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Critical Listening for Social Change:

The Possibility of "Playback" in English Language Arts

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Abstract

In the last two decades, there has been an expansion of the literacies that are part of adolescents' lives. Although sound proliferates the lives of youth, little attention has been given to understanding the possibilities of sonic education and the capacity of listening as a space for literacy activism in school. With the recognition that more teachers are embracing critical literacy, this article pays attention to the affordances of sound for supporting civic imagination. Drawing on data from adolescents' sound-based compositions, this article offers listening as critical practice. We found three elements that characterized listening as a critical practice: (1) listening to participate, (2) becoming audience to one's own voices and own knowledge, and (3) spontaneous revision. Within the context of a sonic pedagogy, this inquiry illustrates the power of listening to our own voices and the potential of becoming audience/listener/spectator to our own individual and collective knowledge.

Keywords: Arts-based literacies, critical literacy, adolescents, sound, sonic pedagogy, English language arts, secondary school, multimodal composition

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Introduction

The old drama classroom was full of noise and energy. The students had finished watching a documentary on hip hop around the globe and were huddled in small groups. Some students were seated, heads down around a shared iPad, making beats; others were plugged into individual iPads with earbuds and splitters, listening to, thinking with, and critiquing their already-composed beats; still others moving around on foot, rehearsing the sounds of near-finished beats, making in the moment adjustments based on what they heard and felt.

The high school students in this vignette were in the middle of a transdisciplinary unit around a theme of communication with a goal of creating, recording, and performing a unified music album. The ten-week unit put a premium on literacy opportunities that invited youth to write about social issues that were important to them and share their work in multimodal ways that could promote social change. In collaboration with a local musician working with the students as an artist in residency, the students would work to reach their audience by writing and composing a music album.

In and through the learning experiences associated with collaborative music composition, students drew on, developed, and extended their critical literacy practices. We believe that collaborative music composition, as designed and enacted in this account, is a powerful way to cultivate young people's critical media literacies. Students are required to represent their ideas in their written compositions, but also in their recorded and live musical performances. Based on the unit plan designed by the artist-in-residence with input from school-based collaborators, the intellectual work at the heart of this unit aimed to: (1) position youth as agentive writers and

researchers and (2) offer youth a platform to leverage their voices for social justice. Thus, the composition is not an end in itself, but rather works in the service of learning about social issues the young people have identified.

As reflected in the vignette, part of what it means to participate in this work is to listen—actively, repeatedly, and closely—to the material that students produce. Aligned with the proponents of aesthetic education (cf. Dewey, 1934; Greene, 2001), the students were asked to "break with the taken-for-granted" tools of communication often centered in schools (Greene, 2001, p.5) and instead use music and sound to investigate their world with attention or "wide-awakeness" to the social contexts surrounding them (p. 25). Regularly throughout the unit, students would listen to and experience, in an embodied way, the soundscapes that were part of students' compositions-in-progress. Student *listening*, as a practice and a stance, was fundamental to their participation and, as we learned through our inquiry, fundamental to the life of this unit. In contrast to thinking about sound strictly in relationship to its structure and/or meaning, the case we share in this article surfaces the need to pay attention to what music and sound "do" and how they "work" in relationship to concepts of listening in formal educational contexts. Extending existing views on listening as a practice focused around listening *to* and analyzing or interpreting audible sounds, this article questions how sound and sonic pedagogies, in the context of critical literacy education, fosters wide-awake listening as critical practice.

Background and Purpose

There is little question that there has been a dramatic expansion of the literacies and texts that are part of young people's lives. To support young writers in this digital era, English Language Arts (ELA) educators have been called upon to teach students to compose texts with a range of modalities, including alphabetic print, image, and sound. Such multimodal approaches

that often surround the arts promote both engagement (Albers, 2006; Albers & Harste, 2007) and critical inquiry around content and complex concepts (Spire, Hervey, Morris, & Stelpflug, 2012; Whitelaw, 2017).

Among the various modes of inquiry and artistic expression are music and sound. We start with the premise that sound and other arts-based literacies are complex representations of knowledge and ideas in-the-making that create opportunities for students to work with sound simultaneously as producers/composers and consumers/listeners. This process of creative production has implications for deepening young people's critical literacies and leveraging the arts in classrooms and schools that are increasingly limited by test-driven pedagogies. Sound plays an increasingly significant role in young people's lives and in the texts they consume and create. Sound proliferates in our everyday lives, and technologies have created easily accessible platforms to create with sound, inviting youth to create "sonic experiences" (Ceraso, 2014). Although attention to the possibilities of sonic learning in P-12 schools is growing (c.f. Brader & Luke, 2013; Phillips & Smith, 2012; Shanahan, 2012), in depth analyses of sound-based pedagogies as they relate to critical listening are just beginning to emerge (c.f. Brownell, 2018; Wargo, 2018). Yet, according to the NCTE/IRA Standards for English Language Arts (2012), students should "Use a variety of technological and information resources to gather and synthesize information and create and communicate knowledge."

