Meddling with 'drama class', muddling 'urban': imagining aspects of the urban feminine self through an experimental theatre process with youth

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Available online: 27 Jun 2011

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Meddling with 'drama class', muddling 'urban': imagining aspects of the urban feminine self through an experimental theatre process with youth

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This paper addresses how the urban is imagined and troubled through performances of youth engaged in a devised theatre project. These youth, situated next to a particular and storied urban place, reshaped the discourses of 'The Downtown Eastside' (DTES) in a classroom-based performance project. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Ellsworth, who argues for the pedagogical power of considering the student who is in motion and performing in relation to an outside world, we describe how the youth in this study accessed their lived experiences to reconfigure common representations of young women in the DTES. Through devised theatre methods, the youth explored and created more complex and proximal representations of lives and circumstances otherwise steeped in taboo and stereotype. The theatre process used in this school-based project evolved from the meeting of contemporary devising practices with more traditional drama education expectations. This paper describes the circumstances and process of this work and focuses on the analysis of one scene from a final performance of the work.

In this paper we address how a theatre project with youth created a transitional space of learning in which the urban – in this case a particular iteration of the urban – is imagined and reconfigured. In particular, we analyse one scene in which five young women re-imagine the urban feminine subject in relation to their own subjectivities. Drawing on the work of Ellsworth (2005), this theorisation of a place of learning considers students as whole bodies/minds/selves in motion, and pedagogy as places of shared emergence and learning, as knowledge and discourses are created and/or reconfigured. Within these pedagogical spaces, adolescent bodies create and represent lived realities (Grosz 1994; Merleau-Ponty 1962); that is, the body is inscribed

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with, and generates information about, youth subjectivity and positioning (Ellsworth 2005; Grosz and Eisenman 2001).

This work was undertaken as part of a larger federally funded research project, the Youth CLAIM (Critical Literacies in Arts Integrated Media) project. The CLAIM project was a multi-site case study (Stake 2006) that spanned three educational and community settings in which youth appropriated and transformed a range of discursive resources made available through zine production, theatre and film making to express identity positions and engage in cultural critique (Rogers et al. 2009). At Lismore Secondary School (a pseudonym), the site in which this study is based, our research focused specifically on devised theatre as a site of inquiry and critique. In other words, our focus centred on the way in which devising could be taken up as a set of inquiry practices, and excluded any assumptions or expectations as to *what* ideas might be taken up.

Meddling with drama class: a devised theatre approach

The practical and theoretical approach adopted for this site arose in part due to a belief that devised theatre methods in particular afford the unique opportunity for individual analysis, critique, and representation of society within an artistic and pedagogical context. This approach departs considerably from much previous work at the intersection of drama and theatre education, a significant amount of which can be positioned broadly as concerned with the affordances of drama and theatre education for developing literacy and multiple literacy skills (O'Toole and O'Mara 2007; see Baldwin and Fleming 2003; Laidlaw 2005; Schneider, Crumpler, and Rogers 2006, as examples), for social and personal development (e.g. Donelan 2002; Neelands 2009; Wilhelm and Edmiston 1998), and for cross-curricular learning (e.g. Chan 2009; Fels and Belliveau 2008). This work is weighted heavily in the terrain of drama, as opposed to theatre, in education; process is valued over performance, and the notion of representation itself is rarely addressed directly. Performance studies and post-structural theory complicates much of this work as questions of representation, spectatorship, and embodiment muddy the terrain of what counts as 'pretending' versus 'being', and what counts as 'learning' versus 'play'.

Devised theatre, as taken up in this project, addressed this terrain directly with varying degrees of resistance and engagement by the students involved. According to the articulation of Govan, Nicholson, and Normington, we understand devising in terms of a plurality of

'*processes* of experimentation and sets of creative *strategies* – rather than a single methodology' (2007, 7). (For more on devising methods and histories see, for example, Barton 2008; Heddon and Milling 2006.) This project involved an introduction to devising history and theory, strategies, and professional performances to a group of youth who had never directly engaged with devising practices before. During the first half of the programme, interdisciplinary performance methods and non-text-based performance creation strategies were explored, followed by an engagement with spectatorship (touching on performance studies, audience studies, and performance analysis). Bringing these two processes, of creation and spectatorship, into the same space invited the connections between what and how we perform and what and how we watch. It was on this footing that we moved into the development of a devised play for public performance.

