The Theatre of Urban: Youth And Schooling In Dangerous Times
By Kathleen Gallagher

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There are books one encounters that seem to open the research imagination in unexpected ways and Kathleen Gallagher’s *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* is one such book. So pivotal has it been for me as a new researcher that I could not have conceptualized nor implemented my research projects without it. Integral to the research that became my Master’s and for what will become my doctoral dissertation, this review will chart how *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* has opened possibilities methodologically and caused me to reconsider the importance of conflict and the role of the youthful research participant. It has helped to galvanize my commitment to drama as a pedagogy and methodology that creates data while also fostering social relations. It has further helped to me understand the important ways in which the art of theatre-making can contribute to evocative and vital interview conversations regarding youth experiences of schooling and their reflections on their
communities. Gallagher makes just this point when she says,

our encounter with the fictional gave our subsequent interviews with students a quality and depth I imagine would be difficult to reproduce without having experienced, together, such a shared context; without having, however briefly, transformed our space. (p. 135)

What follows is not an objective account of the book, an impossible task given that Gallagher has acted as my thesis supervisor and mentor throughout the five years that I have worked alongside her as a research assistant. I should be clear that I did not work on the research project from which this book was written, but I do believe that this entanglement with her later work equips me well to chart the book’s influence on my own scholarly journeys while documenting just one of the many projects her research has inspired.

*The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times* is an ethnography of four different school sites in the two cities of Toronto, Canada and New York, USA. In Toronto, the research was situated in a Toronto District School Board downtown vocational school as well as in an all-girl secondary school in the Toronto Catholic District School Board. Interested in drama classrooms in particular, in Queens New York, Gallagher followed classes in a diverse school of 3000 students that housed six mini schools, one of which was a Theatre Institute. The second New York school was a mid-town Manhattan alternative school that also served a diverse but smaller student population and struggled with a very low graduation rate. Gallagher, committed to youth in urban schools, refuses to equate ‘urban’ with ‘problem’ by “listening to the plural voices of those normally Othered, and hearing them as constructors, agents, and disseminators of knowledge” (p. 8). This perspective regarding youth is crucially important to her project and one that has featured in my own framing of youth in ethnographic research that asks in what ways drama can make known the contemporary suburb and the diverse lives of youth who live there.

Drama, in Gallagher’s work, enhances the more traditional ethnographic methods of interviews and fieldnotes in groundbreaking ways. In *The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times*, drama and its processes are the object of study while at the same time drama is used methodologically to explore issues of schooling and the lives of youth. For example, disturbed by the levels of surveillance that she and her team found in these post-9/11 North American schools, Gallagher used improvisation with the students to explore this subject in greater depth. The student who is engaged imaginatively and physically in an improvisation can communicate to the researcher something different from what might be articulated in an interview. Gallagher contends,

we understood one of the primary tenets of drama itself as a research methodology to be that the fictional, active, and even unconscious world of the drama elicits understandings and utterances that would otherwise be inaccessible. (p. 128)

In playing through improvisation, the imagination is engaged and notions of the self can be elasticized, while in an interview, we are all performing the rules of the interview and playing out versions of our day-to-day selves. This is not to favor one method over another but to acknowledge that the interview and the improvisation create data differently. Gallagher suggests that:

through studying how drama teachers and students work in role, with each other and through theatre genres, these non-linear and narrative modes of drama education might, indeed, productively interrupt our traditional qualitative accounts of classrooms and theatre studios, and of the actors/people who enliven them. (p. 58)

By taking the research “inside the art frame” (p. 131), Gallagher suggests, “through the remove of the fictional, the convention of creating an alternate world, allowed us, ultimately, to co-construct knowledge with the youth” (p. 132). The importance of a participatory ethnography that diminishes the distance between the researchers and the researched (the students), so important in Gallagher’s work, meant in practical terms, that her researchers interacted with the students through drama activities that became shared
experiences between them. In reflecting upon these drama activities later, in individual and focus group interviews, Gallagher suggests that the youth became a kind of co-researcher. Experimenting with these practices in my own research, I asked the students to enact rituals of their daily lives in school and what they offered were dramas about initiation, conflicts regarding territory within the school, physical fights, gender relations and social media. I also integrated drama into Focus Group Interviews as a means of creating a shared experience, following which the students could discuss 'life' through the interesting remove of one another's drama work. Inspired by Gallagher, drama became methodologically productive and diminished the distance between us, as I worked alongside the students to bring their dramas to life.