Heeding the cautions of others who have used sound and music before us, we position music and sound as modes of communication in themselves, not mere enhancements. Goering and Strayhorn (2016) argue that the benefits of using music within the English Language Arts are most deeply gained when curricular applications push beyond enhancement to integration in

which the learning objectives of both subject areas (music and ELA) are achieved—not just one in service of the other.

If the intent of composition is to communicate ideas clearly in a mode that will most effectively reach its intended audience, today's communication channels require that young people are able to compose with and respond to sound. Although many teachers have designed opportunities for youth to compose with music and sound, alphabetic, print-based text remains the central focus when it comes to students' compositional efforts in ELA classrooms (Mills, Unsworth, & Exley, 2018). An emphasis on sound and music beckons understandings of what unique listening practices might emerge from a "sonic pedagogy" (Ceraso & Ahern, 2014, para. 1).

To expand existing understandings of music composition and the purpose of critical listening in educational contexts, we build on Henry Jenkins' (2018) idea of "civic imagination" (para. 1). Jenkins argues that imagination plays a significant role in the political process. He explains, "Before you can change the world you have to be able to imagine what a different or better world looks like." (Jenkins, 2018, para. 12). Aligned with critical literacy approaches (cf. Janks, 2013), a civic imagination requires one being able to imagine oneself as a civic agent capable of making change *and* being part of a larger collective that is capable of being mobilized to social work. Jenkins argues that for groups that have been marginalized in some way, there is often a leap of faith involved in this process. In other words, many of the youth in our contexts may be less practiced imagining other possibilities for their futures. How might attention to the workings and production of music and sound be avenues into increased civic wonderings and curiosity?

Through an analysis of the music-based learning examples shared in this article, we came to see that multimodal composition with music and critical listening could inspire and strengthen young people's imaginations, and subsequently, their capacity for social change. To explore how critical listening develops imagination in the service of building a more humanizing future, we will explore one classroom case of collaborative music composition to consider what it might look like to design and organize sound-based learning for our imagined futures.

Theoretical Perspectives on Sound, Listening, and the Civic Imagination

Drawing on conceptualizations of sound as an embodied experience and listening as a multimodal practice (Ceraso, 2014) as well as arts-based literacies (Eisner, 2003; Wissman & Costello, 2014), our collaborative inquiry aims to deepen understandings of what it means to consider listening as a form of critical inquiry and a critical literacy practice during the composing process. How do we reflect on and make sense of young people's listening practices in classrooms that use, leverage, and compose with sound as part of the intellectual work? Our work is guided by two central bodies of work: (1) critical media literacies and (2) sound and listening studies.

Critical media literacies. A critical literacies perspective on listening emphasizes *how* stories are told, *who* is telling them, and for what *purpose*. Critical literacy pedagogies encourage young people to examine and question the texts they encounter, envision multiple futures (Janks, 2013), and compose new worlds through naming and renaming their media-rich surroundings (Avila & Zacher Pandya, 2013; Stornaiuolo & Whitney, 2018). Critical media literacy (CML) builds on and expands critical literacy and media literacy traditions. According to Funk, Kellner, and Share (2016), CML supports the examination of the ways in which media positions audiences, including readers, viewers, and listeners, to negotiate and make meaning of identities

including race, class, and gender. Similar to other critical traditions, CML recognizes the inherently political nature of education and encourages educators and students to critically examine the world around them, with specific attention paid to social location/position, systems of power, and root causes of injustice. Following from this, a CML pedagogy offers a framework to not only critically read information in different modes and formats but also to create alternative representations and renderings with multiple formats and modes and become agents of change. Drawing on Kellner and Share (2007) and others (Goering & Thomas, 2018; O'Byrne, 2019), a CML pedagogy "expands the notion of literacy to include different forms of mass communication, popular culture, and new technologies. It deepens the potential of literacy education to critically analyze relationships between media and audiences, information, and power" (Kellner & Share, p. 60). Critical media literacies encourage students to create their own representations and messages that often challenge many of the most common narratives and stories in media texts. We adopt the belief that an affordance of critical media literacies is to engage with technology and media as a form of civic engagement and political consciousness.