Devising performance is a practice that has evolved over time and location, and like any term, over time it becomes less specific as a descriptor. Devising is associated with a vast range of practices and approaches to performance creation, it is therefore necessary to clarify the particular paradigm and practice that was engaged with in this study. The performances that emerged, along with the topics, themes, and issues explored therein, came about through the interests, experiences (lived and vicarious), and connections made by the students themselves through processes of improvisation, character and scene development. No explicit themes or agendas were brought to this process by either researchers or teachers. Unlike play building (e.g. Tarlington and Michaels 1995; Weigler 2001), the more common approach to performance creation in education, the devised performances in this study did not arise out of a scaffolded process whereby the participants collaboratively built upon an agreed theme or issue. Rather, characters emerged with particular locations and stories to tell through creative processes in relation to their own subjectivities. In this way, a performance was created that juxtaposed a wide range of ideas, perspectives, narratives, and experiences.

Devising, as taken up in this study, does not inherently fall in line with traditional notions of critical pedagogy. Indeed, we consciously side-stepped many critical pedagogical methods in favour of adopting a post-critical paradigm that more closely aligns with professional devised theatre traditions (Etchells 1999; Govan, Nicholson and Normington 2007; Heddon and Milling 2006). In this way, the project involved a very different level and form of engagement with ideas,

issues, and themes than that which would more commonly take place in traditional playbuilding structures.

A pre-occupation with its own form is a common trait of devised theatre, and similarly, we wanted to explore ways for the students to be on stage, as drama students, in relation to a role that would function to expose and explore aspects of their subject positions. As the phases of work changed (from developing 'tools', to watching theatre, to creating performance), so did the expectations and interactions of the students. Despite the work they had seen and taken part in, the notion of an 'end of year performance' prompted a series of expectations that conflicted with the methods and practices invested in to that point. Concern mounted quickly in the class from the outset of the performance creation phase of the project. During a group discussion, the most vocal of the students expressed their frustrations at what was perhaps a 'bit too much of the abstract stuff' and a desire to get down to the real 'acting' (Geraldine, focus group, 25 February 2008). Another student added: 'acting, to me is . . . an actor is developing a character and he throws away, he or she, throws away who they are and then becomes that character' (Cassie, focus group, 25 February 2008).

The discussions around this issue revealed a significant tension between the devising processes we were engaged in, and the systems, structures, and models in which the youth functioned. The school production staged by the drama programme the previous year had been Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*; the simultaneously occurring production being rehearsed by the music department at the time of this research project was *Oklahoma*. These plays were typical of productions at this school. Students auditioned for parts, rehearsed, and performed in character, in costume. These public and celebrated productions were highly regarded by the students of this project, who, as members of a drama class, associated themselves with these theatrical and representational forms of performance (see Perry 2010).

Bringing this background to the project reveals specific ways of behaving and receiving in the context of school drama. The form of performance that was familiar to this group was performance within a space supported by entrances and exits, props, sets, lights, costumes, curtains and characters. This is a space that delineates the relationships between the performer and the performed, between the performed and the spectator, between reality and the fiction portrayed. In pursuing performance creation in the absence of a significant pillar in this construction (that is, of character), and asking students to look to themselves, to their own bodies/minds/selves, for performance

material, we were reimagining a pivotal aspect of their drama programme. In short, the mode of performance that we were facilitating was unfamiliar territory for the students, and thus stood in the way of their expectations and assumed pathways to academic, social, and cultural objectives. Recognising and working through this space of rupture (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Perry 2010) became a pedagogical issue as well as an artistic one. We were prompted to establish a place and practice that contained enough recognisable points of contact in order for students to engage and invest in the work, whilst at the same time introducing the post-structural elements of performance practice that exist in the devising process we were facilitating.

