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Dramagirls' Worldcraft: Teaching-Artist Platforms for Spectacle Theatre

Stephanie L. Hodde
Virginia Military Institute, U.S.A.

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Abstract

Drawing from six-months of action research with spectacle theatre-makers in Chicago, this study explores multimodal, expeditionary practice of teaching artists who apprenticed girls through Redmoon Theatre's Dramagirls program. Concepts of new literacy design and aesthetic experience illustrate teaching in socio-semiotic and material worldcraft, set in motion via intermedial, expeditionary platforms: Imaging, Games, and Dramatizing with Objects. Ethnographic, arts-based analysis of discourse scenarios reveal an emerging aesthetic playground, where teaching artists afford girls imaginative schema to construct socio-semiotic material, felt realities and cultural affinities for a girls' utopia. As this hybrid form of theatre is seldom explored as an aesthetic literacy context, Dramagirls' worldcraft offers pedagogical models for significant youth designs and inquiries.

Introduction

If I had the power to change the world,
in my *Girltopia*,
there'd be no cat-calling—
'Ola Chica, que bonita!' Kiss, kiss—
tsssst!
'Cause I'm better than that.
Turn it around, turn it around,
'cause I'm better than that.



Figure 1. “Girltopia” song performed by the Dramagirls (Video Transcript, 1/2002).

This article illustrates spectacle **worldcraft**¹—teaching platforms that build expeditionary, theatrical inquiry with Redmoon Theatre’s Dramagirls. As a mentor for this program, then as an action-researcher in education², I observed and documented Dramagirls’ artistic pedagogy in the late 1990’s, amidst pedagogical shifts to socially constructed, integrated, multimodal learning. This chance to experience and share Redmoon’s force as a model of aesthetic and community-engaged curriculum inspired me then; but sharing the relevance of their programmatic archive feels even more urgent now. As teaching artists, we advocate for work with young voices and bodies, so they have a space to dream and invent, offering ways to practice conscientious worldbuilding. Moreover, Dramagirls’ technical and conceptual designs remind partnering artists and educators how necessary it is that we invest in youth as future craftsmen of our public spheres. The following excerpts from my case research examine Dramagirls teaching artists’ designs to help girls craft worlds from multimodal and socio-symbolic inquiry. For the adolescent girls who were part of Dramagirls, this sparked a year of exploration and training, ending in a public performance, “Architects of Change” considering the theme, “Girltopia”. These young theatre apprentices experienced aesthetic agency which allowed them to craft a world that interrogates their own cultures and futures – worlds built for themselves, and for each other.

¹ I adopted this term **worldcraft** after returning to my 2005 dissertation chapter on Dramagirls teaching platforms. I sought a more universalizing term to embody not just technique, but the hands on, social work to teach imaginative, techniques, especially intermedial and conceptual qualities as socio-symbolic and interactive modes.

² This article is excerpted from a dissertation chapter on Dramagirls pedagogy (Hodde, 2005). IRB permissions from University of Illinois at Chicago’s College of Education were obtained for all volunteer study participants (girls, mentors, teaching artists). Youth participant names were changed to protect anonymity. To my knowledge, no other scholarship has been published on Redmoon’s spectacle theatre influences, practices, or the Dramagirls.

Dramagirls worldcraft produces innate qualities of artmaking that Dewey glimpsed as a *lived-through encounter*. In *Art as Experience* he argues that as makers, we compose unified encounters by learning with complex materials and modes; moreover, we undergo the challenge of those modal experiences so we can communicate what happens: “An experience has a unity that gives it its name, that meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship” (1934, p. 19). For educators and artists, Dewey’s qualities of experience still resonate—in our learning benchmarks and hands on projects for youth to express and socially-construct their potential. Scholars of new, multiliteracies have drawn on Dewey’s sense of experiential encounters to prioritize artmaking as a meaningful event through which learners undergo technical and social growth, actualizing new socio-semiotic, cultural (D)iscourses. Like many researchers who found themselves changing their terms to mirror how youth become capable designers for emerging multimodal (D)iscourses (Heath, 1999; Gee, 1990, 2000, 2001; Cope and Kazlantis 2015)³, spectacle learning afforded me the qualities to reconceive Dramagirl learning actions and media for being and making as more than aesthetic grammar (as Gee’s defines (D)iscourse) but social and aesthetic ways of being and doing in curricular exchanges, handiwork and performance. In my doctoral thesis I describe the girls spectacle artmaking as interactive and **intermedial assemblages** (Hodde, 2005; Gee, 2011, 2015; Kress, 2010)⁴, but the girls’ assemblages only reach their potential because teaching artists provide an Expeditionary Learning stage (Campbell et al, 1988), where emerging meanings give girls ownership to explore their worldcraft as multimodal and interactive inquiry (NLG, 1996; Street, 2005) beyond programmatic or cognitive development.

Dramagirls still opens ongoing conversations about our social imaginary (Rosaldo, 1994) ways we do, think and plan to try out our expectations for better circumstances. This becomes especially urgent in this age when young people are isolated behind the digital world. Now with AI and chatbot, where even the dwindling process of artmaking, embodied expression, and collaborative training with other young people is being replaced by work where the young person remains behind a screen, alone. Instead of worldbuilding, they engage with a digital framework which invents for them. The practice of world building that is about being with others, responding, listening, handling conflict— is threatened. The practice of allowing young people to learn by doing, and even experience itself, is in peril. What future are we building?

³ Shirley Brice Heath and James Gee’s studies of artistic learning cultures as literate discourses prioritize learning as sociocultural events, experiences, and cultures, rather than as individual, cognitive growth (See ‘Imaginative Actuality’: learning in the Non-School Hours *Champions of Change* (1999). Gee represents (D)iscourse as not grammar, but multimodal ways of constructing self and culture by “being in the world, or forms of life which integrate words, acts, beliefs, attitudes, social identities, as well as gestures, glances, body positions.” (1990, p 142).

⁴ **Intermedial** is a term devised during my dissertation research (Hodde, 2005) to consider how teaching artists framed curricular platforms so participants could “read between” spectacle modes. Interacting designs in each curricular platform layer upon each other to integrate varied material and social strategies, echoing Kress (2010) and other’s work on youth assemble multimodal, social-semiotic meanings in found and made materials.

It has been 20 years since I sat with my research notes and camera in the Dramagirls' workshop, and 7 years since Redmoon closed after celebrating its 30th Anniversary producing spectacles for public audiences. Returning to my pedagogical analyses of these workshop recordings again after 20 years, I see young people who seek aesthetic and social agency, who master imaginative ways to disrupt difficult realities. I see teaching artists who model those tools as ways forward. Now, more than ever, those of us working with youth need to reaffirm and reinspire our work with such imaginative designs so we can share them with our learning communities.

