

Unsettling a Canonical Text through Erasure Poetry

Students in Toronto used the poetic technique of erasure—a form of found poetry—to develop imaginative responses to Fahrenheit 451.

On a snowy February afternoon in Toronto, thirty eighth-grade students look on as we present them with pages torn from Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. Having read and discussed the novel together, we invite students to use Bradbury's language to write a new text of their own. There is a hum of excitement and whispers in the room as students realize their teachers have "destroyed a book."

Bradbury's dystopian novel is set in a futuristic America where books are banned and destroyed if discovered. The protagonist, Montag, is a firefighter who burns books but slowly has a change of heart as he begins to question the purpose behind and consequences of his actions and the ideology of the society in which he lives. While *Fahrenheit 451* is considered canonical—once banned, but now frequently taught in schools—it presented the students with a dystopian vision of our own present and possible future, inviting us to engage with our participation in and rejection of issues of power, censorship, and the canon.

We handed out pages from Bradbury's text and invited the students to further "destroy" it with white correction fluid to create erasure poems; this involved selecting words or short phrases that stood out to them and obscuring the rest of the text on the page to create unique poems. As one student, Rodney, noted, he and his classmates discovered "[their] power . . . to remove words": destruction as a tool for invention.

In this article, we describe how inviting eighth-grade students to compose erasure poems with

Fahrenheit 451 encouraged them to unsettle the text and its language. We first discuss the context of this project and our methodology and situate our exploration of erasure poetry in relation to critical literacy (Janks) and creative writing (Ruefle). We then look at poems by two students, Ava and Oscar, as well as reflections by them and their classmates on the experience of rewriting *Fahrenheit 451* as a collection of erasure poems, which we titled *Free 451*. We conclude with implications for how the practice of erasure poetry can be a means of supporting students to respond directly and creatively to the texts they encounter in and outside of school.

ERASING AND RESEARCHING WITH STUDENTS

The erasure poems we present here were created by eighth graders from an ethnically diverse middle school in downtown Toronto who collaborated with their teacher, teacher candidates from University of Toronto, and us in a participatory research project called Addressing Injustices (www.addressinginjustices.com/). This multiyear project invites young people to investigate social issues prompted by texts such as *Fahrenheit 451*, to learn alongside teacher candidates from Rob's English methods class, and to use arts-based methods to share their findings in their school, as well as broader research and teaching communities through presentation and publication (Simon et al.).

Ava and Oscar were among the students who explored *Fahrenheit 451* with us. Our work took

place in Rob's university classroom and the students' middle school. This inquiry involved participatory action research (Cammarota and Fine) and practitioner research, which position teachers' and students' knowledge as central to transforming their classrooms, schools, and communities (Cochran-Smith and Lytle). Data include students' poems, written reflections, classroom conversations, and focus group discussions, as well as photos and videos documenting the students' arts creation.

Students read *Fahrenheit 451* on their own, then explored the novel together in seven workshops that we facilitated. On our first day together, we read aloud

a poem by Adrienne Rich and discussed her call to "use what we have to invent what we desire" (215) as a framework for our critical and creative responses to the book. We then brainstormed using a process we call "big paper," which entails students silently respond-

ing to significant themes and passages from the book in writing on chart paper (Simon; see Figure 1). Big paper allows students to engage with the range of their

peers' different perspectives and surfaces our collective initial questions and responses. We explored the book through sound inquiries, the erasure poems we describe here, as well as summative multimodal projects, which students presented at the American Educational Research Association in 2019. Ava's and Oscar's poems demonstrate how the students engaged in critically reconsidering the malleability of a text through rereading and rewriting the world (Freire) of *Fahrenheit 451* using its language.

REWRITING WORDS AND WORLDS

Educators have documented how critical literacy can support students to wrestle with issues such as climate change (Janks) or racial justice (Pennell) and how poetry can be a vehicle for social justice education (Christensen). Our work is inspired by these and other critical literacy scholars, but it is particularly informed by the work of Hilary Janks. She emphasizes that students must feel capable to not merely read the word and world as Paulo Freire suggests, but to also *rewrite* that world to better serve them and their communities. Janks et al. argue that "critical literacy work has to pay attention to questions of *power, diversity, access*, and both *design* and *redesign*, and to recognize their interdependence" (5; italics in original).

