

Making *Fahrenheit 451* “Come to Life”: Sound Inquiries with Youth and Teachers

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“When I read a book now I kinda analyze it more. Not through grammar, but through emotions.”

—Ava, eighth-grade student

We noticed the sounds of bodies shifting in chairs. We could hear breathing. Several eighth-grade students described hearing:

“hushed laughs . . . sighs . . . whispering . . . bracelets.”

We heard the subway passing six floors below. We had a heightened awareness of the space and of ourselves and each other in it.

Ava (all students and teacher candidates are identified by pseudonyms) was one of a large group of eighth-grade students. Along with their teacher and teacher candidates from Rob’s English methods course, Ava and her classmates attempted to pass a single broadsheet page of a newspaper as silently as possible around the circle. We sat quietly and let the subtle sounds travel to our ears while we searched for ways to describe what we heard.

Click <https://bit.ly/3dLve7S> to listen: “Clip 1: Sound and Listening Exercises.”

Another round of passing followed. This time each person tried to find different sounds to make with the newspaper page. Again, we listened. Ava and her peers searched for words to describe the sounds that traveled from hands and paper to our ears (see Figure 1):

“Crumple . . . shake . . . air . . . wind . . . crinkly . . . crinkles . . . ripple . . . tears . . . rips . . . folding . . . shaking . . . unfurling.”

Our silent passing of the newspaper was multi-sensory. While we listened, we could see each other move with effort and anticipation: hoping, individually and together, to pass the page from touch to touch without sound. This period of focus and silence, and the work that followed which we describe below, challenged our understandings of how students interact with each other and with texts in a classroom. How do sound and

listening shape students’ relationships to literary texts, to one another, and to the world?

In this article, we describe how eighth-grade students and teacher candidates used sound and listening to read, remix, and attune themselves (Stewart, 2011) to the dystopian novel *Fahrenheit 451* by Ray Bradbury (2011). We begin by situating our sound inquiries in relation to critical literacy (e.g., Vasquez et al., 2019; Wargo, 2019) and sound education (Oliveros, 2005; Schafer, 1992, 2005). We then describe the context of our research, including our decision to teach *Fahrenheit 451*, and our methodology. We share examples of how students and teacher candidates used sound to deepen their reading of the text and, in the words of a participating teacher candidate, make *Fahrenheit 451* “come to life.” These examples suggest how sound inquiry, which we define as exploring our environments and media through heightened listening and attention to/creation with sound, can encourage students and teachers to engage with their surroundings, with each other, and with canonical texts like *Fahrenheit 451* in transformative ways in critical literacy classrooms.

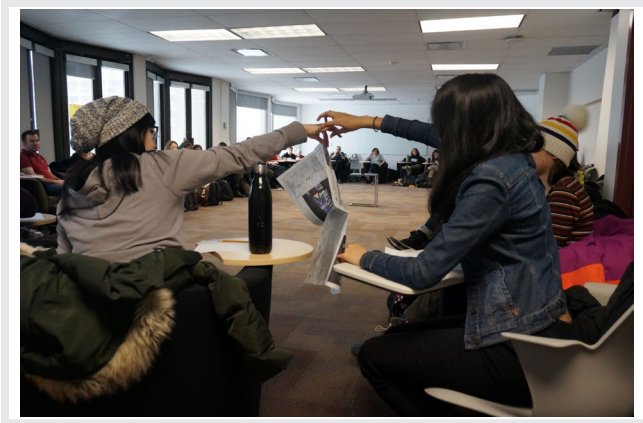
Critical Literacy and Sound

Vasquez et al., (2019) have described critical literacy as “a way of being and doing” that foregrounds students’ lives and the social issues that impact their communities (p.

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Figure 1
Passing a Newspaper without Making a Sound



Note. The color figure can be viewed in the online version of this article at <http://ila.onlinelibrary.wiley.com>.

308). Other scholars have documented how critical literacy facilitates children's cultural and transnational experiences (Ghiso, 2016), as well as their explorations of pressing social issues such as racial justice (Pennell, 2019). Building on the work of the New London Group (1996) and more recent research in critical literacy and multimodality (e.g., Ávila & Pandya, 2012; Garcia et al., 2015; Ríos, 2017), these and other scholars have expanded what counts as texts in critical literacy classrooms, inviting a broad range of arts-based practices including sound.

