

“A Place Where It Was Acceptable To Be Unacceptable”: Twenty-First-Century Girls Encounter Nineteenth-Century Girls Through Amateur Theatricals and Dance

Heather Fitzsimmons Frey

Heather Fitzsimmons Frey is an assistant professor of arts and cultural management at MacEwan University in Edmonton, with a PhD in drama, theatre, and performance studies from the University of Toronto. She studies arts and performance for, by, and with young people, in historical and contemporary contexts, and her research is published in a variety of books and journals, including *Girlhood Studies*, *Jeunesse*, *Oxford Review of Education*, *Youth Theatre Journal*, *Canadian Literature and Imaginative Geographies* (2018) and *Ignite: Illuminating Theatre for Young People* (2016). Her PhD and Banting postdoctoral fellowship at York, the Institute for Dance Studies at the University of Toronto, and many families and wonderful young people supported this research. Email: Fitzsimmons-FreyH@macewan.ca

This self-reflexive article about girl-centered, performance-based historiography uses Carole Lynne D’Arcangelis’s cautions about self-reflexive research writing and Caroline Caron’s concerns about girl studies as activist research focused on social change to explore how the presence of girls and listening to girls shaped the knowledge that was created. By staging encounters between living 21st-century girls and 19th-century girls, the process reveals possibilities about the lives of girls in both eras. Encounters drew attention to issues concerning power, gender, agency, present-mindedness, emotion work, embodiment, and racialized identities. The article demonstrates how girls’ actions and insights complicated understandings about 19th-century girlhoods and at-home theatricals and, simultaneously, exposed power structures influencing their lives today and opportunities to work within or subvert them. Working through concepts like “radical reflexivity” (D’Arcangelis), “theatrical ethic of inappropriation” (Michelle Liu Carriger), “the wince” (Stephen Johnson), and the “foolish witness” (Julie Salverson), the article describes research pivot points and argues that ways of listening to girls alters how meaning is made.

Key words: performance-based research; girl-centered research; 19th-century girlhoods; at-home theatricals

Performance-based historiography means working with live, thinking, and feeling humans and using performance practices as tools for generating knowledge about the past that processes of examining historically located archives and material objects may not reveal. As Claudia Mitchell (2016) writes of girlhood studies research, “we do all have to start somewhere” (p. 99). This self-reflexive article hearkens back to 2014 when I began my own performance-based historiography research that aimed to put girls at the centre of the projects. As I have described previously (Fitzsimmons Frey, 2016) my approach is based on porous conceptions of time inspired by Doreen Massey (2005) and Rebecca Schneider (2011). The focus is on developing knowledge through what I call “encounters” between white, middle-class, 19th-century English girls and 21st-century girls living in Toronto (whom I describe in more detail below). I like the implications in the word “encounter” of *casual*, *chance*, and *unexpected*. An encounter is brief, and offers the potential of a flash of insight or an intense emotional response, but does not suggest the time to develop a deep relationship. An encounter is often about first impressions and lingering questions—and these questions shape the next steps of research. In practice, 21st-century girls participate in workshops and creation-based projects, revealing difficult-to-get-at information about 19th-century girls and simultaneously creating spaces for 21st-century participants to theorize their own lives. Marlis Schweitzer (2019) observes, “As historical subjects marginalized by age and gender, girls exist on the fringes of theatre and performance history, rarely popping into historical narratives except in exceptional

situations” (p. 1), and my participatory performance research demonstrates how significant it can be to put girls of today *and* girls of the past into the centre of the inquiry, analysis, and understanding.

Listening to girls is the most important facet of my research methodology, and through the performance-based research process I learned that when I ask 21st-century girls to act as bridges to the past, they and their insights reach toward possible futures. When I wrote my dissertation (subtitled *Performing and Playing with Possible Futures*) I understood *futures* to refer to the white, middle- and upper-class 19th-century English girls whose lives were long since past but who, during their girlhoods, had futures to look forward to (Fitzsimmons Frey, 2015). But as I reflected on ideas generated through performance-based historiography and girl-centered research during my postdoctoral fellowship, I came to believe that by acting, dancing, trying on costumes, and creating theatre in particularly 19th-century ways, the 21st-century girls were also, significantly and often critically, reaching toward possible futures for themselves, their communities, and research itself.