Soep and Chavez (2010), through their sound work at Youth Radio, have come to view youth media practices as a form of "converged literacy" (p. 21), one in which multiple practices of media analysis, production, and distribution converge together. For Soep and Chavez, making media involves more than production of content with personal impact; it requires a sophisticated understanding of the message in a given context, as well as the audiences and afterlife of the media content created. In Brader and Luke's (2013) work with young people's engagement with the digital arts, specifically how youth engaged with opportunities to circulate performative work and share and receive feedback from peers and mentors, they illustrate the ways in which "interactional exchanges reflexively are used to further build the quality of the students' music

production, their self-confidence and literacy skills" (p. 202). Based on their work, they argue for a dramatic shift in thinking about how we design for and assess music, video, and art production. The authors posit that this shift is possible when schools move away from the industrial-based schooling models and come to acknowledge design-oriented, multi-literacies paradigms.

This heightened attention to audience interaction with media content and its mobility across networked platforms positions media makers as simultaneously performing roles of spectator, interpreter, producer, and distributor of media content. CML tends closely to the role and position of readers, viewers, and listeners as audiences that are actively working to make meaning of texts and, in turn, how those audiences rewrite their own texts in response to their own social, political, and cultural contexts. Our work both builds on and extends this scholarship by paying specific attention to the ways in which the audiences' meaning-making, navigation, and exploration of specific texts could contribute to the so-called original texts. We consider how close listening contributes to a kind of co-authoring and collaborative re-writing of texts and narratives.

This multi-layered understanding of how audiences interact with media and its digital afterlife is often overlooked in discussions of youth media and media literacy that focus primarily on technical mastery of production practices. Thus, Soep (2014) urges that we look beyond individual practices of youth voice and expression to instead analyze youth participation in public spheres, noting how youth use media to make and create interactive content and mobilize audiences in ways that pivot them for civic engagement, a set of tactics described as "participatory politics" (p. 6). In this sense, what we see as playback (or "collaborative listening and critique") becomes a moment of multimodal intercession, in which young media makers become audiences to their own creations as they replay their compositions-in-progress to pause

and listen, or experience and feel the impact of their multimodal decisions. In our work, this means tending to the collection of interactions, most especially listening, that happens during the course of digital productions with music and sound.

Listening and sound studies. Since the 1990s, there has been growing interest in the relevance of sound in the humanities, yet much of this work has taken place in post-secondary or out-of-school contexts. In film studies for example, there has been a call for a more comprehensive attention to the materiality of sound as it is experienced beyond a text. This approach considers the physical and spatial dimensions of sound and how they impact the listener/audience. Sound is not simply heard, but also seen and felt. In chorus with embodied approaches to understanding sound, French composer Chion (1994) argues that sound has a "figurative, semantic, or evocatory value" yet also affects the body in physical ways (p. 31). In turn, Chion urges those working with sound to practice "disciplined attention" to the physical impacts of sound.

Extending the work of Chion, research on video games presents sound as embodied and interactive. In Collins' (2013) theory of interactive sound experiences, game players' experiences with sound are central to the design of video games. Rather than approaching music and sound from an appreciation stance, Collins, like Chion analyzes how sounds from "sonic textures" that shape user experience and engagement with the content (p. 4). In this sense, people do not just listen *to* sound, they interact *with* sound. Collins' interactive approach to sound positions audiences as "participants in an action," which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of students' engagement with sound during media production processes (p.8). In other words, to listen is not a passive form of participation but an active negotiation of meaning

and world-making, key practices for nurturing civic imagination and subsequently the invention process of writing.

Within the field of education, music and sound have been explored for their potentials to spark engagement in learning, with the goal of increasing or enhancing academic achievement for students young and old (cf. Brader & Luke, 2016; Shanahan, 2012; Sylvester & Greenidge, 2009) and the relationships between academic achievement and musical play (Marsh, 2008). However, according to Wargo (2018), few studies have examined how sound is used to amplify (in)justice in youth literacies. He argues, "Sound, when viewed through the practice of sonic cartography, brings us into the present and orients us to see bodies and perspectives in new ways" (p. 3). There is a need for more scholarship in the language arts that examines the resources and purposes of sound for youth composing in English language arts. How might young people use sound to write and rewrite their own current and future narratives?

Listening as critical practice: "Playback" as pedagogical stance and approach. The theoretical concept we want to highlight is listening as critical practice. Building on critical media literacies and listening and sound studies, we focus on listening as a critical practice to call attention to the ways that music and sound can push us to critically engage with texts, our bodies, and perspectives in new ways. To support this thinking, we introduce the concept of "playback." For us, playback surfaced as a way to characterize and understand listening as critical inquiry. Embedded in this notion of playback is the idea of listening *as* participation and, relatedly, an active and necessary part of the composing process. This concept emerged in and through our work with youth making media. Through our work with youth media we both observed youth attending deeply to the crafting of sound for social and aesthetic purposes (cf. Doerr-Stevens & Buckley-Marudas, 2019). Music and sound were not a backdrop to otherwise

important content; rather music and sound were the message. Furthermore, we observed several instances of performed listening in which focused, silent listening, individually with earbuds in, or collectively with heads bobbing in unison. These often quiet yet collaborative and rhythmic moments were a central part of the composing process, of critical listening and, specifically, the performance of listening to our own voices. As a concept "playback" foregrounds several ideas including the power of sharing sound, collaborative listening, and sonic ways of knowing. By paying specific attention to critical listening within a critical literacies framework, we hope we are able to tend to new ways of knowing and being that sound might have the capacity to carry.