When I first met Redmoon Theatre's band of puppeteers, they had begun their halcyon days of making and teaching spectacle magic.⁵ While Chicago public schools invested in local arts partnerships, inspiring an arts-integrated arts Renaissance, community-nested companies like Redmoon were already teaching multimodal skills and expeditionary thinking their neighborhoods - artistic 'thirdspaces'⁶ where young people spent hours tinkering, playing out theatrical possibilities. Over a half-year observing Dramagirls' craft, I found teaching artists fostered exemplary qualities of emergent social learning design in aesthetic (D)iscourses (Hodde, 2005; Gee, 2000-2001). Dramagirl teachers Kate Thomas and Brigid O'Shaughnessey framed resources as catalysts for 'felt realities', the very raw material to extend creative thought and action (Eisner, 2003; Greene, 1995). As my video transcripts and discourse analysis will indicate, their teacher-talk and felt modes for 'undergoing' aesthetic experience generated not just fluid, theatrical discourse, but a liminal thirdspace between home and school, virtual and concrete, where girls could immerse themselves, construct and grow within their Girltopia. Kate and Brigid offered girls an integrated environment via three learning platforms shaped by their particular blend of spectacle⁷ forms—stilting, drumming, shadow and population puppetry, comedia masks, as well as more traditional dramatic elements such as dialogue and gesture. The intermedial and interactive qualities of these forms guided young apprentices on a six-month quest to decide-what needed attention, and how they might perform those decisions for change in their 'Girltopia'. Training the Dramagirls through Redmoon's particular style of spectacle performance, young apprentices mastered tools and interactions for social and aesthetic events.

⁵ **Redmoon Theatre** closed shop in 2017 after 30 years producing spectacles for the public. When I first volunteered and performed with Redmoon, I was hooked. Holding Frankenstein's heavy wooden puppet legs as he fell through the stage trapdoor under Steppenwolf's Studio Theatre or cycling down Chicago's Magnificent Mile as a fire-drumming skeleton for All Hallow's Eve, I became a junkie of their storytelling. Ten years later, as a graduate student at the Univ of Illinois Chicago, I participated in an innovative moment with Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (*Renaissance in the Classroom*, 2001), and made a record of Dramagirls' performance practices.

⁶ **Thirdspace** is borrowed from Heath, Gutierrez and others who prioritize literacy events in cultural and curricular geography—new spaces make way for new literacy events created outside of, but related to how the learner identifies with primary and secondary literacy environments such as home and school.

⁷ Redmoon Theatre's genre of **Spectacle Theatre** employs multimodal performance with forms of street puppetry to create and connect with community. Redmoon's influences for enlivening objects include Bread and Puppet (Glover VT) and European forms of Comedia dell'arte. My use of spectacle does not consider its use in contexts related to mass media or market force consumption.

Dramagirls Roots: From the Concrete to the Possible

Dramagirls aesthetic roots were born of their parent company, Redmoon Theatre, who employed theatrical objects, images and ritual interaction to make public spectacles. Oriented in popular European forms emulated by ensembles like Bread and Puppet, Redmoon made large theatrical vehicles—20-foot population puppets, mechanical props, live musical parades and site-specific spectacles with the whimsy of street-theatre. Regular, public interactions with local youth on their home turf, Logan Square, let company artists share expertise and play a part of children's lives; they provided a thirdspace so youth could immerse themselves in free, drop-in workshops to prepare *Arts in the Park* Medicine Shows, Winter Pageants and All Hallows Eve parades from the Illinois' Centennial Monument down Kedzie Boulevard.

In the camaraderie of these encounters, Tria Smith founded and grew Dramagirls' within a culture where professional artists understood how to foster young people's expressive designs. Rather than give explicit instructions, their role was to guide youth in using simple puppet-making tools, then set them off to experiment animating scrap cardboard, metal junk, a bicycle wheel, whatever materials attracted them or afforded 'potential' (Kress, 2000). In program notes for a co-performance by Redmoon's Children's Company and Dramagirls, 'Horsetails, Housetails: Puppet Histories of Logan Square', Smith and fellow director Frank Maugeri acknowledge children as developing artists, decision-makers:

The children suggest their beautiful and elaborate ideas and we serve as technical guides. We teach primary skills—math, reading—as well as the equally important skills of imagination, trickery, creating illusion and sustaining magic. The children then begin the challenging and sophisticated process of rehearsal. They work with the puppets over and over, change them, get rid of them if they don't work, and move on. They create scenes, establish transitions, develop characters, work together to exhaustion and bliss. We sing, sit around, eat bananas and peanut butter, stilt, drum, argue, cry, compromise, negotiate, and change. It is about transformation of an individual child into a community member, into an artist, into an achiever of dreams. (‘Horsetails’ Program notes, 2000)

Redmoon's approach to technique and collaboration grounded Smith's vision. Still, she saw that even in a free-flow environment, participating girls felt constrained, struggled to feel visible and heard: “(W)e noticed that when they became 8 or 9 girls would begin to drop out, or that between the two, the boys were getting more active, they were getting louder, but the girls were staying home to take care of other children” (Interview March 21). Simultaneously, she saw that her go-to, abstract theatre games had shortcomings for these girls to own the space:

Imagining you are wearing a hat, or in the forest at midnight doesn't work in the war zone . . . Things like, “you're in the heart of the jungle”, or “reach out, right in front of

you is the greatest hat you've ever seen, feel it—is it heavy, leather, lace, feather, floppy, stiff . . . put it on. How does it make you feel—smart, stupid, mean?” sent girls running under tables, pushing each other, going for water; anything murky, gooey, involved in imagining the space—made mayhem break loose . . . they were not polite at all, or obligated to be *good* girls, and I celebrated that. This told me they needed something concrete. (Interview, March 21)

Smith wanted to nurture creativity, but sensed that to really empower these girls, she should begin where they lived. In a grant, Smith reported how home could manifest significant distress: “At the end of the month girls are hungry, stories of a father coming home and knocking the mother out cold, someone needs glasses and her mother can't go get them, things are happening in the home that I can't even imagine, the school playground is the meeting ground for the Kings and the Cobras (then dominant gangs in Logan Square) frequently someone runs down the street and yells, ‘they are about to shoot’” (Smith, 1996). As their lives became familiar, Smith searched for responsive tactics so girls could “receive what happens and then create art from that, from the truth of what's happening” (Interview, March 21). Practicing stiling, drumming and mask-making created active, low-risk encounters that met Smith's mission to nourish girls' self-possession and creative access through theatrical inquiry. This dynamic playground presented a welcome challenge to new teaching artists Kate and assistant Brigid to further develop aesthetic platforms for this performance community.

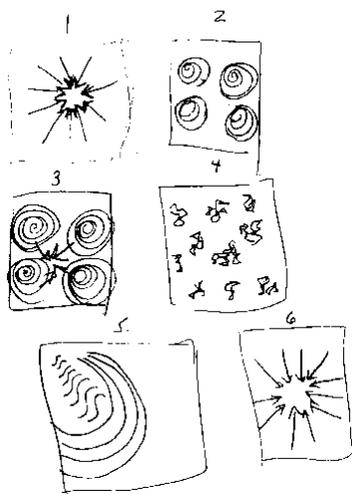
Envisioning Expeditionary Approaches for Girltopian Worldcraft

As observed in Smith's transfer of her Dramagirls' vision, emergent learning environments need groundskeepers to establish attitudes and practices, prepare fertile ground. Visionary training for artists and apprentices helps steward “special ways of seeing” (Eisner, 2002, xii) with which to animate imaginative perception, and find “risk and courage” (Albers and Sanders, 2010, p. 18) within four aspects of multimodal composing--materiality, framing, design and production (Kress and Jewitt, 2003 in Albers and Sanders, p. 8). Smith's vocabularies and scaffolds emboldened Kate and Brigid to frame workshop practices and participant agency with Expeditionary Learning approaches (Campbell et al, 1998) and negotiate a hybrid discourse that would characterize Dramagirls' spectacle inquiry. Listening in on early discussions revealed Kate and Brigid to be expeditionary learners themselves, risking adventurous approaches, responding to opportunities and problems, reciprocating each other's diverging perspectives. As Kate suggests below, generating this dialogue pushed girls from mere fantasy to a social imaginary, from inventive thought to investments in their own actions:

Expeditionary Learning is formulated on thoughtful structure. You debrief, you frontload, you have the initial questions. I want class to be challenging. “I'm here to guide you,” but I don't want to be the one who's always controlling their

growth. I want to be like “*ummphhh* (demonstrates pushing motion with fist), go out there girl! Bring us what you’ve got!” (Thomas, Audio Transcript, Feb 30).