Elsewhere, Janks has suggested that critical literacy involves reading both with and against texts: "[t]o understand different points of view and the ideas of people we disagree with, we have to try to make sense of what they write" (561). Similarly, we regard writing erasure poetry as both an opportunity for students to engage deeply with a novel and an act of resistance and critical rewriting, or in Janks's framing, redesigning. Writing erasure poems allowed students to unsettle the fictional world of *Fahrenheit 451*, in which people are surveilled and stories are destroyed. It allowed them to look closely at the novel, using the act of erasure to analyze its dystopian world. In many ways, it also felt like a rejection of dystopian elements of the world we currently live in. The process of creating erasure poems allowed us to investigate censorship, the literary canon, the creative possibilities of resistance, and the creative

The process of creating erasure poems allowed us to investigate censorship, the literary canon, the creative possibilities of resistance, and the creative potential in destruction.



FIGURE 1.
Students explored their concerns about censorship using the activity "Big Paper."

potential in destruction. To erase a text is to be in conversation with it and to disrupt power relations.

USING ERASURE POETRY IN ELA CLASSROOMS

Linda Christensen has described how poetry is often taught in classrooms “as a memory Olympics for literary terminology: assonance, dissonance, dactyl, couplet, enjambment, hexameter, pentameter” (14). By contrast, erasure poetry shifts perspectives of what poetry and creative writing can look and feel like in ELA classrooms. Instead of memorizing figurative language and learning to write in iambic pentameter, students got their hands messy, working with language right away. Our starting point was not looking at poems or writing them from scratch, but engaging with words already on the page.

Recently, many poets and writers have used erasure with an array of published and personal texts to write—or erase—into political moments, movements, general disorder, and their lives. For example, poet and essayist Niina Pollari used erasure to engage with her N-400 forms for naturalizing in the United States. Former US poet laureate Tracy K. Smith wrote an erasure poem titled “Declaration” using the *Declaration of Independence*. Solmaz Sharif reimagined censored letters received by Guantanamo detainees, and Ariel Yelen made erasure poems using some of President Donald Trump’s speeches (qtd. in Stone). These writers seem to be exploring several inquiries at once: What can I do to this language on the page? What can this language on the page do to me? Erasure poetry surfaces how we are informed and altered by language and its implications.

REIMAGINING AND RE-CREATING WITH THE LANGUAGE OF *FAHRENHEIT 451*

On the day we presented the class with the torn-up book, we began the lesson with a discussion of erasure as a concept and explored what it means to remove, erase, or rewrite a text partially or completely and, ultimately, who gets to decide. We looked at one of Mary Ruefle’s erasure books of poems titled *A Little White Shadow* and discussed what it would mean to

do this to an entire book. We discussed censorship of *Fahrenheit 451* and how censorship of this book and other texts continues today (see Figure 1). Students were acutely aware and excited that they read a book considered “dangerous” by some, asking questions such as: What makes a story dangerous? What does it mean to live in a society that censors stories?

Each student was given a few loose pages of *Fahrenheit 451* and invited to scan each page, underline words or short phrases that stood out to them, as well as letters from multiple words to be combined and form a new word of their choice. When students felt like their work with the page was complete, they used white correction fluid to obscure the remaining text, resulting in a poem that did not need to “make sense” or adhere to any traditional notions of narrative. This activity is particularly welcoming for students who have difficulties engaging with more conventional—often creatively limiting or overwhelming—invitations to write.

Students had control of the page. When they held the white correction fluid and made decisions about language and the story they would tell, they became the authorities. We discussed how erasure of a text differs from burning the original book since *Fahrenheit 451* remains under the white correction fluid and haunts the rewritten text we titled *Free 451* (see Figures 2–5). This process was collaborative; not only did we do this work alongside each other, but our book *Free 451* is also an artefact of our collective efforts in collaborating with the dystopian novel.

