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Poetic Space of Intimacy and Movement: Re-Imagining the White Space of the Page in the Erasure Poetry of Carolyn Thompson, Sonja Johanson, and Lisa Huffaker

The blank space of the page has been widely regarded as a fundamental aspect of both identifying and reading poetry. Often, it is the exaggeration of blank or empty space surrounding poetic lines which first signals to readers that a poem is indeed a poem. In recent years, discussions about how to read these blank spaces have circulated and these spaces are often read as vital indications of silence or absence. However, the expanded field of writing—which has exploded throughout the contemporary era, expanding on avant-garde experiments in mixing media and pushing the boundaries of several distinct art forms—has seen poems, poetry collections, and artists' books which transform blank space. These new experimental works fill the spaces around language with illustrations, collages, and found objects, or in some cases, exaggerate the emptiness of the page by indicating that words are blocked out or by cutting out the page altogether. A glance at Carolyn Thompson, Sonja Johanson, and Lisa Huffaker's use of reductive or additive methods of erasure demonstrates how space surrounding the poem can be re-imagined to not only re-envision pre-existing texts but also to transform the role of poetic blank space. Through looking at Thompson's *Actions Speak Louder Than Words* and *The Eaten Heart*, Johnson's *Untitled Erasure* poem series, and Huffaker's "6 Images," this paper explores the possibility of reading blank space, not as silence or absence but instead as areas for action and intimacy.

While the blank spaces of the page are often read as silences or emptiness, these three writers invert this interpretation, redefining poetic blank spaces as evoking either action or sensuality. These *experiences* of the text are both widely accessible and transformed by individual readers. Furthermore, each of these three writers uses methods from the expanded field of writing which involve a series of techniques and materials usually considered untraditional for practices of writing. Thompson's purely reactive methods

of creating erasure differ from the additive techniques used by Johanson and Huffaker, as well as how the physical alterations of source texts bring about separate meanings based on the creative process. The transformation of these poetic spaces causes the texts to be read and experienced in new ways which are dependent on *mis-en-page*¹. Michel Foucault discusses the notion of the book itself as an experience in an interview which has been recorded in the collection *Power*. Here, Foucault states, “for me my books are experiences... An experience is something that one comes out of transformed” (Foucault 239). He then goes on to describe the act of writing *Madness and Civilization* while considering general reader reactions to the text, explaining that his readership had a particular kind of experience with that text. Foucault writes, “An experience is something that one has completely alone but can fully have only to the extent that it escapes pure subjectivity and that others can also—I won’t say repeat it exactly, but at least encounter it—and go through it themselves” (Foucault 245), essentially defining “experience” as simultaneously isolating and social encounters. Fundamentally, “In the book, the relationship with experience should make possible a transformation, a metamorphosis, that is not just [the writer’s] but can have a certain value, a certain accessibility for others, so that the experience is available for others to have” (Foucault 244).

In a similar vein, multi-modal artist and poet Amaranth Borsuk writes in *The Book*, “Whether the volume in question is a travel guide or a romance novel, the perception that books are the same as little worlds enclosed in covers remains the same. We think of ourselves as disappearing into them only to emerge hours later, changed by what we have read” (Borsuk 84). Borsuk also describes the book “as a love token or symbol of great kinship: *Here, I loved this, and I think you’ll love this too*” (Borsuk 84). Although unlike the object of the book which can be held and circulated through physical interaction, the texts discussed in this paper are encountered digitally, the quality of immersion which Borsuk points to is essential to the way that the texts are read. Regardless of how the text is circulated the notion that literary works embody within themselves some form of intimacy and some capacity for human connection is vital to considering physical indications of intimacy on the page. Traditionally, the intimacy in reading and sharing a text, despite the physical transaction of the text, is entirely psychological. However, texts which emphasize their material qualities draw attention to the fact that these intimacies between the reader and textual object are physical as much as they are psychological and emotional. Like Foucault, Borsuk describes the reading

1 The layout of the page or arrangement of the text.

experience as simultaneously individual and social (84). Although Borsuk's discussion of the social function of texts relies on the notion that the text is transportable and shareable, her depiction of the book as a 'little world' implies a sense of shared or mutually accessed experience. To discuss the material elements of the text, such as the materiality of poetic blank or surrounding space, involves recognizing that texts initiate similar experiences amongst members of a vast audience while still also resonating differently with separate individuals—this is, in fact, the very feature which creates intimacy between text and reader. The nature of the transformations of blank space in Thompson, Johanson, and Huffaker's work all add an element of intimacy through an added emphasis on bodily interaction (an element which is signaled through visual cues and subject matter rather than physically initiated) by incorporating physical gaps, gentle textures, and natural elements or by initiating physical movement.