Over three hours every Monday night, collective activities and rituals created emerging artistic structures, which on any night could involve between 26 to 30 middle-school girls and adult mentors. Rather than set rote exercises, Kate responded to immediate energy and available materials. She illustrated for me a typical workshop evening:



Kate explicates her curricular drawing:

“This is how I see the artistic energy of a Dramagirls evening happening:

We circle up (1), *aaah*... then we move into theatre games, filling the space (2), then we switch group exercises (3), then we partner off and work on word poetry (4), then we give feedback (5), and finally we circle and close together (6).”

Figure 2. Kate Draws Workshop Energy and Environment (Thomas' notebook).

To marry energies to concepts, Kate and Brigid mined initial concerns with questions: “what matters for girls in everyday life?” or “what do girls dream about?” Kate shared with me three salient themes girls asserted during talks: ‘wanting to be heard and respected’, ‘having the power to end violence to the body / ability to protect yourself’, and ‘having the ability to travel freely in the world / freedom of the body’. As shown earlier, these conversations were translated into a co-written song with a local musician. Dramagirls’ performance program narrates the expedition’s development from there:

We attempted each week to articulate an idea of a Girls’ Utopia. We asked ourselves many questions.

Why journey to a girl’s utopia?

How can our journey to a utopia connect to our everyday lives?

What does a “Girlltopia” look like and how might we get there?

We shaped the physical world of a Girl Utopia with our bodies, voice, objects and imaginations. Our expedition took us down many paths. We collected, we brainstormed, and we joined forces. "Architects of Change" is our response. (Program Notes, 2002)

To meet their inquiry's potential, teaching artists embraced an improvisational spirit, merging disparate aesthetic languages as complementary approaches. After listening to live conversations and reviewing discourse patterns in audio/ video transcripts, I noted each brought distinct, aesthetic qualities to their teacher talk. Table 1 below highlights a few key phrases to illustrate how spectacle invited Kate and Brigid's hybrid strategies. I chose parallels in noun / verb patterns to represent dissimilar theories of approach, but also subjective use of pronouns (*we, them, and you*) to distinguish ways arts teachers tend to acknowledge thresholds and registers for assuming or giving authority (Wagner, 1976; Heath, 2005).

Table 1

Comparison of Teacher Phrases (Audio Transcript, Feb 26)

Kate's Phrases	Brigid's Phrases
I would like to find a key image.	I want there to be a clear journey that happens.
Something that you want to do, make happen.	Getting people gathered around a clear, concise, firm idea first.
I want them to take ownership.	I think we can construct that.
I don't have a clear sense yet.	I like to see things in front of me.
I'd like to see the girls wrestle with that. We'll have to set up all kinds of deliberate opportunities.	We need to brainstorm on how we are going to get them to figure it out.
Give them some key objects and ask them to manipulate them first.	The story starts here and then it goes here.

In these planning sessions, choices of nouns, pronouns and verb phrases offered a glimpse of how different artistic expertise and values informed how they got their heads around an expansive genre like spectacle. Whereas Brigid relies on story-oriented words (*journey, starts*) as well as pronouns to suggest clearer parameters, Kate's language is more visual or event-oriented (*image, object, manipulate*); moreover, she seems bent towards serendipitous learning, rather than setting objectives (*wrestle, opportunity*). I also found distinctions in pronoun use as far as how each viewed the learning agent (*getting people gathered, we can construct* versus *you want, them, make happen*). Brigid assessed goals via her classical theater training, envisioning protagonists who find their way through established plotlines, clear actions and scripted dialogue. Her choices seemed grounded in a desire for girls to identify with a central character's struggle to find her 'Girltopia' and focus on voice to articulate individual journeys. However, Kate, a multi-media artist who developed Expeditionary Learning (EL) models for Chicago's

Teacher's Center, approached the process as a frame in which girls could play out visual and action-oriented inquiries to discover their own visions. Resisting a clear artistic trajectory, Kate noted, "we have to take all our source material and painfully go through it . . . I feel like this is their vocabulary because when you talk about girls buying into it, these are their dreams and their thoughts . . . visions of what's going on in the world. . . it has to do with different ways of constructing" (2/26 Interview). Kate felt that to fully immerse themselves as spectacle architects of this utopia, youth had to experience art as both an imaginative and real-life resource, that could respond to an array of questions, create livable spaces, and perceive ways things work in the world:

For me imaginary doesn't mean it has to exist in fantasy. I imagined it was possible for them to do dishes and they did it. I think we want to play with both worlds. The gift of what we could be doing is telling them that they have the power to imagine it and then come on Monday nights and experiment, see if it works. We have to arm the girls with real-life tasks. (Thomas, Feb 26 Interview)

EL qualities Kate relied on to frame their expedition included a "focus on assessment and understanding", "passion for learning and alertness to opportunity," and "a spirit of adventure and challenge" (Campbell et al, 1998, p. 5). Expressed through these qualities, artistic and social materials, prompts and perspectives would afford learners creative risks to delve into "new orders in experience" (Greene, 1995, p. 18).

To further my understanding of how combined aesthetic vocabularies generated spectacle learning, I replayed artist's conversations, attending to how their disparate models of aesthetic thinking--between *text* and *image*, *narration* versus *expedition*, *emoting* versus *doing* and *identifying* versus *experiencing* mediated complex, hybrid designs for theatre pedagogy. While Kate kept her eye on the aesthetic whole and taught expressive models for object-based, visual inquiry, Brigid strengthened traditional drama skills through games, theatrical rituals, and writing exercises to create a storyboard.

Framing Spectacle Theatre's Social-Semiotic Practices To proffer opportunities for a Girltopian expedition, I observed Kate and Brigid construct an emerging language of spectacle's 'significant forms' (Langer, 1954) via three primary qualities. First, their assembly and animation prioritized a 'low-tech materiality' (Albers & Sanders, 2010, p. 8). While the hi-tech world propagated virtual communications, Dramagirls encouraged a world of low-tech, corporal expressions via puppetry, maskwork, and dramatic gestures. Second, to integrate these modes, teaching-artists created *intermedial*⁸ techniques in which young artists could become aware of and play with connective, aesthetic conditions for spectacle—such as, how can I move cautiously

⁸ My sense of intermedial discourse draws on Kress' (2010) defining of multimodal assemblages.

in this silk fabric? How does this mask or puppet help me verbalize or gesture a take-charge personality? Thus, spectacle-making became learning how to improvise multimodal ensembles—linguistic, visual/object-based, and performative—that assembled meanings in creative flow (Fig 3). Third, these low-tech languages and assemblages encouraged participants to identify with and inhabit certain performative, linguistic and object-based *interactions* for their social imaginary.

