poems.”

This experience is echoed by several of the others in the interview. For instance, when discussing *The O Mission Repo*, Macdonald said “The title of and the initial idea for my own work emerged simultaneously at the moment, fully formed and demanding realization. So I grabbed a pencil and started dissecting the text right then and there.” Poets such as Kleon and O’Hare have mentioned similar beginnings with blackout poetry.

In terms of determining how blackout poetry has evolved, this is significant. Few poets can point to the exact moment that they first read or noticed blackout as a form. Therefore, it raises the question of if any one person created the form or if it a synchronously arose independently. Regardless, the number of different places, poets and poetry, these poets describe as introducing them to the category or that they have encountered speaks to the popularity of the form and thus the need for greater academic coverage of it.

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage The DIY Movement

Blacking Out *Evening Will Come*

The monthly journal of poetics, *Evening Will Come*, often focuses on different issues in poetics. For their [28th issue in April 2013](#), the journal focused specifically on erasure poetry and poetics. The eight essays in the issue have become some of the most widely cited in the small amount of academic work on erasure poetics, particularly Solmaz Sharif's essay "[The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure](#)." In her *Jacket2* [essay series](#) on erasure poetics, Jennifer Cheng even states, "If you read anything on the politics of poetical erasure, let it be this essay by Solmaz Sharif."

However, because it is themed around "erasure," this issue does not specifically touch on or even mention blackout poetry by name. As is common in most literature about blackout poetry, though, some of what is talked about in these essays is mislabeled as erasure poetry when it is actually talking about blackout poetry. Solmaz, for instance, mentions both erasure and blackout poems in her work. She also directly discusses blackout poems in comparing erasure poetry to government redaction because of how they cover the text in a way that looks like government files that have been redacted. Even though it contributes to the confusion surrounding the difference between blackout and erasure poetry, the issue is still important in the evolution of blackout poetry in academic spheres because it is one of the first major publications to really start investigating erasure and blackout poetry's colonial roots.

For instance, in his essay "[from](#)," erasure poet Craig Santos Perez specifically draws a connection between erasure poetry and colonialism. He suggests that over the past century, Guam has been subjected to "American colonialism [that] has brought devastating erasure," erasing everything from housing practices, family structures, cultural practices, and even native languages. This has caused him to write "from a continuous space of erasure" because he cannot escape the erasure this colonial destruction has inflicted upon him and his community. Yet, even within this constant and ever invasive erasure, Perez writes. Specifically, he writes erasure poetry because he considers that his poetry "exists as continuous presence against continuous erasure." He is able to take the erasure that has so destroyed his world and use it to create poetry that tells the story of his people that the colonized world has attempted to erase. Sharif also briefly touches on erasure's colonial connections. She likens the act of erasing and blacking out to the violence enacted upon people by colonizers, suggesting, "historically the striking out of text is the root of obliterating peoples." This comparison is echoed in Cheng's essay series in *Jacket2* as well, which was published three years after this issue.

This issue was the first to really explore the underlying implications of erasure poetry. [In her introduction to the issue](#), Cristiana Baik remarks that "While reading through contributors' pieces for this issue of *Evening Will Come*, erasure also became a violent gesture, a map of potential; intervention; an act of sifting; palimpsest." This insight and transformation is important to the greater study of erasure and blackout poetry, as it engages with the connotations of the methodology of creating these works. By identifying the finer points of what erasure poetry is, these essays help us to understand the boundaries between erasure and blackout poetry.

Last Updated: April 2020

[Learn more about the "History of Blackout Poetry" project.](#)

[Questions, Corrections or Additions?](#)

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage The DIY Movement

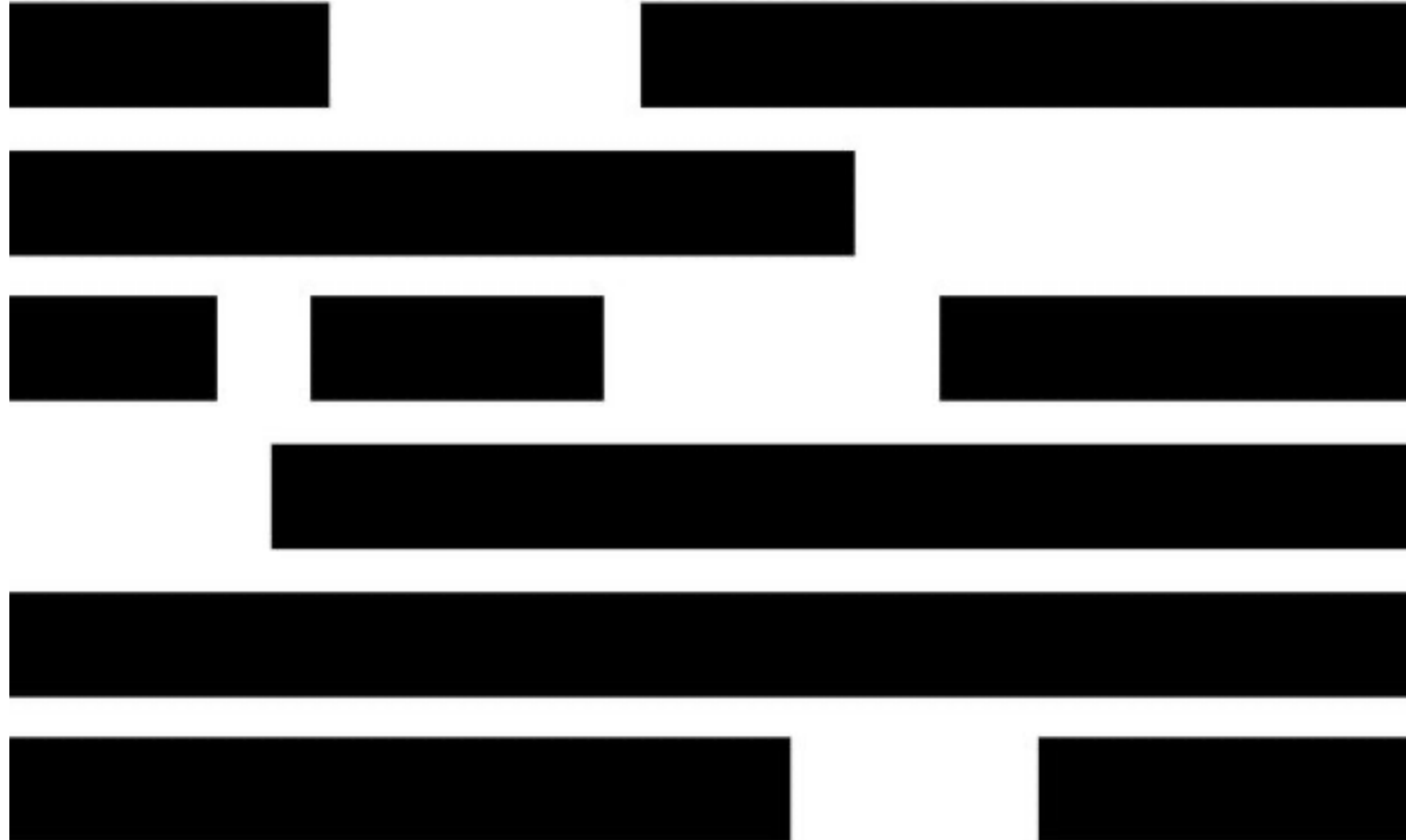
Blacking out *Jacket2* & *Jacket Magazine*

There are only three major poetics journals that have pointedly focused on erasure poetry thus far: *Jacket2* (and thus *Jacket*), *The Kenyon Review*, and *Evening Will Come*. Whereas *Evening Will Come* dedicated one issue to erasure poetry and *The Kenyon Review's* coverage was predominantly written by only one author, *Jacket2* has been continuously publishing on blackout and erasure poetry for years.

The [journal](#) is the digital reincarnation of [Jacket magazine](#), a poetry and poetics magazine published by poet [John Tranter](#) from 1997 to 2010. It currently digitally hosts a searchable archive of *Jacket's* forty issues as well as publishing new content on a semi regular basis. Both *Jacket* and *Jacket2* focus on modern and contemporary poetry and poetics. While together they have published numerous book reviews and critical essays on blackout, erasure, and found poetry, there are two works that stand out as being significant pieces in the academic coverage of these genres: Jennifer Cheng's essay series on the politics and poetics of refraction and Travis Macdonald's "A Brief History of Erasure Poetics."

Jennifer Cheng's Essay Series

Throughout September 2016, poet Jennifer Cheng published twelve essays in *Jacket2* investigating what she refers to as the politics and poetics of refractions. She describes her essays as exploring the idea that visual and mixed media art "shed[s] light on the poetics of language by manifesting it viscerally and tangibly...[and] how refractive poetics invoke alternative or marginal perspectives, constructing new meaning by moving beyond normalized ways of experiencing the world." In order to do so, she looks at a variety of multimedia projects. Two of the essays, though, focus on what she refers to as erasure poetry. Though she predominantly focuses on M. NourbeSe Philip's erasure poetry collection *Zong!* and never uses the phrase "blackout poetry," the header image, for her first essay, shown below, uses imagery that is indicative of blackout poetry.



In these two essays, Cheng refers to erasure as a means of refracting documents. [In the first essay](#), she connects refraction and erasure by suggesting that erasure "disrupts, interrupts, modulates the original ... literally ruptures the textual line and bends it...[and] creates a new work whose meaning does not stand alone but is informed by its process, by the shadow of the old document and the act of obfuscation that transforms it." Whereas a majority of academic work on blackout and erasure has only tackled a single particular text, this first essay looks more at the entirety of erasure poetry as a genre by identifying common characteristics in reference to refraction.

While she focuses here on erasure, some of what she describes is applicable to blackout poetry. For instance, blackout poems also disrupt their source text and create works that are informed by the process of creating it. It is difficult to fully apply to blackout poetry, though, because Cheng goes on to identify things that are more specific to erasure poetry such as its connection to colonial oppression. Additionally, [in the second essay](#), she focuses exclusively on erasure poetry. This specificity to erasure poetry is significant for identifying blackout poetry as a distinct category of poetry, however, as Chen highlights characteristics of erasure poetry that do not apply to blackout poetry.

For instance, she describes "Erasure as prism: the scattering of a bounded text into fragments, pieces, shards." The way she describes what erasure does is almost comparable to how a dropped glass might shatter into a billion pieces upon hitting the kitchen floor. It is within that shattering and the emptiness between the pieces that meaning is now found. Blackout poetry, on the other hand, connects those pieces, and it is in that additive connection that meaning develops. She goes on to suggest that an erasure poet like Philip "excavates further to unbury." But blackout poets purposefully bury part of their source texts. They cover the original words, they do not strip them away. By helping to define erasure, Chen opens space to identify differences between erasure and blackout poetry. In turn, this helps us to understand what blackout poetry is and is not.

Travis Macdonald's "A History of Erasure Poetics"

In 2009, Travis Macdonald did something few have ever really attempted; he began trying to trace the origin of blackout and erasure poetry in his essay "[A Brief History of Erasure Poetics](#)." He states that identifying this kind of history "is necessary" and hopes his work will "act as a guide for future practitioners in this increasingly important form." He anticipates the erasure poetry will continue to grow and that scholars need to begin treating it academically as a result.

For a first history, Macdonald does well attempting to wade through an enormous amount of information. However, his desire to pinpoint the very beginning of erasure poetry gives some pause. Like many scholars, he does not differentiate between blackout and erasure poetry or given any kind of specific guidelines as to what he is determining as erasure poetry. In the second section, he connects erasure poetry with the poems of Sappho and Aeschylus. He suggests the fragility of the papyrus on which they were originally written has left the poems damaged and partially erased, thereby making them erasure poems even though they were not created as such. While an interesting notion to consider, this casts doubt upon his historical timeline and what he considers to be erasure poetry. It raises questions as to what is and is not erasure poetry without ever really answering these questions.

His work is significant for erasure poetry, but it is only tangentially related to blackout poetry. He mentions Tom Phillips' *A Humument* (1970) in comparison with the erasure poet Ronald Johnson, who began creating erasure poems at roughly the same time as Phillips began his book length blackout project. Most of his inclusion of Phillips only deals with this comparison rather than how Phillips has influenced other blackout poets or the field. He does mention a handful of other more contemporary blackout poets in the final and shortest section, including Austin Kleon, Mary Ruefle, Janet Holmes, and Jen Bervin. He does not dive much into their contributions, though. He simply briefly lists their publications and how they created them.

Macdonald's history was published in 2009, which was right before blackout poetry really began to take off in popularity in the mid-2010s. The lack of blackout poetry published at the time makes Macdonald's conflation of erasure and blackout understandable. He had no frame of reference to distinguish between the two. However, we are now able to separate the two due to the number of blackout poetry publications within the past ten years since Macdonald wrote his history. Macdonald's work was significant when he first published, but looking back on it with this new context, we see how he conflates the two. Moving forward, we should avoid conflating erasure and blackout poetry in order to give a more accurate history of these categories of poetry and how they have impacted society

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry?

[The Politics of Blackout](#)

Academic Coverage

The DIY Movement

Understanding the Politics of Blacking Out

In a 2012 collaborative interview with *The Kenyon Review*, Andrew David King asked six erasure and blackout poets, “Is erasure in any sense a political act?” Most answered no. Well-known blackout poet and author of “A Brief History of Erasure Poetics” Travis Macdonald even went so far as to say, “No. I don’t think so. Not at all. Sincerely [sic].” The other poets in the interview echoed his stance, though not as fervently. Macdonald went on to suggest that “the business of politics is to politicize everything. The business of poetry is to *poeticize* everything.” Erasure poet Srikanth Reddy expanded on this by suggesting that erasure poetry is “poeticizing the political,” if it is using a political source text. However, it does not have to be political.

Many of the poets participating in the interview had created political blackout or erasure poems, meaning that they had created these poems in order to develop political commentary. Those that had not, though, maintained that their works were not political. For instance, Matthea Harvey, author of numerous erasure poems, stated that her poetry collection *Of Lamb*, “isn’t meant to be a political act—more of an homage.” Though the poets in this interview argue their blackout and erasure poems are only political if they intended for them to be political, other blackout and erasure poets feel differently.

In the erasure poetry themed issue of *Evening Will Come*, several erasure and blackout poets discussed the inherently political nature of found poetry, particularly erasure and blackout poetry. In her essay in this issue, erasure poet Solmaz Sharif argues that “every poem is an action. Every action is political. Every poem is political.” Sharif suggests that manipulating another’s words makes the poem political even if the poet did not intend it to be so.

