

Composing with

Composing With

Ethan Philbrick

Composing Is Decomposing

There's a kind of making that happens in rotting, a reconstitution of matter, a generativity in decomposition. When I feel lost I make erasure poems¹—cutting words out of texts and decomposing a text in order to make a different one, a text that feels like mine when I don't know how to make mine. Maybe one way to think about erasure poems is as a kind of willful rotting, a scrubbing out of words on a page to create a new assembly of words, a becoming-parasite that eats a text and spits part of the unchewed chunks out to make one that works.

When I was 22 and had just gotten married to an emotionally abusive partner and didn't know how to tell anyone about it, I grasped for things to keep me afloat. I found myself at a community garden center's composting workshop. It was me and a bunch of sweet retirees. We ripped up newspaper and combined it with squirming worms in the bottom of plastic containers to make "worm bins" for our basements. When I got home I loaded my bin up with a bunch of vegetables and eggshells and promptly forgot about it for over a year. When I finally happened upon the bin and opened it expecting to find books I thought I had stored in the basement, I found it full of deep brown soil, rich and teeming with dirty life.

Composing Is Improvising



When I'm playing the cello and making up music and not using any notation, am I composing or improvising? Why don't we call improvisation a kind of composition, a composing in time, a composing without marks? Performance studies scholar Danielle Goldman writes wonderfully about the indeterminacy between composing and improvising in *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*:

Improvisation is generally described as a spontaneous mode of creation that takes place without the aid of a manuscript or score. According to this view, performance and composition occur simultaneously—on the spot—through a practice that values surprise, innovation, and the vicissitudes of process rather than the fixed glory of a finished product. This view may initially seem straightforward, but [...] it becomes increasingly complicated the more instances of improvisation one considers. As the ethnomusicologist Paul Berliner states in *Thinking in Jazz*, composition and improvisation “overlap hopelessly at the margins.” Many improvisers work with loose scores, call upon idiomatic tradition, or cultivate individual styles. And many compositions begin with improvisation. (5-6)

These complicated and overlapping distinctions between composition and improvisation are always already gendered, racialized, and classed. Musicians of color who work within genres such as jazz are thought of as improvisors rather than composers, with “composition” connoting more of the authority of the author-function while “improvisation” connotes more of the labor-function of a performer.

Composing Is Recomposing

I love to translate a poem into another poem in the same language. Or translate a manifesto into a poem and then that poem into song. Or translate a song into another song. This kind of composing is a relational generativity—recycling and recomposing. For the past few years I've been working on a choral recomposition of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *Manifesto for the Communist Party*. The piece is a way to sound out an alternative anti-capitalist manifesto by re-sounding an existing anti-capitalist manifesto. Maybe you'd like to take a listen: <https://soundcloud.com/e-philbrick/choral-marx-movement-six-july>.

Note

1. The *Academy of American Poets* defines erasure poetry as “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, creating a wholly new work from what remains.” Works

such as Ronal Johnson's *Radi Os* and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* are named as exemplary texts in the genre.

Works Cited

"Erasure Poetry." *Academy of American Poets*. <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/erasure-poetic-form>. Accessed 12 September 2018.

Goldman, Danielle. *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*. U of Michigan P, 2010.

Johnson, Ronal. *Radi Os*. Flood Editions, 1977.

Philip, M. NourbeSe. *Zong!* Wesleyan UP, 2011.