One response to this tension involved the incorporation of a character development process. The process merged traditional acting techniques with the more experimental approaches of devising that formed the basis of the project as a whole. This process, although unexpected, became central to the inquiry and representation that emerged from this project and which we conceptualise as occurring in a transitional space of learning.

Transitional spaces

Based on Winnicott's (1989) notion of transitional space, Ellsworth (2005) explores the dynamic of relationality that is at the heart of the learning experience. The transitional space is taken up as a place whereby the learning self is put in relation with that which is different from herself, and through the mechanisms and mediums engaged, an interrelation occurs. In this light, the transitional space is a theory that responds to Ellsworth's supposition that 'we cannot know self in absence of separate different others. We cannot know others in absence of self' (2005, 61). Integral to transitional space is the maintenance of separation between the inside and the outside; the interrelation that occurs does not massage difference, or blur distinctions of diversity, Ellsworth continues, 'we cannot know only through difference . . . we cannot know only through cohering' (2005, 61).

As a place where students can put themselves in relation with that which is different, other, 'outside' of oneself, the transitional space resonates with many articulations of pedagogy in participatory learning practices. In the practice of process drama as expounded by Cecily O'Neill, the 'liminal' spaces or 'creases' are the terms used to describe the imagined world at the intersection of one context of meaning and another, places that signal areas of instability and

disturbance as well as potential change (1995, 66). Kathleen Gallagher, in her ethnography of theatre in urban schools, describes a 'sociology of aesthetics' whereby students create new experiences through drama that draw on both 'identification and difference' in relation to the subject matter at hand (2007, 161).

In *Places of Learning* (2005), Ellsworth engages in an empirical investigation of anomalous transitional places of learning, drawing towards an awareness of the contingent nature of the transitional space. It is not 'one thing' that can be accompanied by a series of steps or strategies. Such spaces cannot be prescribed, and the emergence that may occur within it cannot be predicted. There is no agenda attached to the space in terms of intended outcomes. The experience of the transitional space, because it is never fixed, and because it is made up of the subjectivities taking part, will always come as a surprise to the designer of it, and student within it.

One of the many ways in which Winnicott referred to the notion of transitional space was a 'good enough holding environment'. This term implied the availability of a framework of stability within which one can risk interrelation with that which is different. Ellsworth explains:

> An environment of interrelation holds the potential to become transitional space when it provides opportunities for us to both act in the world and to be acted upon by it − while at the same time offering us the flexible stability we need to risk allowing ourselves to be changed by that interaction. Stability may be offered in the form of limits, forms, traditions, expectations, or conventions. (2005, 32)

We found this articulation of transitional space useful in unpacking the learning experiences within the character development process, one that occurs in the interstices of the lived, the vicariously experienced, and the imagined selves. In addition, this space was facilitated in a school environment that carries with it myriad traditional expectations, structures, and prescribed behaviours.

The research site

The devising project was carried out as the main element of the grade nine drama programme over the course of one school year, between September 2007 and May 2008. The class included 15 youth, 11 of whom were female. As co-researchers in this site, our roles were changeable and dependent on the circumstances and needs of the site on a day-to-day basis. Overall, we moved along a continuum with

participant observer at one end (a role primarily taken by Theresa, co-author) and facilitator and performance director (roles primarily taken by Mia, co-author) at the other. Over the course of the study we co-facilitated at least two out of three drama classes per week and supervised two devised theatre outings. Facilitating, to a significant extent, the learning and creation of devised theatre, rendered our roles very active in the generation of data. We acknowledge this dynamic in the research and position ourselves accordingly in the same space of interrelational creation that the youth engaged in. In this way, we, as researchers, are implicated along with the youth, and the social, political, cultural, and interpersonal contexts that take part in this study. Along with video taping, audio recording, and jottings of the performance creation work, the data set drawn on for this study includes other ethnographic data sources, such as individual and focus group interviews, observations, field notes, and student-generated artifacts.