For example, Wargo (2018a, 2019) has documented how students' critical inquiries are deepened by sound and listening. Wargo (2019) notes the importance of "students' own inquiry through processes of personal production" (p. 284). Elsewhere, Wargo (2018b) has described how sound in critical literacy classrooms can act as an "atmospheric partner" (p. 506) to attune listeners to difference, a way for teachers and students to not only read (Freire, 1975/2010) but also remix, rearrange, and transform the world.

As part of our sound inquiries, students produced sound plays that included audio of their readings of the text with accompanying sounds they selected or performed. Although there is research on using podcasts (Goodson & Skillen, 2010; Smythe, & Neufeld, 2010; Wilson et al., 2012) and radio plays (Owens, 2013) in English classrooms, we use *sound play* to draw attention to and center sound and listening as ways of interacting with texts. These plays and our broader sound inquiry were informed by the work of Gershon (2017) and Aoki (1991), who critique the prioritization of sight over hearing in curriculum and suggest possibilities for centering sound in the classroom. Shipka (2016), however,

cautions that educators "stand to gain little by inverting existing hierarchies" privileging any single sense or sign system over another (p. 255). Sound and listening pedagogies illuminate how our experiences in classrooms are multi-sensorially charged; foreground haptic, more physically embodied, responses to texts as a basis for critical investigations; and may help teachers know their students better by revealing how students engage with the many texts and contexts they navigate (Freire, 1975/2010).

Music educator Joseph Abramo (2014) suggests that there is an intimacy unique to sound. He asserts that seeing positions an object as fixed and separate from us, whereas hearing an object involves continually shifting sounds that are both separate and connected to our bodies (p. 81). Similarly, ethnomusicologist Beverly Diamond (2016) suggests that "sound, like movement, is experienced as vibration," and that it "enters our body, enlivening and energizing [us]" (p. 243). Our awareness of this fully physical shifting and waning experience of sound and listening can deepen our presence and our attention to our bodies and each other, as it brings about new understandings of how we might learn and research together in classrooms.

What sounds can you hear now as you read?

What sounds are farthest away from you?

What is the first sound you can remember hearing?

Can you still hear it now?

Co-learning and Co-researching with Students and Teacher Candidates

For the past 5 years in our participatory research project, Addressing Injustices (www.addressinginjustices.com), we have invited eighth-grade students from a public alternative school in downtown Toronto to inquire together with teacher candidates from Rob's methods course at the University of Toronto (OISE). We read novels such as *Maus* (Speigelman, 2011), *Beautiful Music for Ugly Children* (Cronn-Mills, 2012), and *Fahrenheit 451* (Bradbury, 2011) that we hope will inspire students and teachers to investigate issues related to identity, culture, and power, and respond creatively through arts-based methods.

An example of what literary theorist Roland Barthes (1974) might call a *writerly* text, *Fahrenheit 451* is written in a style that invites readers to construct their own meanings, making it a perfect canvas for sound inquiry. Bradbury's dystopian novel describes an America that embraces censorship, restricts knowledge, and outlaws

and destroys books. There is no music in this novel, no one sings. The sounds referred to in the story are often those of a battlefield: shouting voices, sirens, crackling fires, and helicopters. The protagonist, Montag, is a fireman, whose job demands burning books. The novel chronicles Montag's crisis of faith and eventual active resistance to the society he has worked to uphold. Although it was published in 1953, *Fahrenheit 451* is still commonly taught in public schools throughout North America. We found contemporary resonances with Bradbury's novel, and chose to use the book to explore how students and teachers might disrupt the placement of canonical works above students' voices and affective responses as well as less represented stories (Dallacqua & Sheahan, 2020; Thomas, 2016), to provide opportunities for them to make Bradbury's dystopian novel their own, and to explore issues in the world today.

The 30 eighth-grade students were from a small public alternative school that emphasizes a concern for social justice and project-based learning. Our research partner, Sarah, was their teacher, and the work that we engaged in with *Fahrenheit 451* was a part of a 7-week unit in her English Language Arts classroom. These students and the 20 teacher candidates were partners in the research process, which took place at the university and middle school, both located in downtown Toronto. Our collective inquiries were informed by critical practitioner research (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Simon et al., 2012) and participatory action research (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), traditions which center the knowledge and experiences of teachers and students. We invited teacher candidates and students to be co-learners, co-teachers, and co-researchers, who raise and explore questions together in response to the shared text. Our research is concerned with transforming literacy education and also, in the case of the examples we share in this article, exploring how traditionally conceived music education might be expanded (Friesen, 2009) and how it can be taken up outside of the music classroom.