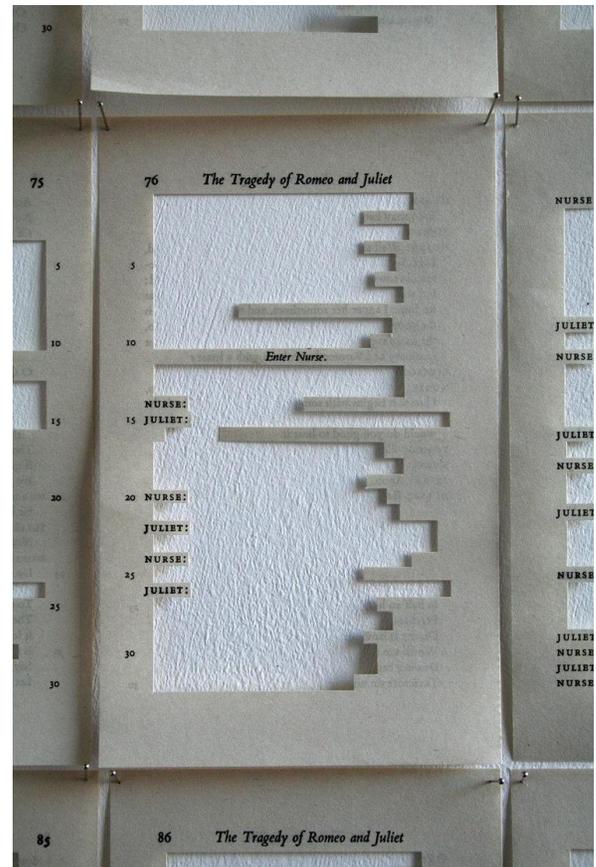
It is essential to frame Thompson, Johanson, and Huffaker's work in light of Erasure poetry as a genre. Erasure poetry involves a method of using found text and then redacting the text using a variety of different tactics and techniques. As a form, it involves the use of either additive or reductive methods to cut away at a source text, leaving behind fresh poetic lines and word combinations; it is a genre which fundamentally involves revisioning and adaptation. The very existence of this genre invites new approaches to revisioning and adaptation at large, prompting readers to consider how they might physically interact with a text through a simultaneously creative and destructive process. In addition to each of the poems explored in this paper being erasure works, the use of the page to emphasise the material qualities of the text aligns with the tradition of artist's books. An artist's book, as defined by Joanna Drucker, is "a book created as an original work of art, rather than a reproduction of pre-existing work... it is a book which integrates the formal means of its realisation and production with its thematic or aesthetic issues" (2). Furthermore, "an artist's book should be a work by an artist self-conscious about the book form, rather than merely a highly artistic book" (21). Each of these genres, whether distinct or combined, emphasise the materiality of the text as a fundamental aspect of the reading experience.

These forms not only prioritize materiality but also simultaneously highlight the creative process involved in constructing the physical texts. Often, the way a work is made signifies an essential aspect of how it is read; the areas in which material interventions and emphasis on the creative process come together

fill the spaces surrounding text with new meaning. The texts, which include the remaining pieces of their source material and entirely new poems in-and-of-themselves are read in light of the spaces surrounding them. The artistic use of the book or of individual pages as a medium serves as a method for augmenting a text's meaning, while the act of erasure becomes a means of re-envisioning pre-existing texts.

Carolyn Thompson's 2007 piece, *Actions Speak Louder Than Words*, uses Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* as its source text and applies erasures through the use of a scalpel that physically cuts away vast areas of the original. In this series, rather than creating new poetic lines using fragments of the pre-existing text, as is most commonly seen in works of Erasure, Thompson cuts out all dialogue from Shakespeare's play. What remains of *Romeo and Juliet* is only speaker names and stage directions, implying the presence and actions of characters but removing their voices. Thompson describes *Actions Speak Louder Than Words* on her website: "By replacing the text with negative space, the work examines the ability to communicate on an intimate level, without the use of words, and the inadequacies of language as a means by which to describe emotion" (Thompson 2007). Here, the source text is essential to deriving this meaning and does so on multiple levels. Both the canonical significance of the source text *Romeo and Juliet* and the pre-existing literary tradition of genres like the sonnet, which inform the structure of the dialogues in *Romeo and Juliet*, contribute to how Thompson's re-visioning can be both interpreted and experienced.

