

How Writers Write Poetry 2014

CLASS SEVEN • Video Transcript

-Welcome back. By now you are beginning to see how many diverse voices there are in the world of poetry, what a multiplicity of ways to go about composing a poem and this week we move in yet another direction with the work of Nick Twemlow and Kiki Petrosino.

-Nick Twemlow is the winner of the the Norma Farber first book award from the Poetry Society of America for his collection Palm Trees. He's the poetry editor of the Iowa Review and he teaches at Coe College. He's also a filmmaker and has been in many, many prestigious festivals. So multiplicity is the name of his game. Kiki Petrosino, her first book is called Fort Red Border, an anagram for Robert Redford. Her newest collection, which has been getting great reviews, is Hymn for the Black Terrific. She teaches down at the University of Louisville, in Kentucky and she is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop. We went to school together.

-And one of the things they will be talking about is what you do with found material, how you appropriate what's already out there and use it for your own purposes to discover some of those deeper meanings in the language and the world around us.

-We'll see you soon.

-Hello, I'm Nick Twemlow and I'm a poet and a filmmaker and sometime editor and today I'm going to talk about a range of things that have to do with using other peoples' words, texts, and so forth, in your own work and trying to find ways to creatively appropriate as a way to help you, perhaps, push through periods where you're having trouble writing or as a way to amplify your whole artistic practice, or at least as a way to get out of maybe some stumbling blocks that you're dealing with as you write. I'm going to mostly talk about poems but I think this, there are some instances where this can apply to prose - and I am actually going to talk a little bit about film making just as a way to, to kind of discuss or underscore, illustrate the writing practices here. I've had success teaching, in the past, I've taught a revision class, where we focus on looking at radical and not so radical ways to revise your own work. And I don't just mean taking a red pen and crossing out superfluous words or even breaking a line somewhere earlier in a line that you've had or just shifting bits of text somewhere else, or literally just crossing out the last four lines because you realize the poem may have ended earlier. I'm talking about radically revising a poem where you might take something that you've written sort of loosely in free verse and try and stuff it into some kind of formal constraint. It might be something like trying to rewrite a poem as a villanelle which, Elizabeth Bishop eventually did if you look at her drafts, which you can find online, of her poem One Art. There are at least eighteen, or so. That poem goes from something not like a villanelle at all and suddenly it becomes this villanelle and tracking that progress is is sort of amazing but it doesn't always have to be taking your work and sticking it into some kind of received form like a villanelle or a sestina or a sonnet. It might be looking for ways into your work by adding other peoples' words into a poem, or even by taking the sort of general tone, perhaps, of a poem and saying, okay, I can work with that, nothing else is working but I have this inclination toward some

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expression. Now let's find another text and see if I can find it there. And there are a lot of practitioners of what has been called erasure, redaction, not quite documentary poetics but it's sort of related to, it's in this constellation of methods. The cut up, to some degree, arrangement, which I think of in terms of how jazz music is done, that a lot of popular songs - the music is rearranged in different ways. To take a song and give it a different rhythm. It's a different interpretation of the same material, passed down. In fact, this is the foundation of how jazz musicians work, is to work with these sort of common texts and give a new spin.