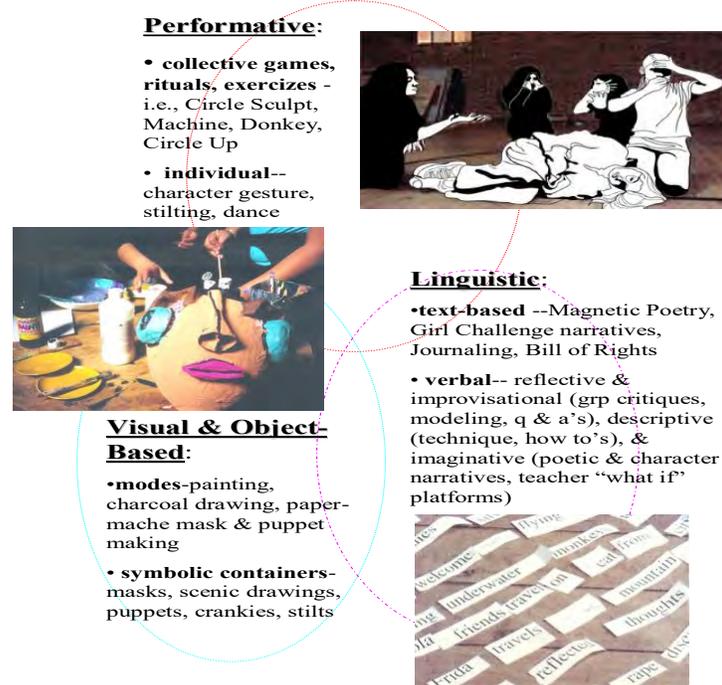


Figure 3. *Intermedial Forms* (X, 2005; photo artwork by Nikolai).

Grounded in these intermedial, and interactive forms, Kate and Brighid developed a socio-semiotic language for close contact with sentient qualities and capabilities. Video and audio transcript review developed names for these pedagogical platforms that provided complementary, physical routines to improvise and rehearse *living in and through* aesthetic and social experiences: **Imaging** (Green), **Dramatizing with Objects** (Purple), and **Games & Rituals** (Red, not discussed here). As the spiral map shows (Fig. 4), spectacle learning platforms happened in tandem, corresponding to shared inquiries. For instance, while Kate led an Imaging Tableaux with spoons and bowls to re-create a painting, Brighid led a Body Sculpting exercise to physicalize a similar scene. While engaging different dramatic skills, each gave girls ownership to improvise with their knowledge as adolescents and creative thinkers, to build belief while designing in uncertain conditions. Given possible risks that such artistic responsibility might pose for a Dramagirl, Brighid and Kate's used these platforms as staging grounds to rally Girltopia's collective for "heavy experience" (Thomas, Transcript). Getting into heavy experiences encouraged girls towards felt realities and affinities for a world-in-the-making.

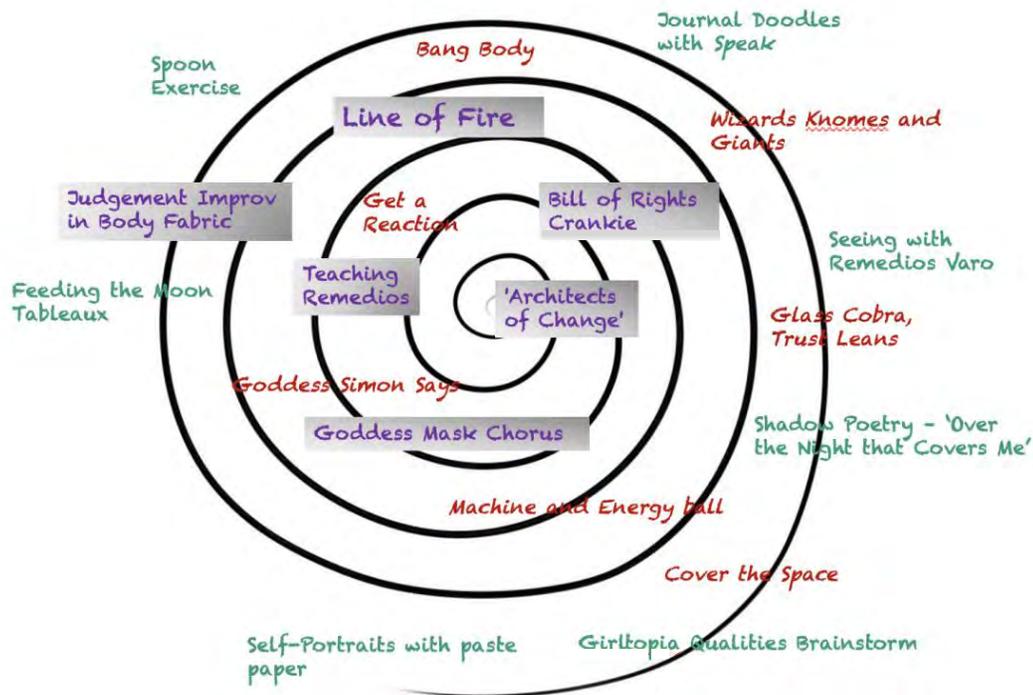


Figure 4. Teacher-Artist Platforms Spiral: *Imaging* (green), *Games* (red) *Dramatizing* (purple).

Platform 1: *Imaging*

I think along the lines of a definition I read of Utopia: 'An imaginary and indefinitely remote place'. I think this class is a remote and indefinite place and time. I feel like by being there, they're experiencing a kind of Girltopia. I like to use theatre and art to express things that we're too afraid to express in our everyday life, like 'I'm going to have the courage to make a mask', but the actual business of making a mask, I feel like I am living it, this vision.

(Thomas Interview, 2/26/03)

Art expeditions push participants to articulate qualities of imaginative thought as sentient meanings. "Seeing is an achievement, not merely a task," (Eisner, 2002, p. 12), which Kate envisioned as a brand of visionary courage. Generated through expert models and exercises, *Imaging* informs Dramagirls' aesthetic vocabulary, establishing conceptual constraints to play with and articulate visual qualities. I borrow the term '*Imaging*' from 18th C art historian Barbara Stafford, who like Eisner, reclaimed this dynamic practice for seeing and valuing images' power. Visual forms "not only possess a cognitive quotient, but they can refine our imaginative, emotional and spiritual lives" showing us "painted, sculpted, built forms as complex, experiential achievements, the best of conscious human activity at work (Stafford, 1996, p. 17).

Drawing on girls' brainstorming, Kate led *Imaging* as an object and event-making process, initiated in multimodal happenings so that all could translate ideas via symbolic modes such as visual poetry and improvised puppetry, I'll discuss a few experiences highlighted in Fig. 4 above, in this order: *Shadow Poetry*, *Looking at Remedios*, *Feeding the Moon Tableaux*:

Seeing with Remedios Varo and 'Speak'

Designing models for an artistic expedition provides powerful informants. Kate felt experts inspired further dialogue and even counternarratives (Albers & Sanders, 2010) to bring adventurous qualities to girls' conceptual worldcraft. After doing a literature circle with Laurie Halse Anderson's novella, *Speak* (1999), then seeing an exhibit of Remedios Varo, a surrealist who sought alternatives to a constrictive past, Kate felt a lightbulb went off for Girltopia images. An ex-patriot who fled Spain's Civil War and a strict Catholic upbringing to paint in Mexico, Varo extended capabilities of the female body through technology, magic and travel, creating "a total world, a coherent world, a secret world" (Kaplan, 1988, p. 7).



