

## Deliberate Erasure and Liberating Silence in Blackout Poetry on Instagram

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### Abstract

In her essay, "The Aesthetics of Silence" (2013), Susan Sontag explains how postmodern silence comes to be realised aesthetically in literature. While Sontag's focus is on the self-silencing of the writer, the focus of the present paper is the silence found in the deliberate act of erasure in writing. Erasure/blackout poetry is 'created' by a heavy cancellation of words on an occupied printed page and the arrangement of words that remain *un*-erased then form a certain newfound poetry. Erasure forms both the material as well as thematic aspect of Erasure Poetry. Considering the politics of erasure, the paper studies the aesthetics of silence with the help of Sontag's study and reads "silence" as an attempt at liberating art. Through McLuhan's understanding of media, the paper also probes into the implications of this silence in erasure poetry on Instagram where it claims popularity because of its visual appeal. Such a reading endeavours to suggest that literature in the digital space, social media poetry being the case in point, needs to be re-read in the light of changing pedagogical paradigms today.

**Keywords:** Instapoetry, erasure poetry, aesthetics, silence, social media

### Introduction: Silence

Silence, primarily associated with the faculty of hearing, is indicated by the absence of sound. It is understood in a spatial and temporal context in music, language, and literature. It is an absence that acknowledges the presence of an unattainable "something else." As against the conventional idea, silence is not necessarily caused only by nothingness or blank spaces.

Ihab Hassan (1970), in "Frontiers of Criticism: Metaphors of Silence," sees silence as a metaphor that makes its appearance prominent in postmodern literature. This postmodern silence (also found in Absurdist drama) arises from prolonged overdoing or repetition of a sound, word, or even an activity. Rhetorically, it can be expressed as "silence in noise" like "loneliness in crowd."

In her book, *Styles of Radical Will* (1969)<sup>1</sup>, Susan Sontag talks about the "aesthetics of silence" in postmodern literature which, according to her, is noisy. Analogous to the structure of the present paper, Sontag conceives of *silence* as a precondition and the end result of a coherently directed speech. To her, the silence rendered by the artist "is part of a program of perceptual and cultural therapy" (Sontag, 2013, xiii). Silence here is interpreted as the artist's renunciation, a self-punishment in the "exemplary madness" where he/she withdraws from speech and words to negate his authority. Thus, the postmodern silence that Sontag engages with instances of the act of self-silencing by the artist as an exercise in a metaphorical suicide. However, the act of deliberate erasure is instead a murder of some other text and points towards a new direction in understanding silence.

### **Erasure as Silence**

Erasure refers to the act of erasing or cancelling out chunks of the original text/artwork, which calls for its rebirth as a new text. Erasure poetics have been around for a century now, and there are different types of erasures enacted by many artists across history. Erasure poetry is a subcategory of Found poetry where the poet crosses out, covers, or paints over the letters, words, and phrases on an occupied printed page. This is done using a redaction tool like a pen, markers, or paint. It is usually executed on materials like newspapers, old books, recipe books, documents, etc. The words that remain on the page are then perceived in a chronological sequence to form new meaning and stand as autonomous poetry. The words left out are read in various sequence combinations that render a different meaning to the words every time the reader reads them. This poetry works in excision rather than addition, so the traditional ways of interpreting this art change and subvert.

Sontag's aesthetics of silence pertain to postmodern silence, while erasure entails another kind of aesthetic. So starting from the aesthetics

of silencing self, erasure moves towards the aesthetics of silencing for subversion. The role of silence in liberating a text from its author and its context, conveying non-conformity to the conventional sensibility, and creating myriad possibilities for interpretation, is common in both.

The two silences discussed so far function in taking away the written word and thus question the meaning of the text. If this meaning, as the only end of art's language, is removed, art will be freer and more liberated. Two thematic patterns of political concerns emerge here, pertaining to each of the silences.