The Kenyon Review interview touches on this by asking poets, “How did you navigate the politics of appropriating another’s voice as your own?” Macdonald responded by saying, “As far as the appropriation of other voices is concerned, I would argue that the very idea of language ownership is a political act which erasure seeks to subvert.” He suggests that rather being political by stealing someone else’s words for your own poem, blackout and erasure poetry asserts that we cannot even own words like we normally think we can. However, Macdonald comes to this conversation from a place of privilege, not belonging to communities that may have had their words stolen or erased.

For example, Sharif, who does have experiences with this kind of theft of language, considers the political impact differently. She remarks that when she first saw erasure being used for poetry she was “horrified” because she connects erasure with the erasure of the words, language, and lives of marginalized communities and individuals by oppressive powers such as the government and colonialism. Sharif asserts 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. And, it seems, many erasure projects today hold these things as unrelated.” Macdonald’s response fails to consider the political connotations of erasure that Sharif introduces. These political connotations inform the creation of blackout and erasure poems even if the poems are created to be apolitical or to subvert the idea of ownership of language because the poems are being created in a society that has erased groups of peoples in order to profit off of them.

Last Updated: April 2020

[Learn more about the “History of Blackout Poetry” project.](#)

[Questions, Corrections or Additions?](#)

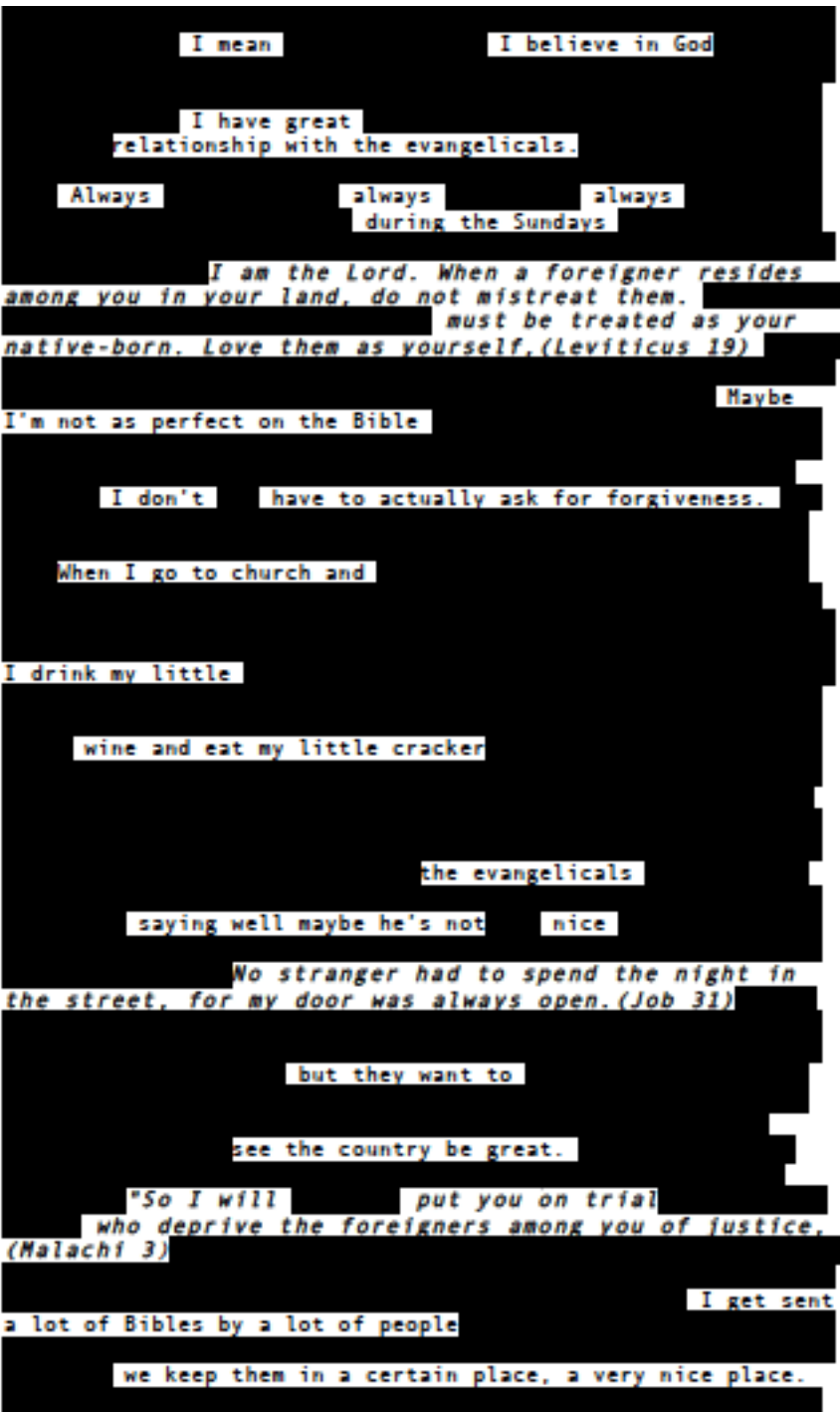
This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

- [What is Blackout Poetry?](#)
- [The Politics of Blackout](#)
- [Academic Coverage](#)
- [The DIY Movement](#)

Why Poets Keep Blacking Out U.S. Political Rhetoric

Following Donald Trump’s election as president of the United States, many people started writing in publications from [The New York Times](#) to [The Atlantic](#) about how political poetry was coming back into fashion. [Poet laureate Tracy K. Smith](#) suggested it was because this kind of poetry “has become a means of owning up to the complexity of our problems, of accepting the likelihood that even we the righteous might be implicated by or complicit in some facet of the very wrongs we decry...[poems] take us by the arm and walk us into the lake, wetting us with the muddied and the muddled, and sometimes even the holy.” However, I would argue that blackout poetry does not quite do this. Instead, it does almost the opposite. Rather than showing that the average U.S. citizen is complicit in this political turmoil and upheaval, it allows us to highlight how those we have elected and upheld on pedestals have failed us. [In a 2016 interview](#), the editor of *Poetry Magazine* Don Share remarked that “Sometimes we feel alienated from our politicians, and that becomes itself a political issue. And poetry works through and around that.” Blackout and erasure poetry go a step further. By physically manipulating political rhetoric, we are able to expose what we believe is the truth within it.

For instance, as [Rachel Stone](#) remarked, “Erasing the language of Trump, on the other hand, provides the particular satisfaction of watching Trump say exactly what he means, stripped of bombast.” In her blackout poem “[We Keep Them in a Certain Place](#),” Erin Russel identifies what she thinks he is actually saying. She strips away the florid language of her source text, Trump’s “God is The Ultimate” speech, and forces him to say phrases like “I don’t / have to actually ask for forgiveness,” pulling on this frustration that U.S. citizens have with Trump acting as if he can do no wrong. To use Smith’s metaphor, blackout poetry allows us, the common person, to take these politicians and walk them into the lake. There, we can, as he suggests, baptize them and encourage change by showing them their wrongs. Or we can drown them in their own words if they refuse to listen.



“[We Keep Them in a Certain Place](#)”
by Erin Russel

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

- [What is Blackout Poetry?](#)
- [Academic Coverage](#)
- [The Politics of Blackout](#)
- [The DIY Movement](#)

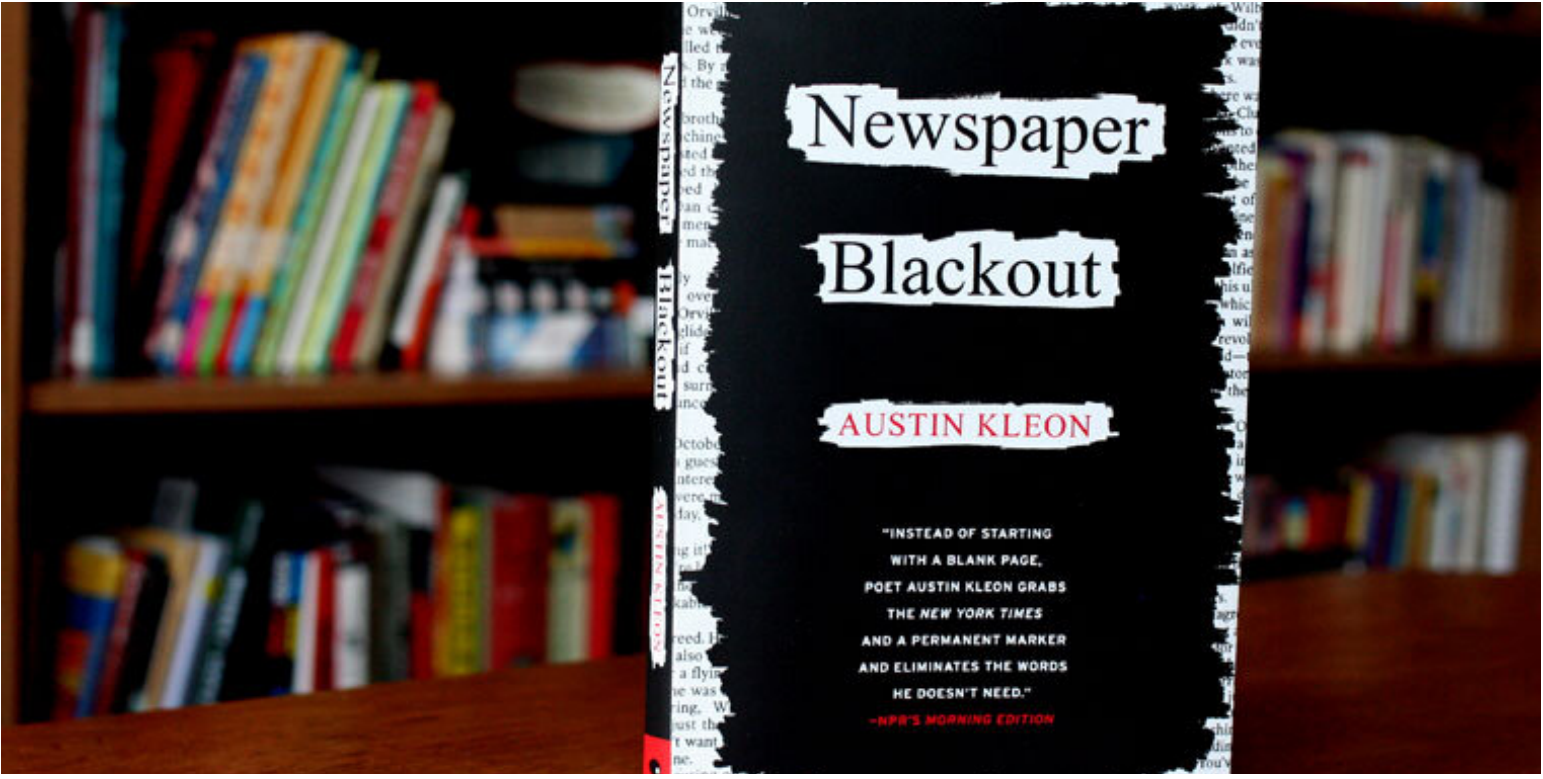
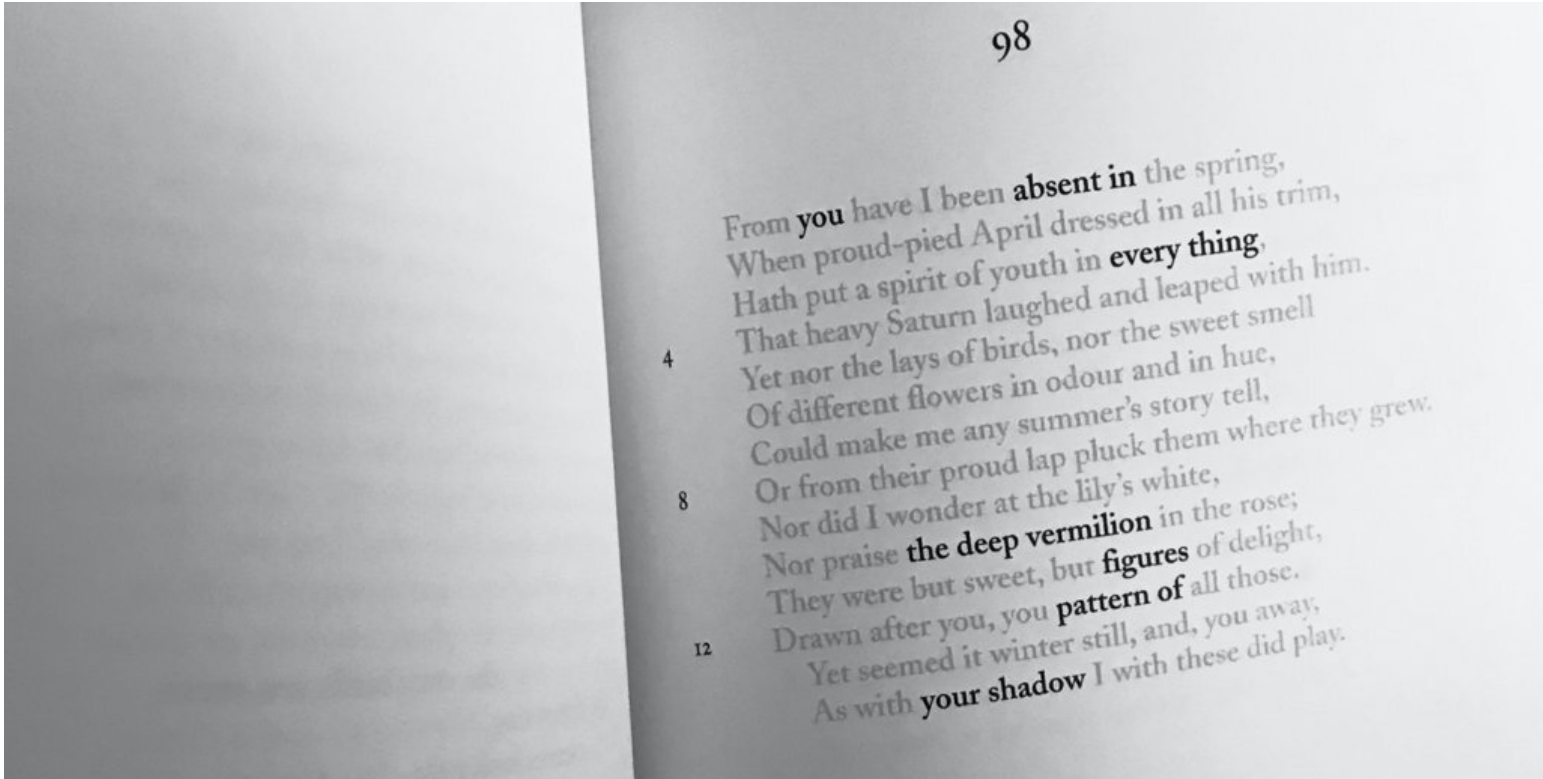
Blacking Out Political Turmoil

In a [blog post](#) about President Barak Obama, popular blackout poet Austin Kleon discussed a political poem he had made, saying “Politics is ephemeral, which is why I would never put this in the book.” However, I would argue that politics are not ephemeral. Policies may come and go, but their effects are long lasting. Though President Obama was only president of the United States for eight years, U.S. citizens such as myself still feel the long lasting ripples of his presidency from policies to cultural shifts. Rather than avoiding politics in their blackout poetry, blackout poets instead should write politics.