There's several great practitioners of, of this practice and many of them have very interesting things to say about them. One of them is Mary Ruefle, who is an essayist and a poet and she has been creating for quite some time, sort of, these books. She'll find a book, and using a variety of methods, including white out, she'll take that actual book itself and take white out and white out entire chunks of a page, for example. What's left behind, so it's visually very attractive, because what's left behind will be maybe a few phrases on the page, even just a word here or a word there so visually it's very striking but also these things then can be read as - it certainly provides like a whole new text and a whole new meaning because now you just, you have literally different sentences or different, they're not really arranged as lines like you would normally find in a poem but you find the constellations on a page and you have suddenly a new text and what I find interesting about this is Ruefle is engaging some commonplace books, say, for example, and clearly has read the book and is reading it deeply and looking at it one word at a time and she's looking for some other, some other resonances between some of the words that the author of the text probably was never think of, but weirdly enough, the words are there. So if you just hack out large chunks of the words, suddenly you might have a whole new sentence. There's a poet named Srikanth Reddy whose second book is called *Voyager* and in that book he took Kurt Waldheim's memoir, which was published in the early eighties, and he was interested in Waldheim because Waldheim had been Secretary General of the United Nations and was considered like a major, global, geo-politics voice but later it had been revealed that he had been complicit with Nazi Germany and his entire reputation was sort of destroyed and I think he wrote his memoirs as a way to address this but also to sort of do the great, grand survey of his own life. So Srikanth Reddy, who goes by Chikoo, and I'll call him Chikoo, he was interested in a lot of this sort of duplicity of Waldheim but also the fact that Waldheim's voice was included on the Golden Record that was put on the *Voyager* satellite, that was sent out into space, broadcasting an endless signal in hopes that if there is alien life that the transmission would be heard and that they would, whatever artificial or not artificial, whatever extraterrestrial intelligence would encounter this might start to get a sampling of what is back on Earth. And from my understanding, I think the Rolling Stones' *Satisfaction* is on that record. There are a variety of languages and then also there's Waldheim's voice and Chikoo thought this was sort of an amazing thing. I mean there are other impetus, other reasons he was attracted to this book but this was sort of the trigger because he'd also just been obsessed with *Voyager* and this particular record as a child. So, what he did was he went into this book, bought several copies, and he created a formal constraint for himself which was to, he was also going to do something similar to Ruefle which was to redact the text, right, this is like what the FBI does to our documents. If you do a Freedom of Information Act request for, say, documents, perhaps on someone in your family, if your family's ever been, you think, documented by the FBI, there's a good chance that you'll receive a document. You've probably seen on television or the papers, that's like lots of text on a eight and a half by

eleven page with lots of blacked out stuff. The blacked out stuff, of course, we can only infer what might be there and so, that's why the term redaction to me is very interesting. You're taking something out of something that was originally there. And what Chikoo did, throughout this, is he took several passes through the book and each pass resulted in one section of Voyager and he was looking for - his only constraint - was (formal constraint) and this is worth thinking about if you ever want to try this is, was he could only move forward. It was a linear progression and he would only redact whole words, he wouldn't keep certain letters out to form other words, which is a subtle distinction but - and if he crossed something out and then isolated a word or phrase he wouldn't allow himself to go back if he suddenly found something that he thought could work and then he saw a few lines back, wait a minute I crossed something out I think actually would work well with this. He didn't want to think in those terms and so from what he has said, this has sort of retrained himself how to think about what he, how to look for, and how to read far ahead to, and make certain decisions about what he was trying to find. And among other things he was looking in some ways to take one pass and look sort of at the politics of our world today and find out what is still resonant and what kind of vocabulary was Waldheim using to describe the geopolitics of, you know, twenty, thirty years ago and really since he had a historical sweep to it, even further back and so part of what Voyager is is a document looking to see what is still resonating, politically speaking, and then there's a component of the book in which he's looking for something much more personal and it has to do with self investigation, relationships and so forth. So he took a second pass to do this. So it resulted in an enormous book that he eventually sort of winnowed down but it's a gorgeous book and the poems themselves, if you don't have the sort of framing that you know this comes from this Waldheim and it's an erasure, you would read these poems and think to yourself, these look like beautiful, wonderful, lyric poems. And that raises a different question that I'm not going to ask but it's worth thinking about is - do you even need to know the architecture of books that have been erased? Is it important to know, if you're reading a book of erasures, what the source text was? Is it important to see the actual crossing out or the redactions? That's a good question. It's a question I always ask my students when we look at these kinds of things. So, so now what I want to get into is a couple of exercises or at least one in particular that I think have been very helpful to students of mine who are at various stages of their writing lives, and helpful in sort of a lot of ways, which I'll talk about a couple of them. And, actually before I do that I want to read one, I forgot that I had this. I found an interview in which Mary Reufle is asked about her method because she's done over forty of these books and she considers them, sort of, I think, sort of both a production of art and artwork but also a text, a creation of a new text. She says, "An erasure is the creation of a new text by disappearing the old text that surrounds it. I don't consider the pages to be poems but I do think of them as poetry, especially in sequence and taken as a whole. When I finish an erasure book I feel I've written a book of poetry without a single poem in it and that appeals to me." Which is - that sort of illustrates Reufle's often interesting, contradictory thinking about her own poetry practice which I think is wonderful. She goes on to say that "the books have been called 'found poems' but I don't consider them as such. A poem, a found poem is a text found in the world, taken out of its worldly context and labeled a poem. I certainly didn't find any of these pages. I made them in my head, just as I do my other work. In the erasures I can only choose words out of all the words on the given page, while writing regularly I can choose from all the words in existence. In that sense the erasures are like a form. I'm restricted by certain rules. I have resisted formal poetry my whole life (and there I think she's talking about writing in blank verse, meter, the sonnet) but at last - found

a form I can't resist. It's like writing with my eyes instead of my hands."