The first condition is where the silencer and the silencee are different. This is also to recognise erasure as a violent political act. Jennifer Cheng (2016), in "Erasure Poetry: A Revealing (I)," argues on similar lines. She sees works of erasure as refractions of the original, as a rupture of language into an assembled one, and as a new work over the monumental ruins of the old original work. She also discusses power relations implicated in the act of erasure in *Zong* (2008) by Nourbese Philip. She mentions how, through this act, the oppressor functions to bend the narrative and how today, by erasing the erased narrative of the oppressed, the poets and artists are reclaiming the language (Cheng, 2016, p. 2).

The second condition is where the silencer and the silencee are the same. This is to recall Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of Jacques Derrida's concept of "sous rature," which she translates as "under erasure" in the "Translator's Preface" from Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1967). Derrida's "writing under erasure" is materialized in the act of crossing out where what is written is inaccurate yet necessary. Spivak's argument problematises the Heideggerian term "being" as it still lurks for a possible presence, while Derrida's "trace" shows an altogether absence of a presence.

Trace is "the lack at the origin that is the condition of thought and experience" (Spivak, 1967, xvii). Where "meaning" is concerned, it is never fully reached and what is left in the pursuit of finding the meaning is a self-effacing "trace." In this scheme of things, one reaches an acceptance that the "meaning" or the "signified" cannot be reached. At this point, the artist is swamped in frustration, throwing off crumpled pages, reiterating Eliot, "That is not it at all. That is not what I meant at all."<sup>2</sup> At this point the reader is coerced into admitting that reading does not lead to an "understanding" of what is read, but to an ever-inevitable

and recurring “misunderstanding.” This abstraction then comes to be represented aesthetically in literature through material erasure as a rewriting of the “misunderstood” meaning.

### Poetry Under Erasure

Q. “Why is an aesthetic model necessitated here at all?”

A. “It is inaccurate but necessary.”

Hegel’s warning against things too familiar can be called upon here. If things are too familiar, they may be passed off as nothing peculiar. Overdoing silence through erasure is, therefore, necessary to defamiliarise to make way for inquiry. John Cage’s (1961) “Lecture on Nothing,” where he leaves out empty spaces between words to overdo silence in a way that readers consciously notice the space is one such example (109). Erasure is nothing but a context for the readers to acknowledge the silence often missed in writing without material erasure. Erasure voices vacancy. Erasure makes the reader read the opaque emptiness and not think of it as “nothingness.” This results in another realization that even the said word is never complete—this takes away the writer’s authority. Thus, the deliberate erasure as silence liberates the text.

### Erasure Poetry and Instagram

A proper beginning of erasure poetics can be traced back to the early decades of the twentieth century. An online article, “Blacking Out the History of Blackout Erasure” ([www.thehistoryofblackoutpoetry.org](http://www.thehistoryofblackoutpoetry.org), n.d.), suggests Man Ray’s untitled poem ‘Paris, mai 1924’ as a predecessor of erasure poetry. Brian McHale recalls Robert Rauschenberg’s (an American painter) artwork of 1953, where he “erases a drawing by his older contemporary, the Abstract Expressionist Willem de Kooning, and exhibits it as a work of his own” (McHale, 2005, p. 277). The last four decades of the twentieth century saw some sporadic works based on erasure and blackout poetry, which emerged as self-aware postmodernist art.

With an upsurge of digital media, the form invites newer tools and techniques to enact erasure instead of becoming obsolete. For instance, The Deletionist is a web system, a digital tool developed to enable hypertextual erasure today. Trish Hopkinson shares a guest blog post by Erin Dorney, an American poet, which lists six styles of Erasure poetry—

Cross-out, Computer, Cut-out, Covered-up, Re-typed, and Visual. These works combine visual and verbal poetry in their unique play with the spatial context on the page, opacity (created by a monochromic scheme of blackout), and the said/unsaid words. It is no surprise that the resurgence of such poetics coincides with the rise of social media—platforms like Tumblr, Twitter, Pinterest, and especially Instagram that provide space to post pictures and videos—which principally works on minimal content and attractive visuals. Carol Rumens uses the term “Instagrammable” to describe erasure poetry. The question is: what are these elements that remain specific to social media and more so to Instagram? How has Instagram affected or added to the form? To address these questions of form adapting to social media, some ideas from Marshal McLuhan’s theory on new media in *Understanding Media* (1964) can be evoked.