Figure 5a, b. R. Varo (left to right), *Toward the Tower* (1960); *Embroidering the Earth's Mantle* (1961). Photo reprints, Kaplan, 2000.

In these heretical visions for a woman of her time (Fig. 7), Kate found powerful parallels to tap as girls envisioned designs for their own oasis, one that could inspire armored apparel or 'rooms of their own'. Varo's experimental technique also echoed Redmoon's longtime tradition constructing animated, theatrical bodies and experimental forms of transport. And for Kate, Varo modeled a heroic imagination, like *Speak's* protagonist attempts by retreating into her own drawings in a school janitor's closet. Kate notes that the uncertainty of a chaotic, artistic expedition, like Varo's journey, needs visual exemplars to sow artistic seeds: "It all feels very

precarious. What's my favorite style of making. What? Who am I? I have no idea." (Thomas interview, 2/2002).

Embracing uncertainty, Kate excitedly shared her confusion and connections between her own mask-design sketches and the figurative language of Varo's body armor and *Speak*'s cover, where the protagonist's obscures her face in leafy camouflage. Both illustrate strategies of disguise in response to struggle. From Kate's notebooks she showed costume and storyboard doodles (Fig 8), inviting a visually savvy 8th grader to compare aesthetic qualities in hopes she could lead other girls to produce designs: "Lily, I want to see what you think of these images." Hoping Lily would recognize connections between the cover's branching layers and Varo's technique of clothing women in elemental protection ('Minitour'), Kate asked pointedly, "Do you see what they're both doing with these images?" "Yeah, yeah!" Lily agreed, as she rifled through Varo's paintings; "we'll have to make our own version."

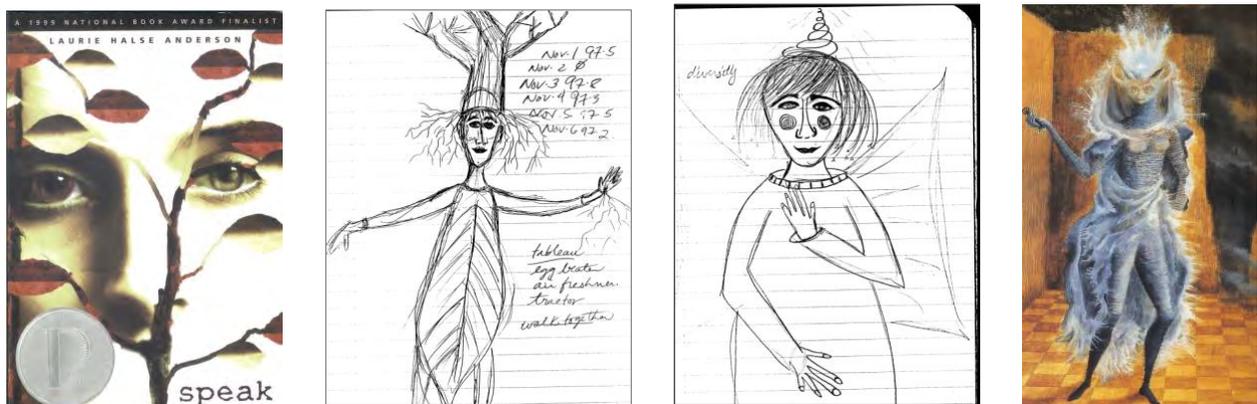


Figure 6.1-4. *Speak* Cover (Morgenstern, 1999); Kate's Notebook doodles of Varo's images, 'Minitour' (R. Varo, 1959, reprinted image in Kaplan, 2000).

By reinforcing girls' desires for a girl's utopia, such as creative spaces, freeing, and protecting the body, journal "doodles" and object-based workshops with expert images influenced how they translated conceptual play, ways to 'do rather than tell' to see, sense and symbolize both their Girltopian environment and spectacle production. Furthermore, mimicking metaphorical and fantastic images buoyed girls' artistic bravery—adventurous talk and sketches excavated ideas for mask designs. Thus, *Imaging* afforded constant activity for sensory material. Early in the process, Kate and Brighid helped girls invent shadow puppets and visually integrate them with a collectively composed word-art poem, 'Down Through My Heart' (Fig. 9). Transcribing ideas to large dialogue boards on the gym wall, they posed rapid-fire questions echoing Varos: "How can we get around the world? How do we protect and empower ourselves? What does a Utopia look like or feel like?"

“A waterfall with dolphins?” one Dramagirl piped, tentatively.

One of the new fifth graders contributed contrasting tones: “A Dark sky with full moon”. From this brainstorm, which teachers only interrupted to subtly offer, “remember, we’re trying to create a visible, tangible world”, girls crafted stronger, two-dimensional shadow images using manila files, razor blade pens, and wooden barbecue skewers to illustrate phrases cueing images of light and dark, wisdom, mystery, and hope.



Over the night that
covers me,
girls stand beside me.
The sun hides
from me,
but the moon shields me from
the darkness.

Figure 7. Dramagirls’ shadowpoem, “Down Through My Heart” (Videostill excerpt, Feb 2002).

Spending time co-constructing images with sensory techniques like sketching, shadow puppets and word poetry gained strong source material for the ensemble to move from seeing to dramatizing an inhabited world. Like Kate’s notebooks, their imaging assumed an improvisational, almost precarious feel, as if to nudge everyone to the brink of discovery. The following Spoon Exercise and re-creation of Varo’s painting as a “Feeding the Moon Tableaux” illustrate Kate’s interest for girls to clarify their desired environment with her proposal, “How can we experience, represent this felt world of a Utopia?” As I observed her co-imaging in these examples, Kate seems to empower girls by modeling commitment to *feeling ways through* visuals in order to master aesthetic perception for material qualities.

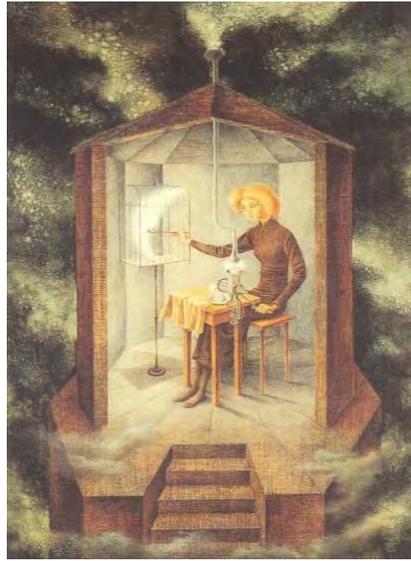


Figure 8. Varo, “Celestial Pablum”, 1958.

Feeding The Moon: ‘Spoon Exercise’ and Object Tableaux

Kate sits quietly in a circle of seven girls and their adult artist mentors, each with a silver spoon in hand, china soup bowl in their laps. “I’m going to count to fifty”, says Kate, “and it will take us that long to get the spoon from the dish to our mouths.”

