INTRODUCE THE PANELISTS

Srikanth Reddy's latest book of poetry, Underworld Lit, was a finalist for the Griffin International Prize in Poetry, the T.S. Eliot Four Quartets Prize, and a TLS 2020 Book of the Year. His previous book, Voyager, was named one of the best books of poetry in 2011 by The New Yorker, The Believer, and National Public Radio; his first collection, Facts for Visitors, received the 2005 Asian American Literary Award for Poetry. Reddy's poetry and criticism have appeared in Harper's, The Guardian, The New York Times, Poetry, and numerous other venues; his book of criticism, Changing Subjects: Digressions in Modern American Poetry, was published by Oxford University Press in 2012. A recipient of fellowships from the Creative Capital Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts, he is currently Professor of English and Creative Writing at the University of Chicago, where he serves as Series Editor of the Phoenix Poets book series at the University of Chicago Press.

Sam Taylor is the author of three books of poems, including *Body of the World* and *Nude Descending an Empire* (Pitt Poetry Series). His new book of poems, *The Book of Fools: An Essay in Memoir and Verse,* is a book-length elegy for our earth and oceans that incorporates the self-erasure he began more than a decade ago. His poems have appeared in such journals as *The New Republic*, *AGNI, Orion Magazine*, *Poetry Daily*, and

The Kenyon Review. A native of Miami, he has been a wilderness caretaker in the mountains of northern New Mexico and traveled around the world with the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship. He currently tends a wild garden in Kansas, where he directs the MFA Program at Wichita State.

I'm Kristina Marie Darling. I'm the author of thirty-six books. An expert consultant with the U.S. Fulbright Commission, my work has been recognized with awards from Yaddo, the American Academy in Rome, the Andorran Ministry of Culture, the Elizabeth George Foundation, Harvard University's Kittredge Fund, the Heinz Foundation, Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris; and the Whiting Foundation. Beginning in the fall of 2022, I will serve as Publisher-in-Residence at the American University of Rome.

I want to thank our panelists for being with us today. Before we delve into presentations, I'd like to briefly introduce the topic of ethics and erasure poetry. In recent years, we have seen erasure projects that function as both activism and appropriation. For example, a recent blackout project raised serious questions about when erasure becomes an act of violence against a literary work and/or its author. The writer in question, who self-identifies as white and male, chose source texts by a female writer of color, then after blacking out some of the text, claimed the poem as

his own, presenting it as a new work that he himself had authored. The response on social media proved as outraged as it was nuanced. Among the questions that emerged: When does erasure reinforce existing imbalances of power in the literary community? What potential does erasure wield for reversing, questioning and interrogating those same structures of power? Jen Bervin's NETS, an erasure project that takes Shakespeare's sonnets as its source text, offers a window into this potentiality. Bervin begins with a literary form that arises from an undeniably male lineage. After all, Shakespeare and Petrarch are still considered the foremost practitioners of the sonnet. From there, she offers both a dismantling and a deconstruction of that inherited tradition. By presenting the redacted text in greyscale, she suggests that postmodern experiments are haunted by such a gendered lineage, its traces visible just beneath the surface. Erasure becomes metacommentary, becomes creative literary criticism. Recent years have seen erasure become corrective gesture, critique, excavation and reversal. But where does the line between response and violence lie? With that in mind, I'm thrilled to delve deeper into this question of ethics and best practices in erasure poetry.

ERASURE POETRY
& THE GENERATIVE VIOLENCE OF THE EXPERIMENT

In her seminal essay, "The Near Transitive Properties of the Political and Poetical: Erasure," Solmaz Sharif writes, "Erasure means obliteration. The Latin root of obliteration (*ob-* against and *lit(t)era* letter) means the striking out of text." Sharif's definition raises the question of whether erasure as an aesthetic gesture is implicitly violent. And relatedly, can this violence ever be generative?

In a recent lecture on innovative writing, Myung Mi Kim argued that any artistic experiment is inherently violent, as the artist is dismantling an inherited tradition in order to make way for the new. For many writers, innovation does indeed contain destruction in its very definition. After all, the experimental text cannot exist in the same space as the conventions that restrict its meaning, stifle its performativity, and deny its legitimacy.