While Kleon and others may believe that political blackout poetry is not as worthwhile or worthy of publishing, many people have only started creating blackout poetry because of politics. Poetics scholar [Kenneth Goldsmith](#) [suggested](#) that when people are “angry and pissed off at documents” they turn to erasure and blackout poetry to deal with those feelings; therefore, when people are upset with political documents, they begin making poems out of them. In fact, much of the popularity blackout poetry has gained has been a result of this political commentary. Though the political moment that inspired that initial frustration may pass, the documents will still exist and that frustration will still be felt.

Many people have begun making political blackout poems for years. In fact, there are four different contemporary political movements within the blackout poetry community, including one inspired by Kleon’s newspaper blackout poems. Click through below to learn more about each.

Contemporary Blackout Poetry Political Movements



Blacking Out US Warfare

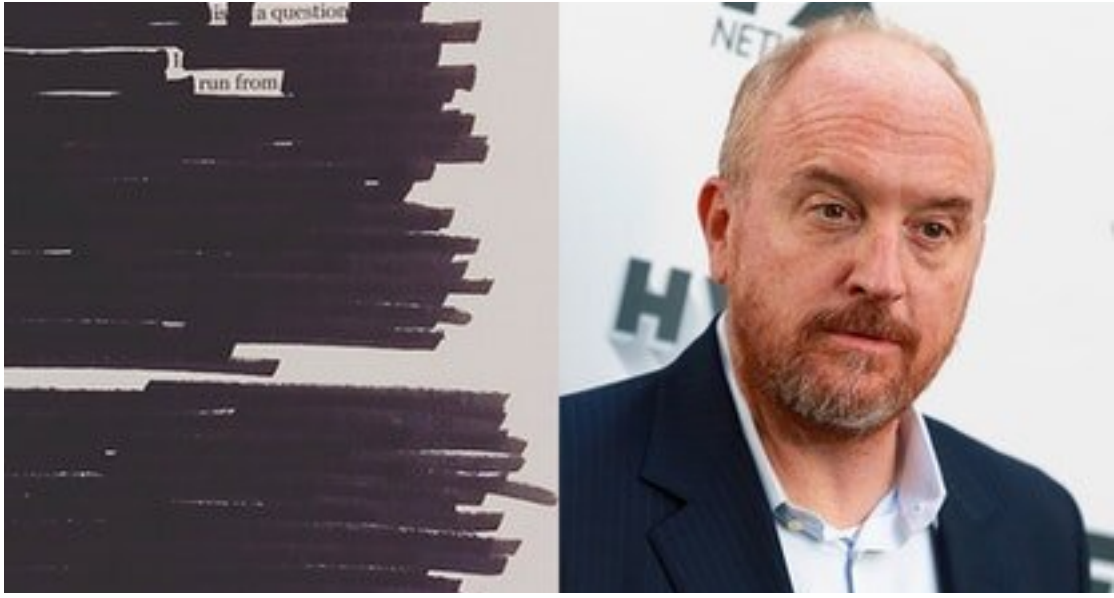
Travis Macdonald and Jen Bervin tackled the turbulent political turmoil surrounding the United State’s warfare engagements in the Middle East in their blackout poetry projects *Mission O Repo* and *Nets*, respectively.

[Learn More](#)

Blacking Out the News

In the mid 2000s, Texas poet Austin Kleon began creating blackout poems made from newspapers. While he did not intend for his poems to be political (in fact, he says actually purposefully avoided publishing political poems), his use of his newspapers as source material set the stage for a political shift.

[Learn More](#)



Blacking out in the Age of Trump

The political turmoil of the United States during and following the 2016 presidential election sent many towards the blackout poetry genre. Hundreds began posting their own blackout and erasure poems on twitter and publishing them in popular literary magazines as a way to deal with the political climate.

[Learn more](#)

Blacking Out in the #MeToo Movement

As a way of dealing with the frustration over the outpouring of stories of sexual assault in the late 2010s, poet Isobel O'Hare began making blackout poems from the apologies of these assaulters. When O'Hare posted them online, they went viral.

[Learn more](#)

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

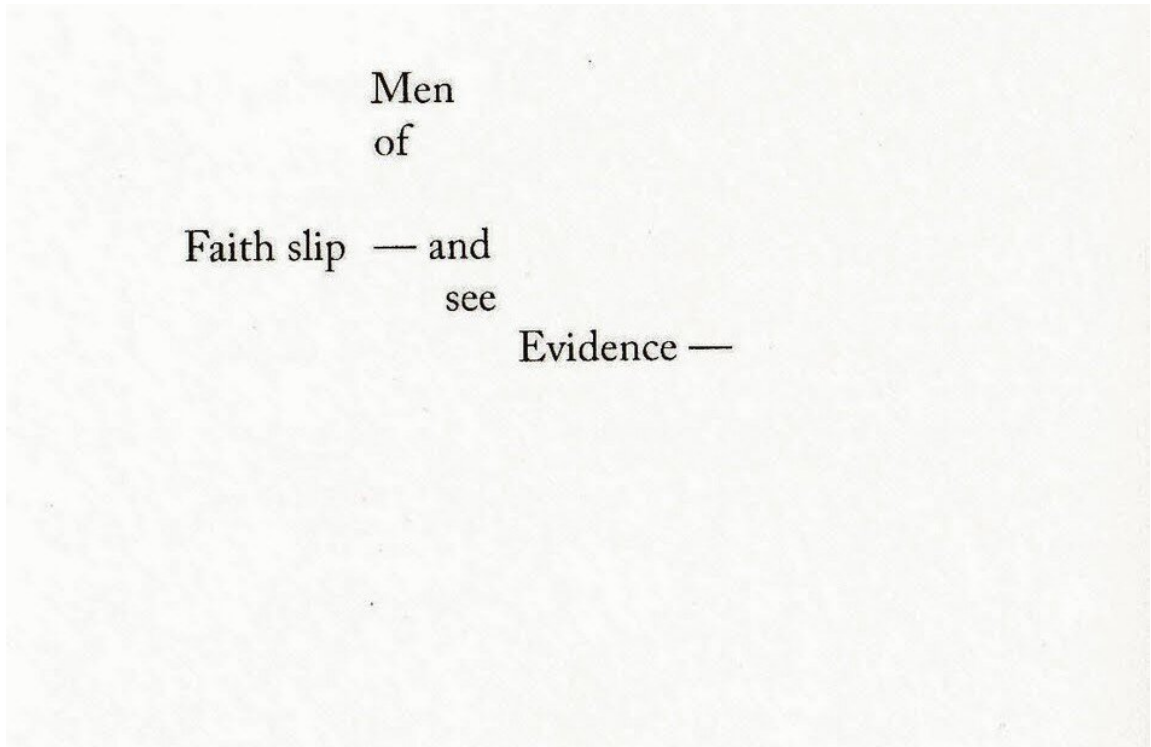
What is Blackout Poetry?	The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage	The DIY Movement

Blacking Out U.S. Warfare

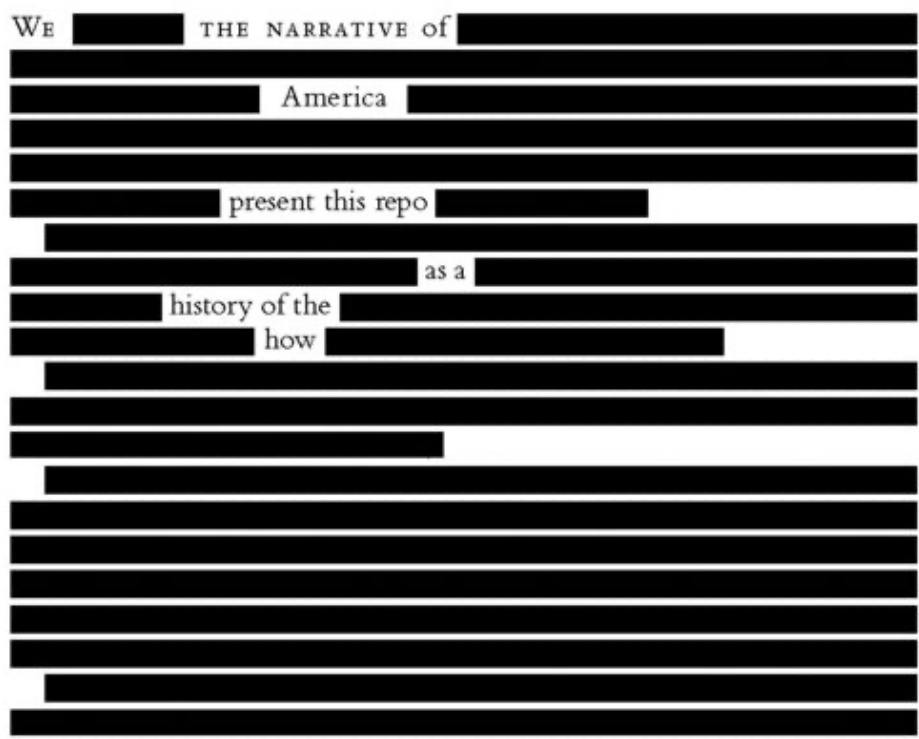
Throughout the 2000s, the United States was embroiled in political and military conflict with the Middle East, particularly Iran and Iraq. Poets Janet Holmes and Travis Macdonald took to erasure and blackout poetry as a way to both highlight and investigate this turmoil. Their works rely on significantly different source texts, but the poets manipulate these texts for similar purposes. Both seek to call out the government in a way through their work by effectively critiquing the government’s actions and even sometimes lack of action. Holmes’s *The Ms of M Y Kin* and Macdonald’s *The O Mission Repo* were two of the first intentionally political blackout or erasure projects published in the United States that have gained significant public attention.

Neither of these books are fully blackout poetry collections. Holmes’s is erasure poetry, as she purposefully erases portions of Dickinson’s work, leaving the remaining words lingering in white space., Macdonald similarly blurs the lines between erasure and blackout poetry in *The O Mission Repo*. He incorporates a mixture of erasure and blackout practices in his work. Each chapter is modified in a different way from covering with black lines, to blurring, to erasing, to even being arranged as a musical score. Though they are not specifically blackout poetry, they have influenced the greater blackout poetry community and set the stage for the boom of political blackout and erasure poetry following the 2016 presidential election.

Macdonald’s book was published on September 11, 2008, while Holmes’s was released just a few months later in February 2009, a few months before Macdonald’s essay “[A Brief History of Erasure Poetics](#)” came out in *Jacket Magazine*. Their books marked the beginning of a new era of popularity for erasure and blackout poetry, as before there had only been a handful of books written in these categories of poetry. Those that had been published had minimal reach, staying predominantly within creative writing communities. The political connotation of these two books, however, made them more accessible for people who may not be as used to experimental poetry that would have possibly been turned off by the experimental nature of other erasure and blackout poetry publications.



from [The Ms of M Y Kin](#) by Janet Holmes



from [The O Mission Repo](#) by Travis Macdonald

Macdonald’s blackout and erasure poetry project *The O Mission Repo* uses *The 9/11 Commission Report* as source material. [A review](#) in *Rain Taxi* by Elizabeth Robinson described the book as Macondald “burrow[ing] through the 9/11 report (itself heavily redacted prior to public release) to create an alternate text that is downright lyrical.” [In his review of the book in Found Poetry Review](#), Douglas Luman suggests Macdonald is attempting to make it appear that the source text’s “secret subtext has been decoded.” As such, it appears that Macdonald is making some kind of purposeful commentary on *The 9/11 Commission Report* through this project.

Like Tom Phillips’ famous blackout poetry book *A Humument*, Macdonald creates a narrative that incorporates characters and a plot. For instance, the United States becomes referred to as “Unit” whereas Osama Bin Laden becomes a character known as “Lad.” Macdonald also interests himself into the project as “author,” which Robinson regards as a way for Macdonald “owning up to his role in revising the original document while also disrupting its authority.” He is clear in that it is his lens through which we as readers are decoding the work.

While Macdonald purposefully uses a political source text for his commentary on 9/11 and the United States’ political relations with the Middle East, Holmes picks something that is distinctly more poetic, Emily Dickinson’s poetry. The poems used are not, however, completely apolitical. Holmes specifically erases sections of Dickinson’s Civil War era poetry in order to discuss the United States’ wars and political conflict with Afghanistan and Iran. According to [Elizabeth Robinson](#), Holmes, like Macdonald and Phillips, does use a “well-wrought narrative structure.” Her book does not feature a main character like Phillips’ Bill Toge, but a cast of characters named things such as “Despair,” “Blood/the puppet,” “The Man” and “The Woman.” An end note in the book states that despite these more generic names, these characters refer to specific real individuals such as prisoners from Abu Gharib prison, Osama Bin Ladin, Donald Rumsfeld, and journalist Daniel Pearl. Holmes does not include an author character like Macdonald, but it is only through her author’s note that this connection is made clear. This achieves a similar effect as Macdonald’s author character.

Macdonald and Holmes’s work in their respective books provided the basis for the idea that blackout and erasure poetry allows us to have a conversation with what rules us and opened up an invitation for other poets to begin negotiating their role within the United States political systems. They set an example for how to process one’s frustration with the government’s action or lack thereof, especially when they do not agree with what politicians are doing. As average citizens, they do not have much say in how things beyond helping elect officials, but by manipulating a government document, they are able to add their say in. Poet Jerrod Schwarz touches on this in his foreword to [Make Blackout Poetry: Activist Edition](#).

“You are owed a conversation with what rules you. . .when you pick up a Sharpie, a paintbrush or a pair of craft scissors to reshape these ordinances, addresses, and government records you are worthy of that conversation.”

He goes on to say that “whatever remains when you’ve finished, that is the previous distillation of what America means to you.” Macdonald and Holmes gave permission to poets like Schwarz and others who came to start finding their identity and voice in these government documents.