Research Context, Methods, and Analysis

Research focus. There are growing numbers of teachers attending to sound in diverse content areas, including the language arts. Teachers are incorporating digital stories, audio essays, podcasts, and songs into the learning opportunities in their classrooms. There is increasing evidence (Wargo, 2018) that sound serves various important functions and has the capacity to facilitate critical literacy and social justice work. Our focus in this article is to understand the nature of multimodal inquiry and listening in sound-based language arts classrooms and, relatedly, how this kind of listening informs young people's composing efforts and critical literacies.

This research focuses on the ways in which sound informs and/or expands literacy learning in school. Given our commitment to critical literacy, we pay attention to sound and listening as they relate to social action. How do we listen? Who do we listen to? What do we listen "for"? We will share the ways in which listening to sound is a critical component of writing and being a writer in these times. We asked: (1) How does composing with sound (re)shape what it means to listen in school? (2) What is the potential of multimodal, arts-based

inquiry for critical literacy education? and (3) How does sound make students feel, act, and/or behave? Drawing on experiences in classrooms that honor sound as a part of the intellectual work, this article shares how pedagogies of sound support listening as critical practice.

Listening, as enacted in this telling case (Mitchell, 1984), became a compelling way to approach language arts instruction in these times. This case is unique in that students are required to compose aspects of their academic work with sound. Furthermore, the soundscapes that accompany all of this work are embraced as part of what it means to learn. We believe these examples help to illustrate the potential of listening as critical practice for enhancing students' capacities to imagine and compose more equitable and socially just futures.

Methods and context. This qualitative inquiry draws on data collected from a Midwestern city in the United States. Drawing on multiple case study methods (Yin, 2002), this study examines and compares the role that listening plays (or does not play) across different people, situations, and events. Within and across the collaborative composing events, we focused on the ways young people took up the invitations to work with digital media and sound as part of their compositional efforts.

The context for this study was selected through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2004) because of evidence that instructors at the school site were integrating sound and multimodal composition into the curriculum. The classroom was situated in a public, STEM-focused high school in a mid-size Midwestern city. This school served approximately 400 students and was known for its commitment to project-based learning. Students were in the 11th grade and diverse with regards to gender, race, socioeconomic class, country of origin, and sexuality. The framework for this transdisciplinary unit was designed by a local teaching artist who co-facilitated this unit. The teaching artist had consistent and regular class time with students during

the course of the unit. He led daily lessons around beat creation, lyric writing, song composition, recording, album production, and more. He occasionally co-taught with other teachers, which helped to meet school and grade-level learning goals. This teaching artist brought extensive experience working with and teaching young people in the context of in-school residencies, out-of-school workshops, and hip-hop summer camps. The artist's in-school hip hop residencies, "Fresh Voice," are focused around songwriting, recording, and performance. Fresh Voice is part of Refresh Collective, a non-profit organization for arts and youth development. During the unit, there were many opportunities for students to make choices around the content of their work and the tools and resources they would use to complete their work and achieve their goals. The culminating performance task for students was to compose, record, and perform one album around a unified theme.

Student participants in this unit were in the 11th grade. In line with one group's song title, we will refer to this case as *Struggle* in the rest of the article. All enrolled students participated in a required 10-week unit led by a visiting teaching artist but co-taught by teachers across disciplines. Students worked together to compose tracks for a unified audio-recorded album, album art cover, and live performance. The culminating album (also titled "Struggle") and live performance allowed students to connect with local audiences about issues that the young people themselves have identified as critical and developed ways to address those issues in word and song. Focal participants of the *Struggle* case consisted of one group's efforts to compose and choreograph their track. Specific attention is paid to the ways in which the use of sound required and/or created certain kinds of listening opportunities.

The content of *what* students composed is not positioned as a perfunctory technical task or an end in itself, but rather an opportunity to raise awareness about important social issues.

Along the way, students were also taught various skills related to songwriting, beat creation, musical and lyrical choreography, performance, and digital tools. In keeping with the goals of Refresh Collective, the teaching artist's unit was "a hip-hop project committed of shared humanity." The invitation to use, leverage, and create with sound was not optional or supplemental to the culminating project, but an essential part of the task. Music and sound were deeply integrated into the activities that led up to the final production. Explicit instruction related to sound was tied largely to sound waves, beats, and choreography of beats and lyrics, but also drew heavily on students' existing knowledge bases of music and sound design. Although music and sound were fairly normalized as part of learning, we know that this is not necessarily the case in many classrooms.