Along with other members of our research team, we facilitated seven workshops with teacher candidates and students over several months from January to March 2019. These included opportunities for everyone to respond to *Fahrenheit 451* through writing—including recreating the book as a series of erasure poems entitled *Free 451* (Allen & Simon, 2021)—and multimedia arts projects—including a life-size papier-mâché figure papered with pages from banned books, and a short film of students burning stories that most matter to them—which 18 students presented at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting (AERA) in 2019.

Data and Analysis

In addition to the sound plays we describe here, our data include transcriptions of classroom sound and listening explorations and our discussions of how centering sound felt to students (for examples of classroom sound activities, see Figure 1). We analyzed reflections written by eighth-grade students and teacher candidates about their experiences with our sound and listening activities and the sound plays they created. After the sound plays were completed, students participated in focus group discussions, which we recorded and transcribed. Our analysis involved re-listening and reading student reflections and transcripts of our discussions and focus groups. In revisiting this work, we uncovered some common themes such as surveillance, censorship, the power and authority of the state, and the necessity of stories. We also accounted for student perspectives and creative work that did not fit these themes, what Elizabeth St. Pierre (2018) has called the “too much” (p. 607).

For this article, we returned to student's completed sound plays, which they recorded and edited using GarageBand. As part of this process, we deconstructed the sound plays into their separate components (tracks, takes, and sounds) in order to delve deeper into students' creative, critical, and technical choices (e.g., their edits, repetitions, choice of effects, and layering). Our process of re-listening and analysis was inspired by Patricia Carini's (2011) collaborative description of art, which challenges educators to look and listen to student work without quick judgments.

We used sound-making practices to analyze our data, inspired by Laurel Richardson's (1997) poetic methods of analysis and Kodwo Eshun's (1998) use of *sonic fiction* to describe funk musicians and DJs remixing of the past in order to change the present and transform the future. Rather than just listen to, label, and code students' sound plays as fixed works, we used Launchpad, an application made for DJing, to remix them. Doug placed sounds from the various projects next to each other, chopped them up, and looped and layered them in order to create new combinations. Interacting with the data through live remix helped us to elicit themes and fresh perspectives on students' sound work, and experience what they heard when they read the novel. It also informed our teaching. We shared remixes of the sound plays to encourage students and teacher candidates to listen back and attune themselves (Stewart, 2011) to their own and others' creative processes and responses to the text. Similarly, performing the data in this way helped attune us to students' conceptual and material choices.

Anthropologist Kathleen Stewart (2011) describes atmospheric attunements as “an intimate, compositional process of dwelling” in which “things matter not because of how they are represented but because they have qualities, rhythms, forces, relations, and movements” (p. 445). Stewart (2011) suggests that attending to atmospheric attunement involves “writing and theorizing that tries to stick with something becoming atmospheric, to itself resonate or tweak the force of material-sensory somethings forming up” (p. 452). This approach to teaching and analyzing students’ sound plays allowed them to resonate, dissipate, wane, and move, for ourselves and for our students. In creating sound plays from excerpts of *Fahrenheit 451*, students made critical, creative, and interpretive choices as they unpacked and performed responses to the text.

Sound Inquiries

We began our inquiry into sound with listening exercises influenced by composers, educators, and sound practitioners Pauline Oliveros (2005, 2013) and R. Murray Schafer (1992, 2005) (see Tables 1 and 2 for how we did this and for additional ideas for teaching with sound). As we described in the opening vignette, we sat in a circle listening to the sounds we made with the newspaper page as well as objects students and teacher candidates brought to class with them. We discussed the different ways we each heard the same sounds, what a deep focus on our sense of hearing feels like, and how it might attune us to the world differently.