Instagram is a social media platform where users can share pictures and videos publicly. Stories, posts, and reels from different profiles appear on the user’s homepage, which the user scrolls through for information and entertainment. The Instagram algorithm works to showcase mostly those posts that the user may be interested in. As a result of its broad reach, many artists are drawn to post their works so they can curate and publish their art online and create a digital profile. It is different from mass media because users become participants in the production in many ways. Therefore, it is an “‘all for all’ arrangement” (Barichello & Carvalho, 2013, p. 239). Directly, they can produce content, while indirectly, users can influence the algorithm and determine the nature of production in the future by liking, sharing, and saving certain kinds of posts.

Barichello and Carvalho (2013) affirm that digital social media, like any new medium, brings forth the possibility of creating new languages and modes of communication. Again, a change of medium implicates a change in environment, context, and culture. What one sees and consumes on social media is short-lived and ephemeral. Within a few minutes of scrolling, one rarely remembers the content. This is not tagging social media content as frivolous or trivial, but it is how users demand it to be for a quick scan. McLuhan sees the medium as affecting the overall experience, which is why the medium becomes the message as an extension of ourselves. Experiencing media is a continuous process. Processing this experience into a comprehensible study to understand

it is like grabbing sand in a fist. The experience slips but its effects seep through and influence behaviour unbeknownst to the user. So, rather than the content, the effect of media in determining the meaning is focused on.

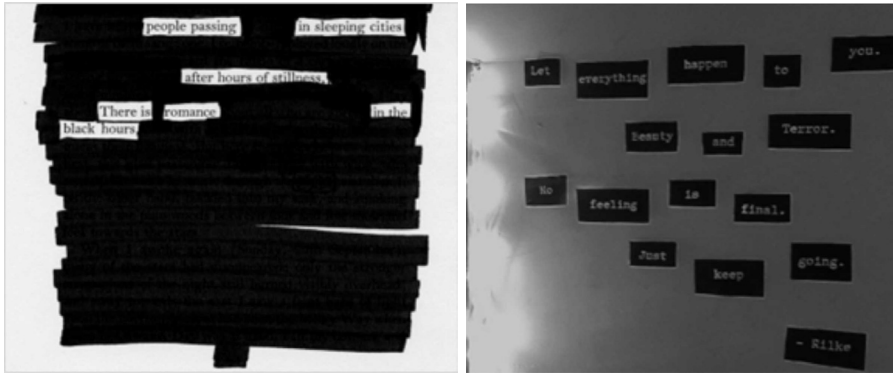
Social media has immensely changed how one experiences reality today, let alone the experience of digital content. The average attention span has dropped. From books to movies to YouTube videos and now to Instagram Reels, users do not prefer to read plenty of words on a page, or watch a monotonous video for a longer time. Instapoetry adapts to the requirement of the medium in being precise and powerful with eye-catching graphics. The form changes with media, and, in turn, changes readers. It is a cyclical process that reminds one of Lewis H. Lapham's (1994) introduction to the MIT Press Edition, where he summarizes the essence of McLuhan's message, "We become what we behold. We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us" (xi). However, the length of poetry cannot decide the depth or the quality of the aesthetic experience one goes through when reading poetry on Instagram. What follows is the researcher's reading of a selected few Erasure/blackout poetry.<sup>3</sup>

The selection of blackout poetry samples on Instagram is random, where most are recently posted and belong to public profiles, not breaching privacy policy. #erasurepoetry and #blackoutpoetry are the metadata hashtags used for curating the posts.

### Reading Sense in Nonsense

Austin Kleon's experiment with blackout poetry in *Newspaper Blackout* 2010 is momentous in the history of Erasure poetry. Kleon blacks out newspaper articles to create his poems. The experience one goes through reading these poems is different because the words do not flow in constant rhythmic gaps. Unforeseen spaces govern the reading, which reflects the horrors of unnerving pauses that are avoided in day-to-day conversations. These poems also make a political statement about silence that speaks loudly through logo-centric newspaper articles, as the language of reports is drained of emotions and truth is organized into facts. By silencing the unemotional, blackout gives birth to the emotions that newspaper reports try to veil. This is the silence that speaks to the reading subject.