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry?

The Politics of Blackout

Academic Coverage

The DIY Movement

Blacking Out the News



Around the same time that the content of blackout poems started becoming more political, the source material started changing. Authors started moving away from the classics in favor of the less traditionally literary pieces, things like legal documents and newspapers.

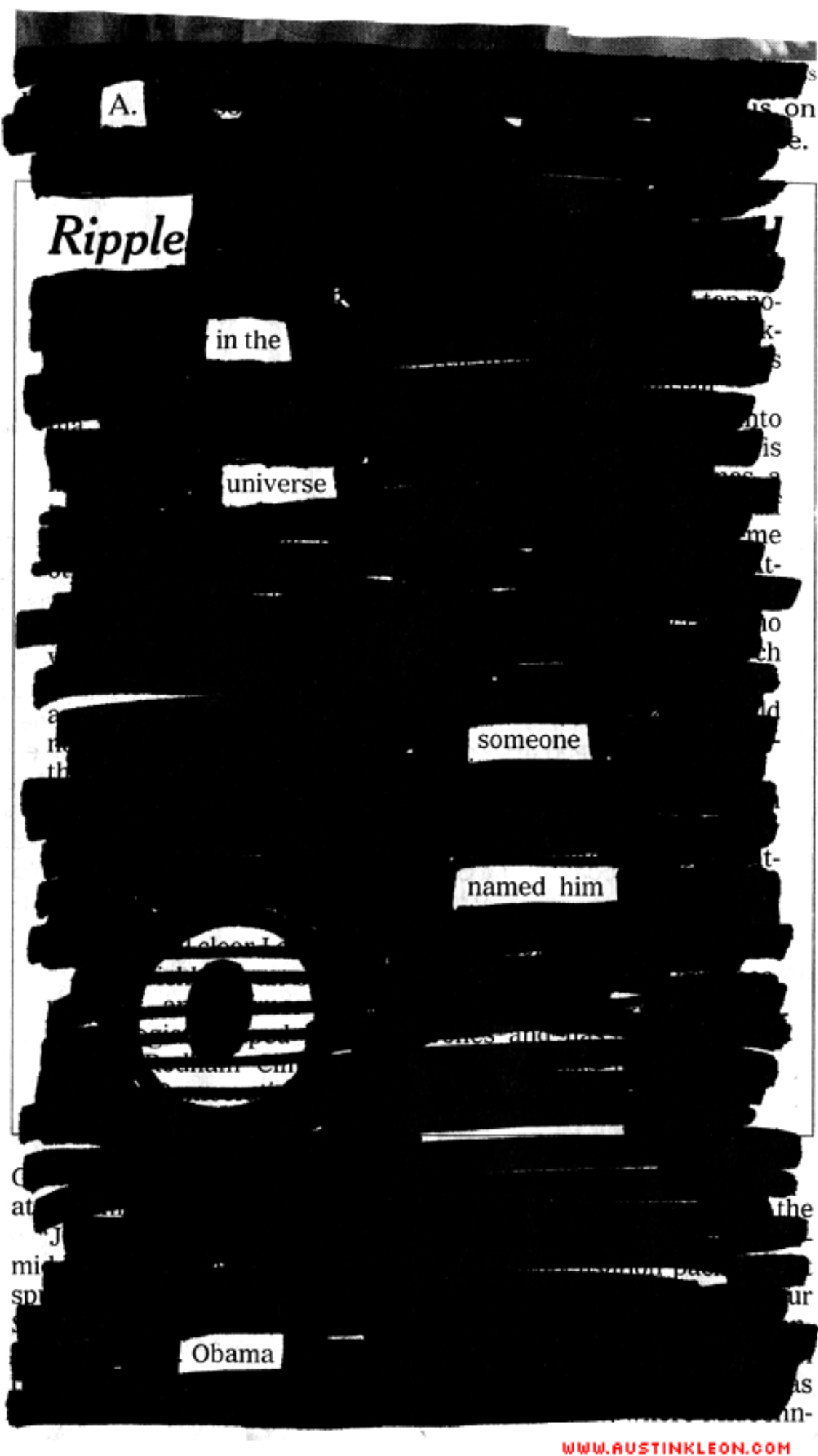
While others were experimenting with this kind of source text beforehand, Texas writer Austin Kleon was the first blackout poet to gain major popularity with blackout poems made from newspapers. According to the preface of *Newspaper Blackouts* (2010), Kleon first started creating blackout poems out of boredom rather than political activism. Unable to write, he started playing with the stack of newspapers his girlfriend had been collecting for work and happened to start making blackout poems. While Kleon did not set out to talk about politics (and he often does not even touch on political issues in his poems), many of the articles he used as source material did. After all, when writing about the news, it is impossible to fully escape politics.

Kleon began by posting his poems on Tumblr under the hashtag “#newspaperblackout.” Others soon began joining him, something Kleon encouraged. After five years of publishing online, Kleon was approached by HarperCollins and asked to create a collection of his works, *Newspaper Blackout*. Whereas previous blackout poetry collections had been predominantly published by smaller indie presses with a smaller reach, HarperCollins was a major publisher. As a result, Kleon’s book received significantly more press than other earlier blackout poetry collections.

When he was creating this collection, it appears that Kleon attempted to steer away from explicitly political content. In a blog post in 2008, [Kleon stated](#) alongside a poem about Obama, “... I would never put [politics] in the book, and why I’m posting it here.” He claims he does not write about politics specifically often, and he does seem to avoid politically charged words in his book. Yet, when he invited readers to begin making their own poems, politics quickly became part of the conversation.

Kleon published a website called “[Newspaper Blackouts](#)” alongside his book of the same name. On this website, Kleon encouraged his readers to submit their own blackout poems and offered how-to instructions and videos on making them. This encouragement of readers is a consistent theme in Kleon’s career. His methodology is based on this idea of sharing and community creation. He typically posts the poems directly to his website or Instagram after making them, even [crediting his digital readers as being the reason](#) he continues to write blackout poems.

Additionally, by creating a [tumblr](#) dedicated to sharing newspaper blackout poems, Kleon removed many of the barriers poets face in publishing experimental poems. Typically digital literary magazines have submission processes in which submitters must pay a small fee and the editor either accepts or denies the poem based on their opinion or a set of agreed upon regulations. Often blackout poems go against these submission regulations because of their more visual quality as well. Before Kleon, it was significantly more difficult to get a blackout poem published. Yet, on the “Newspaper Blackout” tumblr, Kleon simply shared all the newspaper blackout poems that came his way. He did not position himself as an evaluator of content, simply a sharer. Additionally, his hashtag “[#newspaperblackout](#)” took on a life of its own on social media sites such as Instagram, enabling poets to completely remove Kleon from the process. They could publish their work without Kleon acting as a middle man.



Kleon not only held digital space for new blackout poets, however. He also opened physical space. At his first solo art show of his poems, he created a physical space for visitors to create their own poems and hung them up in the gallery alongside his own poems. By hanging up attendees’ poems, he placed them in a position of power. They were not just viewers. They became creators as well, given wall space just like this famous poet; this in its own is political.

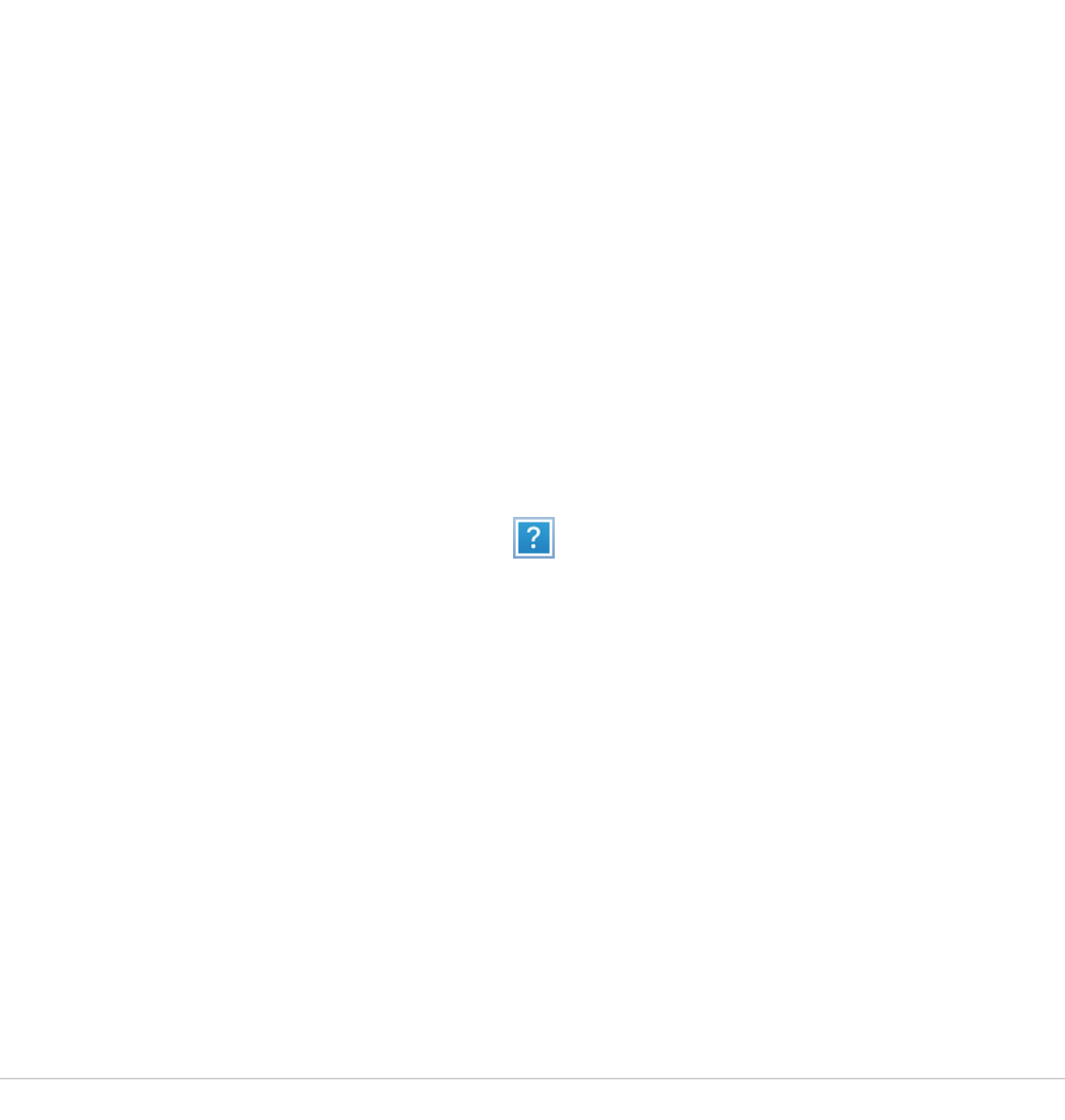
This is reminiscent of DIY zines, which are tied with the [ideas of resistance](#) because they took control of publishing from those who were in power. They published what they wanted, how they wanted. Here, Kleon was given a show by people who wanted to see just what he had written, and he refused. Kleon’s actions are comparable to how [Stephen Cuncumble](#) describes what the DIY zine community did: “everyday oddballs...speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy ‘fuck you’ to sanctioned authority — for no money and no recognition, writing for an audience of like-minded misfits.” Kleon is giving his stage to those “like-minded misfits” who attend his show, encouraging them to share their work about their lives.

Kleon’s actions also inspired many to bring blackout poetry into their classrooms and their daily reading. He especially, though, it seems inspired *The New York Times*. The newspaper uses his how-to videos to explain how to create blackout poems for their poetry contests and credit him as having popularized the form. As a part of their 2014 National Poetry Month celebration, the newspaper produced an [interactive digital blackout poetry maker](#) that “featured snippets of Times articles you can use to create and share your own short poems.” After participants finished making their poem, they could share their poem on *The New York Times* website and social media. Visitors can click through numerous poems made on the site, including one by Kleon. Typically the process of getting published in *The New York Times* is fairly arduous. Yet like Kelon’s bypassing of traditional poetry publication processes, this blackout poetry maker allowed readers who were not traditional poets to have their work be a part of this prestigious publication.

Many of those who began creating their own newspaper blackouts either as a part of Kleon’s *Newspaper Blackout*, *The New York Times* interactive maker or separately used this form to tackle more political issues than Kleon did in his book. *The New York Times* maker steered away from source materials that were specifically political. It provided articles that talk about Coachella and Buddhism rather than campaign races or fights for healthcare access. Even though the source material may not be inherently political, viewers can still create political poems. The blackout poem “[a-du-ca-tion](#)” by arianna sexton-hughes using the maker, for example, comments on the state of education and how students can simply download their assignments and test answers. Many educators would consider this to be a political statement as it is commenting on issues with education, something many view as being political.

Though they did not use *The New York Times*, poet Jamie Mortara did something similar to sexton-hughes. They began the Instagram account “[@cnnpoems](#),” a collection of blackout poems made of CNN poems. Their pieces fluctuate between the political and nonpolitical, touching on things from sex, depression, to global warming. In the bio of the account, Mortara describes the poems as being “how i cope with the headlines,” which suggests that these poems were created as a way to deal with the political happenings of the world.

By popularizing newspapers as a source material and opening up creating blackout poetry to the general public, Kleon set the stage for the blackout poetry political revolution of the late 2010s when Donald J. Trump began campaigning and was then elected as the President of the United States. Kleon helped give the general public, those who might not call themselves poets, the ability to process the political climate, specifically the onslaught of political news in the information age.



Blacking Out in the Age of Trump

“I have been so far unable to create new organic words about our political climate. partly because so many excellent writers have eloquently explained the crisis. this is my offering to the literary conversation & resistance.”

— jayy dodd’s epigraph to her poem “Inaugural Poem for [REDACTED]”

Several popular media outlets such as *Vice* and *The New Republic* have covered this sudden rise in the category of poetry’s popularity and attributed it to two needs of the American people. The first, according to Rachel Stone, is a need to “re-examine the institutions and narratives that shape American’s lives, from government bureaucracy to new media” in order to “craft their own counter-narratives” that tell their story from their perspective. The second is to process documents, how they are currently being handled by the government and public and our access to them.