Many girls especially stare in disbelief—as if to say—‘50 seconds—why?’ (My own journal documented the following: “*it must be hard in a rushaday world where we often shovel food to understand the need to practice such a slow gesture to savor and think about what they are eating, what nourishes them.*”

When they begin the feeding gesture, their physical energy mirrors Kate’s. As her spoon dawdles (they dawdle), as it drops (they drop), and so they follow her spoon as it goes limp, as it ascends in a pitiable manner, wrist first. The girls stare, mouths half-open, trying to anticipate the dull, unsavory dish. Bowls held half-heartedly, half-tipped of contents, I watch girls valiantly maintain Kate’s lethargic pace towards a single bite. After all dawdling teeth finally clamp on metal, Kate pauses and addresses Andrea, a young participant:

Kate: *Now, Andrea, you take us back up on fifty more counts.*

Andrea: (freezing) “*Me? What do I do?*”

Kate: “*Just take us back up, however you see it happening.*”

(Several rounds of spoon action occur)

Kate: *How did you find it?*

Andrea: *Hard.*

Rosanna: *I thought it was cough syrup, or really bad soup. She made her spoon look like a feather falling down.* (Rosanna repeats Andrea's sidling motion of a feather floating across her lap). (3/2002, Video Transcript)

Drawing on their shadow and spoon experiments, Kate introduces small groups to a follow-up, moving tableau with objects to re-imagine Varo's painting of a tower-bound young woman feeding a caged moon (Fig 8) more fully:

Kate: *We're still going to use a spoon and a bowl, but I want you to take a really close look at this image. You guys are going to interpret this image, and I have a bunch of props. I want you to create a tableau using the objects and materials I've made available to you.*

Kate pauses while girls study; then asks, "*What's the temperature like in this painting?*"

Rosarro: *Chilly?.*

Kate: "*What's it like inside the shelter?*"

More responses trickle in: "*Cold. Quiet.*" Soon she leads small groups to choose from a jumble of objects—plastic tubing, a ladder, lightbulb, feathers, a hand-held eggbeater. Kate stands by and observes the groups experiment on their own—shifting bodies, objects, improvising soundscapes—only jumping in if a group needs certain materials. Four moving tableaux soon emerge, each with its own aesthetic and tone for picturing this event: feeding the moon. One group personifies a somewhat ominous, full-bodied machine, arms and legs sprawling from a cloak to grind stardust and extend a spoon to a famished moon. Another creates a light and airy setting, playing percussion with bells and waving glittering objects as if to hypnotize the moon into eating (Video Transcript, 3/ 2002).

Kate's approach to *Imaging* with subtext of human activity, which she focused on how one nourishes oneself, or feeds another, signifies less about *what* happens (a meal consumed), and more about *how it feels* to experience an event *as* it happens (floating spoons and whirring eggbeaters). With little intervention, Kate asks girls to place objects in a visual frame and slow *Imaging* down to discover a lived, felt sense of "a feather floating down", while engaged in their human action, feeding. Crafting moments to carefully explore detail-laden images invites girls into new, though low stakes, sensory discourse. Moreover, rather than consider more easily recognizable emotions like anger, distress, joy, she grounds them in universal "languages of feeling" (Courtney 1995; Eisner, 2000) by asking them to communicate sensory knowledge (the feel of gloppy soup on your tongue, the weight of an airborne feather) with familiar tools (an

eating utensil). Such constructive imaging enacted immediate, aesthetic conditions for the next layer of spectacle.

Platform III: Dramatizing with Objects

When you're working on an expedition, you have to be doing it, not talking about it. We're heavy into experience, we have to shake it, to move it."

How are they going to tackle it and make it a piece that comes together? My job is always to create constraint, so they can be empowered to own their own project. And our job, to make it on an aesthetic level, in agreement, and be a piece, is for us to create the playground. It's our job to focus the question and create the playground."

(Thomas Interviews, Feb 26; March 11)

As Kate notes above, experiments with *Imaging* and *Games* platforms gave girls dramatic spaces to shake out ideas, move together through playful processes. Yet, bringing ideas and performances together to realize ideals and qualities for their spectacle required that they refine formal and symbolic designs with a third platform, *Dramatizing with Objects*. Varo's images and courageous activity as a young, resistant adult inspired these expectations. Captivated by the artists' first name, Remedios, which in Spanish means "remedy", the girls unanimously chose it for their focal character in Girltopia. They imagined Remedios as a young girl who, in the spirit of the painter, restlessly searches for her ideal world somewhere between a world of fantasy, and one she knows to be real. Thus, *Dramatizing with Objects* (Fig. 9) orchestrates a rite of passage for not just their protagonist, Remedios, but also for any girl wishing to perform something in multimodal dimensions:

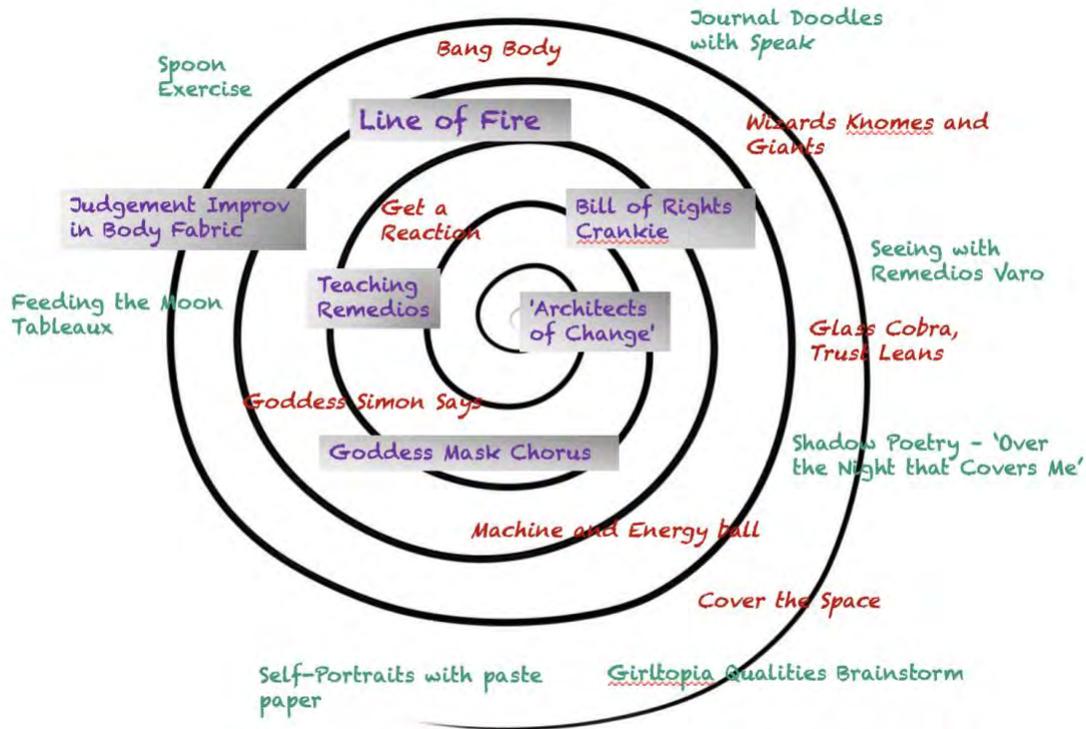


Figure 9. *Dramatizing with Objects Platform* (purple) layered on *Imaging* (green) and *Games* (red).

