Blackout history: exploring Daniel Wale’s poem ‘Navajo Roads’

This lesson explores Daniel Wale’s poem ‘Navajo Roads’, a winning poem from the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020.

Students should read and discuss Daniel’s poem (see page 7) before drafting their own poem using the erasure technique.

Students’ writing will inform their understanding of the featured poem and reflect on how writing and reading poetry helps us to learn about other subjects and issues. By combining writing with history (and any other subject for that matter) we can encourage creativity as well as develop or revise knowledge from the history classroom.

Specifically they will explore the technique of erasure to create poetry through the use of existing printed texts. The activities can be used in a single session or over a series of sessions.

Print out the images and slides (see the last section of this resource) and display them around the room or lay them out on tables. Read Daniel’s poem on page 7 to help research and select any further images you would like to use for this activity.

First impression activity
The title of Daniel’s poem is ‘Navajo Roads’. Ask students to predict what the poem will be about. You may wish to direct them to the images as prompts.
Read Daniel’s poem aloud to the class several times. You can also see and hear Daniel read it himself online.

The first time you read, just ask the students to listen. During the second reading ask the students to think about the ideas in the poem.

Ask the students what is interesting about the words and phrases used? What do they associate with the words used?

Example prompts:
- Chime of falling coins
- Leaked from a bullet hole
- Man’s hydrocarbon quota
- Steel blankets
- Salted earth

Do they feel the content of the poem matches the title? Why? Why not?

**Reviewing the poem and its meaning**

Explain that Daniel wrote the poem to reflect on what he had learned in his American history classes.

Explain that the title refers to the ‘Long Walk of the Navajo’ of 1864, when 10,000 Navajo Indians were stripped of their property rights and freedom and were forced to walk 400 miles across America.

Ask them again to think about what some of the words used might mean with reference to particular aspects of Navajo history. For example:
- ‘the chime of falling coins’. To what extent were the white settlers’ actions towards the Navajo people motivated by money? What are the economic repercussions of this today? Could this phrase be considered a reference to modern casinos and gambling on tribal reservations in the USA?
- ‘leaked from a bullet hole’. How might this gesture towards the violence employed by white settlers in their oppression of the Navajo people?
- ‘man’s hydrocarbon quota’. Consider this phrase in relation to our historic environmental impact. Compare it to the way the Navajo have traditionally managed the land.
- ‘steel blankets’. How does this phrase relate to:
  a) railways and the impact of industry and,  
  b) the time in history when it is thought colonists gifted diseased blankets to tribes in an attempt to eradicate the indigenous population?
- ‘that Mercedes was my horse’ and ‘a thick perfume of hot leather seats’. How do these phrases bridge the gap between history and modern society? What does this comparison suggest about changing values?

The atrocities of the Long Walk of the Navajo are also known as the Trail of Tears – ask the class how many of them had heard about this part of history?

Have any of the students been inspired to write about something they have learned in another lesson?

In an interview about the poem, Daniel addresses the fact that he cannot claim to speak from the Navajo People’s perspective, as their experience and history does not correspond to his own. Daniel says “I have only ever been me, and I am far removed, geographically and culturally, from the things I talk about in this poem. I knew I couldn’t try to pass off a purely artificial voice as meaningful. This led me to tell this poem from someone like me: an outsider, living in the modern age with modern conveniences.”

How do you think this technique of using an outsider’s voice affects our reading of the poem? What does a sense of distance achieve?
In this lesson students may use mnemonics or other revision tools but poetry is unlikely to be one of those tools! The type of poetry they are going to be writing teaches them to look closely at the words of the text and to play around with the language. The act of reading another person’s writing helps students to understand it but also learn about the subject and possibly use words that they might not have used before.

The type of poetry we will be writing replaces the daunting prospect of the blank page with its opposite. Students will search for poetry in prose by creating an erasure poem. Erasure poetry, also known as blackout poetry, is a form of found poetry wherein a poet takes an existing text and erases, blacks out, or otherwise obscures, a large portion of the text. Erasure poetry offers the opportunity to have fun and be creative and bring together different subjects. It can also reinforce understanding of a text.