Figure 1 Tyler Knott Gregson's "In My Solitude" Figure 2 Cut-Up Quote by Rilke



Tyler Knot Gregson's "In My Solitude" is another similar attempt at blackout poetry, posted in 2018 on Tumblr (Figure 1). The poem engages the theme of loneliness experienced in peaceful solitude in the dark hours of the night. The voice of an individual plays with the romance of the black hours. The voice fades and rises again to grasp some words to express itself, which can be seen in the spaces that are blacked out, hushed up. The page is full of words, which would have been visible during the day, but at night, the poet's voice finds a way because of his deliberate crossing out of the other voices. However, the picture is so visually occupied that the silence is instead found in words spoken, in the succinctness, conveying that the words are never enough, but silence sometimes is. Silence is the unreachable "trace" Spivak refers to.<sup>4</sup> Silence at the spatial level also indicates the mood of each pause, while the white space in the margins speaks its own story.<sup>5</sup> That the space indicates nothingness is a fallacy. One has to agree with Sontag in saying that as long as one sees, one is looking at something, and there is always something to see. If nothing, one sees one's predicted meanings fall.

For example, Disha Joshi's (2022) Instagram post (Figure 2), a cut-up quote by Rilke, is an aestheticized version of Rilke's words. The cut-up words arranged on a wall can be seen as different posts stuck on a "digital wall" of a social media platform. The words do not appear in a straight line, creating room for interpreting them in different sequences. The order of words is deliberately changed, the original being—"Let everything happen to you/Beauty, and terror/Just keep going/No feeling is final" (Rilke, 2005, pp. 59, 43). Again, cutting up and naming



the author does not go without political implications. The dismantling of a statement by the original author seems to demystify it. The gaps are silent words that can be filled up by a possible new narrative of one's own. These silent spaces, recalling Sontag, liberate the author and the artist who reworks the quote. Comparing the two figures, one finds in Figure 2 a different story in the treatment as the gaps are not blacked out. Here the white text is highlighted black. It is not only a visual juxtaposition of Figure 1, but also carries a contextual connotation to its publication on social media. This makes Instagram (with its "edit" feature) a public sphere where art is democratized and becomes free of context and meaning, which used to be the determining factor of most printed works.

**Figure 3** *Natalie Napoleon's Blackout Poem*



Another blackout poetry by Natalie Napoleon (2021) assumes a "meta" theme on two levels (Figure 3). One, the image shows graphic mutilation of a text (black and red marks indicating bruises and blood) that talks primarily about violence. Second, the frame of the image poem consciously includes the markers with which the text is crossed out, and the title reads, "Markable Scenes in Streets." This exposes the process of composition. There is an eraser in the negative space by the corner that says, "Manual Backspace Button," positioned to follow a particular 'Instagram aesthetic.' On a thematic level, the eraser can be perceived



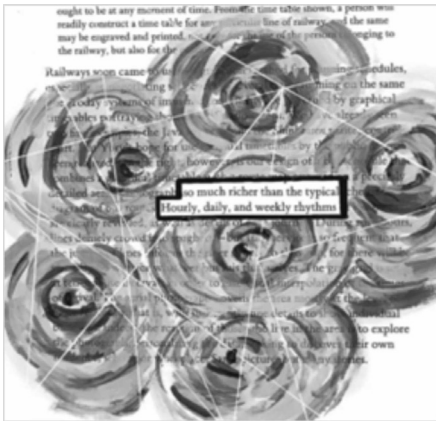
as a failure in erasure itself because erasers cannot erase ink. The act of crossing out aesthetically portrays the inaccuracy and the necessity of the text, mainly representing the world of logos. Lastly, while the words of the text are silenced, the silent space in the corner is used to create another narrative.

