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REVIEW ESSAY

Performing new spaces: *the theatre of urban*

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The theatre of urban: youth and schooling in dangerous times, by Kathleen Gallagher, Toronto, Canada, University of Toronto Press, 2007, viii + 222 pp., £32.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8020-9483-4

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Aperitif

What can be more basic than food itself? Food to begin to grow. Without it, you'd starve to death, even academics. But don't stop there, my friend, don't stop there, because food is the point of departure. A place where growth begins. You eat, you drink and you laugh out loud. You wipe the sweat off your forehead and take a sip of water. You tell a story, maybe two, with words of pain and desire. Your companion listens and listens, then offers a different telling. The waiter comes back with the main course and stays to tell his version. Your companion offers three more stories and the people seated at the next table lean over to listen. You push all the tables together and the room resounds with voices. (Goto, 1994, p. 201)

In 1970, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss published his famous structuralist analysis of myth, *The raw and the cooked*. The 'raw', the natural world and the 'cooked', the world of human culture, form the imagined binary through which he conducts his analysis. Lévi-Strauss argued that a structural and thematic connection between, or the assemblage of, the raw and the cooked in mythological thought are human attempts to institute congruency between 'natural' and 'cultural' forces. Cooking facilitates a conversion from nature to culture, by means of which human subjectivity is produced. Cooking is a form of intercession between nature and society, life and death, heaven and earth. The cook can be viewed as a cultural agent whose function is to 'mediate the conjunction of the raw product and the human consumer', an act of creative interlocution which has the effect of 'making sure the natural is at once cooked and socialized' (Lévi-Strauss, 1970, p. 336). If you will indulge me, let us consider writers and ethnographers chefs. Their analysis and crafting of the text is the scholarly process of 'cooking', in which experiences of the field are translated via a chosen theoretical lens, in relation to pertinent bodies of literature. Within such a frame, Kathleen Gallagher's *The theatre of urban: youth and schooling in dangerous times* reads like a Japanese banquet: crisp, interesting, with a sense of history, carefully thought through, and prepared from a mix of interesting and varied ingredients, clearly identifiable. It's refreshing but it's not all 'cooked'. It's not supposed to be. *The theatre of urban* is an innovative and considered mix of 'raw'

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and ‘cooked’ data and it is one of the most measured multi-method approaches to qualitative research I have read. The point here is, like food, myth: the joining of meaning and language on cultural symbolic levels, is part of the fabric of human existence. We need ideas and beliefs in order to have our everyday. Books, or more importantly, the ideas they bring into the world, articulate meaning and content in culture. *The theatre of urban* offers sustenance to scholars working at the intersection of a range of conflicting discourses and teaching practitioners labouring in difficult contexts. To bastardise the words of Hiromi Goto, for those who are working in complex educational spaces, working often without hope of change or respite, ‘What can be more basic than thought itself? Thought to begin to grow. And imagine otherwise’ (1994, p. 201).

A little machine

There are two major ways in which this book advances different fields of scholarship. In this review essay I consider these contributions to knowledge in turn, and I offer this commentary with the proviso that my reading of *The theatre of urban* takes up the book as a little machine, an assemblage of different textual forms, times, spaces and bodies of knowledge. Deleuze and Guattari draw our attention to the fiction of a-temporality and mono-spatiality that a book can create. Books, they say, are accordions, compressions of speeds, times, spaces and places. The reader is easily misguided by the apparently static, compact materiality of the book. It is, in fact, only static and compact on the surface. Inside, years of people’s lives are housed – along with traces of the places in which they have lived. Deleuze and Guattari make this point by stating:

[a] book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of relations ... a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs. We will never ask what a book means, as signified or signifier; we will not look for anything to understand in it. We will ask what it functions with, in connection with what things does it or does it not transmit intensities, in which other multiplicities its own are inserted and metamorphosed, and with what bodies without organs it makes its own converge. A book exists only through the outside and on the inside. A book itself is a little machine. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 3–4)

The theatre of urban has a number of ‘outsides’: it connects to spatial, feminist and critical theory, scholarship on theatre studies and drama education and also Foucault’s writings. On the inside, *The theatre of urban*’s ‘raw and cooked’ are transcripts, images, theoretical perspectives, researcher’s reflections. What this little machine produces depends on how it is taken up – by you – and other researchers in the fields that constitute its outside.

On one level, Gallagher’s book is about theatre, urban space, young people and education. On another level, it is about changing the relationship of theatre education scholarship to spatial theory, pioneering new approaches to research and reconsidering the utility of risk discourses. These are the fields of scholarship with which the book transmits intensities; they are the other multiplicities in which the subject of the book is inserted. This essay is not, then, about the subjects of *The theatre of urban*, but rather about the connections with other assemblages that *The theatre of urban* establishes and how Gallagher goes about crafting these fields of

resonance. Another scholar would no doubt read this text in relation to different bodies of knowledge and perhaps suggest significant contributions that will not be touched upon here. My stories are partial, circumstantial and self-interested. They are the dimensions of connection I experienced, yet there are infinite other important connections between this work and different academic fields which will need to be explicated by future scholars.