This article is arranged in a series of vignettes. Each vignette clusters around experiences I staged in order to work through questions about 19th-century girlhoods and performance. Each vignette contains a story that reveals how listening to girls and paying attention to girls’ actions offered unexpected insights that altered my practice and my thinking. The first encounter addresses power, gender, and agency; the second engages with present-mindedness, care, and emotion work; the third is about dance, racialized identities, embodiment, and defying expectations. For each vignette I describe the pivotal research questions, and then I focus on moments when girl participants radically influenced my process, analysis, and understanding, not only of 19th-century amateur theatre practices, but of the way this methodology engages with girls today.

In a way, the vignettes can be seen as a kind of charting—Claudia Mitchell (2016) argues that charting the field of girlhood studies is “a strategy for getting at imagined pasts and imagined futures” (p. 96). Charting these vignettes reveals moments when girls—who were encountering imagined pasts—changed the future of my research. I take seriously Caroline Caron’s (2016) concerns about girl-focused research as a rights-based approach to research and activism: Caron challenges researchers to consider whether their work with girls actually pursues social change (p. 122). I am also holding onto Carole Lynne D’Arcangelis’s (2018) concern that self-reflexivity is “a fraught mechanism for grappling with and dismantling structural privilege” (p. 340), and that even though self-reflexivity can demonstrate how “researcher subjectivity shapes knowledge production ... the goal is not simply to tell one’s story, but to do so in a way that sheds light on broader structures of power and meaning making” (p. 341). As a white, settler, feminist scholar and artist, I aim for D’Arcangelis’s “radical reflexivity” (pp. 350–351) inspired by Sara Ahmed (2004). True to Doreen Massey’s (2005) and Rebecca Schneider’s (2011) porous and slippery conceptions of time and space, the research process isn’t linear, nor does the arrangement of vignettes attempt a kind of progressive narrative with a false promise of climax, catharsis, and denouement. Nevertheless, the vignettes respond to Mitchell’s invitation to feminist scholars to embark upon charting (p. 99), demonstrating that positioning girls as drivers of each trajectory alters the way we can understand the map, the narrative, and the shape of research. Throughout the research process and through embodiment and thoughtful reflection, girls uncovered the past and also reflected on how they can change how they approach their lives today.

Setting the scene: Girls and 19th-century amateur, at-home theatricals

Throughout the 19th century, at-home theatricals were a popular leisure activity among England’s middle classes. Whenever I offer workshops related to this research, I ask participants to describe family gatherings where they created performances for the adults with siblings, relatives, or friends. Nearly everyone has a story, and memories range from highly involved reimaginings of *Annie* or *Swan Lake*, to at-home piano recitals, to nearly impromptu

performances featuring silly, unrehearsed improvised play. While I suspect that the impulses that produce the childhood urges to create and perform for the adults are similar across the 21st and 19th centuries, in the 19th century there was a thriving commercial industry around the phenomenon of “getting up” a play at home, including published scripts, how-to guides, and costume advice.¹ Usually with the help of older girls or sometimes aunts and mothers, and often during the chilly holidays around Christmas when houses were bursting with relatives and it was too cold to be outside for long, young people would work together to perform for an invited audience.

Boys, girls, families, and young people all participated in at-home theatricals, but in the 19th century, they were particularly popular with *girls*. Anita Harris argues that in the 21st century, “the category of girl is constantly shifting,” and the 19th-century idea of “girl” was equally difficult to pin down (as cited in Rodgers, 2016, p. 4). Generally, a white, English, middle-class girl could be as young as 4 and as old as in her 20s, providing she was unmarried yet still viewed as marriageable. Carol Dyhouse (1981) establishes that even though many middle- and upper-class girls had to take jobs as governesses or companions, the preferred situation was for middle-class girls to be dependent on fathers, while women were to be dependent on husbands (pp. 7, 138). Throughout this research, I made use of these broad English 19th-century parameters of white middle-class girlhood, and depending on the project, the participants’ ages ranged from 5 to 25.²