The focal data for this study was selected due to its particular engagement with perceptions and experiences of the urban female self. Of the five girls directly involved in this data, four gave consent to take part in this research. In terms of traditional categories of social identity, these girls can be described as white, middle-class Canadians, between the ages of 14 and 16. In terms of the practical and epistemological approach to this study, these categories are relevant only as far as they indicate the socio-political position of such identities in relation to those of the urban context that they explore (see below).

The proximal urban texts

We explore particular representations of the urban that students generated in the context of this project in relation to particular discourses of the adjacent city. The school is situated in a suburb next to a large Western Canadian city (Vancouver) in which there is a particular area that has been discursively produced and reproduced as a kind of 'cautionary tale' in the popular imagination. The Downtown East Side (DTES) is a catchment area for the city, province and nation for people who are often homeless, dealing with addiction, engaging as sex trade workers, etc. It has been referred to as 'Canada's poorest postal code' (City of Vancouver 2005–6). Women are particularly vulnerable to violence and exploitation in the DTES. Over 60 women have disappeared since the 1980s (Fuller-Evans 2010).

This urban landscape formed a key backdrop against which a group of Lismore students took up these multiple and contradictory discourses in the transitional space of the devised theatre work, particularly in one scene that was created and performed with five girls, The Clinic Scene.

The Clinic Scene: imagining urban feminine subjectivities

In line with the practical and philosophical approach of devising discussed earlier, The Clinic Scene arose out of the ideas and connections that five students developed through a number of processes within what we believed might be a 'good enough holding environment' (Winnicott 1989, cited in Ellsworth 2005, 32) for the emergence of desire, identification, critique, and discovery. Through preliminary exercises and discussions, the students identified a series of ideas and concepts that they deemed important to them, as individuals and as a class. The first building block of the character development work was a self-selected word or phrase chosen from this list (e.g. 'impulses', 'creativity', 'food'). We asked each student in the class to imagine someone (a character) who might share a strong interest in this concept. In this context, it was not surprising that the students created characters that personified aspects of themselves, and in this way began to complicate the binaries of 'performer' and 'performed'. The students engaged in the process through their bodies, physically exploring an alternative way of moving and interacting in the space. In addition, they developed the characters through narrative – writing textual biographies. They put their characters in relation to others in creation through conversation, interview and finally scene creation.

In some cases the characters revealed aspirations of their student-creators, in others the character development process was an exploration down a path that was possible in their own lives, but forbidden or foreboding. Some examples of this relationship between student and character came up with regard to appearance: She's like me, but without braces (Lisa, classroom exercise, 26 February 2008); he's like me, but six foot tall (Sam, classroom exercise, 26 February 2008). Often age was a distinguishing factor: A 14-year-old student becomes 27. As the holding space opens up the parameters of possibility, realities are explored, and desire, identification, and critique moulded these realities into playful, satirical, and confessional spaces.

The Clinic Scene materialised as students were asked to group themselves with other students whose characters might share the

same time (medieval times, contemporary time) or context (young aspiring artists, princesses and Scottish Lords). During this loosely structured exercise, five girls came together with the rough assumption that they would have things in common due to their characters' ages, gender, and interests. Imagining a common location for their characters, the girls created a medical clinic and developed a scene from there.

The choice of a clinic setting was interesting to us as it is unique as a represented space situated in the intersection of the private and the public. Donna Haraway, in her classic feminist manifesto argues for permeability of boundaries between personal body and body politic and points to interrelated places where women are reduced to bodies and where we might consider 'changing the rules of the game' (1983, 291). While Haraway's argument is related to technology in its call for a new 'cyborg' metaphor for women, the central thesis is relevant to other feminist calls for a way out of traditional and oppressive dualisms. It is interesting to note that the 'clinic-hospital' is one site she names to point to the ways in which women's bodies are constructed by the ideas around them (e.g. medical constructions) and where we might re-construct them as 'maps of power and identity' (Haraway 1983). The girls in this clinic scene, April, Amy, Kim, Dana, and Helen (pseudonyms), engage in remapping and reinscribing their lived and embodied subjectivities through exploring and representing aspects of themselves in relation to known and imagined realities removed from, but proximal, to their own.