Blackout poetry allows us to negotiate the power documents hold over us and their place, deserved or not, in our lives. In the introduction to *Make Blackout Poetry: Activist Edition*, blackout and erasure poet Jerrod Schwarz encourages people to take documents integral to American history and black them out because “You are owed a conversation with what rules you” and documents included in the book, such as the Immigration Act of 1924, The Monroe Doctrine, and the Declaration of Independence, are often far removed from the average person’s daily life, but they influence our daily lives by contributing to how rules and laws of the U.S. He tells readers that “Every word you black out in this book brings you closer to the truths of your American identity...whatever remains when you’ve finished, that is the precious distillation of what America means to you” because we are taking ownership of those documents that rule us that we are told we have no control over. Furthermore, in a 2019 interview with *Vice*, Schwarz considers the explosion of blackout poems to be “art imitating society.” Poets are doing what many consider the government to be doing by editing documents. However, whereas government redactions attempt to hide material, poets are attempting to “elucidate a hidden truth” to show what is actually going on.

Currently the truth is something many do not feel that the average American has access to, particularly when it comes to government documents. Schwarz suggests this lack of trust is “the defining feature of America, right now: we don’t get to know the whole truth.” In that *Vice* article, *Adriane Quinlan remarks* that blackout and erasure poems become more and more prominent when we become aware of “how everything we see, touch, read, wear, and nibble was created through selection by cutting, refracting, withholding, reducing, commercializing, and making smaller from a wider, more complex strata of possibilities. Everything around us is blackout and erased, which causes us to become hyper aware of what we do and do not have access to.

Take, for example, the Mueller Report. In March 2019, the public was allowed for the first time to read special counsel *Robert Mueller’s report* on their 22-month probe on possible Russian interference in the presidential election. However, a significant portion of the document was redacted by Attorney General William Barr and his staff. They covered with heavy black lines any portion of the document that addressed the grand jury or intelligence materials, anything related to any ongoing investigations and any “derogatory information about ‘peripheral’ individuals” according to *Ryan Lucas from NPR*. As a result, some pages of the Muller Report look a lot like blackout poems.

Seeing documents like this be redacted, being unable to read the full story, generated frustration for a lot of people. In a 2019 interview with *Vice*, poetics critic Kenneth Goldsmith suggests that “In the Trump era, I think people are angry and pissed off at documents” and that it is that anger that is turning people towards blackout poems. When documents like this are redacted, readers are unable to engage in true dialogue with them, so they find a way to create that conversation by physically manipulating the text.

A Brief Timeline of Trump Era Blackout & Erasure Poems

On the day of Donald J. Trump’s inauguration, the online literary magazine *The Rumpus* posted *several poems by Aireal D. Matthews* as a part of their *Rumpus Inaugural Poems series*. According to Matthews, these poems walk the line of erasure and cut up, as they open with the note that “The following are composed entirely from the original text of the Constitution of the United States of America.” The poems all look similar to traditional erasures in their spacing and composition, but it is unclear if the words of Matthews’ poems occupy the same locations in the poem as they do in the source text, which is one of the primary differences between erasure poems and cut-up poems.

Just before his inauguration, *Queen Mob’s Teahouse* published a short collection of erasure poems made from *Trump’s campaign speeches* by Ariel Yelen. They rely heavily on mocking Trump by removing words in order to make his language and syntax seem simple and uneducated. Two days after his inauguration, the online literary magazine *PANK* published a *blackout poem of Trump’s Inaugural Speech* created by Jerrod Schwarz. Schwarz titled the piece “Inaugural Speech – Erasure” and most have described it as an erasure poem respectively. However, it is instead a blackout poem even though it appears to be an erasure at first glance, as Schwarz did not erase any piece of the original speech. Instead he changed the font of the speech to white and highlighted it with a light grey while leaving the parts of his poem unhighlighted and in traditional dark black font coloring. Upon close inspection, readers can see all of the speech’s original words.

Around Trump’s inauguration, more people started writing and publishing blackout poems inspired by the president. Two Vermont College of Fine Arts graduates Kelly Lenox and Pamela Taylor, for instance, expanded the *ERASE–TRANSFORM Poetry Project* to include poems all sources of political speech. They hoped to “foster perspective in this difficult election year” and provide a space for “transforming political speech into poetry and art, in hopes that it might inspire other transformative actions.” They went on to publish a handful of numerous blackout and erasure pieces such as Trish Hopkin’s blackout poem “Redacted” and other more traditional politically inspired poems before going inactive in June 2018.

In late February 2017, *Tyrant Books* published a *politically inspired blackout poem by Niina Pollari* that used Form N-400 as a source text. Pollari describes form N-400 as the United States’ “application to become a naturalized U.S. citizen.” Pollari titled the poem, “Form N-400 Erasures,” but the piece looks just like Kleon’s blackout poems with heavy black marker lines covering the parts of the source text Pollari wished to obscure. Therefore, though she originally titled it in a way that would imply her piece is an erasure poem, it would be more appropriate to call it a blackout poem.



Form N-400 Erasures
Niina Pollari

Form N-400 Erasures
Niina Pollari

About a month after Pollari’s piece went online, *The Rumpus* published another Trump related-erasure poem series, this one by erasure poet Alison Thumel. Thumel describes her poems as “erasures of Breitbart articles by Julia Hahn” that she created “to subvert, rebut, and reverse the language of the alt-right.” She describes her process by saying that she “erased several of Hahn’s articles individually, from beginning to end. These poems are what remained.” Yet, her poems read and look more like a cutup poem than an erasure poem, though, as Thumel has moved the words around on the page. For example, take her poem “On laws passed” which is an erasure of Julie Hahn’s article “Jeff Sessions on Immigration Law: I’m Going to Follow the Laws Passed By Congress.” I have included it here to the right just as it was published on *The Rumpus*. It no longer looks like the *Breitbart* article Thumel used as a source text but rather a traditional poem written using stanzas and traditional formatting.

Towards the end of 2017, *Poets Reading the News*, published their first erasure poem. The online literary magazine is well-known in the poetic communities as being a space in which poets talk about political issues as it only publishes work about current events. Matthew Murrey’s “Tom Freidman’s Kingdom Come,” published by the online literary magazine on December 5th, is described by the author as “an erasure of Friedman’s crack-worthy paean.” Much like the erasure poem in *PANK*, however, Murrey’s piece looks more like a cut up using traditional poetry formatting, as Murrey ignores the formatting of the source text in favor of rearranging the location of the lines.

The magazine has only gone on to publish two other erasures: “Erasure of Trump’s Letter to Kim Jong-un” by Jerrod Schwarz on July 14, 2018 and “The Human Condition” by Denise Sedman on June 5, 2019. Schwarz’s piece is more overtly political than Sedman’s as his is a critique of United States and North Korean politics through his erasing of a May letter from Trump to Kim Jong-un whereas Sedman is celebrating Anthony Bourdain’s life and acknowledging his death by erasing one of Bourdain’s *New York Times* articles. Schwarz also stays more in line with the erasure format while Sedman’s piece like Murrey’s resembles more of a cut-up poem. Thus far, however, *Poets Reading the News*, have yet to publish a black out poem even though many poets are making them.

In December 2019, *Headline Poetry & Press* began the “Erasure The Occupant” project. The project’s co-editors Hakis and Kim Harvey posted a call for “erasure created from the words of Trump House’s co-editors. Extravagantly colorful to black marker taken to text. This column will run until he is VOTED OUT!” Despite being referred to as “Erasure The Occupant,” Hakis and Harvey accept both erasure and blackout poems. The submission instructions seem to suggest a preference for blackout, as it talks specifically about different ways authors could cover their source text. On December 21, Hakis published the first poem in the series, their own blackout poem made from Trump’s December letter to House Speaker Pelosi, entitled “Page 1: Hate’s Vantage Point.” Headline Poetry & Press has published 11 pieces, of which ten are blackout poems.

These publications are only a fraction of the ones created about the political climate during Trump’s presidency. There are thousands of literary magazines, all publishing a variety of work consistently. As such, it is likely that many of these magazines are publishing similar pieces to those mentioned above. Additionally, many poets bypassed the traditional publication route and simply posted their Trump-inspired erasures on social media sites.

For instance, jayy dodd posted an erasure poem titled “Inaugural Poem for [REDACTED]” to her twitter, where it quickly took off. Since its initial posting, it has garnered 578 retweets and over 1,200 likes. The day after dodd tweeted the poem, which uses a poem *The Independent* claimed as being written for Trump’s inauguration as source material, *Lit Hub* published it. *Buzzfeed* also went on to include dodd’s poem in an article. Few articles beyond *Buzzfeed’s*, though, include dodd’s work in their round up of Trump-era erasure and blackout poems, however, because it was lost in the massive amount of pieces created and published during this time. Blackout and erasure poems about the political climate of the US and even the world continue to be published both in literary magazines and social media every day, as the genre is uniquely suited to the visual and viral nature of the internet.

On laws passed

The morning should
rewrite the law.

There’s a spot
in our broken manner.

Tell me:
are we more illegal

in favor of desire?
Consider the dream.

Give amnesty.
Which birthright

is perpetual
and whose is made?

One sentence
should be kept:

I had a body
to believe.

Source Text: Hahn, Julia. (2017, January 10) “Jeff Sessions on Immigration Law: I’m Going to Follow the Laws Passed by Congress,” *Breitbart*. Retrieved from <http://www.breitbart.com/>.

Blacking Out in the #MeToo Movement

“erasure can mimic the violence of the state, it can also expose the human cost of suppression, and symbolically restore a voice to the silenced.”

— Rachel Stone, *Vice*

Many blackout poetry projects have emerged because of a poet’s obsession or frustration with specific documents whether that be newspapers, inauguration speeches, or Victorian novels. Blackout poet [Isobel O’Hare](#) turned their frustration with apology statements during the [#MeToo movement](#) into one such project.

Though the phrase was first used in 2006 on Myspace in 2006, the #MeToo movement gained traction in 2017 when Alyssa Milano, an American actress, [posted on Twitter](#), “If all the women who have ever been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote ‘Me too.’ as a status, then we give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem,” and people began responding by not only tweeting #MeToo but also publicly calling out their abusers. After the callouts came the apologies. [In a 2019 interview with *The Rumpus*](#), O’Hare describes it as “every day there was some guy being accused of sexual assault or harassment and coming out with a statement.” Their roommate noticed that many of the statements were “remarkably similar,” something that frustrated O’Hare and many others, as it appeared these men were not actually apologetic, only apologetic that they got caught. This frustration [turned them to blackout poetry](#):

“I found myself overwhelmed with emotion by both the accounts of victims (#MeToo) and the statements/apologies by the perpetrators. I printed out those statements and sat down with a Sharpie to reveal what I felt they were really saying about themselves, their privilege, and their willful oblivion to the consequences of their actions.”

— Isobel O’Hare

O’Hare had created blackouts before, but only as a “playful, fun thing, or something I did in order to have a conversation with other people’s work in a reverent way.” However, the frustration they felt at these apologies manifested a different kind of blackout, one that was “like an angry redaction style ” according to O’Hare. Previously when making blackouts, they had only used source material they respected, but in this project, [“The text was \[their\] enemy.”](#)

In a 2018 interview with *Luna Luna Magazine*, O’Hare has described stated they connected with the experience of those in the #MeToo movement: “I know that I will never receive any kind of apology or redemption from the authority figures who have wronged me..Many of these experiences of abuse are universal. So many of us have been hurt by people more powerful than us.” O’Hare created these poems as a way of processing the anger and frustration they and others were feeling as they watched statement after statement be read. They described the experience of creating the poems as “cathartic,” as they allowed O’Hare to highlight things in the apology statements they thought were “dishonest or concealing the truth” while also “mutat[ing] the original messages of the statements into my own version of the truth behind them.”

In creating these pieces, O’Hare gave a voice to those who were feeling stifled by the repetitive apologies. In an email interview with [Mashable](#), they stated this was purposeful, “I hope that the form of erasure itself draws attention to the fact that these men have in fact erased the voices of their victims, for many years, some deliberately and litigiously.” Many poets turned towards erasure as a way of exposing the truth within a text or highlighting a voice not being heard, particularly in the tumultuous political climate of the United States in the late 2010s. Nonpoets, however, did the same. The form and genre is relatively accessible, as it does not rely on overly academic language or rules. Anyone can simply pick up a marker and strike through words to create a piece that speaks to the truth they know or see within the source text. The accessibility of the form combined with people’s connection with the material and the timeliness of the project brought a lot of attention to O’Hare’s work.

I'll keep sharing erasures here when I have time, but if you want to keep up with them, they're all up on my instagram where my username is isobelohare.
#metoo #kevinspacey #louisck #harveyweinstein
#jesselacey #richarddreyfuss
pic.twitter.com/PSlkkHfnAo

— Isobel O’Hare (@isobelohare) November 14, 2017

O’Hare began by posting their poems on Facebook and Instagram. They quickly took off with readers sharing them nonstop. At the height of the poem’s popularity, O’Hare began sharing them on Twitter and “[within twenty-four hours received half a million views](#).” They were interviewed and written about by numerous media outlets from *Poetry Foundation* to *Bustle*. These publications lauded O’Hare’s work. [Caitlin Cowan of *Luna Luna*](#), for instance, described reading O’Hare’s poems as a “refreshing counterbalance to the frustratingly substance-free ‘I don’t recall’ and ‘sorry-not-sorry’ backpedaling.”

They soon began receiving book deals as a result of all the attention. Their experience is similar to that of popular blackout poet Austin Kleon, who also posted his works online and received a book deal due to his digital sharing from HarperCollins. However, unlike Kleon, O’Hare turned down an offer from a major publisher. According to [their 2019 interview with *The Rumpus*](#), they did so because they felt as if they “had to make a choice: either I can be like Rupi Kaur and be this “poet influencer” because it was being pitched to me that I was a new Instagram poet...It would be my brand, and all of that was just totally making me feel horrible.” They could not stomach much less imagine continuously creating erasures and blackout poems for the sole purpose of posting them online.

While it is likely their book would have reached more people had they published with a larger publisher, their choice to not is almost symbolic. [One of O’Hare’s major concerns](#) with the #MeToo movement was that “the most prominent voices are the voices of white, cis-gendered, mostly hetero women. And you know it’s very glamorous people: wealthy, comfortable people. When there are all these other stories that are not getting that much attention.” Even in a movement that was meant to allow all victims of abuse to voice their experiences, only certain voices were being listened to. O’Hare is queer and non binary, but they are “still a white person with a tremendous amount of privilege,” and their book is representative of that privilege to an extent. By choosing to not publish with a major publisher and thus place their book and poems in the role of the dominant narrative of erasing #MeToo statements, they are opening space for other writers. This is something that is important to them, they even encourage readers of [their book in the introduction](#) to “read things beyond me and things beyond the dominant narratives of that movement.”