Biological age, education attainments, class, work, marital status, and attitudes of the immediately local community all shaped the construction of the idea of “girl” (Rodgers, 2016, p. 5), and as Kristine Moruzi (2012) and Beth Rodgers (2016) demonstrate, adolescence increasingly offered girls a temporary liminal space to push boundaries and explore possibilities. As the 19th century drew closer to the First World War, girls and journalists began to reject the “angel of the house” narrative of self-sacrifice in favour of “self-development” (Dyhouse, 2013, p. 42), but anxieties around duty and frailty shifted slowly and unevenly: The late 19th-century offered opportunities to some girls, but remained a potent time for debate. At-home theatricals were one arena in which girls could test possible futures for themselves, and could imagine and practice different ways of being in the world.

“The Frog Prince,” 1896 meets 2014, and being fin-de-siècle girls

One of my early questions about getting up an at-home theatrical related to the social conditions inherent in 19th-century amateur performances: What was it like to *be* a 19th-century girl putting on a play at home? Unlike their male counterparts, middle-class girls were encouraged to be self-effacing and helpful, to serve their mothers, fathers, and brothers, and to model good behaviour (Dyhouse, 1981, pp. 11, 28). After reading how-to guides, fiction, letters, and diaries³, I wanted to connect empathetically with 19th-century girls and their possible at-home theatrical experiences. Many playwrights used the at-home stage as a place to explore issues concerning suffrage, gender roles, women’s education, and saying “no” to marriage⁴, but the young thespians were *not* the heroic characters they portrayed on stage. The real performers of the past were young, middle-class girls, and I wanted to connect to their life circumstances in order to imagine what the experience of getting up a play could have meant for them.

Working with undergraduate and graduate students at the Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies at the University of Toronto, and together with designer and technical director Justin Blum and musical director Art Babayants, we decided to explore the social and working conditions of creating an at-home theatrical. We opted for a very short 23-hour rehearsal period, which probably mirrored the amount of time people had together over the two weeks of Christmas holidays. Rather than recreating Victorian special effects, candles for lighting or fur for costumes, we attempted to reproduce the experiential aspects of play making by following the methods described in Charlotte Yonge’s (1864) and Juliana Horatia Ewing’s (1861) fiction—raiding closets, altering, or, as

David Oswell (2013) puts it, “mixed up mash-ups and making do” (p. 59). We were fortunate that the University of Toronto drama department manages an on-campus house built in the late 19th century, with a living room in which we could perform. The cast and crew did not adopt 19th-century personas or live together during rehearsals, nor did they abandon their other university-student responsibilities, but I hoped the compressed rehearsal period and correct kind of space would help us to imagine better. In practice, the focus on social conditions also guided our decision to adopt a “realism” acting style⁵, and significantly for this vignette, for me to adopt advice regarding 19th-century at-home theatrical management offered to women (rather than men).

In the 19th century, there were no theatre directors as we understand them today, but there were theatre managers who produced the shows and took care of the people. In her study of 19th-century amateur acting manuals, Mary Isbell (2013) observes that men and women received different advice regarding getting up home theatricals with their friends. Advice for men stressed a strong vision and authoritarian execution, while advice for women emphasized the congenial social occasion and the importance of rendering one’s leadership invisible (pp. 24, 111). The advice given to women seems to mimic the advice given to girls putting on theatricals with young people and children.