Romeo and Juliet is itself a text which has widely set the standard conventions for romantic tragedies and so, the themes of expressing love as well as physical intimacy are embedded within Thompson's piece due to public conceptions of the source text. Additionally, the dialogue of *Romeo and Juliet* (which makes up the



A page from Actions Speak Louder Than Words.

areas which have been cut out of Thompson's re-visioning) is informed by pre-existing poetic conventions. For example, amongst these dialogues, there are several interactions between Romeo and Juliet which are written as sonnets (such as the scene when the couple first meets). These sections of the dialogue follow the fourteen-line structure and feature three stanzas of four lines rhymed A-B-A-B, followed by a rhyming couplet. These English sonnets, which are variations of the Italian or Petrarchan sonnet, re-imagine but allude to a tradition of the sonnet form being used to describe tales of unrequited love. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the sonnet continues to be used to signal a tragic romance—one which is not unrequited but interrupted, prevented, and combatted due to circumstance.

Essentially, while the text *Romeo and Juliet* is a play which has helped to establish conventions of romantic tragedy, the form of the dialogue in and of itself plays with pre-existing conventions in order to convey its themes and messages. In Thompson's artist book, the removal of the dialogue, along with its poetic conventions and formations, resist the conventions used to express verbal intimacy. However, rather than leaving the white space of the page which might easily signal a silencing of the characters, the physicality of Thompson's intervention in the text implicates the body into the narrative. The visually or physically perceived cut-outs combined with the title *Actions Speak Louder Than Words* prioritise the *act* of love rather than *declarations* of it. Acts of affection are both legible and illegible within the text, as they are implied but not written. Through this implication of ongoing action, the text provides an argument that physical affection between lovers is more impactful than any form of language.

Another work of Thompson's which uses erasure is *The Eaten Heart* (2013). Unlike *Actions Speak Louder Than Words*, this text features pages layered on top of one another as though the book is closed, rather than individual pages pulled apart and displayed side by side. On Thompson's website, the piece is called an "adaptation" of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Eaten Heart: Unlikely Tales of Love* (a story which is featured within *The Decameron*). The source text, which has been manipulated using a scalpel, is one tale told within a series of stories surrounded by a framing narrative (the tale of several youth who come together to tell stories during the black plague). The text fundamentally combines conflicting issues related to bodily experience and sensations: love and sensuality, as well as death and illness. Likewise, the text is both somatic and sensual, dissecting the body but transforming what might be a bleak biological list into

something poetic. However, all that remains of the original novel is a collection of words related to the body such as “corpse,” “bosom,” “fingers,” and “hair” (Thompson 2013).



Image of The Eaten Heart.

Thompson’s website explains, “By removing these words from their context and grouping them, their significance changes dramatically. The piece celebrates the abundant innuendo in Boccaccio’s text” (Thompson 2013). The book itself becomes a body and the framing elements of the page hold the text together like a human skeleton or perhaps flesh. This piece effectively functions as an artist’s book, drawing attention to the book as a medium while also using the material elements of the book to signify the text as *having* a body. In this way, the empty crevasses of the text become an element of the body, mimicking somatic curves, crevasses, holes, and gaps. Here, the book can be imagined as a body which is being dissected or discovered. This quality gives the poem a certain eerie and uncanny sensuality.

In an article on reductive techniques used in prose-narrative, Martin Paul Eve writes, “in following the surface-reading invitation of a literary redaction, we use [the] surrounding textual contexts as though they were cartographic metadata that give texture and depth to seemingly blank surfaces. To read

redactions on the surface is to accept an invitation to explore the deep, using the available contexts, be they historical and symptomatic or otherwise” (331). In this instance, the surrounding context comes from both the material interventions and the content of the source texts. Each of these works by Thompson uses open space to insert the human body into the text. The palpability of the empty and open space adds a tactile dimension to the space of the page, making the absences *physical*. If the open spaces within the book are read as somatic gaps, such as the crevasses and curves which exist in the forms of human bodies, then these gaps mimic the open spaces within and around bodies which can be felt and experienced through acts of affection or intimacy. Furthermore, Thompson plays with literary convention to insert these intimate possibilities within the texts by borrowing texts, which have defined lasting conventions of romance within popular consciousness and immediately signal to readers the themes she hopes to engage.