Rather going through a larger publisher, O’Hare chose to publish with University of Hell Press based out of Seattle, WA. They compiled the poems into a 196 page collection titled *all this can be yours* after an alleged statement made by one of the accused abusers when he exposed himself to his victim at a party. Furthermore, in the book’s introduction, O’Hare mentions that “this experience of being daily assaulted and sexualized is already ours. All of ours. We are all suffering from this sickness.” The collection was released in March 2018 to high acclaim. The [hardcover edition](#) featuring artwork by Susannah Kelly sold out of its initial print run of 300 copies soon after release and the publisher has yet to run another printing of it. The paperback copy remains available for purchase, however.

While other poets may have attempted their own blackout poems of these apologies, the media coverage of O’Hare’s poems has made it difficult to find any others writing about this. However, a few poets, like [Raye Hendrix](#), created blackout poems inspired by O’Hare’s and posted them online. O’Hare showed it was okay to take back our experiences of assault, that we did not have to accept these apologies at face value. They gave permission in a way for poets to investigate and manipulate these words with the same intensity that sexual assault victims are investigated and manipulated by the media and court systems. As Stone said in her article, blackout poems can restore those who have been silenced, and O’Hare laid the framework for us to begin restoring our own voices among all this sexual violence, oppression, and fear.



This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

Poetry

[What is Blackout Poetry?](#) [The Politics of Blackout](#)
[Academic Coverage](#) [The DIY Movement](#)

DIY: Moving Blackout Poetry Into the Hands of The Reader



Visitors to a [blackout poetry show](#) creating their own blackout poems in Denton, TX.

Many of the movements that led up to blackout poetry, such as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, Oulipo, and conceptual poetry, I had never heard of before starting a creative writing program. Most of my friends had not heard of them either, but they had all heard of blackout poetry. In fact, most people in my life from my parents to my coworkers have some idea of what blackout poetry is even if they, like me, cannot place where they first learned about it. This is because since the 2010s, blackout poetry has increasingly left more experimental creative writing programs like [Vermont College of Fine Arts](#) and into the hands of the public.

This is due in part to what could be called the DIY-ing of blackout poetry. DIY or “do it yourself” refers to “activities in which individuals engage raw and semi-raw materials and component parts to produce, transform, or reconstruct material possessions, including those drawn from the natural environment” [according to Marco Wolf and Shaun McQuitty](#). A simpler way to state this may be that it is anything that we do ourselves that we might pay someone else to do. In *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (2014), Stephen Duncombe asserts that alongside this shift to making things ourselves, there arose a “DIY ethic” that called for people to “make your own culture and stop consuming that which is made for you.” Poetry, particularly more experimental forms of poetry like blackout and erasure, were once done by a more select group of people, those that had the time, leisure, and money to write and experiment freely. However, this shift toward DIY in the public sphere influenced those in the poetic. The everyday reader began to feel empowered to embrace this DIY ethic and begin both making their own blackout poems and teaching others how to make them.

There are thousands of blackout poetry how-to guides on the Internet. Once people start making blackout poems, they tend to find they need to share this with others. For instance, popular Instagram tarot card reader [Carrie Mallon](#), who does not even call herself a poet, started making blackout poems in 2018 after being inspired by the Instagram account “@makeblackoutpoetry.” She found making blackout poetry to be “a psyche-healing activity” so she began sharing her poems on her own Instagram, which she uses to perform tarot readings and encourage self-discovery and healing. Her followers, who followed her for those readings not poetry, began asking her for advice on making them after she started posting them to her account. According to her blog, this made her “really excited because creating blackout poetry has really ‘clicked’ something within me, and I’d love to see others have that magical experience.” So she made her own [“how to guide”](#) after only a month of creating blackout poems.

Mallon’s experience is not unique. Wolf and McQuitty found in their study of those who undertake DIY projects that “DIY behavior can take on greater meaning than the functional or aesthetic value of the project. Study participants voiced feelings of accomplishment, control, and enjoyment when completing their projects.” People find real joy in making things themselves. In the art, music, and literature spheres, this goes even further. Wolf and McQuitty suggest that “DIY in these spaces ‘involves consumers’ mental and physical engagement in acts of planning, designing, and fabricating for self consumption. By physically making things, a DIYer becomes the designer, builder, and evaluator of a project that is experientially consumed both during production and after its completion.” As she made her own poems, Mallon experienced these feelings of accomplishment and enjoyment both while making it and upon reading it when completed. This joy then made her feel as if she had to share this method with others.

Like Mallon, many of those who have been introduced to blackout poetry over the past ten years have begun sharing with their friends, family, and followers how to create blackout poems of their own. This has led to an enormous explosion of popularity for the form, a popularity that even exceeds that of erasure poetry. More people are now posting blackout poems online than erasure ones and have a better understanding as a result of what blackout poems are over what erasure poems are, which only furthers the need to separate the two categories.

A Brief Timeline of the Blackout Poetry DIY Movement

On Tik Tok, videos labeled with the hashtag “#blackoutpoetry” have been viewed over 700,000 times as of mid April 2020 and there are over 147,000 posts labeled with [the same hashtag on Instagram](#). The DIY shift in the blackout poetry community has been primarily driven by an increase in the use of social media sites like Twitter, Instagram, and Tik Tok.

These platforms have become hotspots for blackout poetry, as they make it easy to share visual poems with strangers and to encourage those strangers to make their own. Several social media accounts have taken advantage of this by pushing for poets to share their work under a particular hashtag to participate in contests or publishing opportunities. For instance, the Instagram account “@makeblackoutpoetry” began by resharing any blackout poems posted under the hashtag [“#makeblackoutpoetry.”](#) Over 59,000 posts on Instagram have been tagged with the hashtag and the account has shared over 2,000 poems and generated a following of over 60,000 people. The man behind the account, John Carroll, went on to publish a book in 2018 titled *Make Blackout Poetry: Turn These Pages Into Poems* (2018) that teaches people how to create poems. However, he stopped posting to the account after the book came out. He last posted in February, 2019, over a year ago. Carroll is just one of many people who have used hashtags to promote this DIY mentality of blackout poetry.

Popular blackout poet [Austin Kleon](#), for instance, also used hashtags to launch his career as a blackout poet. Unlike Carroll and a majority of social media based blackout poets, Kleon started by sharing his work on Tumblr where he encouraged people to submit blackout poems to his Tumblr for publication either via a form or by tagging it with the hashtag “#newspaperblackout.” While the blog went inactive in 2018, it gained significant attention while active, even being heralded as one of *Time’s* “30 Must-See Tumblr Blogs.” The attention he garnered digitally eventually led to a book deal and career of teaching people to make blackout poems and later just how to write in general.

Kleon set the standard for how to teach blackout poetry in community workshops; thereby, moving taking the DIY-ing of blackout poetry to another level. He was not just posting about online about how to make blackout poems, but he was interacting face-to-face with people, teaching them how to make this kind of poetry. He began hosting numerous workshops across Texas where he lives. Though he resides in Austin, he hosted a majority of his workshops in the DFW area, working primarily with the Dallas Museum of Arts (DMA) specifically. With the DMA, he had attendees create in the museum and then display their works in an exhibit as if they were famous pieces of artwork. [On his blog](#), he recounts that he found that “folks really don’t need much instruction—they just need materials, some space, some time, and permission to play.” A few years after his DMA workshops, Kleon had his first solo art gallery showing about forty minutes north in Denton. At this gallery showing, he modeled his workshop and digital behaviors by encouraging visitors to create their own poems.

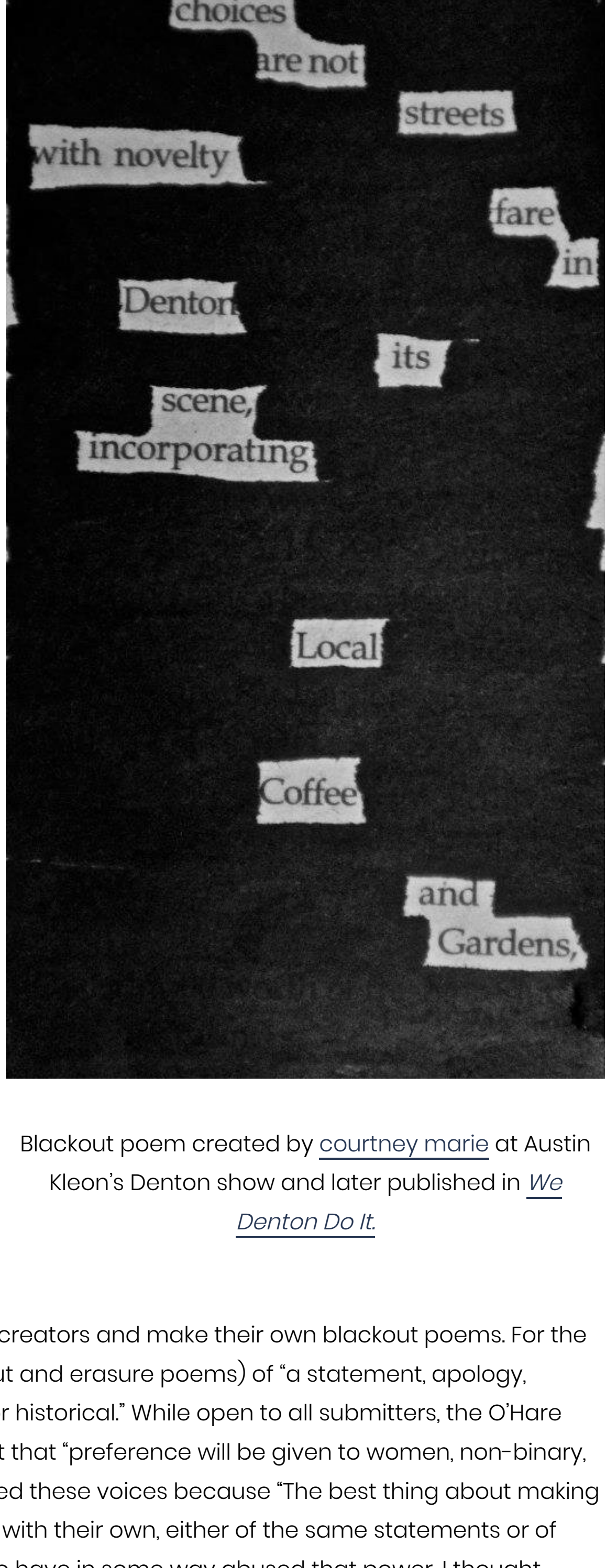
He made the focal point of the show a space for visitors to create. On [his blog](#) he recounted how “Much to my delight, visitors who attended the opening were already taking advantage—it’ll be great to see how those walls fill up over the next couple of weeks.” Kleon left the pieces visitors created up in the gallery for the duration of the show, thereby suggesting these visitors’ works had as much value as his own.

Kleon’s way of inviting people to create attracted others with similar mindsets and encouraged them to create and share their own blackout poems. For instance, courtney marie, poet and co-founder of Denton-based DIY creative collective [Spiderweb Salon](#), created several blackout poems at Kleon’s show. Several of those went on to be published in [We Denton Do It](#), alongside the blackout poems of other local poets and community members.

Spiderweb Salon and other similar DIY based creative communities such as the group responsible for [The Found Poetry Review](#) across the U.S. embraced blackout poetry. They began spreading blackout poetry amongst their local communities. For example, at zine making workshops, Spiderweb Salon frequently encourages and provides the materials for poets to create blackout poems. For instance, [Sebastián Hasani Páramo](#), who studied under well known blackout poet Mary Ruefel at Sarah Lawrence College, created a blackout poem titled “Despair” from from Soren Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death* (1849) for Spiderweb Salon’s zine *Book of the Dead* (2017). While Paramo has written a number of poems, he has not written much blackout poetry. The influence of Spiderweb Salon, however, appears to have encouraged him to experiment with this category of poetry.

Spiderweb Salon is additionally home to popular blackout poet Isobel O’Hare. Though O’Hare lives in New Mexico, they still participate in the collective’s various events and publications. In addition to their work with the collective, they also promote blackout poetry writers in their area and across the world. In 2018, they published a blackout poetry collection made from the apologies of sexual assaulters during the #MeToo movement entitled *all this can be yours* (2018). Their book quickly gained worldwide attention, and they have used that attention to empower writers to make their own blackout poems through local workshops and their community sourced anthology [Erase the Patriarchy](#).

Like Kleon, they prioritized the voices of their readers through this project by encouraging them to create co-creators and make their own blackout poems. For the anthology, [they asked for](#) erasures (meaning both black-out and erasure poems) of “a statement, apology, speech, and/or other document, whether contemporary or historical.” While open to all submitters, the O’Hare stated that submissions from men would be accepted but that “preference will be given to women, non-binary, and LGBTQIA writers.” They started this project and prioritized these voices because “The best thing about making these erasures has been watching other people come up with their own, either of the same statements or of other documents written by men in powerful positions who have in some way abused that power. I thought, what better way to continue this project than to invite y’all along with me?” Poets like O’Hare and Kleon and groups like Spiderweb Salon began encouraging what Duncombe described as the DIY ethic of making a culture for yourself by creating a blackout poetry community and culture that empowers one another to use blackout poetry to share their stories and reclaim their voices.



Blackout poem created by [courtney marie](#) at Austin Kleon’s Denton show and later published in [We Denton Do It](#).

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage The DIY Movement

Blacking Out Self-Publishing

While blackout poetry is slowly becoming more accepted, it is often difficult to publish poems written in style. For a long while, publishers seemed to struggle with thinking of blackout poetry, and even found poetry as a whole, as legitimate poetry. They assumed it was [just plagiarism](#) or that it was not creative and thus not worth publishing. A [Writer's Digest](#) article even suggested that erasure and blackout poems were only “new,” and thus appropriate for publishing, if they erased “more than 50% of the text.” This attitude was incredibly pervasive amongst the publishing community for a long time. For instance, in 2011, found poet Jenni B. Baker [received a rejection letter](#) in response to a submission of found poems that told her: “How about next time you try to write something original and not plagiarize someone else’s work for a change!” Many found poets, including erasure and blackout poets, received similar messages.

These kinds of misunderstandings led found poets to make their own publications instead where they could publish their work. Due to this misunderstanding of found poetry, Baker and Beth Ayer founded [The Found Poetry Review](#) the day after Baker received that letter. They hoped to use the journal to “educate more people about found poetry and provide a home for work that was often not welcome in traditional publications.” Over the five years Baker and Ayer ran the magazine, they published over 150 poets over ten volumes.