As facilitators, our role in this performative exploration was focused on positioning the work in relation to other performances being developed simultaneously within the class as a whole, not on unpacking or analysing the socio-political implications of the students' choices. In other words, our interest was in exploring and exposing ways of *making* meaning, rather than exposing meanings made.

Immediately preceding The Clinic Scene in the final performance, April performs a monologue in the role of her character, Lexa. This monologue portrays her circumstances of rehabilitation, medical dependence and a highly structured day-to-day life. Emphasising the inevitability and predictability of what will make up the rest of her days, Lexa contrasts this with her previous 'chaotic life' that included the freedom to do 'whatever, whenever' – a life that also included illegal drugs and a successful art career. April, in her performance of Lexa, provides an example of how the transitional space allowed the students to create a character that incorporates both lived and

perceived realities to create a hybridised and interrelated position from which to perform. April reflects, 'It all started out 'cause I wanted to be a little bit older than our age right now'. In talking further about her experience, April discusses the interrelations between her under-standings of herself and her character. She states: 'the creative side of Lexa, my character, was based upon me ...[but] her personal experiences, I've obviously not really had'. It is these experiences that point to 'the raw parts of life that aren't so great' that April refers to and that became central to her character biography. In identifying with the character, April proposes: 'she's obviously having a down time and, you know, everyone's kind of had that'. April, of her own accord, went 'people watching' downtown, exploring parts of the city generally absent from her own life, she referred to this experience as influential, and one that affected her work in the character development process. She explains: 'I actually went to see myself ... you can just see a lot of stuff and you just kind of absorb it ... and when I think about people with issues and, to make my character, actually, I [ask], what are the issues that I see around and stuff, and I just kind of absorbed that' (interview, 27 May 2008).

In similar ways, the other performers created characters that combined aspects of their lived, vicariously experienced, and imagined selves. The transitional spaces and interrelation afforded in the character development processes with the students alter and expand their experiences (lived, vicarious, imagined, performed) of the urban feminine body. The students further unpack and explore this construc-tion in the representational contexts of scene creation and perfor-mance. The following analysis portrays the performed scene in which the girls placed their characters in the represented space of the clinic. Within this portrayal, we focus on two moments that emerge as informative and interesting places of discursive interaction and conflict in relation to the students' perceptions of urban feminine subjectivities.

Moment one: negotiating discursive boundaries

With one character (Lexa) already introduced through the above-described monologue, The Clinic Scene opens with Amy, in the role of a clinic receptionist (Emma), entering the performance space to set up a desk, with a laptop, trashcan, desk lamp; traditional symbols of a public, administrative space. She straightens her skirt and sits down. Lexa is already seated, waiting, in a plastic chair. The projected backdrop is a large full-bloom flower, and contemporary 'indiemusic'

is playing. Following Lexa's entrance, Roxy (character), played by Kim, enters arguing with someone on her cell phone. She stops at the receptionist's table to provide her name and reason for being in the clinic, which she states, is blood testing. She takes a seat and finishes her phone call, which is later revealed to have been an argument with her boyfriend. The third performer in the scene portrays Rheanna, a young mother. The fourth to enter is Helen (student) who plays the character Nicky, 16 years old. Nicky discreetly reports that she is there for a pregnancy test; the receptionist says loudly, 'for what'? and so Nicky is forced to repeat, in a way now audible for everyone, that she is there for a pregnancy test.

In this opening sequence, the body takes on the focus and function as the object of dialogue, circumstance, and interaction. In fact, in this space, the dimensions of character are reduced to the body in a material way; bodies that are further constructed and defined by medical discourses of testing, a kind of medical surveillance of transgressive behaviours. This scene is played out in a way that subjects the private feminine body to public scrutiny. The scrutiny or surveillance in this case is ventriloquated (Bakhtin 1986) and reproduced by the women themselves in the following dialogue.