Kate Baer's Instagram account is yet another exciting site exploring the politics involved in erasure poetry. As Rumens (2021) observes, her poetry posts like many other Instapoems "offer such cryptic snatches of wisdom, wry quips given significance by their spotlighting" (p. 2). Baer blanks out mean messages from followers and trolls on Instagram and bends the words in such a way that suffice as witty replies turning tables. Baer remains silent by reserving words for a comeback, rather speaks by silencing. Silencing here works like pasting one narrative onto another. It becomes all the more effective in an Instagram culture where reposting the original posts regularly bends narratives to their means and branding purpose, like meme templates.

Andrew David King (2012) suggests that, in some ways, material erasure imitates the selective perceptivity of the reader (p. 1). The more readers are offered in reading, the less their sensibilities move. Erasure in this way catches the attention of the reader and provides room for a better aesthetic experience with lesser content.

Being a social media platform, Instagram demands feeds to be attractive with appealing aesthetics. A feed has to catch the users' attention while they scroll through a flood of noisy information. The need to be louder than the loudest becomes necessary to be heard. This is aptly illustrated in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, where glaring colours thrown across a busy page make something of a statement. For example, Richards's (2019) blackout reads, "so much richer than the typical/Hourly, daily and weekly rhythms." The rest of the text (deemed inadequate but necessary) is painted with flashy pink flowers, which seem refreshing to the eyes in a crowd of verbose feeds. The image remains within the limits of a fixed Instagram frame, not going beyond, while the entire content is not painted over, suggesting that loudness cannot eliminate other sounds once and for all. This temporary patchwork of silence works to break the monotony and, in its place, seeks to find sense in nonsense.

**Figure 4.1** Bekah Richards's *Blackout Poetry*



**Figure 4.2** Maria Mori's *Find Sense in Nonsense*



### Conclusion: Silence

Apprehending a digital future, Ihab Hassan (1970) points out, "At a certain limit of contemporary vision, language moves toward silence" (p. 82). With its "all for all" arrangement, Instagram provides a space to break authority, which erasure means to do. The reader/user becomes an artist in their own right by negating the artist's authority, setting art free, and creating opportunities for new narratives to seep in, reverberating Sontag's (2013) vision, "What's envisaged is nothing less than the liberation of the artist from himself, of art from the particular artwork, of art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations" (xi).

Silence in blackout poetry on Instagram is experienced on two levels: one in the deliberate and material erasure of the blackout technique, and the second, a somewhat metaphoric and liberating silence, realised by the nature of the medium itself as the meaning-making happens in the way the reader chooses to develop in a crowded space. Therefore, the thematic chase for meaning that Spivak speaks of is accentuated with a medial intervention. The silence that Sontag contextualises in the postmodern world is here contextualized in erasure practised on a twenty-first century social media platform—Instagram.

The paper engages the blackout poetry on Instagram with the 'aesthetics' realized through sensation, perception, and experience. 'Aesthetics' is

nothing but a representation of the abstraction offered by these contexts. Such a reading opens up vistas of experiences, trying to understand that there is never an absolute experience, and so, never a truer or more sincere experience than any other. Specifically, reading Instapoetry in this manner leads one on to the path of re-reading social media poetry in the light of changing pedagogical paradigms today.

## Notes

1. The paper has taken reference from the 2013 Edition published by Penguin, UK.
2. From “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T.S. Eliot. The lines suggest the impossibility of conveying what one means. The words always strike different for different people and so misunderstanding prevails.
3. Blackout poetry is a subcategory of erasure poetry. It is often interchangeably used for Erasure poetry on Instagram. E.g., #blackoutpoetry would show results of posts with erasure poems.
4. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Translator’s Preface” in the English translation of *Of Grammatology* notes that Heidegger’s “Being” searches for a presence to replace Being, which is inaccurate yet necessary. While Derrida’s “trace&quot; hints at an absence of the presence itself.
5. Gregson’s post may not be a product of an exclusive collaboration with digital tools. However, by being a picture post on Tumblr and Instagram, the white space in the Picture & #39’s margins can also represent thematic space. A necessary space in the margin enhances the effect of emptiness.

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