Data gathering and analysis. To examine the use of collaborative composing with music and sound, one of us (Molly) participated as participant observer in the class events (Kawulich, 2005), attending the school site multiple times a week to observe, listen, and work alongside students. Data types included: observation notes, audio and video recordings of collaborative work sessions, artifact analysis and conversations, and an interview with the teaching artist. Given the focus on sounds and listening, the music recordings and album tracks, both in process and the final productions were listened to multiple times. All of the music and artwork related to this work was published and made available by Refresh Collective. We paid attention to different elements of what was reflected and captured in the recordings. In this case, this included paying attention to elements of sound (speech, music, sound effects, and silence) were positioned as objects that mediate affiliations with certain social groups and truths. Drawing on the corpus of recordings and student-produced texts, we examined how students

engaged the invitation to use sound and the range of purposes for listening in ELA contexts that embrace the sonic.

Rethinking Listening as Active, Shared, and Spontaneous

When invited to compose with music and sound, students created the album *Struggle* (MC2 STEM 11th grade, 2015). Although the structure of the unit and performance tasks were developed by teachers, students had great freedom and flexibility along the way. At the beginning of the unit, students brainstormed possible topics and possible themes for an album, all of which were handwritten on paper and posted on the classroom walls. Topics included struggle and school stress and themes included violence, struggle, food, and stress. Table 1 includes the larger list of themes, topics, as well as the ultimate track titles that students generated and published.

Table 1

Student-Generated Topics, Themes and Track Titles

Topics	Themes	Track Titles for *Struggle*
Violence	Violence	Intro/Black Lives Matter (English)
Positivity	Neighborhood	Black Lives Matter (Mandarin)
School stress	Community	Listen to Our Voices (English)
Hard times	Food	Listen to Our Voices (Mandarin)
Animal abuse	Poverty	Struggle (English)
Graduating		Struggle (Mandarin)
Life story		Peace Interlude
Life's struggle		Peace in the Streets (Mandarin)
Teen violence		
World hatred		
Taxes		

After students discussed their ideas, they voted on their preferred choice. This pedagogical move on the part of the teaching artist is critical because it put students in the position to articulate and decide on the issues that had social significance to them. Consistent with the central tenets of Culturally Responsive Computing (CRC) framework (Scott, Sheridan,

& Clark, 2014), this created space for students to connect technology with community issues in order to confront and transform social conditions. Students were given room to examine societal issues, power relations, culture, and identity *as* they drew on new technologies and created technologically-mediated products. During this work, sound was recognized as part of what it means to compose in school.

Students selected "Struggle" as their overarching theme and then began working in small groups to develop ideas for songs related to the theme. Each group was responsible for all aspects of the project. A completed song included developing and writing the lyrics; choreographing the lyrics, beats, and other sound effects; and recording and performing the final piece. Given the students' work in Mandarin, students explored the way hip hop spread around the globe and translated and recorded all songs in Mandarin as well. Students successfully recorded one album, titled *Struggle* (*Shengyin* in Mandarin). The album was made available for distribution, and students performed it live on a university campus. In addition to the composition and production of the album, students developed the artwork for the album cover with support from Pat Griffiths, a 12th grade student from another high school who was completing an internship with the teaching artist at Fresh Camp. See Figure 1.

Figure 1. Album cover of student-produced album, *Struggle*. Graphics by Pat Griffith (2015). Published with permission by Refresh Collective.

This album, a product of collaborative, multimodal sound composition, provided spaces for youth to practice listening in ways that fostered active participation and an ongoing collection of interactions that helped to expand, enhance, and in some cases, amplify students' ideas about social issues. An examination of the listening that was part of these learning contexts surfaced opportunities for young writers that revised the "typical" role of listening in composition. Within our analysis of sound-based compositional processes, we found three key practices that characterized listening as a critical practice: (1) listening to participate, (2) becoming audience to one's own voices and own knowledge, and (3) spontaneous revision. All three practices

foreground the communicative *action* of listening in an effort to understand what listening *does* when composing with sound.