Improvisation in Object Design and Performance.

During Saturday “object” workshops, Kate’s talk helped girls harvest dramatic content and gain confidence in designer roles. On first take, these workshops seemed like sprawling Italian feasts, girls jammed alongside each other at long worktables, drinking cocoa, jabbering and singing, sticky hands digging into their paper maché. One metaphor she used to describe these celebratory scenes was midwifery—“helping them to get through the birth of their idea” as they learn about themselves and make things in the world. Exemplary phrases I selected show Kate taking time to use a collaborative teacher register with apprentices: “Can you find something to improvise with? Do you want it to be feminine or masculine? So you want it to be pretty--think about your features. I would love to see glasses or earrings” (Transcript, Feb 30) . Occasionally I would hear Kate urge a girl to be unapologetic as she sculpted features--“Yeah, make it chunky, bulbous!” Thus, exaggerated eyelids, big hair twists, and a variety of beaks or horns became “larger-than life”, fantastic goddess heads. Each matched personas for ‘The Joker’, ‘The Objective Source’, ‘The Warrior’ and ‘The Nurturing Mother’– all whom mentor Remedios when she arrives in Girltopia.

Making these masks was one challenge; enlivening them as spectacle objects was harder. Not only were girls learning to mirror a mask's physicality, but also connect with their own natural movement. Julia, a thoughtful, mischievous girl, struggled to enliven The Objective Source: a round bluish head two sizes bigger than her own, with protruding eyes and Einstein-like hair. Although she received initial ideas to "scratch your chin and your head" or "lean back and nod", nothing seemed to click with her instincts for being "objective". Another problem was seeing through her large mask's eyeholes. Still, she somehow blindly felt her way through gestures, boldly improvising movements to interact with The Moon and The Sun. Kate shared enthusiasm for her free-spirited moves and lilting voice as Julia tried a clever, hip 'Objective Source' who seems unfazed by a boy-girl conflict (Table 2).

Table 2

'Objective Source' Chorus Poem (Video Transcript, 3/2002)

<p>Julia's Poetic Phrases</p>	<p>Julia's Masked Gestures</p>
<p>"His best friend only wanted to help other boys with math."</p>	<p>(on 'boys', tilts her head with hand)</p>
<p>"Some boys don't like it when girls shine."</p>	<p>(on 'shine') <i>Julia shimmies her hips, slides, rolls out from sun into back bend.</i></p>
<p>"Maybe they're afraid of the sun!"</p>	
<p>"We should be able to live together in peace."</p>	<p>(on 'We') <i>Objective Source Chorus members echo O.S.- shimmy heads, skip and high-5</i></p>
<p>"We can be like the sun and moon, take turns."</p>	<p>(on 'take turns') <i>Julia and Andrea sport "muscle" gestures behind sun and moon</i></p>
<p>Kate's Responses to Julia's improvised gestures</p>	
<p><i>Before improv:</i> "Everyone, have fun with your body!"</p>	
<p><i>(after 'shine')</i> "Nice, nice! I love the way your body is moving, I love that you're rolling," whispers Kate.</p>	
<p><i>Afterward:</i> 'Do you want to pause a moment longer to let the "shine" line set in?'</p>	
	

Later Kate asked Julia to gesture with two paper maché teacups, which Julia admitted, "shows how to balance yourself" (Video transcript, 3/2002). Taking time to interpret mask features through dramatic gestures allowed Julia to flesh out what might have been a less interesting interpretation of "objectivity", into a lighthearted take balancing power and gender.

The Judgement Body Fabric

While Kate grounded girls in visual and kinetic modes, Brigid taught dramatic skills to empower girls' voices and narratives. In the next scenario they used writings about 'being judged' to develop 'The Judgement Chorus', where Remedios steels herself against invading comments. Girls had already envisioned crossing a threshold with Varo's image of 'The Call' (Fig 12), in which a lone woman passes through a corridor bulging with faces. Brigid invented a related ritual, the 'Line of Fire / Love Den', where Dramagirls volunteer to enact a 'line of fire'- walking though jumping, taunting girls jeering lines responding to an earlier prompt: "Write down six things that keep you from doing what you want to do, that turned into judgements against you":



I wish you weren't my daughter.
 You embarrass me.
 You'll be alone forever.
 You can't do that!
 Do you have any idea what you're *doing* with your life?
 You're too cautious.
 I don't believe you.
 Are you really going to wear *that*?
 You're weird, stupid and sick.
 I'm going to tell your secret.
 My best friend's got a new best friend that's
better than you. (Fieldnotes, 2/26/02)

Figure 10.a, b. Varo, "The Call", 1961. (Photo reprint, Kaplan, 2000); Girl's 'Judgements'.

After they confront their judgements (Fig 12), crossers entered a 'Love Den' or 'Forest of Supporters' (which soon became the four goddesses) who might share wisdom for resisting words that haunt any ordinary girls' confidence. Dramatizing the negative ('Line of Fire'), then positive forces ('Love Den, Forest'), they identified dramatic tensions occupying a Girl Utopia. Returning to these forces the next week, Brigid introduced a large screen of stretchy magenta fabric, in which girls could imprint faces and bodies, and practice vocalizing "judgements" as a live body sculpture. Prepping them, she reviewed vocal tenors they might introduce to enliven the fabric: "You could whisper your lines, you could scream them, you could find a moment of stillness where you choose not to move, whatever you feel like doing. Choose a line that feels important" (Mar 5 Transcript). Though tentative, girls experimented with the screen, pressing faces, elbows, hands to dramatize an intensifying chorus. When girls lost focus, giggled, or felt weird, Brigid reassured them of their shared objective:

It makes sense that we're playing with our fears, right? Remember one of the reasons Remedios forgets how to dream is that all her fears and judgements get so loud... those statements that you're saying, those are your statements—I didn't write them—if *we* can really commit to them with all of ourselves, then *we* can honor those people for being brave. So, when you go for the taunt, "you're failing, you're failing, really go for it. (O'Shaughnessey, Audio Transcript, 3/5/02)

To keep the collective energy of this felt world, Brigid immerses herself in the "we" of the ensemble's dramatic intentions. She reminds them that playing with their phrases in the Judgement fabric aids delivery of fear via real-world threats like, "You're failing; "I wish you weren't my daughter". Blending their voices, giving and taking energy, asserting themselves with other bodies, participants recommitted to expressive tools and prepared their chorus of rants for next workshop's rehearsal of the 'Judgement' costumes:



That next Monday, Kate and Brigid set the girls up for feeling the imagery of encircling Remedios, played by Gracia, in the Judgement costume, a huge swath of black fabric with holes for many heads and arms to peek through. Kate addressed the chorus: "these are the things we want to make her feel. Gracia can tell us, you know, "you're making me feel dizzy, "I feel anxious, "I feel sick, like I'm going to throw up." We have to take her on a little trip, we want to make her feel, 'Whoa!'"