Poet and educator Maya Pindyck reminds us through Deleuze:

The simultaneous act of reading-writing that erasure requires abandons commonsense reading level logic for a different, more intuitive logic: a logic of sense that resists communication and even meaning making . . . [so that] reading becomes a matter of attunement to the creative possibilities of the page’s words and spaces Through a process of intuitive scanning, students select *their words*. (60; italics in original)

Not only does this activity invite students to engage with rewriting and reimagining a preexisting text, but it also asks that they engage and strengthen

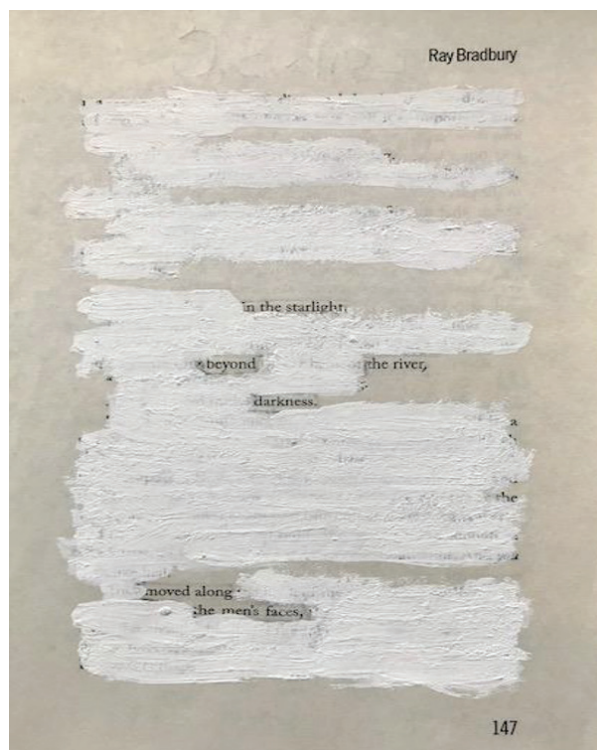


FIGURE 2.
Ava maintained the solace of the narrative in the original text in her poem “in the starlight . . .”

something not always invited or cultivated in classrooms: their intuition. Engaging with intuition offers students the space to assert, explore, and further know themselves (Sadowski). When we look closely at several erasure poems, we see what students accomplished with our invitation.

One of Ava's erasure poems (see Figure 2) reads: “In the starlight / beyond the river / darkness / moved along / the men's faces.” On this page of the novel the protagonist, Montag, has discovered a small community who have also escaped the State physically and mentally and are, unlike law-abiding citizens, keepers of stories. Montag finds solace in these fellow fugitives. Ava has partially kept the narrative of the original text. She notes in her poem Montag's blind faith in these obscured identities under the stars; a hope in the unknowable, infinite future seeps into the final pages of the novel.

Another poem by Ava (see Figure 3), only four pages later, reads: “The / dreadful yet sudden / whisper of / shattered / memories / was / the / scream of the / dead.” Ava's poem uses words from the culminating section of Bradbury's novel in which Montag watches on from a distance as the government he was

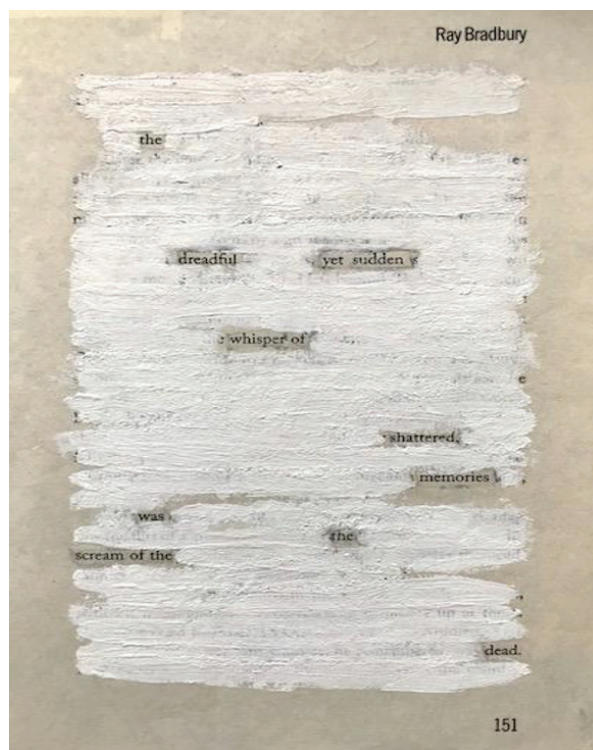


FIGURE 3.
Ava harnessed the confusion of the novel's summative moments in “the dreadful yet sudden . . .”

previously complicit with is destroyed by a war that begins and ends simultaneously. In her poem, Ava chose to express this immediacy and confusion by juxtaposing both a whisper and a scream in the open space of the page. Ava's poem is urgent and asserts that a single sound can be both a whisper and a scream, depending on one's proximity to the voice and life.