So, that hopefully can frame the next exercise, the one that I've given to my students as something that you might try. And I would recommend, I think, thinking of, there are numerous situations you might want to try an erasure. One is, you just can't come up with anything, you're having trouble writing. Well, go to someone else's text. If you go into it with an open mind and say, look, you know, there might be some other beautiful poem that's embedded in this newspaper article that you just picked up this morning to read, more likely looked at on your phone. So it may just simply be a way to get you started and I find it really interesting, I don't do it that often, sort of putting an erasure together, or practicing an erasure but I do do it and I find that it's a great way to sort of let go of the sort of default subject position that single poem I think I write comes from, or takes as its position. It allows me to get out of myself and I think I find, you know, that particular kind of, it might be a neuroses but I sort of start to begin to wonder how can I keep writing from this first person point of view which isn't always how I approach the writing but it's very hard. I'm a big fan of thinking about persona in complicated ways but sometimes I just have to take a break from the big tone or the big voice, or at least try to find it in someone else's words and I think it's a privilege to be able to take someone else's text and try and say, you're not trying to make it better, you're trying to find something else that it might be saying. And so, so the exercise, I'll tell you this, is - and I did this when I taught this revisions class a couple of times, it's the very first thing I ask my students to do and I ask them to do it overnight and bring it to class and the exercise is, in one case, it was about four months after the BP, the big oil spill in the gulf in April of 2010, and I was interested and I have been for a while, in how large corporations present press releases to the world to talk about disaster, or problems. Because in every case, when there's a specific public relations disaster that a large, multi-billion dollar corporation has to respond to immediately the documents will clearly, you know, the function of a document like a press release is to mitigate and to shape public perception of, you know, what, what, what, the press might be calling a disaster such as the BP oil spill. BP wants to say, you know, no, things are okay. Here's what we're doing to control this problem. In the case I gave one class - a very short, gorgeously composed, press release that Mcdonald's issued after the FDA discovered an incredible amount of contaminated beef had been being used by Mcdonald's in their burgers and all this beef had been recalled, but with the BP particularly. So we know, now in hindsight, that that oil spill on that first day had no sense of the enormity of not only, just literally just literally how much oil was going to continue to seep into, into the waters of the Gulf but also like eventually just the wreckage of the entire coast line, you know, a huge swath of the Gulf Coast coast line. But BP has a short press release in which they were very smart. So, it's all a giant sort of euphemism for what's happening but they said everything is contained, we're on top of it, and then they used lots of like hard data numbers about, you know, the number of people mobilized, the number of crafts, how they're going to approach the problem, saying things like they don't foresee long term damage, this will be minimal and easy to clean up, etcetera. And of course they have to do this. This is a multi, multi, multi-billion dollar company and it probably didn't have all the facts, in terms of, or probably didn't at least want to believe how enormous in scope this was going to be but so I gave, I gave each student a copy of this, it's like half a page, it's got some facts and figures in like really sort of strange engineering, oil-rig clean up speak in it as well just sort of a general response from BP. And I say to my students, ok, overnight you have to go and write a poem. You're only allowed to use language within this press release and you