Another strand of my thesis that was supported conceptually by The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times was Gallagher's analysis of the productive potential of conflict. She coins the phrase, “pedagogies of conflict” (p. 140) to illustrate what conflict can teach, not by seeking a quick resolution but by exploration through both discussion and drama. Reading her accounts and the verbatim dialogue that she includes in the book, I began to recognize the importance of conflict in the drama classroom and this became the spine of my Master's thesis, a project that looked at sabotage in practices of student-created playbuilding and devising that mistakenly insisted on too much cohesion.

Gallagher documents conflict that is simultaneously interpersonal and political. In one particular discussion, which will be of interest to the readers of this journal, a conflict erupted in one of the Toronto schools after the teacher invited her students to reflect on a play they had seen the previous day exploring the issue of HIV/AIDS. The exchange was excruciatingly raw and acted as a poignant example of unresolvable conflicts regarding troubled gender relations and brutally frank homophobia. Gallagher credits the teacher for keeping such a difficult discussion going and for managing to:

critique heteronormativity and condemn its violences while opposing, in several instances, the boundedness of identity. She accomplished her difficult work on this day by helping the

youth in her charge to be heard and to hear things that invited them to think through the complexities of their own sexual, gendered, racialized, and religious identities and affiliations. (p. 127)

This powerful example of difficult and conflict-ridden pedagogy underscores the importance of bringing the everyday into the drama classroom so that issues of hidden and not-so-hidden homophobia, heteronormativity, sexism, racism and income polarity can be discussed and challenged.

Gallagher credits Dominque Riviere (Gallagher & Riviere, 2004) who talks about an “unofficial multicultural doctrine” that searches for “commonality” and “racial transcendence” (p. 89). Writing against this effacing of difference, Gallagher suggests that schools are “places steeped in liberal humanist values” that prize social coherence and community-building” (p. 89). I came face to face with the dangers of humanism in my own Master’s research site where the avoidance of conflict and divergent viewpoints promoted a kind of enforced, albeit well meaning, conformity. This pull to conformity and cohesion became an easy target for a student who worked to sabotage the playbuilding/devising process. The pull to sameness that youth experience is also emerging as one of the central themes of my doctoral research looking at schooling and youth attitudes to diversity in the changing suburb.

I would like to close this brief review with a passage that expresses my sense of Gallagher's commitment to drama and its potential in work with youth as a means of accessing their experiences of the power relations within their school, the local community and the broader world:

I wanted the specificity and intimacy of these classrooms to create a counterpoint to the broader, more generic school context. How do, for example, the dialectics of self and other, of local and global, of democracy and domination play out in drama’s pedagogy? Further, how do we come to understand the dialectical relationship between the performative and the non-performative or the fictional roles enacted in the drama classroom and the so-called ‘real’ ones? (p. 5)
Gallagher’s purpose is not to use drama simply as a means to represent youth experiences but as a way to challenge what is taken as ‘normal’, “The youth in this study, I came to learn, use their words and stories not only to reflect their realities but to reconstitute them” (p. 5).

Gallagher’s work spurs methodological curiosity and leaps into new research methods. But it does not end there. In my experience, this book has also acted as a valuable reference point, a welcome place to return to again and again. Re-reading The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times, provokes new questions and new considerations of the tensions and assumptions within my own scholarly work that aspires to be both artful and socially engaged. The provocations expressed in The Theatre of Urban: Youth and Schooling in Dangerous Times, the ways in which relationships between youth and researchers are reconceptualized, and the artful experimentation with traditional ethnographic methods have been crucial to the conceptual and methodological practices of my own fledgling research.

References