

What did they *really* say?

Exposing rape culture through blackout poetry

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Background and rationale

In 2018, US poet Isobel O'Hare published a blackout poetry collection (*all this can be yours*). The poems are redacted versions of apology statements by public figures accused of sexual violence during the height of the #MeToo movement.

Blackout poetry is overlooked as a 'serious' topic in literary studies. It is dismissed as 'too accessible' and 'too simple' according to aesthetic values in literary criticism, which historically privileges 'difficulty' above other reading practices (Yaron 2008).

This research challenges the critical neglect of blackout poetry by demonstrating its 'value' as a tool that aids O'Hare in exposing rape culture and opening up mainstream conversations around sexual violence through accessible language.

Research questions

1. Why does O'Hare use blackout poetry to re-present rape culture?
2. How is rape culture exposed and challenged in O'Hare's blackout poems?
3. What are the benefits and limitations of using blackout poetry to critique rape culture?

Analysis

Why blackout poetry?

- Blackout poetry helps O'Hare channel anger when reading #MeToo apology statements (O'Hare 2018, p. xiii).
- Enables O'Hare to reveal what is *really* being said in the statements and expose how the language (re)produces rape culture.

How is rape culture exposed?

- #MeToo apology statements are redacted using black marker pen.
- Remaining words are carefully selected to expose rape culture.
- Fig. 1 reveals how the statement upholds rape culture by blaming victim-survivors for their assault, removing responsibility from perpetrators.
- Fig. 2 unmasks how the statement maintains rape culture by discrediting victim-survivors and accusing them of lying for personal gain.

Benefits and limitations?

- Blackout poetry is dismissed as 'too accessible' and 'unworthy' of 'serious' scholarly study, potentially limiting readership of poems.
- However, accessibility is beneficial for exposing and challenging issues (sexual violence and rape culture) that affect many people.
- By leaving a few 'everyday' words visible, O'Hare converts statements into short counternarratives that are accessible to wider audiences, opening up mainstream conversations around rape culture beyond academia.

References & further reading

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- **Keyser, A.** (2019) *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: Lerner.
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- **Yaron, I.** (2008) 'What is a 'Difficult Poem'? Towards a Definition. *Journal of Linguistic Semantics*, 37, pp. 129-150.

Rape culture
Cultures that **normalise sexual violence**, e.g. sexual objectification, trivialising rape, denying harm, and victim-blaming (Keyser 2019).



#MeToo movement

Feminist movement that **challenges rape culture** by empowering victim-survivors to share their stories and create a sense of community through expressions of solidarity.

Founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, #MeToo went viral in 2017 after the phrase was tweeted as a hashtag by Alyssa Milano following allegations against Harvey Weinstein.

Key words

Blackout poetry

Poetry made by **redacting** (obscuring) words from source texts. Unredacted words form the blackout poem. Blackout poems often resemble censored FBI files.



My original goal with these [blackout poems] was to make myself feel better [...] As I worked on them, the purpose of the act became clearer to me: I was **revealing the truth** (as I saw it) behind their PR statements (O'Hare 2018, p. xiii)

Figure 1: O'Hare's blackout poem based on actress, director, and popular feminist Lena Dunham's statement in support of producer Murray Miller, who was accused of sexual violence (O'Hare 2018, p. 135)

...sides to this case. We have to own up to the fact that women
...unethical, have gone out of their way to make themselves attractive
...unfortunately, it has backfired on us - and it's women's fault
...blame women easily to think that

Figure 2: Blackout poem based on actor, comedian, and producer Jeremy Piven's #MeToo apology statement (O'Hare 2018, p. 101)

these women
...and hope they can
...the stories that should be
...to be entering dark times - allegations are being brought as fact
...ing out in property without a hearing, due process or evidence
...with the benefit of a doubt when we then re-examine
destroy careers
and need to be addressed