Theatre education and ‘the spatial turn’

Conceivably, the failure to entertain the spatial dynamics and exigencies underpinning education, in any fullblooded way, will result in understandings of education’s context, policy and practice that, at best, will be narrow, and, perhaps, at worst, flawed. We would argue therefore that making space for space in education is long overdue. (Gulson & Symes, 2007, p. 107)

These words of Gulson and Symes signal a new movement of research in education that foregrounds space and place. A move that is indeed, long overdue, and which *The theatre of urban* contributes to in some discipline-specific ways. I have been rather disillusioned by the theoretical blind spots of theatre education as an academic discipline. Theatre studies, more broadly, has developed as a discipline in relation to – and with an awareness of – the broader social and cultural theories being deployed in tertiary scholarship. I have not felt that theatre education has carried such an integrated approach to scholarship, indeed, an anti-intellectual sentiment can be identified in theatre education texts that uncomfortably maintain teaching theatre is a primarily practical enterprise that engages students who like to ‘do’ rather than ‘think’. The very act of identifying ‘thought’ as being somehow distinct from ‘doing’ signals some of the problems with such approaches to scholarship. The implications tend to include the presumption that abstract thought is, at best, to be avoided at all costs and, at worst, a middle class luxury. This is simply not the case. Not only do such reductive conceptions of thought limit the power and possibility afforded to young people’s work in the drama classroom, they are superfluous in scholarly terms. Gallagher’s text stands in stark opposition to a-theoretical accounts of ‘doing’ theatre. More than this, she offers a lucid, applied and timely analysis of the spatial politics and practices of schooling. The significance of this theoretical move is partially made plain in the ways Gallagher situates her theoretical lens. She notes that her work is innovative in its engagement with ‘the spatial turn’ in the social sciences, and argues: ‘... spaces are ideological. They produce ideas, transmit messages, contain fears’ (p. 11). Moving on from this point of departure, Gallagher undertakes a spatial analysis of schools which offers a unique contribution to the sociology of education and to architecture. Allow me to illustrate this point by quoting at length:

Foucault (1978) suggests that the architectural layout of schools has demonstrated a preoccupation with children’s sexuality: the classroom spaces, the planning of lessons, the distribution of partitions and tables have been ‘largely based on the assumption that this sexuality existed, that it was precocious, active, and ever present’ (28). What I have identified as ‘dangerous times’ in schools, however, have much less to do with 18th- and 19th-century European bourgeois concerns for discipline, learning, and sexuality than they have to do with the ideology of fear that disparages youth and deems public (school) space inherently dangerous. Scanning systems, holding cells, and other security procedures are based on the assumption that criminality is active and ever present. To

paraphrase Foucault (1978) pedagogical institutions have multiplied the forms of discourses on the subject of security; they have established various points of implantation for criminality and danger; they have coded and (dis)qualified (un)worthy persons. Such pervasive discourses of risk and safety operate with school architecture – the long corridors and contained class-rooms – and produce social spaces that instruct particular codes of behavior. (pp.28–29)

This nuanced embrace of the spatial (and material) turn in the social sciences and education makes some important moves towards rectifying what Gulson and Symes (2007) have noted as a dearth of the presence of space and place in education.

Creative approaches to research

Writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 4)

Mapping realms that are yet to come is a creative practice: a material imaging of the future through words, pictures and in this instance, theatre methods. Gallagher's study is modest and interesting in its engagement of creative approaches to research. She brings together a range of research techniques which include photographic essays, improvisation and drama activities with young people. Gallagher then frames these generative and affective aspects of her research method within what she calls a 'porous ethnography': a research methodology that changes with context and media. This is grounded in detailed observations of school contexts and qualitative interviews. These core data sources are augmented by collaborative creative exercises with the young participants, such as semi-structured improvisations, group discussions and role plays. The creative approaches to research that are incorporated into ethnographic method are articulations of an applied critical, feminist methodology. This is explained by Gallagher as follows:

Our *porous methodology*, as I came to call it, was derived often enough by the explicit and immediate needs in the field. The feminist ethics of this study ... work well with action research's agenda for change. In education, action research has been primarily concerned with activity and change; it is usually undertaken through explicit partnerships with practitioners or those whose behaviours and actions most directly affect and are affected by the context under study. For this reason, the youth and their teachers moved in and out of co-researcher modes, both identifying problems and imagining ways to address them. Unlike the often practitioner-led action research in classrooms, however, our work did not determine, in advance, what specific changes were required. (p. 56)

To this I would also add that, unlike the often practitioner-led action research in classrooms, Gallagher's study speaks from – and to – a theoretical base of critical poststructural feminist theory. This is what brings a sense of coherence and a logic of inquiry to her methodology. It is also why the creative approaches to research that the study takes up read as sensible extensions of more conventional ethnographic techniques: theory is deployed to show how research methods and products illustrate young people's experiences of the spatiality of schooling. Not that being 'sensible' is always good, indeed non-sensical inquiry is a form of mapping realms yet to come that might well be worth exploring. Questioning the foundations of what constitutes 'sense' is certainly a generative point of departure for epistemological critique. The critical feminist approaches to research that Gallagher employs facilitate such a questioning of dominant logics of space, and this is a crucial part of her being able to

tell the stories of the young people involved in her research. Often their stories and their spaces differ profoundly from dominant spatial narratives of schooling. Suffice to say, I liked the relationship between theory and diverse arts media employed in this study's research methodology. Five years ago, people were still talking about research methods such as this; now we are seeing them in publication.

Digestif

Gallagher writes about – and for – youth who are regularly constructed within risk discourses, yet she does so without re-inscribing many of the ideological assumptions that accompany these discourses. She argues that theatre and drama education can be taken as a sociological lens through which to examine issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, and the politics of space and knowledge production in secondary schools. In doing so, Gallagher also looks at ways in which practices and places of schooling articulate cultural policies, politics, contemporary discourses of 'youth' and their constitutive subjects. I was interested in, curious about, and consumed *The theatre of urban*. It is an excellent book, and one that the field of performing arts education clearly needs. Don't approach this book with the expectation of a 'cooked' product. This pastiche of textual forms works in a different way to many studies of the sociology of schooling. But it works well.

Notes on contributor

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