One eighth-grade student, Chico, said this helped him “to just slow down and think about everything.” He later recalled engaging in careful listening while riding the streetcar: “You can just pay attention to every single sound, and you can have a completely *different* experience.” For Chico and other students, listening and sound offered chances for more embodied physical sensations of and connections to texts and environments. Sound and sounding (making sounds), along with quiet moments of deep listening, provide a chance to make the familiar strange and newly interesting (Erickson, 1986), to take note of what goes unnoticed. Listening itself is multi-sensory—as Ceraso (2018) notes, listening, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touch are all interconnected. In other words, we “hear” with our entire bodies.

We shifted from listening and describing to asking the students to look for and imagine sound within excerpts of *Fahrenheit 451* that we had previously selected. The research team intentionally chose these excerpts as sections that are rich with descriptions of action and scenery that could prompt a reader to sense

Table 1
Bringing Sound Into the Classroom

Bringing Sound Into the Classroom:

- **Sound and Tell**—Bring an interesting sound object from home (i.e., ratchet) and share it with the class without telling them what it is. Ask the class to try describing what they hear without guessing/labeling what it is.
- **Daily Sounds**—Write a description of a sound you hear every day, for example when you first wake up in the morning. Try to describe it without saying what it is. Describe it to a friend.
- **Sound Walk**—Go for a walk and just listen. Does focusing on sound change the experience? Try a walk with others and compare your descriptions of what you heard.
- **One Sound Once** (Oliveros, 2013, p. 41)—Breathe and listen. Each person makes one sound once; the piece ends when everyone has made their sound. Describe what you heard.

Table 2
Using Sound to Explore Texts

Using Sound to Explore Texts:

- **Search for sound in novels or short stories**—Are there sounds that reoccur? Are there soundmarks (sounding landmarks)?
- **How might different characters experience the sounds differently?**
- **Read with a focus on sound**—Read a short passage four times. What changes when:
 - We each read separately, silently?
 - We read aloud together?
 - We read aloud while adding literal, contextual, or ambient sounds? (these can be created by the class or downloaded from the BBC Sound Archive <http://bbcsfx.acropolis.org.uk>)
 - We read aloud with an ambient sound creatively chosen? (these can be made by students with sound objects or found online)
- **Remix a reading**—Use GarageBand, soundtrap, Fruity Loops, or any other digital audio workstation to record a reading. Remix it. Edit, loop, rearrange, add sounds and effects, etc.
- **Other senses**—Are there references in the text to smell, taste, or touch? How does centering these senses change how you read?

the scene. Before students and teacher candidates made their sound plays, we used sound to respond to the text as a class. Doug read aloud the following passage of the novel, in which the character Clarrise laments how quickly people are forced to live life:

I sometimes think drivers don't know what grass is, or flowers, because they never see them slowly," she said. "If you showed a driver a green blur, Oh yes! He'd say, that's grass! A pink blur? That's a rose garden! White blurs are horses. Brown blurs are cows. My uncle drove slowly on a highway once. He drove forty miles an hour and they jailed him for two days. Isn't that funny, and sad too? (Bradbury, 2011, p. 6)

We asked the students and teacher candidates to list sounds that are referred to in this passage, as well as sounds they imagined while they listened to the passage being read. We collectively decided which sounds we wanted to add, how best to make them, and when they should occur. Some sounds were made by using objects that students brought to the class with them; others were created with our bodies and voices. Doug then reread the passage while students and teacher candidates performed their sounds.

After our performance of the text with sound, we discussed the creative and interpretive choices students made, and how listening to this reading felt different. Students and teacher candidates, many talking at once, described their excitement about the experience: "...aww, it was so sad...I wanted more sounds...the whoosh of cars driving past...I heard the wind blowing in the grass after the cars passed...I wanted the slamming of a cell door." Matthew, a teacher candidate, reflected, "I never really thought about...reading as such a visual act." Once we began engaging with *Fahrenheit 451* using sound, many students became curious about deepening their experience through considering smells or tastes in the text. Jack reflected, "It was nice to hear the book. Like, it was cool—cause it was like you're *experiencing* it" (see Table 2 for a step-by-step description of this process along with other ideas for using sound with texts).

Barthes (1985) suggested that the ear is "a funnel leading to the interior" and "to listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred...in order to make available to the consciousness the 'underside' of meaning" (p. 248–249). Our sound inquiries helped us take note of and even compose or transform the emotional content of the text, and set the stage for the group sound plays that followed.

