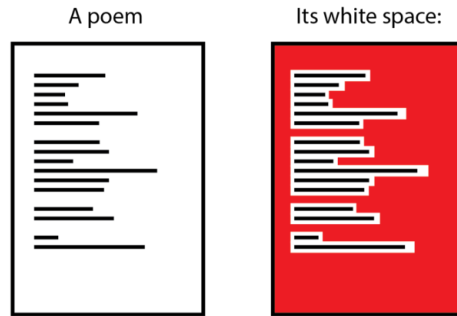


White Space

“Poetry is a problem of form and emptiness.” – The Book of Form and Loneliness, Ruth Ozeki



White space is the unmarked page or canvas—it is everything you *don’t* write on, draw on, or place image or text against. Since white space is the page itself, it can technically be any color.

White space exists in all poems on the page, but a poet traditionally has very little to no control over much of it, since the publication or press decides the formatting and layout. A short poem on a large page will have a *lot* of white space, no matter what the poet intends. Even so, a text-only poem *can* increase white space by breaking larger stanzas into smaller ones, or by increasing the distance between each stanza.

A visual poet, on the other hand, tends to *actively* create white space through intentional decisions about how big an image will be, or by the shape of a poem. This engagement with white space therefore foregrounds it. To see if the poet might be “working with” white space, look for poems that “don’t fill” or “don’t fit” their container. Look for poetry collections that are not conventional in their sizes or dimensions and layouts that introduce a lot of page with nothing on it.

So what does it mean? As with all forms of language, there is no one answer, and any answer depends on context. Here are some associations that could apply to white space:

Space (all the definitions of it), the field, emptiness, breath, time, absence, rhythm (be mindful of how long it takes the eye to find the next word or image), calm, focus (think of the effect of a single haiku on a large page), quiet, whiteness (since most pages and screens are white).

A poem that has no white space might feel cramped or oppressive. A poem with a lot of white space might feel airy. Or it might feel exposed. What else is the poem saying or doing that might let you know what the white space could mean?

Further Examples:

- M. NourbeSe Philip – *Zong!*
- Erasure poems. See: *Nets* by Jen Bervin or *The ms of my kin* by Janet Holmes
- Sky Hopinka – *Calligrams* (Text installation)
- Leila Chatti – “Annunciation” (from *Deluge*)
- Diana Khoi Nguyen – *Ghost Of*