Erasure poetry may be used as a means of collaboration, creating a new text from an old one and thereby starting a dialogue between the two, or as a means of confrontation, a challenge to a pre-existing text. For this reason, erasure poetry can be a fruitful way to explore connections between old and new. You may also wish to discuss with students the sensitivities around using an erasure technique when exploring issues like territorial and cultural colonisation.

Students will be taking a pre-existing text and changing or manipulating it. Building on Daniel’s interest in the Long Walk of the Navajo, the text I have chosen is about the enforced removal of the Cherokee. However, any piece of prose could be used for this lesson.

Poetry across the curriculum
A note for teachers

In an interview, Danie Wale said that he wanted to use poetry to “explore cultures far removed from my own, and their own person trials”. Having learnt about the abuse of minority groups in his American history classes, it was this that Daniel sought to portray in his poem.

This confirmed something I have always believed, that poetry should not be reserved for the English class alone. It offers a wonderful opportunity to work across the curriculum and help people learn in a different way.

The aim of my lesson is therefore to bring curriculum subjects together through the use of poetry, but also to raise awareness of issues and perhaps even to be used as a revision tool. Poetry can help explore and analyse a piece of text, to further an argument and create a conversation.

This type of poetry also supports those with a limited vocabulary as they are exposed to new words, in context that they can use directly in their poems. However, it may be necessary to include a glossary.

Erasure poetry offers us the opportunity to take poetry out of the English lesson, to overcome writer’s block and can be used for all levels of experience. The format could be used for any subject by utilising printed text.

Project Gutenberg is a library of over 60,000 free eBooks. You do not require special apps to read, just the regular Web browsers or eBook readers. As well as the world’s great literature you will also find older works for which copyright has expired so the text can be used without worry.

The text used for this lesson, Myths of the Cherokee by James Mooney, 1902, is sourced from Project Gutenberg: https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/45634
On Tracy K. Smith’s erasure poem ‘Declaration’
The poem ‘Declaration’, sourced from the United States Declaration of Independence of 1776, by Tracy K. Smith – Pulitzer-Prize winner and former U.S. Poet Laureate – is a brilliant example of erasure poetry.

Erasure poetry is a form in which the poet takes a pre-existing text and removes some of the original words to create a new piece, often one that comments on the original text. Erasure is a way to give an existing piece of writing a new set of meanings, questions, or suggestions.

In a profile by The New York Times, Smith states her belief that “Poetry is a shortcut to honest conversation, a way of getting past small talk to probe the spots where our culture is most sore.”

Introduce students to Tracy K. Smith’s erasure poem ‘Declaration’ (it can be viewed on the Poetry Foundation website).

• Give students 5 minutes to read the poem.
• Read through the poem as a class.
• Compare the poem against the original United States Declaration of Independence.
• Discuss how Smith has changed the meaning of the original text to make the point that those who wrote the United States Declaration of Independence were complicit in slavery.

For students: creating an erasure poem
Students will need two things – a piece of writing and something to highlight and then black it out with.

Put simply, they select words from the printed text that they like and want to use and black out/erase/redact the rest. The words that are left become the student’s poem. Only the words that are left are visible and offer the opportunity to create a brand new story.

The poem is then read top to bottom, left to right – therefore the words you choose need to be in this order. Students can add words if needed.

The most challenging part of writing erasure/blackout poetry is identifying which words to eliminate. Students should look at the page and put boxes around the words and phrases that stand out.

The theme of each student’s poem will be defined by the words they have selected.
1. Give students the extract from ‘Myths of the Cherokee’ (see Student Worksheet, page 6) and allow them 5-10 minutes to read it.
2. Students should then highlight words they want to keep in and join together.
3. To start with, students should use a pencil to circle the words they want to keep so they can change their mind if necessary.
4. Reread words and look for connections between them:
   a. Suggest students don’t just use exciting words – to create a narrative or something that makes sense they also need the little words (to, the, and...)
   b. Tell students it is up to them how much of the text they use/remove.
   c. Students can use this old text and update it – similar to how Daniel compared the Mercedes to a horse.
   d. Students do not need to worry about punctuation.
   e. Encourage students to be creative. For example, erasing the t in a word like ‘can’t’ transforms it into ‘can’ (students should be playful with the language)
5. Once students are happy with the word selected, they should check that their poem reads well.
6. Once students are happy with their word selection, they can erase – black out the words they are not going to use:
   a. Suggest they don’t black out until the very end
   b. Clean it up
   c. Bring in art too by erasing in a creative way – have an erasure party of English/History and Art! 😊

Copyright warning: When selecting texts for erasure poems, be aware that UK copyright law, in line with legislation in many other countries, restricts the use of creative works for 70 years after the death of an author. Works that are out of copyright are in the public domain and may be freely used.