In a similar vein, Sonja Johanson reimagines Anne Rice’s horror novel *Taltos* in her *Untitled* series of erasure poems². The series evokes “consideration of the breakneck speed of climate change and globalisation easily observed by those working in horticulture and conservation” by combining the context of the horror novel with elements of the natural world to suggest an intervention from the earth (Johanson). In this way, wildlife becomes a collaborator within the series and this notion is reflected in the larger communal nature of the series’ conception. As Johanson explains on her website, “In this way, wildlife becomes a collaborator within the series, and this notion is reflected in the larger communal nature of the series’ conception.” Johanson further states that,

This series of plant-based erasures was developed as part of the Poeming, a found poetry project which takes place in October. Participants are assigned a novel in the horror genre and use the text to create one found poem each day of the month. Found poetry forms include erasure, pastiche/remix, and cento.

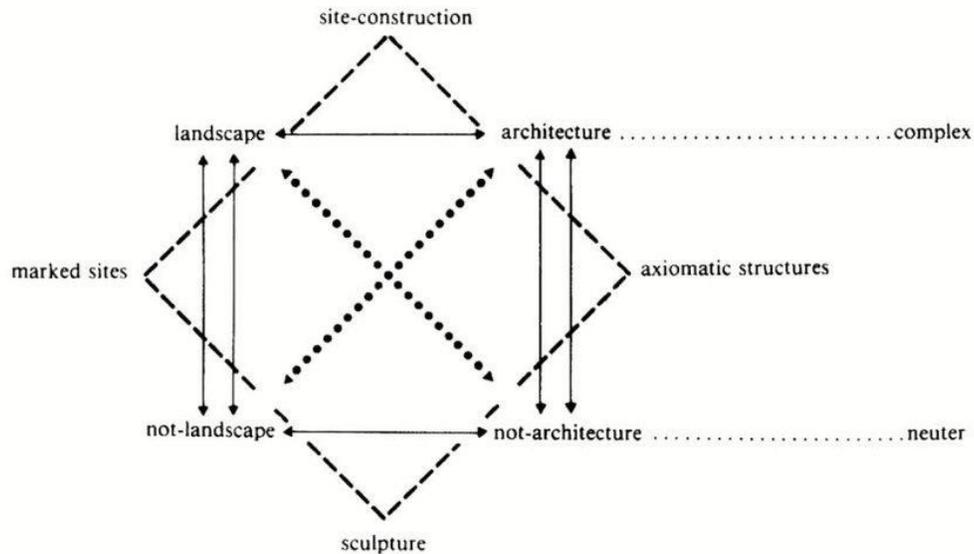
Within the layering of plants, seeds, bark, grass, and other natural elements over the source text, it is the intersection of the material and textual elements which signal the subject of climate change, using the mix of horror and the sense of intimate collaborations with nature to evoke both affection and fear.

2 The poems discussed here are all referenced from Johanson’s website on which several links are listed which each lead to several poems. The poems are published across several literary magazines, each of which uses separate methods of documenting the work and therefore the naming of individual poems/pages may be inconsistent in this paper as well.

Johanson's use of natural elements mainly consists of plants and adds an element of texture to the poems. Although the poems are experienced as two-dimensional images accessed through the internet, the signalled softness, observed layering, and perceived ridges of the plants all become part of how the poems are read. The physical quality of multi-modal works such as this one, alludes to a connection between the elements of poetry and sculpture. In his article "Tactility or Opticality, Henry Moore or David Smith: Herbert Read and Clement Greenberg on *The Art of Sculpture*, 1956," David J. Getsy explains Herbert Read's argument that "Sculpture was not just an artform to be looked at; it was meant to be *felt*, with and through one's own experience of embodiment" (105). Recognizing the obvious and numerous limitations created by boundaries between a given viewer and the object of the sculpture, Getsy clarifies that "Sculpture does invoke the sense of touch—as well as our sense of space in general—but it does so primarily through the sense of sight and the tactile associations of which that sense is capable" (112). The notion that palpability can be signalled through the sense of sight is relevant not only to sculpture but also to visual art and multi-modal poetry, which use signalled palpability or texture to create meaning.