Sound Plays: "Imagining the vibe of the text"

Following our introductory sound and listening activities, we assembled students and teacher candidates into small working groups, and asked each of them to create a sound play of a short excerpt from the novel we had chosen. Groups went to different rooms to record a

reading accompanied by made-in-the-moment sounds that were referred to in the text or that they felt would provide atmosphere. Students then had a chance to work on these remixes over several days. With Doug's help, students edited and layered sounds, adding additional effects, such as echo, distortion, or dynamics to what they had previously recorded.

Listening back to the sound plays, we noticed the wide variety of literal sounds students and teacher candidates added to the text. Their sound choices range from human sounds such as breathing, whispers, screams, gasps, and footsteps, to atmospheric sounds such as mosquitoes buzzing, bombs exploding, doors slamming, planes flying close overhead, coins jangling, and computer automated voices. Many of these sounds occur quickly, in direct reference to moments within the text. One group, however, decided to keep a continual rain sound throughout their entire reading, which adds a sense of dark foreboding.

Other sound choices were more interpretive. For example, one group added a cracking, short and fast sound (like paper being shaken) behind the line "an electronic ocean of sound" (Bradbury, 2011, p. 10). Another group recorded a three-part harmonic chord of "zzzzz" to mimic "The [electronic] seashell hummed in [Montag's] ear" (p. 118). These sounds offer a window into students' interpretative process and also invite the listener's own sensorial connections and interpretations.

One group began their sound play by replacing text with sounds. The sound of fluttering cards takes the place of the phrase "flutter of cards" (Bradbury, 2011, p. 29). This is followed by a sound interpretation of the phrase "motion of hands" (p. 29). The group chose to switch readers every sentence, intentionally removing some phrases and words. Listening to this sound play is a disorienting experience, which mimics the novel's protagonist, Montag's, growing feelings of disorientation.

Fahrenheit 451 is indeed unsettling, evoking impressions of a crumbling society. Students' sound plays invoke this atmosphere in various ways: through loud sounds such as screeches, jets humming, and bombs exploding that are interjected; with cries, sobs, and frightened gasps that accompany reading. They also make use of contextual, ambient noises, reflecting their environment, from quieter rooms to echoing stairwells, and noisy classrooms.

One group, consisting of three teacher candidates and five eighth-grade students, created a sound play for one of the culminating scenes in which Montag is pursued by a "Mechanical Hound" for the crime of harboring books:

Hell! and he was away and gone! The alley, a street, the alley, a street, and the smell of the river. Leg out, leg down, leg out and down. Twenty million Montags running, soon, if the cameras caught him. Twenty million Montags running, running like an ancient flickery Keystone Comedy, cops, robbers, chasers and the chased, hunters and hunted, he had seen it a thousand times. Behind him now twenty million silently baying Hounds ricocheted across parlors... (Bradbury, 2011, p. 131)

Click <https://bit.ly/3dLve7S> to listen: “Clip 2: Excerpt from students’ and teacher candidates’ sound play of *Fahrenheit 451*.”

Sound inquiry pushed the students—and us as we listened to their sound play—beyond the words of this excerpt. Amy, one of the students in this group, reflected: “As the scene got more and more intense, more and more people would add in their footsteps, so it would be like eight people all [stomping their feet on the floor] at once, and it would get really intense.” She described how the group initially approached planning sounds for their excerpt: “If you *feel* there should be a sound... just go ahead and add it.” Amy later mentioned that this attention to sound helped her “imagine the ‘vibe’ of the text.”

As Amy’s reflection suggests, this group made full use of their voices, bodies, and found sounds in reimagining *Fahrenheit 451*. Elisabeth, a teacher candidate, remembered it took them a while to determine what sounds they should work with: “We wanted to make the sounds realistic and sometimes it took time to think of how parts of the text might be associated with sound... such as Montag stopping in his tracks.” In spite of these challenges, the group performed their sound play in one take with no edits, overdubs, or added effects. Elisabeth initially felt that the group’s focus was on sound effects rather than mood or atmosphere. After listening again, she felt impressed with how their recorded performance explored the text “in deeper and different ways.” According to Elisabeth and others, the group’s creative process was democratic; they listened to each other’s interpretations and ideas, and worked together to create their shared composition.