By publishing so many found poets and categories of found poetry, the editors for the magazine were able to help give the publishing and writing communities an idea of what found poetry should look like. According to one of the poetry editors E. Kristin Anderson, who also happens to be a blackout poet, writers were often confused as to if their work was really found poetry. She recounts on [her blog](#), “During my time as an editor at [Found Poetry Review](#), I sometimes saw writers send in a poem written by someone else that they found in a book or magazine, and sent it in. Just a poem. Someone else’s in full. That’s not what constitutes a found poem. That’s just literally finding someone else’s work . . . And it’s certainly not something you can attribute to yourself or publish without permission from the author.” The editors, including Anderson, made it a point when someone submitted to “send out personalized rejection letters with a few notes about why we rejected your piece.” This feedback was instrumental in helping the greater writing community to develop an understanding of found poetry.

Because of this work by *The Found Poetry Review*, more mainstream publishers began to start feeling comfortable publishing found poems. *Poetry Magazine* even [shared on their website](#) a collection of erasure, blackout, and cut-up poems of their magazine created by patients in the pediatrics ward at the John H. Stronger, Jr. Hospital under the direction of poet Eric Elshtain. This uptick in mainstream publishers publishing found poems is actually what led to Baker and Ayer to close their magazine, as they felt their original goal was complete, and to an extent, it was. However, a majority of mainstream publishers publish primarily text-based found poems rather than visual ones like blackout poems.

Due to this lack of publication of visual poems, poets and artists in the mid to late 2010s began creating lists of places that did accept visual poems, found and otherwise, because they were so few and far between. For instance, in 2016, poet Trish Hopkins, who is known for her collations of places to publish, created [a list of journals that accepted “nontraditional & found poetry,”](#) including [Vagabonds Creative Anthology](#), which I was an editor for at the time. However, just two years later, a commenter noted that several of the publications were defunct.

Those magazines and journals that publish visual found poems that have remained in business often do not publish them frequently. [In the April 2020 issue of Poetry Magazine](#), only two of the 29 creative pieces published were [visual poems](#) that relied on atypical visuals in some way to create additional meaning. For example, one of the pieces published was a selection from Madeline Gin’s [“Transformatory Power.”](#) The poems are visual in that they were typed with what appears to be a typewriter or written with a pen and then photographed or scanned. They cannot exist as poems without their visual context. However, they are not blackout poems. Neither of the visual poems in this issue of *Poetry Magazine* are. Thus, even those magazines that do accept visual poetry submissions do not often publish blackout poems. Additionally, mainstream book publishers still reject found poetry submissions for the most part, even though smaller journals have begun publishing these forms.

Found poets have long been cut out of mainstream publishing, and blackout poets even more so. In order to get their work published, they have had to make their own journals or just self publish on social media or through self-publishers like [CreateSpace](#). They will likely have to continue doing so until we begin acknowledging blackout poetry as a legitimate category of poetry that is separate from erasure and worthy of study in academia. Once we do so, publishers will hopefully begin to lose their association of blackout poetry with plagiarism or a lack of creativity.

Last Updated: April 2020

[Learn more about the “History of Blackout Poetry” project.](#)

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This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage The DIY Movement

Blacking Out in the Classroom

My AP English students often ask for blackout poetry days. They started making blackout poems the year before in sophomore English as a part of their *Lord of the Flies* unit, and they became obsessed. They created so many that the school library even displayed their poems for months. Many have continued to make their own blackout poems for fun. Every few weeks, they ask me if we can make blackout poems in class.

Their requests are not unique to my school. Blackout poetry has become increasingly popular in classrooms across the US from elementary to even college. Googling “black poetry lesson plan” yields over a million hits in .050 seconds, and there are over [150 lesson plans](#) tagged “blackout poetry” on the popular curriculum website Teachers Pay Teachers. Both [Scholastic](#) and [the National Council of Teachers of English](#) have posted how to guides and lessons for how teachers can incorporate this category of poetry from elementary through high school. While it appears from these numerous public postings that blackout poetry is becoming increasingly popular in English and Language Arts classes, there has been minimal investigation into the pedagogical benefits of blackout poetry.

Even English classes at the college level have taken to using blackout poetry to engage students on a different level. [Melissa Landenheim](#) explored some of the benefits blackout poetry has at a college level in her article “[Engaging Honors Students through Newspaper Blackout Poetry](#).” In the article, she explores how her students created blackout poems out of Sappho’s poetry in an honors seminar course. She found that the “blackout poetry makes students active participants in the construction of knowledge and understanding” and that her students’ understanding of and ability to engage with Sappho’s poetry increased once they created blackout poems of Sappho’s works. One of her students remarked, “Although writing the blackout poetry was difficult, I definitely learned a great deal more about the works we have read by writing them.” According to Landenheim, the students have gone on to use blackout poetry as a way of interpreting other works throughout the year.

Blackout poet and former high school English and creative writing teacher JM Farkas found blackout poetry especially helpful in her creative writing classes. She mentions in a post for the [National Council of Teachers of English](#), “When I taught 12th grade Creative Writing, blackout poetry was one of my most successful lessons.” Her students were more engaged and more open to writing because they “seem less intimidated by the process of erasing, as opposed to new writing.” The blacking out opens the door to creating entirely new works that are not dependent upon a source text.

Additionally, Farkas found that blackout poetry helped make classic literature more accessible and interesting to high school students because “blackout poetry provides an opportunity for students to “make” the words say whatever they want.” Students can take what they are reading, even if it was published hundreds of years ago and make it apply to them by morphing it through blackout poetry, similarly to how Landenheim’s students were better able to engage Sappho’s work after creating poems of it.

To have a full understanding of how blackout poetry helps students in their literary analysis skills, more research needs to be done. While some teachers, like [AP Literature and Composition teacher Brian Hannon](#), have discussed how they have used blackout poetry as an analytical tool for students, there have been few, if any, IRB approved studies published that investigate whether blackout poetry helps students grow their reading comprehension, writing, or literary analysis skills.

However, before we can begin diving into researching the impact of blackout poetry, we have to identify what blackout poetry is, since teachers – like scholars, poets, and journalists – conflate erasure and blackout poetry when discussing it. This conflation makes it difficult to even begin to do this research and in some cases even to teach either blackout or erasure. Without a clear distinction between the two, we end up teaching students the wrong things about both, furthering the conflation. For instance, after listening to blackout poet Mary Ruefele speak at the University of Arizona in 2017, middle school ELA teacher [Natalie Welch decided to teach her students about erasure poetry](#). She did so by having her students make blackout poems by “crossing[ing] out words and lines from published poems.” Then they copied their poems onto a new sheet of paper, by this I am assuming they copied just the words not the formatting of their original poem, thus creating new erasure poems. Their peers then made blackout poems of their erasure poems, but Welch refers to every version of these poems as erasure poems. This left me confused about what students were supposed to be creating and how, as the language she was used to describe the poems her students were making did not match the methodology she described them using. This makes it difficult to replicate and to assess.

Furthermore, conflating the two is particularly detrimental when using blackout poetry to teach and assess things outside of just getting students interested in poetry. Blackout poems depend on a physical obscuring of the source text. This allows poets to incorporate visuals that add or reinforce a meaning, which in turn provides students the opportunity to increase their visual analysis skills. Comparatively, erasure poems depend less on visuals and would not be as useful in a class that is looking for meaning in visuals. But what if a teacher writes and publishes a lesson plan on developing visual analysis skills and refers to blackout poems throughout it as erasure poems? Will the next teacher be able to adequately replicate the lesson? Possibly, but it would not be guaranteed as that initial teacher was referring to an entirely different category of poetry.

If we want to increase the use of blackout poetry in classrooms, we need to be able to clearly explain what blackout poetry is and then begin exploring the academic benefits of it. While I have had success teaching blackout poetry in my creative writing classes, I have yet to bring myself to incorporate it into my AP English courses because I have not seen enough evidence that supports that blackout poetry is beneficial for my students in developing their reading and analytical skills. Anecdotes like Farkas and Landenheim’s are encouraging, but they are not enough. We need to support students’ love of blackout poetry with evidence and to gather that evidence, we need to separate blackout poetry from erasure and establish a clear definition of what qualifies a poem as either or.

Last Updated: April 2020

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This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

What is Blackout Poetry? The Politics of Blackout
Academic Coverage The DIY Movement

Blacking Out in Community Workshops

Starting 2014, libraries suddenly began hosting teen and youth blackout poetry workshops as a part of their National Poetry Month celebrations. They predominantly took place in cities home to popular blackout poets like Isobel O'Hare or Austin Kleon, but by 2018, these events had become a staple during April all across the nation.

Despite happening in different places, these workshops were all fairly similar. Most focused on blackout poetry over erasure and they described the poems as blackout. They were, for the most part, low cost or free. They tended to be open to the public but with an emphasis on engaging youth poets. As well, they were rarely offered as anything more than an introductory workshop. They focus on those who are new to the form rather than those looking to master it. Here are a few examples of some of these events:

- [October 2014 Texas Teen Book Festival with Austin Kleon](#)
- [March 2014 Found Poetry Workshop at Pasadena Public Library](#)
- [October 2017 "Out of the Box Poetry" at South Bowie Branch Library](#)
- [April 2018 Workshop: Blackout Poetry - Erasure Song Lyrics! At the Cupertino Library](#)
- [April 2018 "Blackout Poetry Workshop" at Norwood Public Library](#)
- [September 2018 "John Carroll, Make Blackout Poetry Interactive Launch Party" at Atlanta History Center](#)
- [April 2019 Blackout Poetry Workshop at Brooklyn Public Library](#)
- [April 2019 "Blackout Poetry Workshop with Michael Nyers" in Monaca, PA](#)

Additionally, some blackout poets were brought into host workshops for specific events and places. For instance, despite being based in Austin, Texas, blackout poet Austin Kleon, held numerous workshops at the Dallas Museum of Art, including an [all-teen blackout poetry workshop](#) in 2011. During that workshop, he led teens through the museum where they discussed art and how they could bring in parts of famous paintings into their own blackout pieces. The students then created their own blackout poems. [Kleon noted](#) in his workshops that he has found that "folks really don't need much instruction—they just need materials, some space, some time, and permission to play." This is significant, because people, specifically teens, want to create and are excited to do once they are freed from the constraints and pressure of more traditional formal poetry.

Whereas most critics and scholars struggle with identifying blackout poetry as blackout poetry, these libraries do so with ease. The differentiation is important because the libraries have to appeal to teens to come to the workshops and teens tend to know what blackout poetry is, likely more than erasure poetry. They ask to create it in classes and they make it (and label it correctly) online on social media platforms like Instagram and Tik Tok.

Last Updated: April 2020

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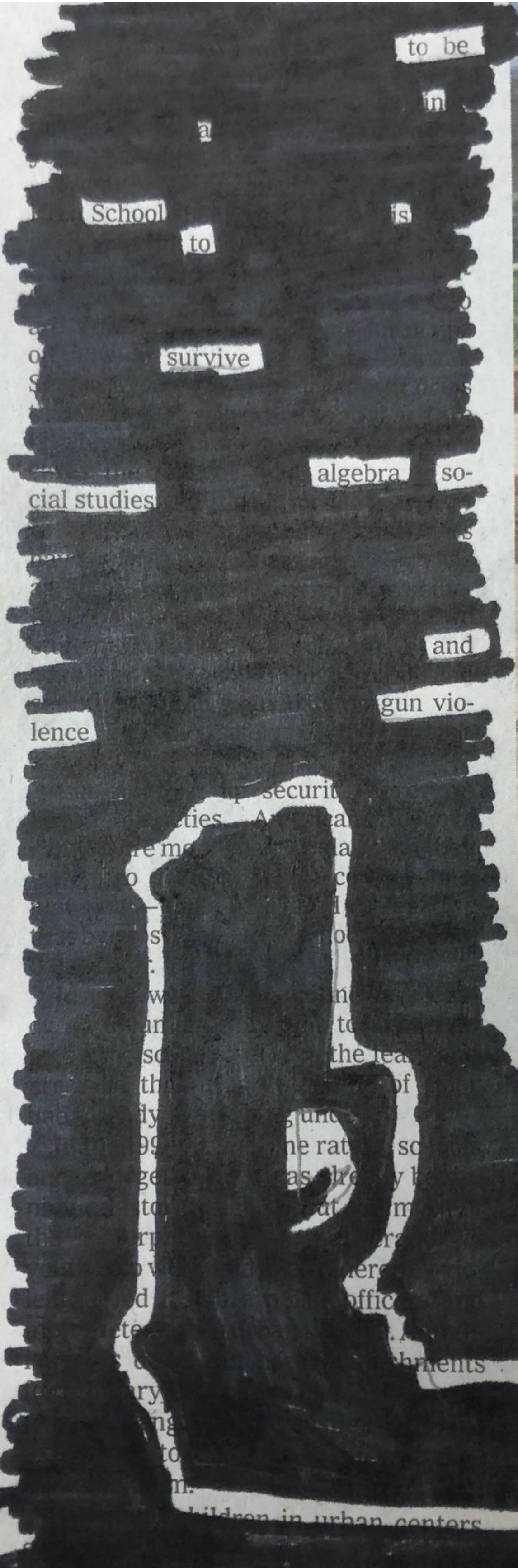
Blacking out for The New York Times

In addition to physical workshops, there has also been a digital push for teens to create blackout poems from *The New York Times*. In 2010, the newspaper launched a yearly Teen Found Poem Contest. These contests only required participants to create a found poem, not necessarily a blackout poem, using an article from *The New York Times* as their source text. Blackout poems are a category of the larger found poetry subgenre, which encompasses any poem made of words sourced from another text. This includes, cut-up, cento, erasure, and blackout poems. A majority of [the winners](#) were not blackout poems as a result. However, in 2014, the newspaper released a digital blackout poetry maker as a part of their 2014 National Poetry Month Celebration. Then, for their tenth anniversary of the Teen Found Poem Contest, *The New York Times* changed their contest from being open to all found poetry to being blackout poetry specific.

Uniquely, the contest required teens to [“make blackout poetry from the print paper”](#) rather than creating found poems from the website, meaning participants could not use the newspaper’s digital poetry maker. According to the newspaper, this requirement was added in order to encourage teens to “page through, understand how a print newspaper works, and make their own choices.” The implication of the instructions was that the newspaper assumed most teens had not interacted with their physical paper much, if at all. By forcing them to engage with the physical edition of the paper, *The New York Times* hoped that younger readers would engage with the news in different ways and thus become better and more robust consumers of news in an age rampant with misleading digital media. The newspaper [also asked the following](#) of participants: “We want you to have fun playing with language and meaning-making. We want you to experiment with choosing different words in different combinations to see how they create new imagery and ideas. We hope you’ll be sensitive to how the space around the words plays into the poem’s meaning, and we hope you’ll recite your work aloud to hear how it sounds. Above all, we hope your creation will show a real love of, and care with, language and what it can do. Please surprise us.”