When thinking about how theorising sculptural elements might contribute to reading practices in the expanded field, considering the expanded field of sculpture proves helpful. In an article titled, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," Rosalind Kraus discusses the difficulty of categorising contemporary three-dimensional works as sculpture: "if sculpture itself had become a kind of ontological absence, the combination of exclusions, the sum of neither/nor, that does not mean that the terms themselves from which it was build—the *not-landscape* and the *not-architecture*—did not have certain interest" (36-7). She later goes on to expand the exclusions, adding to the definition of sculpture categories like *not-landscape* (Kraus 36). Like such sculptures, Johanson's poems work to signal that which it is not-exactly; for instance, landscape is signalled, physical structure is signalled, and sculptural elements such as attention to material and palpitation are signalled.





Example of one of Kraus's diagrams to define what is sculpture using negative associations (i.e., by defining what is not sculpture).

Johanson's work uses the two-dimensional field of the page to transform the literary text into an environment. Although the text is not a sculpture, Johanson mimics the effect of signalling palpability in her erasure poems. If the traditional use of blank space surrounding text can be thought of as a way of providing structure to poetry, then transforming this space through additional material elements accentuates a pre-existing relationship between shared elements of sculpture and poetry. Both sculpture and poetry are recognisable through structural elements, use visual cues to signal palpability (even when it is emptiness or a surrounding void that creates this palpability), and each evoke a sense of environment which is either created or transformed by the content of the art piece. This shared quality is tangibly emphasised through the addition of three-dimensional materials to the page. Of course, the object of the page in Johanson's series can only be perceived two-dimensionally through photography. This aspect does not remove the sense of an evoked palpability but adds a sense of the original object's ephemeral nature. The erasure poem's ephemerality, which is bound to fade away as the natural objects decay, only further instils within the work an impending sense of doom in relation to climate change. This foreboding feeling is further heightened due to the sense of intimacy between the plants, the author, and the readers.

Conceptualising touch as something which is sensed through sight evokes the issue of superficial engagement. The text's use of natural materials might convey the softness of elements and an engagement with poetic conventions (such as the pastoral or tropes of plant metaphors). This becomes apparent from

only a surface level reading of the image of any given page. In an afterword titled “Three Superficial Thoughts on Surfaces” written for Eric Schmaltz’s visual poetry collection *Surfaces*, Joseph Mosconi discusses the quality of superficiality in order to unpack and resist its negative associations. Quoting the visual artist Thomas Hirschhorn, Mosconi writes, “superficiality is not negative ... Superficiality is the condition for a real engagement because if there is no engagement on the surface, there cannot be a profound engagement. To go deeply into something, I must at first begin with its surface” (qtd. in Schmaltz). Likewise, a superficial engagement evokes senses of intimacy and ephemerality. These emotions are created initially through the senses, through the perceived delicacy of the natural objects displayed on the fragile pages of the text. There is something instantly precious about the piece’s aesthetic elements, and yet its fragility creates a sense of approaching doom or sorrow for the object’s temporality. Intimacy is further created through such superficial engagements due to the noticeable pen and pencil markings on the pages which make the writing or creating process clearly observable to onlookers.

Beyond an initial glance at the page, the language in each of the poems describes a sensual relationship between the earth and the humans who interact with it. In one poem made from the 20th page of *Taltos* which begins, “he had / forgotten / the river,” and ends, “He pictured / floods / which so often saved him,” and which uses the addition of bracken fern to create erasures, the human subject is engaged in an emotional relationship with the element of water (Johanson). In another poem [“knowing that”], the lines “I longed to / touch / crumbling / parchment,” combine desire with domestic materials. However, the diction of the poem is juxtaposed with thin, delicate, paper-like leaves which cover the poem making the reference to “Crumbling / parchment” a sign of human intervention in the natural world. In yet another poem, made using page 120 of the source text, the combination



of eastern white pine leaves with the lines “Resurrection / all around” accentuate the religious and spiritual associations with resurrection (which is often connected with Christian stories about the resurrection of Christ or generally with notions of redemption) through the rebirth of plants and wildlife as a result of the transition from winter to spring. Each of the poems mix references to natural elements and deeply emotional language dealing with subjects such as death, spirituality, and desire. All of these meanings, which might be derived once one reads closely and considers the text with more depth, are already initially present in a surface-level reading due to the visual cues created within the spaces surrounding the text. Like the blank space of a white page, plant life is a fundamental element of the poem, and in this instance, these spaces create the initial point of contact for meaningful human engagement with nature.