With that in mind, this talk will consist of several parts. First, I will discuss some examples of erasure projects that successfully foster a kind of generative violence when considering tradition and the power structures that their source text represents. From there, I will transition to a discussion of my own practice as a working poet who frequently turns to erasure as a vehicle for critique, as well as conversation across historical, conceptual, and geographic divides.

When considering erasure as generative violence, I'm immediately reminded of those erasure projects in which the striking out of source text becomes deconstruction, becomes intervention, becomes corrective gesture. Case in point: Yedda Morrison's Darkness takes Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness as its source text.

SHARE SCREEN WITH YEDDA MORRISON'S DARKNESS

For those of you unfamiliar with Conrad's Heart of Darkness, here's a brief summary: the novella recounts a voyage up the Congo River into the Congo Free State. Throughout the book, Conrad draws parallels between both England and Africa as places of darkness. In doing so, he implicitly questions the categories of identity that society imposes, and ultimately challenges racism and imperialism.

Morrison's erasure of Conrad's original text might be described as a procedural erasure, meaning she chooses one element to systematically redact from the source text. The one element of Conrad's narrative that Morrison chooses to remove is people. The end result is an ecopoetics, a meditation on the natural world which seems at first wholly removed from the original context of empire.

However, Morrison reminds us that the visual choices that we make with respect to

erasure often shape meaning. For example, this erasure project could have been presented as a black out instead of white out. She didn't have to preserve the artifact of the signet classic edition of Conrad's work. The choice of whiteout speaks to whiteness as an erasure of other identities, ultimately extending and elaborating on Conrad's original critique. Erasure becomes performance, becomes metaphor. Even more importantly, the violence of dismantling the signet classic edition of Conrad's work, and the way that the whiteout simultaneously evokes light and nature, also serves as a complex and mutlivalent commentary on the task of erasure. Erasure becomes both violence and excavation, dismantling and discovery inhabit the same rhetorical space.

Morrison's project raises several questions about when this kind of violence is actually generative. Here, we have a female-identifying creative practitioner erasing a canonical text by a male writer. Erasure becomes a reversal of an existing power dynamic. If this scenario were reversed, and it were a man erasing a text by a female or nonbinary writer, I believe we would respond very differently to this kind of gesture.

In "Double Cross: Erasure in Theory and Poetry," John Nyman critiques the possibility of a "power free text." Along these lines, I believe that a poetic of erasure

is most powerful when it's grounded in a reversal or deconstruction of the power dynamics embedded and enacted within a particular literary text.

Within my own practice, erasure frequently becomes a way of reclaiming agency over text that as a woman writer I find disempowering. To give one example, Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita presents numerous obstacles and problems for a feminist reading. For me, the most glaring problem is the way female characters are presented in a wholly disembodied way. Here and there, we are confronted with a "honey colored limb," a "knobby knee," but we rarely see Lolita as a whole human being.

SHARE SCREEN WITH IN LOVE WITH THE GHOST

With visual artist, costumer, and photographer Max Avi Kaplan, I created and illustrated a feminist erasure of Nabokov's Lolita. Erasure became a way of redirecting the focus of scholarly attention, making the reader confront an aspect of the text that was previously buried in so much prose. With that in mind, here are a few poems from the project.

READ FROM IN LOVE WITH THE GHOST

Here you see that the erasures and illustrations are also recast from Lolita's perspective. Erasure becomes not only a critique of the source text, but a reclamation of agency.

Similarly, I work on erasures of Shakespeare's dramatic oevre, using erasure as a way of calling attention to the violence against women that overruns the celebrated plays. Erasure becomes a vehicle for literary criticism, but also, it allows these critical, academic arguments to take a visual and visceral form.

READ AND SCREEN SHARE THE SEQUENCE WOMEN AND GHOSTS

Here you will see that erasure — in this instance self-erasure — becomes performance, metaphor, but also a vehicle for a formal academic argument. What's more, erasure allows poets to make arguments that would prove more challenging and less impactful in a traditional scholarly form.

In the spirit of visual, visceral challenges to the literary cannon, I would like to close with a poem from my book Petrarchan, which uses erasure to recast Petrarch's sonnets from Laura's perspective.

READ A SELECTION OF PETRARCH ERASURES