can't use a word twice, if a word appears twice then you can but you can't repeat a word. So, you're limited by - the formal constraint of this exercise is very simple; here's a set of words, create a poem out of it. And we talked about the things that I mentioned earlier about possibly reasons why this might be of interest but we limit the discussion that first time to generally understanding the method. Well, I had one student who looked angry and upset. It was a woman who was a retired psycho therapist from California who had come out to Iowa to participate in this class and I imagine it was an unexpected exercise to give, probably everyone in the class was a little shocked, like, how can this be called revision but this woman in particular, who had talked a fair bit early on just stopped talking. She looked upset with me, I knew she was upset, and she left in a huff right as class ended. So, everyone came in the next day, and they were supposed to type up this new poem. They could also bring in the sheet if they actually had done a redaction but they didn't have to do it like that. The way that they could create this poem was totally up to them. And so, I asked everyone to read their poem and then talk about the experience of creating it and when we got to this woman she started by saying she was very upset when I was describing the exercise and that she thought it was ridiculous and foolish, that there's no way - and what I, one aside, I asked them to try to write a poem that was deeply felt and that, that tried to express some sort of specific, feeling or something quite serious and near to them, probably in a sort of typical lyric form. So, that's an aside. It's an important one because she came to class and she was like, you know, this, she initially thought, there was no way you can find your own original voice in someone else's text, this was a totally foreign concept to her, understandably, and she was angry and she didn't like the press release and she thought that there was no way to find, you know, something of herself within this text and then she said but she sat down and she worked on it for, I don't know, she said a couple of hours and she came out of it, she was so pleased with what happened which was a total transformation of that text into something that she could sort of, in some ways, she could say claim as her own but she did find, in fact, that it freed up a lot of worry about where the words are going to come from and she pointed out that when you're forced to only use a certain set of words you have to ask those words to do quite a bit. You have to try to say, push on certain words and find out just how far they can mean, and are there double meanings, are there ways to arrange them with other words to create, you know, subversive sort of syntax and I was totally enlightened by this because I didn't even think about that initially - that the exercise would force you to put so much incredible pressure on what a word should do and then I said to the class, and now, so you may never want to do an erasure again but now, at least, you can consider how much real work has to go into every single word that you're going to use, right. I think it's absolutely true so if anything, trying an erasure once and giving yourself this formal constraint might at least shed some insight into how you think about just how much pressure you want to put on to a word and I, needless to say, was very happy and quite frankly that was the first exercise we did of about six that week and there's no question and this has been the case every time I've done this, they were the best things people wrote all week, partly because I think people were just freed up. I think at some point when you're not worried about what, that you have to come up with any of the words, you just have to figure out the order and the syntax, which is not a 'just' but it's difficult but when you're more arranging or shaping or rearranging as opposed to having to come up with something completely new, I think it's freeing of certain anxieties that come with this idea of originality. And I think that that exercise tends to be a good catalyst for, you know, a lot of the other revision exercises that we worked on. So, I thought I would talk a tiny bit as I sort of work toward tying this up to give you a couple of other names of some texts that might be

worth checking out. There's a book called Testimony, or Testament, now I've suddenly forgot but Charles Reznikoff, who was sort of the subjectivist poet did several versions of a book where he, in one case, took Nuremberg Trial transcripts of testimony and then shows various parts, then sort of lined them into this long poem. There's the, and it's gorgeous, the whole thing, there's Srikanth Reddy's Voyager. There's Mary Ruefle's many, many texts and I would suggest just searching online and you'll find quite a bit of her work including some images of the actual pages of things that she's done redactions of and there's Ronald Johnson has done a redaction of Paradise Lost called Radios, which the title itself is a redaction of Paradise Lost, the title. And there are many, many, many, many other places to go. So, I'm going to talk just briefly about a couple of times that I've had to employ the use of found text in my own work as a way to maybe help you problem solve other issues that might come up. So, instead of thinking of writing an entire poem as just as an erasure or bringing quotations into your work, something like The Wasteland, T.S. Eliot does quite a bit and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a fair bit of his work also does this but so there's lots of different ways you can use this sort of found work and one of them is if you're encountering an issue, you're working on a poem. In my case I was working on a poem that somehow had become twenty two, twenty one pages long with no breaks. It's not sectioned, it's just this long, unbroken, literally one stanza and I don't, I found myself just sort of relentless at coming back to working on this poem and I felt like it could possibly never end. However, I got to the point, this is a poem in my new manuscript, it's called Burnett's Mound. I did get to a point about twenty one pages in where I could see that I might exhaust, I maybe had already exhausted the potential future readers of this thing but I think I had started to exhaust myself and had run, it had started, I could see it needed to end but I had no idea what to do. And by good fortune I happened to find an old disc that I, it had labeled on a CD ROM, it said, back up 2004 and this was last fall so an almost ten year old file, set of files. I had to find a PC, I use a Mac now, to actually open it but I was able to transfer all the files to my computer and what I had was, basically, a huge archive of old poems of mine that I'd forgotten about, scraps, different chunks of prose, lots of articles that I had saved. And in one I found, it was just one word document and it had one quote and it was from this book by Charles Dickens called Our Mutual Friend. It's a novel and in that book is, there's a sort of minor/major character named Twemlow, last name was Twemlow, which is my last name and I had known about Our Mutual Friend, this book for a long time, and as a child even knew about it because I, of course had seen A Christmas Carol and read a couple of Dickens' novels, the famous ones, but someone had pointed out to me in my family that there was this Twemlow figure in a Dickens novel and I was so delighted and over the moon I assumed it was a relation of mine and that this person was real. But over the years I had thought, maybe at some point this might be of interest. It was a particular, the paragraph in particular was talking about sort of how it was time for everyone to sort of disappear, to leave this social environment of this book that's kind of a book of manners, of sorts, and I read the quote and I realized that's how I'm going to end it. That this will close down because Twemlow, literally the word Twemlow is used in it and then Twemlow is sort of disappeared out of the novel and I thought, this is exactly what I need to do but I made a few minor changes and replaced a couple of words in order to sort of fit what I thought might work. And I don't use quotation marks and I'm not going to use citations at the end of the book. It's there, it's available, first of all it's public domain, so I think I'll be okay but secondly, it's available to go and find the Dickens context if a reader notices it but what I've found was Dickens words spoke precisely to what I was thinking about, unconsciously or not, or I forced them to in some ways. So it's, for me, it seemed to work