Listening to participate. One affordance of these sound-based pedagogies was a revision of the typical relationship between creator/performer and listener/audience. Although much has been written about the role of the audience in relationship to composing (Stornaiuolo & Whitney, 2018; Woodard & Coppola, 2018), it is often one directional, documenting that writers are more motivated and writing is more meaningful with an authentic audience. Although authentic audiences are relevant here and remain critical for writers, it places the focus heavily on the culminating audience and, albeit unintentionally, places less focus on the listeners along the way. When listening was embraced repeatedly as part of everyone's daily work in the classroom and not as that of a singular audience at the end, students learned to attune themselves to active listening to their compositions and their peers' compositions, *in progress.*

For example, one activity that frequently occurred during the music composing process was a simple routine during which individual students or a group would share a piece of their work, be it a lyric, a beat, a hook, or, later in the unit, the whole track, aloud with their peers. Over time, this practice created a culture in which students understood they could share works that were drafty and in progress. Students also came to understand that they, as listeners, played a role in the composing process, offering valuable feedback and response based on what they heard and felt. Students typically organized in a circle muck like a cypher jam, with most students standing, although there were almost always some students seated or leaning against a table. There was not a set order or script for sharing. Students volunteered to share when they felt ready to share or moved to share, perhaps based on the content. Both during and in between contributions, the floor was open for student response, with movement, sounds, and words.

After practicing this routine and engaging sonic responses together, instructors made room for listening and response as part of doing this work. Over time, this habit of participation and collaborative knowledge production became integrated into the composing process. The interactions and contributions that took place in and through this kind of listening were a vital part of the production process. Consider the collection of interactions in a brief, ten-minute segment of a class during the early stages of beat creation. Students shared their compositions in progress and listened to other works in progress. As became custom, there was not a named leader: students participated when they were so moved.

The classroom was a space to share ideas in-the-making, but also, importantly, for everyone to both hear and contribute to the knowledge they generated. As the teaching artist articulated, students shared out loud, typically in a cypher common to hip hop, "mainly, so we can all hear what each other is really trying to say. You all have some great theories out there." This pedagogy rested on listening as an act of participation: it was not simply to hear ideas, but improve, clarify, and distribute them. In the context of imagining a world where "putting one's arms up" is "enough" and where "struggle" is a collective project, students' visions are strengthened when there is room for listening as critical practice.

In the case of Struggle, the opportunities that characterized listening to participate were facilitated largely by sound's capacity to pass through us and the physical flexibility of performance work. Students were welcome to move around, wave their arms, and speak out or speak up. This freedom created a context in which everyone—actual writer and audience member—had a possible role. Students performed some aspect of the work most days. At times this took place in their small groups and at other times with the whole class. In the early stages, this might be a beat or a few lyrics in progress and later, more polished pieces. Regardless, there

were regular opportunities to engage in non-scripted, collaborative listening with the simple objective of "trying" something in progress. During this drafting out loud, students in the rehearsing group and *not* in the rehearsing group were inclined to participate in some unprompted and/or unanticipated way. In other words, students—including the audience members—would speak out, instinctively jump in, and/or make some active contribution to another student's or another group's effort.

Contributions tended to fall into the following categories: encouragement, validation, and/or physical embrace. Students might sing along, nod, echo or repeat a powerful word. They might raise arms in praise and/or wrap arms around another's shoulders and move one's body to the beat. During the ten-minute segment referred to above, there were multiple expressions of appreciation and praise, including "That was rockin'," "Whoo ah whoo," and "Dope." We also observed collective visioning. For example, after one Black Lives Matter (BLM) lyric, another student spoke up: "I've got something to add to that," confirming and extending the attention to the significance of the BLM movement. Another student asked, "Say that again?" to clarify who was "the the higher power?" in a composition. The teaching artist noticed she had two extra bars and suggested she use her additional bars to "clarify the higher power you're talking about it." Another student raps, "I put my hands up, I guess it wasn't enough." Amid the overlapping talk in response, one student says this "started making it real to me" and another says the image was too much. The composer replied, "But, it's the truth." This exchange reflected a tension in selecting words to generate action and the extent to which violent images are useful or "too much" for the actions we desire. Given the important social issues at the heart of students' compositions, this relocated audience members from passive consumers to agents of change.

These dynamic, talk-back forms of listening need to be practiced, especially in U.S. public schools where a majority of the routines, habits, and norms around listening position listening as something to be done quietly, individually, and typically in a seated position, a display of attention and respect more so than expression or contribution.

Becoming audience to our own voices and knowledge. The spontaneous drafting that happened along the way, occurred in small and whole group settings and required that students learn how to be an audience to their own voices. Listening was a practice that was shared and loud. Supporting critical literacy, students' ideas became texts to work with, examine, and revise. Consider the unscripted drafting and revising of the group of students who composed the title track, "Struggle." In one class, students had the chance to practice their partially completed pieces. The Struggle group performed their piece at least five times.