> Emma: Sorry, what was that?
> Nicky: Pregnancy test.
> Emma: Ok, take a seat.
> Roxy: (*to Nicky*) Wow don't you think you're a little young there?
> Nicky: Not really.
> Rheanna: (*to Roxy*) Do you have a problem with that?
> Roxy: Well she looks about 16, I'm just sayin'.

Roxy's comments can be seen to be voicing normalising cultural discourses in response to teenage pregnancy, rather than building on shared life experiences. This tension was criticised by fellow students early on in the development of the work, but remained an important aspect of the scene for the performers, as they wanted to maintain contradictions within the characters (Kim, class discussion, 4 March 2008). As a result, the discourses represented in this clinic space complicate notions of girlhood and womanhood – what is normal, what is transgressive. Transgressive behaviours are monitored and normative discourses are reproduced.

The monitoring and negotiation of discourses occurs both inside and outside the performed scene. Inside the scene, Lexa (character), proceeds from the above-quoted interaction, by stating, 'thank god I

had an abortion'. This statement of positioning and experience provides an alternative response to teenage pregnancy, one that is left unquestioned by the other young female characters in the scene, but that emerges as defiant and taboo in the broader classroom/school space. A school teacher present during a rehearsal of this scene brought attention to the implicit expectations and perimeters of acceptability in the representations presented by these youth by cautioning them, particularly in relation to the 'flippant remark about abortion', that they may get a strong response from their audience and to keep that in mind as they develop the scene.

In the same conversation, the students were asked where their ideas for characters and scenarios came from. Kim replied, 'real life', but immediately adjusted her answer with 'no, just kidding'. This response prompted much laughter and cheering from the class (Kim, class discussion, 4 March 2008). The class interactions outside, and about, the performed scene and characters point to the tensions and limits around what can be voiced in a school context.

What takes place in the scene and the surrounding class discussions and interviews is a careful negotiation along the borders of normative and transgressive discourses. Borders are pushed and broken up, but not beyond recognition; a balance of sorts is struck between the students' desires to play in transgressive subjectivities and discourses, and their need to maintain the 'container' of normative (and in their case, more familiar) behaviours and positions. Simultaneous to the testing and negotiating of discursive boundaries taking place, the constructions and experiences of the feminine urban subject are being complicated as they are put in relation to the students' own subjectivities and positions. In other words, the perceived, the imagined, and the vicariously experienced urban feminine subjectivities are removed from the stable position of 'other' and incorporated into a more fluid, contingent position of relation.

Moment two: addressing the body as a space of counter discourse

The second moment involves the discursive construction of the tattoo artist in the context of The Clinic Scene. The tattoo, and occupation of tattoo art, becomes another visible, performative, and embodied representation of transgressive behaviours. In the broader discourses of urban and youth culture, tattoos function as signs literally inscribed on bodies as markers of resistance, both physical and cultural. In the

clinic scene, Roxy is a tattoo artist who connects with Lexa who is also an artist and has tattoos on her body:

> Roxy: I'm a tattoo artist.
> Lexa: Oh, cool, I have a couple of tats myself. What are you in for?
> Soon after this exposition, Emma approaches Roxy to ask if she would make her an appointment to get a tattoo.
> Emma: So, I heard you are a tattoo artist?
> Roxy: That's right.
> Emma: Do you think you could maybe, fit me in sometime?

In this series of interactions, the characters are sharing experience and subjectivities, rather than attempting to monitor or challenge. Art, throughout this scene, functions as a coalescing engagement – Lexa is a sculptor and sketches in a notebook while she waits for her appointment, which prompts the interest and inquiries of Roxy. In the case of tattoo art, the body becomes implicated in and as art, rather than as subject of testing, offering a counterpoint or counter discourse to the medicalising and surveillance discourse of the urban feminine body in the majority of the scene. Lexa, in her biographical statement had listed 'artist' as a descriptor and associated her creativity with drug-induced inspiration, lamenting the perceived binary of medicalisation/creativity.