Despite the constraint of having to use the print format, thousands of teens submitted and many did surprise the newspaper just as requested. Of the more than 2,500 submissions, the judges, Amanda Christy Brown, Shannon Doyne, Jeremy Engle, Michael Gonchar, Natalie Proulz, and Katherine Schulten, selected 25 poems as their favorites. While the “favorites” touched on a range of topics, it is worth noting that several touched on gun control and gun violence.

For instance, “Triggers” by seventeen year old Brianne Kunisch, pictured to the right, talks about a fear of school shootings. [In her author’s note](#), she wrote that her poem was “a tribute to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas school shooting tragedy, my poem is 14 words to symbolize the day that innocent students, sons, daughters, teachers, and friends lost their lives and loved ones on February 14th, 2018,” thus drawing a specific political connection. Though the contest was not created for teens to discuss politics or political events, many did, as poets, including teenage poets, have taken to using blackout poetry as a way to process politics and trauma.



Blacking out on Tik Tok and Other Social Media

While academia and mainstream publishers struggle with correctly identifying blackout poetry, Tik Tok users don't. In looking to understand why we as scholars need to be paying attention to blackout poetry, we only need to look at the number of posts tagged #blackoutpoetry and how writers, readers, and social media users are navigating them. Blackout poetry has grown exponentially over the past ten years due to the ability to share poems online on Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok, and even Pinterest. It is on these sites that a community definition of blackout poetry has arisen. People have developed a common understanding of what it is and what it is not, as evidenced by the hashtags used. This social media boom has provided more context to the category than any academic paper thus far, as those making blackout poems have taken the need to define the category for accessibility purposes in navigating social media posts into their own hands.

On Instagram

The image sharing social media site Instagram is uniquely suited to the sharing of blackout poetry because it is so heavily based on sharing images. As such, it has become a hotbed of blackout poetry activity. There are over 149,000 posts tagged #blackoutpoetry and over 37,000 tagged #blackoutpoem. Most of these posts tagged with hashtags are completed blackout poems or poems in progress. Many blackout poems are also shared under the hashtags #erasurepoetry and #foundpoetry as well. However, there are only around 48,000 posts tagged #foundpoetry and 23,000 tagged #erasurepoetry and while many of the poems tagged with these are blackout poems, there are also numerous other categories of poetry being labeled with these hashtags. The blackout poetry specific hashtag has generated significantly more posts.

Additionally, some have taken to Instagram to encourage people to post their blackout poets to Instagram through hashtag movements. For instance, blackout poet John Carroll began the account @makeblackoutpoetry in 2013 after being inspired by popular blackout poet Austin Kleon. On the account he not only shared his own poems, but he also reposted blackout poems tagged with #makeblackoutpoetry. There are over 59,000 posts on Instagram that now use that hashtag. Before the account went inactive in February 2019, shortly after Carroll published his blackout poetry guide *Make Blackout Poetry: Turn These Pages Into Poems* (2018), Carroll had shared over 2,000 poems and gained over 60,000 followers.

Numerous other accounts popped up shortly after Carroll's such as @blackoutpoetrychallenges that encouraged poets to post blackout poems, often poems that respond to particular prompts or use certain source material. However, as is the nature of social media, few of these accounts remain active for long. Most seem to stop posting like @makeblackoutpoetry and @blackoutpoetrychallenges within a few years.

Additionally, several blackout poets have developed followings on Instagram for their poetry. Often these accounts are successful because there is something that makes them unique. For example, blackout poet Ryan Walter Wagner has been creating blackout poems out of horoscopes on his account @hiddenhoroscopes since 2010. The popularity of his account has allowed him to create a website on which he sells products such as backpacks, coffee mugs, pillows, and even leggings that feature his horoscope blackout poems. Similarly, Jamie Mortara created the account @cnnpoems on which they posted blackout poems made solely from CNN news headlines. The account @littlegoldenblackoutpoems has developed a following because the poet, only identified as "s.w.," only uses gold sharpie to create their blackouts in line with their account's name.

Popular blackout poets such as Austin Kleon have also used Twitter to share their poems and further develop their digital following. Kleon's account @austinkleon has almost 6,000 posts, of which a fair portion are blackout poems, and over 97,000 followers. Many blackout poets follow him but notably accounts such as @makeblackoutpoetry, @cnnpoems, @hiddenhoroscopes, and @littlegoldenblackoutpoems that are popular but not near the level of Kleon's account do not. Kleon originally pioneered the use of #newspaperblackout as a way to encourage writers to create blackout poems of newspaper articles like him. However, as he has been creating less newspaper blackout poems over the past few years, he has stopped using the hashtag. There are only around 10,000 posts currently tagged with it.

Some blackout poets have purposefully moved away from Instagram recently, however. Isobel O'Hare, the blackout poet known for their blackout poems made from the apologies of sexual abusers during the #MeToo movement, stopped posting blackout poems on their account. They originally began sharing their poems to their social media accounts, which is how they began to develop a following. However, the constant social media attention actually became too much for O'Hare. They recall in an interview with *The Rumpus* that a large publisher suggested that O'Hare could be "a new Instagram poet" and that these Instagram blackout poems "would be [their] new brand." They turned the publisher down because the thought of doing that "was just totally making me feel horrible." Since then, they have published barely any blackout poems to their account and have a following of only around 5,000 compared to Kleon's 97,000.

On Twitter

Twitter did not originally provide the same space for blackout poetry that Instagram or Tik Tok did. It is significantly less visually based. A majority of the content posted on the site is text based, making it harder to share the more visual blackout poems. Many poems do get posted to the site, as do links to blackout poems on Instagram through cross-platform automatic posting. Many blackout poetry Instagram accounts use this cross posting ability to share their poems on Twitter in addition to Instagram. Their follower count, however, tends to be smaller on Twitter than Instagram. Jamie Mortara's @cnnpoetry has only around 100 followers on Twitter compared to the several thousand they have on Instagram. Austin Kleon is a notable exception to this as he actually has more followers on Twitter than Instagram by a few thousand, but he does not post much about blackout poetry anymore; instead, he uses it to promote his other books and sketching projects primarily.

Even though blackout poets do not use Twitter as much for sharing their actual blackout poems, the social media platform was important in bringing the public's attention to blackout and erasure poetry during the political turmoil surrounding the 2016 United States presidential election. Blackout and erasure poets posted hundreds of poems written in these categories of poetry following the inauguration of Donald Trump. According to Rachel Stone in *The New Republic*, erasure and blackout poems are "uniquely suited to quick (and sometimes viral adaptation online)." This viral quality of these categories of poetry encourages poets to share their works on Twitter, which as a platform is known for making content go viral.

For instance, while popular blackout poet Isobel O'Hare began by sharing their blackout poems made from sexual abuser's apologies to Facebook and Instagram, it was not until they began sharing them on Twitter that they really began gaining traction. In their interview with *The Rumpus*, they recount the sudden influx of attention, "because I started sharing them to Twitter...within twenty-four hours received half a million views, which was totally mind-boggling." A large portion of their views and the respective popularity their poems garnered is because of Twitter.

Additionally, because of the push for educators to use Twitter to engage with stakeholders in the local and greater community, numerous educators have begun sharing their students' experiences with blackout poetry on Twitter. For instance, in response to a tweet by Kleon, over a hundred secondary and elementary school teachers from across the United States posted about their students creating blackout poems in the classroom. Their posts were primarily visual. They featured a range of photos of students actively creating and analyzing blackout poems in addition to their final projects. A majority of the more recent posts that use the blackout poetry hashtag are by educators either talking about using blackout poetry in classroom or sharing photos of their students' completed works. *The New York Times* also used twitter to encourage students and their teachers in their blackout poetry contest during April 2019. This generated numerous responses from teachers encouraging other teachers to incorporate blackout poetry into their classrooms.

This has led to the creation of two different sides of Twitter when it comes to blackout poetry posts, one that is more political and one that is dominated by educators. During times of political turmoil and during educational pushes for greater inclusion of poetry in the classroom like National Poetry Month, the number of blackout posts increases. But Twitter overall is not the most popular social media platform for blackout poet

On Tik Tok

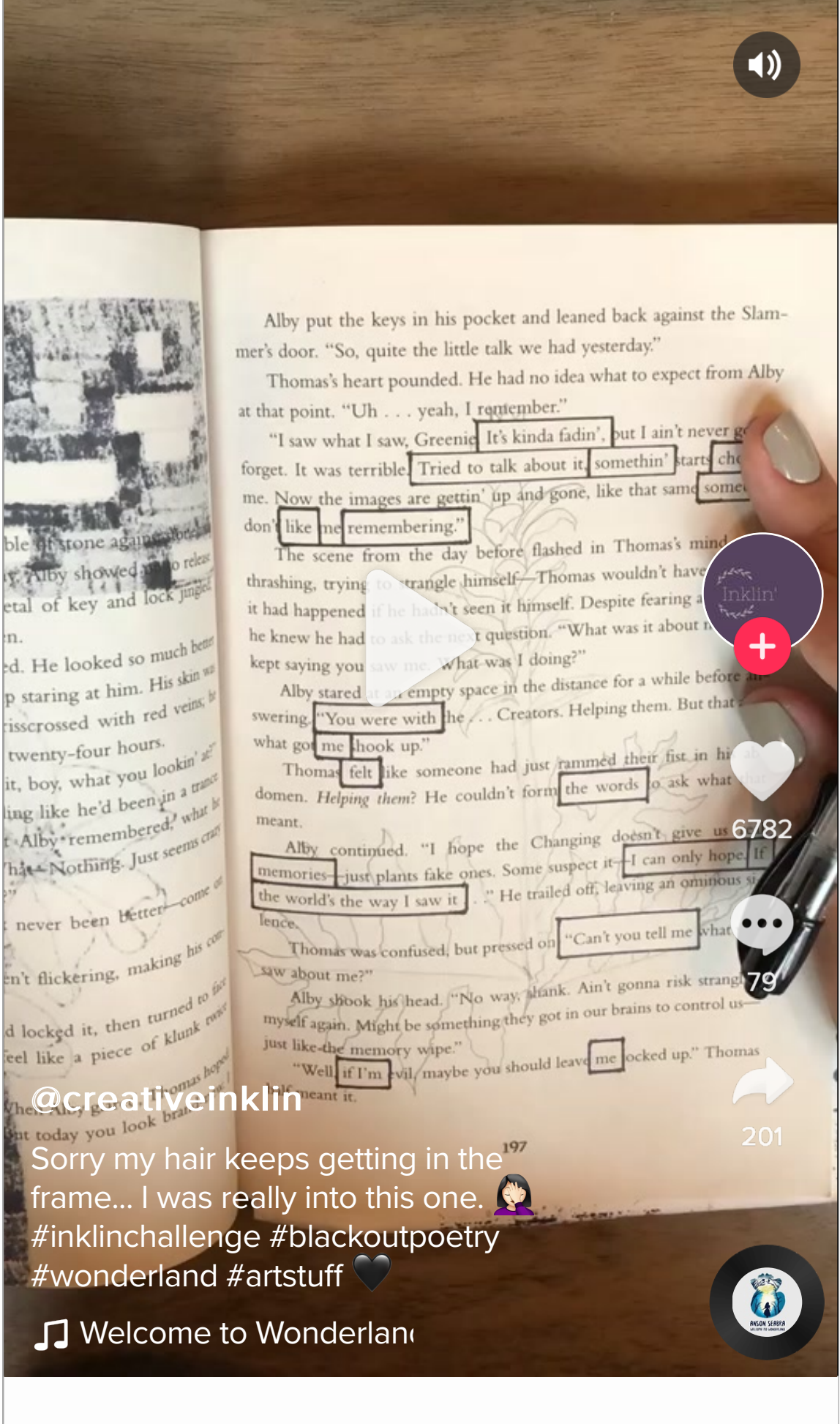
While Twitter and Instagram have both generated a large following of blackout poems, more and more youth poets have been moving to the video-sharing social networking service Tik Tok. According to the popular social media managing service Hootsuite, 42% of Tik Tok's users are 18-24 year olds, while 27% of users are 13-17 year olds. This means a majority of the app's uses are young adults and teens.

Poems are typically a static thing, words on a page that are meant to be read. However, Tik Tok blackout poets are changing this. On the app, poets post videos of them making the poems, going step by step through their process. The videos are set to popular songs used in various Tik Tok trends such as the Renegade dance. Thus far, users have generated almost 700,000 views on videos posted with the hashtag #blackoutpoetry and over 10,000 views on those labeled with the hashtag #blackoutpoem.

Blackout poems are unique due to how they are made. They require the covering and modification of a source text. Traditionally, readers of blackout poetry are only shown the final product, but on Tik Tok, poets are incorporating their methodology to the final product they are putting out into the world. The creation of a more traditional poem, someone typing or handwriting words would not generate as engaging of a video. The visual aspects of blackout poetry, on the other hand, are interesting to watch.

As Tik Tok continues to expand, it is likely that more of these young poets will begin posting on the app. There are already entire challenges like the #inklinchallenge devoted to encouraging people to create blackout poems and then post them. One of the videos created for this challenge was viewed over 13,000 times and liked over 4,000 times within two weeks of its posting. This is beyond the typical reach of the average poem published in traditional literary magazine. The creator's account also links to their Instagram page where they have posted even more static poems.

Several of those commenting on the video mentioned making blackout poems in their English classes. There are also numerous videos under the blackout poetry hashtag on the app that say the creator is making the poem for an English class. This suggests that there is likely a large number of English teachers encouraging students to create blackout poems. Between the increase in classes, workshops, and digital pushes for blackout poetry, it is likely more teens will soon begin creating blackout poems, possibly just for class but also possibly for fun or for views on apps like Tik Tok.



Watch more on TikTok

This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry

- What is Blackout Poetry?
- The Politics of Blackout
- Academic Coverage
- The DIY Movement

I originally created “This Ocean of Texts: The History of Blackout Poetry” as my thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for my Master of Arts in English degree from Texas Woman’s University. However, I plan on continuing to grow the website as blackout poetry continues to evolve. There was a lot of things that have not been added to this yet that I am looking forward including.



Dedication:

This project is dedicated to Dr. Katie McWain, [Spiderweb Salon](#), & [Golden Boy Coffee Co.](#)

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