In responding to what writing her erasure poems provided, Ava remarked: “I think it did give me a better understanding of the book and showed me that so much can be done with words, even if they're already in a story.” Here, students were invited to play with words and phrases that are not necessarily in their repository of expression. When we discussed the process and our poems at the end of the lesson, Ava remarked that the story seemed “darker” than she remembered. When students sat with individual pages of the text and used white correction fluid to compose poems, some were genuinely surprised by elements of the book they had read; the poems were a way to connect to the text.

What does this engagement convey about students' expanding experience and interpretation of the novel? In further reflecting on what this process

of whiting out sections of text offered, one eighth-grade student, Rodney, remarked:

I removed certain words because I just felt that they would not really work with the poem I was creating. I just kind of wrote my poem as I went along. There was no real structure. This helped me understand the book because of the power I had to remove words.

While Rodney became aware of his own power to create with words, another student, Oscar, remarked on his power in destruction: “I was trying to make a surrealist poem that sparked an image in people’s heads. It made me realize how powerful it is to destroy things.” Oscar shared with us that he had some knowledge of surrealism and knew there was value in a nonlinear, perhaps not entirely cohesive, text. This was something other students struggled with at times during our in-class erasing. They needed to be encouraged and reminded that short phrases and interesting stand-alone words can be part of their poems.

Figure 4 shows Oscar’s first attempt at an erasure poem: “Consider / the individual / Consider / the / flapping / rhythm / of / earth / people.” The meditative calm of Oscar’s poem is in contradistinction to the intensity of this moment in the novel, in which the protagonist, Montag, describes backing away from a “man with the insane, gorged face, the gibbering, dry mouth, the flapping book in his fist” (75). While Bradbury emphasizes the feeling of alienation and separation in his dystopia, Oscar used the author’s words to offer a vision of quiet consideration, interconnection, and empathy.

Oscar’s second poem (see Figure 5) explores the relationship of destruction to knowledge: “Please / laugh quietly / I can’t be / afraid / we were always traveling / Better to keep it in / where no one can see it / It’s here / wrapped up in its own coat / I was blind trying to / send in alarms. / But our way is / to keep the knowledge / intact and safe. / if we are destroyed, / knowledge is dead.” Rereading Oscar’s poem, we wonder about the destruction that he found on this page, the quiet within which the speaker experiences laughter. This poem is created from the same pivotal moment in the novel as Ava’s second poem, when Montag discovers a group who resist the government’s attempt to destroy books and suppress knowledge by becoming the books themselves: “we are all bits and

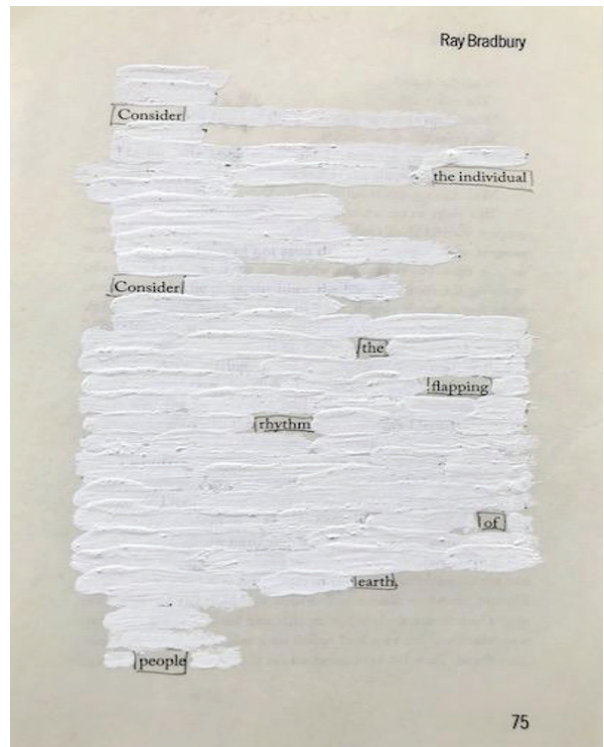


FIGURE 4.
Oscar's poem "Consider the individual" emerges from page 75 of Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