Unlike Johanson’s work, which features a collaboration between additive intervention and the remaining text and imagines the two as working together, Huffaker’s “6 Images” is engaged in a far more antagonistic relationship with its source text. Huffaker is explicitly aware of the act of erasure as a method of writing *against* the original text. In her description of her project she writes,

Fascinating Womanhood was self-published in 1963 by Helen Andelin... Reacting against 2nd wave feminism with a gospel of self-limitation, infantilized “femininity,” and doting dependence upon men, the book became the foundation of a well-organized movement spread by thousands of teachers among millions of women. I first encountered the book in the library of a religious institute as a young college girl, inwardly torn between my educational ambitions and the “God given role” I’d been raised by my culture to accept. It was the most demeaning book I’d ever read. I did what I’ve never done before or since: I defaced the book with the beginnings of a timid rebuttal (in pencil) and returned it to the library shelf... [I] have now returned to this book... Page by page, I am transforming the book into its own counterargument, leaving the words in their original positions on the page, but delineating an alternative reading of the text. My hope is to turn this book into a remedy for its own harms—to make it call forth the very power it was written to repress. (Huffaker).

In addition to her act of mutilating her source text, Huffaker also works by mapping a new pathway through it. Huffaker’s introduction of movement to the text becomes an interference which asserts that the source text is not a stable or fixed object but instead might be shifted or rewritten. She does this by

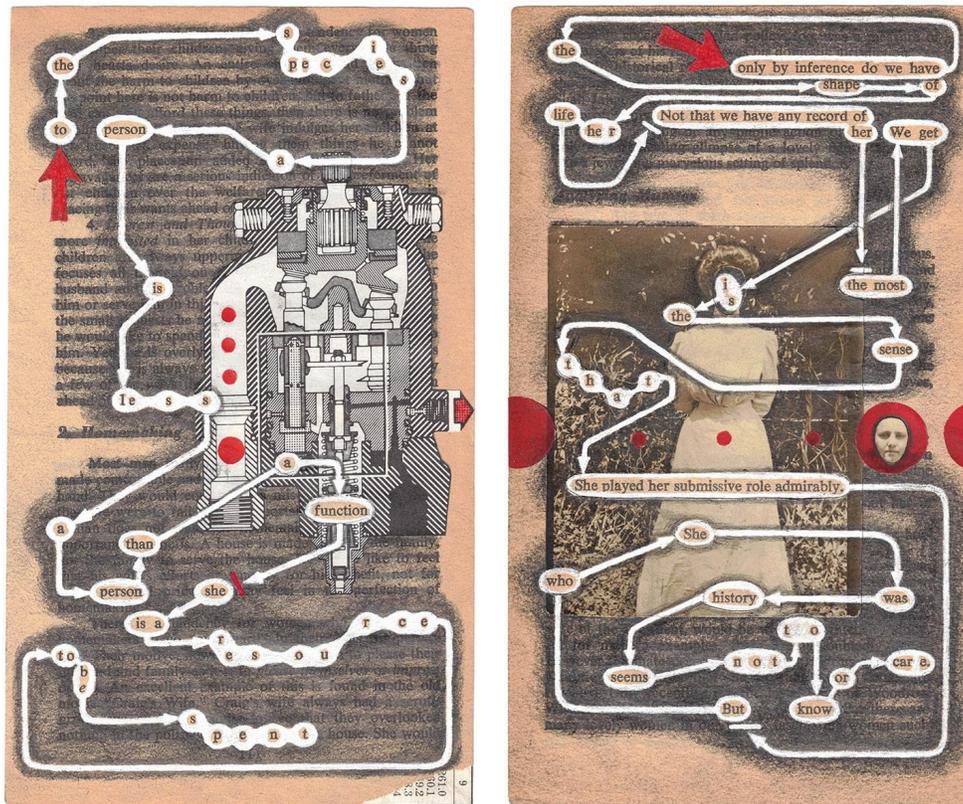
creating curving, swirling, and twisting pathways which move the reader's gaze across the entire field of the page in rollercoaster-like movements. The experience of following the winding paths becomes a practice of traveling through the text in order to trace new pathways and alter the traditional order in which one reads.