really well as a way to close down the poem and so that's another way to think about quotations or text you find, song lyrics, anything you overhear. Keep some kind of notebook or something because you never know when just a little bit of found text might end up serving you to help you get through a problem period in a poem or to help you close a poem down, as an epigraph or as a way into a particular poem. And I do a lot of this sort of use of found footage in other peoples' work in my film making in the short films that I do and I find that examining what other people have put together and looking for resonances in your own thinking and in your ideas can just be a super liberating, fun, freeing, way into and maybe a way to reexamine this whole idea of originality and creativity and like what the creative process might be about. So, I recommend, in closing, go find those books, go look for Mary Ruefle's very wise words on what, not only on her process of erasure but also on her thinking about what we even consider to be original and then go to BP's website and go to the April twentieth, 2010 press release. It's all searchable by date and print it out and try your own redaction and see what you come up with.

-I'm Kiki Petrosino and I'm going to be talking about appropriation as a compositional practice. So, as writers, we're all readers, avid readers. We don't just read within our own genre. Poets read novels, fiction writers read poetry and vice versa and to some extent we're all in dialogue with what has been written before and with the things that we've read in our past. So sometimes when you're sitting down to write you find yourself beginning with the words of someone else and what I want to emphasize is that that is a completely legitimate compositional technique. That is a mode you can use to generate language around the ideas that you want to convey. So, I guess I'll talk about two main ways that that can happen. I'll start with an example from my own work. Several years ago I was able to read a poem by a poet named Thomas Sayers Ellis. That poem was titled Or, O-R, and throughout the poem Ellis used the sound of the word or, O-R, and kind of stacked different words with that sound, one on top of the other, and he made a very beautiful poem that spoke about race and about culture and about history. So, I read the poem and thought that it beautifully captured Ellis' perspective on those things but as an African-American woman poet I also wanted to be able to write my own poem that spoke to those same issues but from my perspective. So I gave myself a little assignment and that was to write a poem, also called Or, and to take Ellis' first line which is; Or Oreo, or / worse, and continue from there but from my own perspective. So I produced a poem that used the O-R sound just like Ellis did and I was working within that as a constraint. So even though I felt very restricted, I couldn't choose any word that I wanted for my poem, I had to choose a majority of words that had an O-R sound that, paradoxically, liberated me to communicate something that I wanted to communicate in the poem. I was also very intent on not repeating the O-R words that Ellis had already used in his poem. So I wanted to find different O-R words to use for my sound poem. So, you know, the activity - something about the activity of making a little assignment like that, the activity of constraint, restraint, looking at someone else's poem, has this counter-intuitive effect of unlocking another part of your mind which is now free to express an idea. So, there's that kind of appropriation, appropriation via response or response via appropriation but then there's something a little bit more, I guess, active or tactile that you can use with appropriation and that is something called Cento Bingo and I use that in my classes. As some of you may know, the cento is an old poetic form. It's a one hundred line poem, each line of which comes from another poem. So, what a poet will do is they will sit down to write a cento and they will select one line from one hundred different poems. Put the lines all together until they make one, one hundred