Joanne Bowles is senior librarian at Tor Bridge High School, Plymouth.

Marker, Bosque Redondo, Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where Treaty of 1 June 1868 was signed. Source: Wikipedia
Use the following text, taken from James Mooney’s *Myths of the Cherokee* (1902), to write an erasure poem

1. Start by reading through the whole text.
2. Highlight words that you like or think are powerful.
3. Read through the highlighted words to see if they flow.
4. Highlight additional words to help the text make sense as a poem.
5. Erase/black out the words you will not be using in your poem.

**THE REMOVAL – 1838-39**

The history of this Cherokee removal of 1838, as gleaned by the author from the lips of actors this tragedy, may well exceed in weight of grief and pathos any other passage in American history. Even the much-sung exile of the Acadians falls far behind it in its sum of death and misery. Under Scott’s orders the troops were disposed at various points throughout the Cherokee country, where stockade forts were erected for gathering in and holding the Indians in preparatory to removal (43). From these, squads of troops were sent to search out with rifle and bayonet every small cabin hidden away in the coves or by the sides of mountain streams, to seize and bring in as prisoners all the occupants, however or wherever they might be found. Families at dinner were startled by the sudden gleam of bayonets in the doorway rose up to be driven with blows and oaths along the weary miles of trail that led to the stockade. Men were seized in their fields or going along the road, women were taken from their wheels and children from their play. In many cases, on turning for one last look at they crossed the ridge, they saw their homes in flames, fired by the lawless rabble that followed on the heels of the soldiers to loot and pillage. So keen were these outlaws on the scent that in some instances they were driving off the cattle and other stock of the Indians almost before the soldiers had fairly started their owners in the other direction. Systematic hunts were made by the same men for Indian graves, to rob them of the silver pendants and other valuables deposited with the dead. A Georgia volunteer, afterward a colonel in the Confederate service, said: “I fought through the civil war and have seen men shot to pieces and slaughtered by thousands, but the Cherokee removal was the cruellest work I ever knew.”

To prevent escape the soldiers had been ordered to approach and surround each house, so far as possible, so as to come upon the occupants without warning. One old patriarch, when thus surprised, calmly called his children and grandchildren around him, and kneeling down, but them to pray with him in their own language, while the astonished soldiers looked on in silence. Then rising he led the way into exile. A woman, on finding the house surrounded, went to the door and called up the chickens to be fed for the last time, after which, taking her infant on her back and her two other children by the hand, she followed her husband with the soldiers.
Daniel Wale

Navajo Roads

A thick perfume of hot leather seats hangs heavy in the air, which drags out scraping melodies through an open window and I – hand on the wheel – use up a little more of man’s hydrocarbon quota. I sweat like a pig; the acrid fluid could fill a lager can to its corroded brim. The chime of falling coins has echoed long in these metallic walls. Two hundred years ago, that Mercedes was my horse. Two hundred years ago, its chassis of bone lay in the dust. Bleached legacies leaked from a bullet hole as you dragged me deeper, further through salted earth. Two thousand nail-strikes ago, the tracks – your steel blankets, hot and sick – left us choking in your wake.

Daniel Wale was a top 15 winner of the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award 2020 for his poem ‘Navajo Road’. You can see Daniel’s reading of his poem on The Poetry Society website.
Route of the ‘Long Walk of the Navajo’

Between 1863 and 1866, more than 10,000 Navajo (Diné) were forcibly removed to the Bosque Redondo Reservation at Fort Sumner, in current-day New Mexico. During the Long Walk, the US military marched Navajo (Diné) men, women, and children between 250 to 450 miles, depending on the route they took.

Image source: americanindian.si.edu
Navajo (Diné) captives at Fort Sumner, c. 1860s

Navajo (Diné) people during the Long Walk

Navajo (Diné) women, Long Walk of the Navajo

Marker, Bosque Redondo, Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where Treaty of 1 June 1868 was signed