As illustrated by video stills (Fig 13 a - c), teachers launched girls into a Chorus reminiscent of a Greek drama, where they wrap themselves around Remedios who sleeps restlessly while they physically toss her about, disturb her dreams. Building their tolerance of risky images and practices in weeks prior gave them confidence to trust each other's experiences for enlivening the chorus. As they envelop Gracia in the fabric, limbs from the Judgement fabric find frightening angles and levels, altering the pace of movements with louder vocals. All the while, Gracia lets herself (with certain fear) be slowly swallowed by the Chorus' harping as she, Remedios is prodded, insulted, draped over backs of slippery women like violent waterbeds. (Transcript, Apr. 23)

Figure 13 a-c. Gracia undergoes Judgements.

After repeated runs of the “chorus” scene, Kate and Brighid asked Remedios how she felt--if the scene helped Gracia *make sense of* her character’s journey through judgement in order to imagine something better in a Girl’s utopia. Her reply: “Yes, cuz I feel really claustrophobic and uncomfortable” (Audio Transcript, April 23).

Conclusions: “Is it Too Good of A Thing to Come Together?”

When the girls feel kind of euphoric, or even when they experience frustration, is it too good of a thing to come together? All of these women on a Monday night? Like is it just uncomfortable? Do you wish there was a guy in the room? A TV? I think we have such a unique opportunity to be together as a group of girls and women, to have this space, and that, for me is the playing out of this whole concept. (Thomas, Feb 26 Transcript)

As lead teaching-artist, Kate felt that for a young ensemble to build and dramatize a utopia was an opportunity rarely offered to girls, or even young women. She spoke of Dramagirls’ workshop time and space as a unique and precious culture, one that could only tenuously defend itself against more mainstream discourses pulling youth away from crafting new identifications, possibilities for being and doing. “Is it too good of a thing?” she questions above, to expect girls and women to interact and explore in a live, artistic culture of their own making, unencumbered by the attractions of then TV, now Tiktok? At moments when the girls’ art reverted to mimetic, clichéd interpretations of popular teen culture, Kate and Brighid would exclaim, shaking their heads, “Oh, that mindset is so powerful!”, then try to re-enter their worldcraft. Building artist-participant knowledge that speaks to both the needs and desires of adolescent girls had always been part of Dramagirls’ mission. However, by focusing on artist-participant platforms that engaged and challenged girls’ visions for a Girl’s Utopia, Kate and Brighid’s *worldcraft* afforded intermedial and social-semiotic designs for groundbreaking literacies.

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About the Author

Stephanie Hodde teaches field writing studies and contemporary drama as an Associate Professor of English, Rhetoric and Humanistic Studies at Virginia Military Institute. As a teaching-artist and performer, she has spent over twenty years developing outreach programming for non-profit organizations, K-12 schools, and intergenerational memoir and theatre projects. Her research and teaching explore intersections between creative discourse, pedagogy, and multimodal forms of social literacy, including community-based narratives, documentary theatre, and arts-based learning. Her current work explores women playwrights as field agents of social theatre. Her chapter, “Up Close and Wide Awake: Participating in Anna Deavere Smith’s Social Theatre” appears in the book, *Teaching Critical Performance Theory in Today's Studio, Classroom, and Communities* (Routledge, 2020).

Appendix

Crafting a Research Aesthetic

In pursuit of an ‘aesthetics of practice’, scholars in education and cultural studies often question how artistic methods inform qualitative research (Conguergood, 1991; Finley, 2003, Eisner, 2017).⁹ Video-camera and notebook in hand, I learned to orient participant observations and interpretative frames within live, intermedial dimensions of Dramagirls’ lexicon. Rather than think as a social scientist, I affiliated my lens and questions with low-tech arts. Like a spectacle maker, puppet designer, or choreographer, I embodied practices to spark a focus on felt meanings. I’d ask, “What is the feeling or quality that this activity generates? What materials and interactive bodies does the teaching artist use to guide or focus that quality? How might I share that sensory experience to interpret and value these aesthetic events? For instance I note earlier how Kate’s notebook doodles inspired me to sketch out and share my own ethnographic and interpretative methods with participants in Reggio Emilia panels (2011, Fig. 3) for feedback during workshops. This became one reliable way of gaining trust with artists and girls as I observed and took part in their meaning-making.

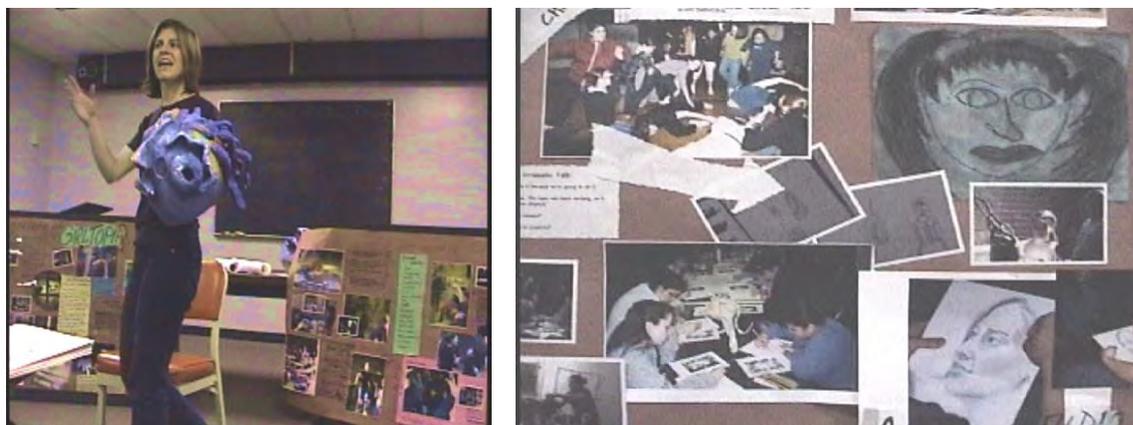


Figure 3: The researcher shares ‘Expeditionary Bodies & Voices’ (X, 2002; 2005).

Participant talks with documentation panels influenced coding of spectacle-making categories within a social semiotic framework (*interaction* as social participation, *intermediality* as formal assemblages). Observing teaching artist’s emerging practices allowed me to further define their Spectacle (D)iscourse as three, overlapping “teacher-artist” platforms, each offering a spectrum of tools, routines and scaffolds for makers to dwell in and a play with as they shifted between

⁹ Finley posed this question for new social inquiries: “is art good research?” (2003, p. 285). She asserts a need for innovative artistic methods and craft skills in non-linguistic modes like photography and performance to balance preoccupation with research ethics. To emulate DG lexicon and aesthetics of practice, I drew on methods from an ethnography of performance class with Dwight Conquergood (1991) and later Eisner’s qualitative approaches to arts-based assessment (2017).

curricular modes. Discovery of three core platforms was defined by “any consistently implemented artistic material, technique or action used to orient girls’ learning through specific aesthetic modes and participatory rules of engagement” (Hodde, 2005). To map these three platforms as an emerging series of *interactive* and *intermedial* events, I illustrated them as overlapping spirals, denoting each layer by color (see Figure 4). Each platform illustrates weekly progress as they construct more nuanced knowledge of technical forms and habits to energize spectacle modes and schema. Moreover, visualizing pedagogical designs as non-linear movement (Wells, 2001) rather than block-chain categories, I could perceive more fully how artists introduced and guided work with significant forms, fostering chaotic, but creative energy for learners to envision and reflect, invent and undergo phenomenal tensions between objectives, materials and products (Grumet, 2003; Edwards et al, 1999).

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