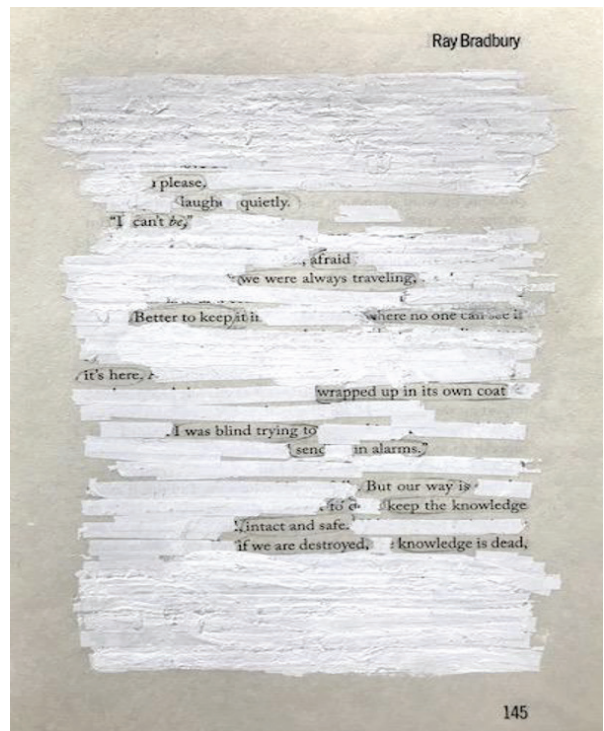


FIGURE 5.
Oscar's erasure poem "Please laugh" explores knowledge and life.

pieces of history and literature” (145). In Oscar’s reimagining, knowledge is unmoored from Bradbury’s more traditional vision of information residing in books. His poem may describe self-knowledge, knowledge in action, knowledge acquired through living, reading, or even writing. Oscar’s poem explores how knowledge is connected to life.

One of the central themes of *Fahrenheit 451* is the process and power of destruction, which is intertwined with knowledge and truth. As one of Oscar’s classmates, Ophelia, reflected, “I think that in [*Fahrenheit 451*] the government eradicated the books because they wanted to paint a picture of a better world, but books tell truths.” If students become writers, even poets, then they are entering into the arena of storytelling, of truth-telling. When Ava, Oscar, Ophelia, and other students wrote erasure poems, something important happened; not only did they create a text by “censoring” another text, but they also became aware that all texts, and thus the authors who write them, are at risk of being censored, silenced, or erased.

One student, Chico, aptly explained:

I didn’t keep what was going on in the story [when making poems]. This reminded me in the story when the firemen started fires to burn books. These firemen could completely change what the real story is . . . which leaves the civilians clueless, not ever knowing that information.

Chico acknowledges the danger in not knowing and the risk in someone else, a government or governing body for instance, having the power to decide what knowledge is accessible. The echoes of Bradbury’s 1953 dystopian novel in our present society are uncanny. Students expressed their awareness of these conditions, and we were inspired by their refusal to be controlled and censored.

DESTRUCTING THE CANON TO INSPIRE A REBIRTH

When we invited students to write erasure poems, we knew there were thematic echoes of censorship from the novel *Fahrenheit 451*, but we could not foresee students’ keen awareness of how censorship influenced their lives. How often are students invited to push back against the censoring in and of their lives? In composing these poems many students for the

first time erased or “did harm” to a canonical text. Canonical texts and the stories therein have historically done harm in obvious or obscure ways to many of us. Erasure poetry can be a way to engage with the canon on terms that the canon often engages us as readers: Through the seemingly arbitrary act of what, and whom, it includes or excludes.