When we listen to the group’s sound play, we notice volume transitions, phrasing, shifting rhythms, and contrasting abrupt silences, which give dramatic, musical shape to the text. Their sound play accompanies the climax of the book. After some exploration with adding realistic sounds for wind, breath, running, and the murmur of television-like walls, the group yells “Hell!” This is a turning point, when the protagonist, Montag, realizes that he is the subject of the news report he is watching.

The group’s sounds intensify and become more layered and atmospheric. Their collective shout punctuates the moment, which immediately begins to grow again with the stomping of feet and a higher pitched ringing sound. The stomping quickens and begins to include the sounds of breathing (presumably from those furiously stomping). A ringing crescendo comes to a full stop before the news report begins, spoken in a different voice. The report is going directly into the protagonist Montag’s ear, represented by an echoing murmur from a third voice.

The narrator once again describes Montag’s thoughts and feelings, in contrast with the news report counting down to his capture. Behind this rhythmic back and forth, the sounds build—feet stomping, bells ringing, doors slamming, and people yelling—and it all resolves in a sudden silence. As listeners, this extended, chaotic soundscape holds us in tension. The final silence makes space for Montag—and the listener—to realize that the news report claiming his capture is fiction, that he is free, and that every report he may have been fed by the government-controlled media projected onto his walls may, too, have been false.

The group’s use of musical phrasing and development—building, rising, and falling—throughout their sound play keeps the listener fully present and connects us to their interpretations of the text. Our own breathing rhythm shifts and halts alongside that of these students and also that of the character in the novel, which happen together in the sound play. As we listen, we simultaneously confront the complexity of Montag’s mixture of relief and horror, and students’ critical, creative, and emotional responses to a literary text.

Coda: Implications

Rather than approaching Bradbury’s (2011) novel with reverence, students and teacher candidates constructively disrupted and remade the text through sound. They chopped up the book, omitted and replaced words, and layered their own screams and stomps into and alongside Bradbury’s words. In the process, they made a canonical text their own.

Ava reflected on her practice of reading after these experiences: “When I read a book now I kinda analyze it more, if that makes sense. Not through grammar, but through emotions.” Ava’s comment suggests how students went beyond decoding to search for their own affective meaning through re-reading and restorying (Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2016) *Fahrenheit 451*.

As Janks (2002) notes, critical literacy classrooms should not focus only on “critical deconstruction” but

also make space for “students’ affective engagement with texts” (p. 9). Teachers and students can benefit from greater attention to the ways that emotions circulate in our encounters with literature. In other words, our emotional and multi-sensory responses shape our engagements with texts and contexts.

Students’ sound inquiries supported their atmospheric (re)attunement (Stewart, 2011) to their surroundings, to *Fahrenheit 451*, and to each other. While we have described many benefits of sound inquiry in a literature class, we are reluctant to regard this as a virtuous paradigm. Although sound can—physically, via vibrations of particles in the air, and emotionally—connect us to one another, we are grateful for the insights of ethnomusicologist and Stó:lō scholar, Dylan Robinson (2014), who warns us about “conflating the collapse of distance with the collapse of difference” (p. 282). Each of us brings our own cultural perspectives and sensorial experiences to our engagement with texts.

Sound inquiry can invite students’ embodied responses to texts but also attune us to difference in material ways. This has the potential to surface tensions or contentious readings, but acknowledging differences may also present opportunities, “potentially productive moments where dialogue might begin” (Diamond, 2016, p. 245). This feels particularly hopeful and necessary in a time in which many of us, students and teachers alike, may feel a heightened sense of disconnection or distance from one another.

Our inquiries centered listening as well as sounding. Documentarian Astra Taylor (2020) describes listening as an underappreciated, deeply political act. She observes that although “[we] expect powerful people to be talkers, not listeners...to listen is to act; of that, there’s no doubt. It takes effort and doesn’t happen by default.” Deeper listening, to one another and to our surroundings, can lead to new ways of interacting with texts and to more democratic practices of teaching, learning, and researching.

Frierean (1975/2010) problem-posing learning is rooted in dialogue—talking and listening—across difference. Yet, our engagements with canonical texts like *Fahrenheit 451* in classrooms are most often demonstrated by talking, being talked to, and being asked to talk. What if we began and ended with listening?

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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