It is difficult to decipher these seemingly chaotic and disorderly pathways mapped across the page without recalling works like Guy Debord's *The Naked City* (1957) and the Situationist International's theories regarding psychogeography at large. A psychogeographic mapping of space, such as the one represented by *The Naked City*, involves mapping geographic space based on its emission of emotionally and psychologically perceived energies (Debord 1958). These maps, in the tradition of the Situationists, have been created through a practice of *dérive* which involves "a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances" that help when navigating a landscape in untraditional ways (Debord 1958). In his "Theory of *Dérive*," Debord resists the prioritisation of chance and randomness, writing:

Progress means breaking through fields where chance holds sway by creating new conditions more favourable to our purposes. We can say, then, that the randomness of a *dérive* is fundamentally different from that of the stroll, but also that the first psychogeographical attractions discovered by *dériveurs* may tend to fixate them around new habitual axes, to which they will constantly be drawn back. (1958)

It is not the randomness of the paths taken through the act of *dérive* which are important to track and continue, but the mapping of new pathways which will eventually lead to *détournement*³, a practice of removing subjects from their ordinary context in order to alter the perception of that object. This practice of re-contextualizing is an essential characteristic of "Unitary Urbanism," which according to Debord, "is defined first of all as the use of all arts and techniques as means contributing to the composition of a unified milieu" (1957). In relation to the arts, Unitary Urbanism "must include both the creation of new forms and the *détournement* of previous forms of architecture, urbanism, poetry and cinema" (Debord, 1957).

3 *détournement*" is a term which was defined by the Situationist Internationale, which as mentioned above can be loosely defined as the practice of re-contextualizing (i.e., removing an item from its original context and putting it into an unusual or unfamiliar context). The purpose of *détournement* is to defamiliarize to create new associations, hence its role in contributing to "unitary urbanism."



The first two images in Huffaker's 6 Images Series.

In accordance with practices of psychogeographic cartography, Huffaker creates new paths through a pre-existing text which in turn produce a radically new textual landscape. In a similar fashion to that of the *dérive*, Huffaker uses the energies and resonances which exist in *Fascinating Womanhood* to write alternative paths for understanding female existence. In Huffaker's revisioning of the text, she transforms the source text from an earnest document to a satire. Lines including "she / is / a r-e-s-o-u-r-c-e / to / be / spent" or "not that we have record of her / the most / we get / is / the / sense / t-h-a-t / she played her submissive role admirable" (Huffaker), in conjunction with dull tones overlaid with red and images of faceless women or mechanical objects, imbue the text with eeriness. The language and images assign a mechanical and dehumanising quality to the gender roles portrayed while also evoking haunting and horror. If there is intimacy present, it is through the human connections made between text and image, in which female figures become the subjects of pathos but also subjects to evoke connection with the reader. The constant movement in the texts likewise adds to the reading experience, expressing a passionate intervention in the source text by creating speed and immediacy.

Taken in conjunction, the erasure works these three poets create by revisioning their source texts are fundamentally bound in their experimental approach to the blank spaces surrounding the words on the page. Meaning is made in these spaces as much as within the poetic texts. While Thompson's reductive technique—which involves creating physical spaces rather than imagined ones—evokes the body and emphasises physicality, Johanson and Huffaker demonstrate how additive techniques can be used to similar ends. Johanson's use of natural elements transforms the reading of the text, and elements such as palpability and sensual evocation create a sense of intimacy between the reader and natural objects. Comparatively, Huffaker adds movement and re-maps the page as a technique for transforming the source text's genre from theoretical to satire. For these reasons, the reading experience would be profoundly different if the physical interventions within the blank spaces of the page were encountered apart from the language of the text and vice versa. The poetic landscape of the page is re-imagined, so that surrounding space does not merely signal a void, but indicates the human body, thereby inviting action, intimacy, and interaction.

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