Inspired in part by our erasure poems, and building from questions they raised in our big paper activity, students explored censorship in their summative creative responses to the novel. For example, one group wrote personal stories on dissolvable paper, which they destroyed in a basin of water. A second group wrote “stories that most mattered to them” in their home languages, including Yiddish and Lithuanian, and bound them into a book, which they burned. A third group created a library of historically banned books that included notecards detailing how authors have been harmed, criminalized, or killed for writing their stories. These and other projects creatively demonstrate students’ concerns about how censorship can be a form of erasure that undermines their agency as readers, writers, and creators in the world.

At a time when teachers may feel pressure to either uphold or entirely discard the canon, we recognize there is still value in reading texts like Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* in public schools. Writer, activist, and educator bell hooks asserts that we need the language we have been offered, and the literature we have been given, even if that is the literary canon. We need, to invoke Adrienne Rich, to use what we have to invent something new, which we cannot know until we have created it. In many ways, we need the canon if only to disrupt the canon (hooks 167–75).

We know education conditions students to believe, in covert and overt ways, that whatever is written in books is incontestably true. Or, more harmfully, that books hold *more* truth than our own lived experiences. If, as educators, we can offer different experiences of the texts we engage with alongside our students, perhaps that has the potential to alter students’ methods of engagement in the world. Our erasing of Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451* was more than just a way to make an old thing new, or a way to make a thing that maybe is not obviously relevant to us, relevant. It was, in Janks’s terms, simultaneously

a critical interrogation of a text and a practice of autonomy and power.

Many students grappled with what *Fahrenheit 451*'s protagonist Montag grapples with in the novel—the search for meaning in life through stories and personal connection as these endeavours resist the legal, political, and social values in a dystopian world. During a class discussion, Ava was preoccupied with the destruction and rebirth in the novel and pointed out the concept of “rebirth and growing from the ashes,” which is what our erasure poems are in a way: the rebirth of a text, if not the birth of something entirely new. In reflecting on the experience as a whole, Ava remarked:

There wasn't any real connection to [the book] until I started to analyze it. Normally I would not get the chance to analyze the book through poems and other forms of art, so it was a new experience. The poems showed the true emotions and meaning of the book. When choosing only a few words from a page of a book, you tend to choose the most “important” ones. Not to say other words aren't important, but the words that were chosen probably hold the most emotion. Using the poems to analyze this book was just as, if not more, effective than using the more common reports and projects that we are given.

Through composing the poems, students became aware that erasure is more than a way to engage with a text's malleability, it is also something we enact in our own malleable lives. Ruefle suggests, “life is much, much more than is necessary, and much, much more than any of us can bear, so we erase it or it erases us.” So, when students who erase (knowingly and not) so much in their daily lives are invited to *intentionally* erase a canonical text, they are purposefully developing a skill related to a familiar act. Erasure is not just deciding what stays, but it is simultaneously deciding what goes, in poetry and in life. **EJ**

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NOTE

All student names, except Oscar's, are pseudonyms.



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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

While this article asks students to erase text written by someone else, this lesson plan invites students to make cuts to their own writing. Students begin by improving a slide presentation by removing pictures. They translate their reasons for cutting pictures into reasons for cutting unnecessary words and sections from their own memoirs. This lesson is designed to help students detect revision needs by using visual literacy as a scaffold for identifying revision issues in their own writing. <http://bit.ly/2gNvkyn>

#32 Whose Muse

Sun slides into the sky,
pale teachers pass out pale poems
with their menagerie of creatures:

Dickinson's hope bird
Blake's innocent lamb
Shakespeare's exit bear

Whose muse

They do not claim me

Whose muse

Greek and Romans are not all origins

Yet I am to carry them

Whose muse

For who do I carry

You muse

Maybe in the midnight moonlight
cradle of my mind, heart to home—India
the mystic, creator of *bhakti*,
condemner of caste—Kabir,
my muse, is in the mud of the lotus

uncontaminated, uncolonized.

Whose muse

You muse

When they make me

carry their sonnets,

oh, how my Sikh Sufi suffers

Make space for our people's songs:

Kabir's *chakora*, lovesick moon-bird

Nanak's nibbling deer

Tagore's human tiger

for all sides of the soul

Whose muse

You muse

Who's this all for

Who

You

—VICTORIA SINGH GILL

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