First, there was tremendous movement. From bouncing and tapping to arm waving and moving side to side, the sounds prompted physical engagement and further spontaneity. Second, the groups started to play with who and how they would perform their hook: "struggle, struggle, struggle." At another point, several boys in the group ended up with arms interlocked around one another's shoulders, reflecting the inclination to move and the inclination to come together. Perhaps most surprising, leading to some stopping mid-sentence, was when one group member, spontaneously and unscripted, jumped in with a deep, "It's *our* struggle." The "our" was particularly drawn out and emphasized and the intonation and vocalization appeared to surprise but delight his group. With each additional take, what had simply seemed to "happen" became a rich and defining part of the entire piece. Even after multiple rehearsals with the final piece, the live performance of this song took on new life with the kind of enthusiastic response it received from the audience and because the way student performers responded to the reactions.

The embodied performance opened spaces for students to compose material that mattered to them personally and politically. Students engaged and generated material that was pertinent to their lives and developed channels to take action and build awareness about these pressing social issues. Perhaps the most pressing issue that students addressed was racial injustice. This included the struggle, as a community, that came with this injustice. Other popular issues included police brutality, violence, the school to prison pipeline, and daily life struggles. The invitation to compose with sound and distribute that composition to their local community seemed to encourage this group to compose material that "matters."

Part of the pedagogical intent of this unit was to support students to create and use sound-based technologies to produce a collaborative album. Of equal importance was students' experiencing how these technologies worked in the service of examining and confronting social issues. It was critical that students share their (counter)stories over a mic in the middle of a university green space where faculty, staff, students, and tour groups traveled. Songs of resistance, pain, and sadness as well as their embodied hope, energy, and playfulness were amplified across the green, stopping passersby in their tracks. The students became technosocial agents of change (Scott, Sheridan, & Clark, 2014) as their music was generated, produced, and then performed for a live audience.

At this historical and political moment, the themes that students generated were not necessarily surprising, particularly given the recent shooting death of Tamir Rice, the rise of the #Blacklivesmatter movement, and the school's urban location and demographics. It was, however, surprising to see students have the opportunity, space, and time to delve deeply into thinking about, writing about, distributing, and responding to these social issues. Although the notion of community is sometimes associated with that which is local, when composing music,

most students connected their ideas to mounting concerns across the country as can be heard in the tracks: "Listen to our Voices," "Struggle," and "Peace in the Street."

The combination of the meaningful content, along with a pedagogy that welcomed in-the-moment, out-loud contributions created a rich context for purposeful and meaningful writing for young people. At the same time, the students learned technical skills about creating sounds and beats, navigating digital applications, building sound speakers, and preparing a performance. Although critical listening was developed over time, students became successful in engaging sound in ways that required technical skills, compositional skills, and social collaboration skills.

Spontaneous revision. In reviewing the collaborative composing process of *Struggle* as a whole, a key affordance of sound was its near-immediate relevance to the composing task at hand. Sound provided opportunities to compose with more spontaneity than typically offered in school. At a time when spontaneity has been compromised in many public schools, especially urban schools, with the adoption of curriculum scripts and high-stakes standardized tests, the range of actions and types of participation that came to define what we refer to as sonic spontaneity were palpable.

In this music and sound-based learning context, drafting, rewriting, and revising were not only expected, but also privileged in terms of the time that was made available for these components of the composing process. Although drafting and revising are long-revered practices in the writing process, they are often constructed as something that is completed quietly, typically on paper, and most often independently. In the case of this instructional space, where sound was an explicit part of the teaching and learning that took place, drafting was collaborative and typically took place out loud. This collaborative and noisy improvisation was especially evident in the spontaneous composing of the track titled "Black Lives Matter"

In the second track of *Struggle*, titled "Black Lives Matter," the chorus consists of a deep, penetrating beat that is coupled with the short, simple lyric, "Black lives matter." After 23 seconds of beats, the first words on this track are "Black lives matter." After several rhythmic repetitions of the phrase, students add "why all lives matter," which serves almost a reverberation or echo to "Black lives matter." Then, closing the chorus loop, students added, "they *all* matter." Both the lyrics and beats offer strong support for the BLM movement. At times students highlight historical moments tied to our country's long history of racial injustice, while at other times, and in a more lighthearted fashion, students debunk common stereotypes about African Americans (e.g. eating chicken, drinking Kool-Aid). Cognizant of the heated debates and contentious discourse around the deaths of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin and too many others, and the range of reactions, including resistance, to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, this segment of the song surfaced spontaneously during group composing.

The improvisational and noisy space of collaborative music production was another example of listening as critical practice in which young people are actively negotiating meaning and establishing social position. Performing multiple perspectives on an issue, the song is able to hold close multiple perspectives and discourses at once, in a shared space. Yet, although the piece is addressing the need to transform our country's attitudes towards and treatment of African Americans, the choice of the lyrics "they all matter" pushes a listener who feels this use of "all" resonates with one of the swirls of rhetoric that uses "all" in a way that elides or overlooks the effort to acknowledge and address our country's history of racial injustice.