line poem and then at the very end there's usually a little answer key or a little glossary that identifies the author of each line so that the act of composition in the case of the cento is a curatorial act. You're arranging lines in a way that is meaningful and makes sense. You're collecting lines from other sources. You didn't generate the language for the lines but you are putting them together, making decisions about how they should work together and what the message should be. So, these are things that we pay attention to anyway when we write poems but writing a cento allows you to isolate that sort of ranging instinct, that curatorial instinct that we all have as writers. Now, you can of course write a traditional cento if you want to but a more fun way of producing a cento is to do something called cento bingo. A friend of mine, the contemporary poet Matt Hart, based in Ohio, invented a kind of cento bingo game for his classes and I've played it in my classes and it works really well. So basically what you do is you go to a website that will allow you to print a customizable bingo card such as this one here and it's great if you can actually change the first line of your bingo card to actually say cento, C-E-N-T-O. Now some of you may already know that a cento is a traditional poetic form. It is a poem consisting of one hundred lines but each line of this cento comes from another poem. So, this is kind of a collage poem. If you want to write a cento you'd have to pick one hundred poems, choose one line from each of those poems and then arrange them to make your own poem called the cento. Okay, so the cento bingo is a variation on this traditional form. Once you have your bingo cards, your cento cards all printed out and set up, you then want to make sure to print the call sheet, which has all the different possibilities for the numbers and letters that would be called during your game of cento. Print out each, cut out each of these little tags and then on the back of each tag, you're going to place a line of poetry. Okay, for example, look in my face, my name is might have been. Okay, also make sure that you have the author written on your tag and then what you do is you place all of these in some kind of container. Maybe you have an actual bingo drum that you can rotate for this. Randomize your tags as well as you can and then, basically play a traditional game of bingo. Now once you or your writing partner or you class gets a a cento, which is five in a row, four corners, diagonal, however you want. Make sure that you set aside the tags that have actually been won by your person and then flip them over. Okay, so in this sample round I won C thirteen, C three, C seven, C eleven, C twelve. Okay, and the lines I got were; There was no talk of ever fixing it; I have seen roses; It was autumn; I married hard; the sky today; yes and no. So once you have these five lines that you've won from your game of cento the challenge is then to arrange the lines in such a way that you have a five line poem that sounds good, coherent, interesting, to you. Okay, and from here you can take any number of steps. You can play another round of cento, you can win five more lines and make a ten line poem or you can find a book from your library. For example, you could take, for instance, the Bible or Moby Dick or a biography that you happen to be reading. You can open up that book. Right here, in my bag, I happen to be reading the new memoir by Kate Christensen and you might look in the book, open up to random spots, find five more lines that stick out to you and then arrange them with the five lines that you won playing cento so that you have a ten line poem and then maybe what you do is you just treat this as if it's a hat and you draw two more lines from here and now you have a twelve line poem. And then you may, insert two lines from another source, from another book in your library, and then you'll have a sonnet of sorts. And, you know, by playing with the arrangement of lines you'll be able to think critically about how to compose your poem and how to revise it once, you know, you have a few lines that you like. You can customize your bingo drum, your cento drum, however you want. You could fill this container, for example, with lines of your own poetry that you're working

on and maybe they're in a file, you don't know what to do with these lines. Put them here and see if you can make something out of them by playing cento. You could choose lines from, from only one source. For example, sentences from Moby Dick and you could play that way. Basically, the point is to have fun with language and to take the pressure off of you to come up with brand new lines every time you, you sit down to write. So, that's cento bingo. Thank you.

-So in the spirit of play, appropriation, shaking up your practice, getting new ideas and new energies into your work. We'd like you to this week, either track down the BP April 2010 press release and do your own erasure on it, remembering to try to bring forth true emotion out of it, like Nick commanded his students to do...

-Or, play around in cento bingo, which is such a great word, isn't it? That alone gets my imagination going.

-Cento bingo!

-Cento bingo.