It becomes apparent, through the characters created and represented in this clinic scene, that the students trouble the perceived distinctions between what is normal and what is transgressive, and construct urban feminine subjectivity in ways that are at times representative of stereotypes, but at times complex and contradictory portrayals.

These discursive constructions are necessarily partial and conflicting as the urban, and in particular the DTES, became a kind of text for their performances. We also argue that the performed discourses and characters in the clinic scene clearly pushed boundaries of acceptability or expected activity as understood by the students involved. Throughout the creation process, this space pushed against an implicit surveillance role of the anticipated audience of parents and teachers. In fact, in her interview April (who plays Lexa) says, 'I thought we wouldn't really be allowed to put those kind of things in, like, when we first did our clinic scene, we put a few interesting things in there. But we were surprised that we were allowed to do that, I guess, 'cause it is in school...' (interview, 27 May 2008).

Devised theatre as a space of re-imagining urban feminine bodies

This paper illustrates how aspects of urban feminine subjectivity are re-imagined through performances of youth engaged in a devised theatre project. These youth, situated next to a particular and storied urban place, reshaped the discourses of the urban, and in particular, of The Downtown Eastside in a school-based performance project. As Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005) argues, there is pedagogical power in considering the student who is in motion, and performing, in relation to an outside world. This work was done in what we argue is a transitional space in which the students were invited to let go of the binary of self/other and explore their relations with that which is external to their own projections and identifications to create something new with body, artifact and text. As Gallagher illustrates, students in such spaces are afforded opportunities to create new experiences through drama that draw on both 'identification and difference' in relation to the subject matter at hand (2007, 161). Through devised theatre methods in which students created a represented private/public space, the youth explored and created more complex and proximal representations of lives and circumstances, which in the context of their school and community are otherwise steeped in taboo and stereotype.

However, these representations also imagined urban feminine subjectivity in limited ways, limitations that involve their social, economic, and cultural positions situated outside the lived realities of the urban context of their scene. In this geographical context, as in other settings, particular representations of the urban sit in uneasy discursive positions in contemporary societal and economic structures – this uneasiness is visible in the work of the students as they appropriated and represented complex cultural discourses and pedagogies. In their performances, the young women both resist and reify pathologies in the proximal urban space (DTES) that they have re-imagined.

This paper points to some of the affordances and limitations of devised theatre work in traditional educational contexts. Devised theatre as taken up in this study afforded an open engagement with relationships and subjectivities, always contingent upon location and context. The central role of subjectivity and interrelationality in this devising work rendered the representations always partial and approximate. The significance of urban in this study did not come about due to an interest imposed by a teacher or researcher. Rather,

the locations, themes, and discourses emerged as students addressed and explored their own experiences, subjectivities and positions. The locations represented in the final devised performance ranged from a medieval fairy tale, to the drama classroom, to contemporary urban scenes of bars and clinics. The final work emerged as a complex representation of space, location and subjectivities, which in performance came in relation to peers, parents, teachers and institutional contexts. As Diane (student) explained in response to a question from an audience member after the public performance, 'in each character in each piece, there's a bit of everyone...' (talk-back discussion, 10 May 2008).

Keywords: devised theatre in education; urban feminine subjectivities; transitional space; embodied pedagogy

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Theresa Rogers is a professor of Language and Literacy Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada. Her research interests include arts-integrated literacy practices among adolescents in schools and communities and critical approaches to literature teaching. She has published articles in many literacy and education journals, such as *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Pedagogies: An International Journal*, and *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, and has co-authored and co-edited books, such as *Reading Across Cultures: Teaching Literature in a Diverse Society*; *Interpretive Play: Using Critical Perspectives to Teach Young Adult Literature*; and *Process Drama: An Educational Tool for Developing Multiple Literacies*. More information about her YouthCLAIM project can be found at www.theresarogers.ca.

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