Implications

Listening, as it surfaced in these music and sound-based learning spaces, recast what it might mean to compose with sound and extended students' understandings of available

composing tools, including listeners. Given that listening is often positioned as a passive practice, we hope this work expands existing beliefs about the potential of school-based listening and composing with sound. The development of students' critical listening practices as well as their technical innovation with sound were not hooks to motivate students, but rather critical components of the unit that enhanced students' critical literacies.

The critical listening observed and heard in the collaborative composition of "Struggle" supports a need for pedagogies that are able to support students to think critically about what they hear and how they compose with sound. Sound is crucial for its capacity to drive critical listening for social action and social change. This work urges us to reimagine the opportunities available for students to create with sound, but also the spaces for students to listen to sound and reflect on the sonic spaces they move through in their daily lives.

We hope this work supports educational researchers and practitioners to design and enact sonic pedagogies that facilitate listening as a critical practice. We offer the following ideas for fostering critical listening to support social action.

1. *Position listening as active.* Educators should position listening as a participatory endeavor and not just something to "take in" or consume. Whereas listening is often taught as a practice of listening *to* and interpretation *of* audible sounds, how might the practice be recast as one of production, in which students interact *with* and create relationships *with* sound. In critical listening classrooms, listeners, including the writers themselves, should actively and repeatedly contribute to what writers produce. Critical listeners have a responsibility to support writers.
2. *Reimagine how we teach listening and document listening.* Educators should tend to sound as an experience. Students need opportunities to learn how to listen in this way and

repeated opportunities to practice attuning to sounds, texts, and bodies. It is important to create conditions for students to be receptive and for students to practice listening together. This might involve talking about the pictures that unfold in our mind as we listen and how those pictures are similar or different from another's images. It is important to rethink what routines and structures could support this collaborative listening and where students have the space to respond to sound's capacity to pass through them. This work invites educational researchers to observe, document, and make sense of instances, routines, and structures that support this collaborative listening.

3. *Leverage* "*playback."* We hope that this account invites fellow educators and educational researchers to use music and sound-based learning as vehicle for multimodal and critical inquiry. As introduced earlier, playback stemmed from our work investigating sonic pedagogies and the role of listening in teaching and learning in this digital era, yet, ultimately, playback became a way for us, as researchers, to capture our own emergent understandings of listening as a critical practice. Thus, we offer playback as a concept that builds on and extends ideas of listening as a form of critical inquiry and practice (Dreher, 2010), but *also* as an analytical tool. We invite researchers to draw on this tool for further investigations into listening and, relatedly, the capacity of critical listening in classrooms and schools.
    a. Typically defined as the replaying or reproduction of previously recorded sounds, often immediately after the recording, playback is also defined as the response to a suggestion, act, or product. We use playback as a lens to signal the significance of replaying, pausing, and revising practices that occur frequently during the process of composing with sound. Far from neutral, these playback moments are

opportunities or invitations to critically (re)listen, rethink and rewrite representations. Furthermore, the students' practice of replaying their own compositions-in-progress, positions students' stories as texts that are open to interrogation and revision.

b. In forwarding playback as critical listening practice and analytical tool, we invite fellow educational researchers to use this lens to consider what might be possible when they position sound and listening as vital parts of a Language Arts curricula. Although this work calls for further research on understanding critical listening in the language arts, we believe there are implications for understanding the role and potential value of critical listening across the content areas.

Thoughts Moving Forward

We argue that listening as critical practice is crucial in order to support students as they navigate the steady proliferation of biased narratives in this historical moment. In Struggle, the connection of sonic technologies with community issues opened opportunities for students to confront and struggle with existing social conditions. The album created channels for raising awareness about racial injustices and human rights in local neighborhoods and beyond. The final recorded album and live performance were not the only sites of civic engagement and re-imagining of worlds. At nearly every step along the way, students practiced playback in and through the active processes of critical listening and re-listening. They made choices about the words they used, the tones they established, the moods they set, and the messages they crafted. In the face of persistent social injustices and racial inequities that impact young people's daily lives, these production spaces made room for deep listening that became a place for individual and collective civic imagining. Extending the potentials of writing as worldmaking (Stornaiuolo &

Whitney, 2018) and the work of Jenkins and the Civic Imagination Project (2017), these are the kind of spaces that make room for students to imagine a better world so that they can change and improve the world. In our contexts, these spaces accommodated fear, anger, and concerns as well as hope, pride, and dreams. We believe critical listening has the potential to enhance youth's ability to see and hear themselves as change agents and make room to name the future they want to see.

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