Juliana Horatia Ewing (1861) warns:

What you (and I, and every other actor!) would really like, would be to choose the play, to act the best part, to wear the nicest dress ... but as this very leading part could only be played by one person at the expense of all the rest, private theatricals—like so many other affairs of this life—must for everybody concerned be a compromise of pains and pleasures ... learning to find one’s happiness in seeing other people happy, aiming at perfection with all one’s might, and making the best of imperfection in the end. (p. 45)

Ewing’s words are very much the kind of self-effacing advice Carol Dyhouse (1981) argues girls of the era constantly heard: Ewing encourages girls to be generous, self-sacrificing, and eager to make a congenial community space. When we were selecting the script, I explained to participants that my intention was to replicate 19th-century social and working conditions, including leadership style. In response to the way I understood the advice offered to female at-home theatrical managers, I managed rehearsals as friendly, sociable affairs, usually with snacks. I acted as prompter but rarely directed beyond very basic suggestions. My interpretation of theatrical management for women meant I adhered to 19th-century gender power dynamics. When our male technical director or our male musician arrived at rehearsals, I listened to their advice and deferentially accepted it. On the surface, the environment appeared completely friction free.

Most advice suggests that participation in an at-home theatrical should be voluntary and inclusive. To that end, all interested undergraduate and graduate students read some short “new girl” type plays⁶ and discussed the scripts’ potential and how each of them read in light of our 21st-century expectations about feminism, gender politics, and our shared notion of how the play was or was not “Victorian.” We ultimately settled on Clara Ryland’s “The Frog Prince” (1896) as our performance text, which was among the shortest and had five speaking parts, aligning perfectly with the number of people interested in performing. Furthermore, the radical princess characters connect to the “new girl” movement (Sally Mitchell, 1995), and invite girls to experiment with supporting women’s suffrage, saying “no” to marriage, ascribing a high value to (traditionally) women’s domestic labour, and considering the possibility of higher education, a career, and a leadership role.



Figure 1. *The Frog Prince* (2015), University of Toronto, Centre for Drama, Theatre, and Performance Studies.
Photo by Justin Blum.

Adopting the advice to female theatre managers the way I did reinscribed the patriarchal power relations of the 19th century, even as we explored a slightly subversive script. In the completely friendly, uncritical, nonconfrontational space, it did not occur to me that anger was simmering beneath the congenial surface. After our performance when we debriefed and discussed, the girls talked about how frustrated they had been with my passivity during the rehearsal process. Would late-19th-century girls have read my interactions with my male colleagues as normal and unremarkable, or did they prickle too when an older woman took a man's advice in the place of her own ideas? In our discussion, I began to consider that there must have been other, less subservient ways for a 19th-century woman to create a congenial social atmosphere without unquestioningly accepting male advice. The critical comments of the university girl participants bring to mind Kristine Alexander's (2015) remarks: "Privileging public forms of agency and equating the term with resistance, as many historians have, limits our ability to understand girls' choices and actions. Is being obedient, for example, a form of agency? Is it a lesser form of agency?" (pp. 122–123). I believe theatricals offered 19th-century girls opportunities to think about, and even embody, alternative possible futures, but given the power dynamics of the day, I wondered if theatricals could encourage girls to do or even *feel* more with those experiences than identify the injustices.

Even more potent than what the process revealed about 19th-century girls' possible experiences of amateur theatricals was what the girls and I discovered about ourselves and the persistence of deference to patriarchal power dynamics in our lives. One participant wrote in reflection:

During the rehearsal process, myself and the other three female actors became frustrated that our female director offered passive instruction while the male director dominated the leadership in the room. However, neither myself nor the other performers spoke up about this power dynamic. During the post mortem discussion...a very valuable discussion emerged surrounding both the nature of Victorian gender roles and their persisting implications. In retrospect, I became aware of my own submission to male dominated direction, and frustration with the passivity of a female superior. Most disappointing was that myself and the other three women performers never felt comfortable voicing our concerns. (S. Robbins, letter of support, February 2016)

The reflexive process not only helped us to interpret what we could imagine about the past, it also changed each of us, heightened our awareness of our assumptions, pointed toward ways we had internalized social expectations, and encouraged the 21st-century research participants to make changes in our social relations and future research. From our very first meeting when we discussed “new girl” plays, my conversations with the university student girls were supported by our collective knowledge and interest in feminist theory, yet our conduct demonstrated the pervasive influence of systemic patriarchal power dynamics. It also highlighted power structures embedded in academia: I was a graduate student (not faculty), but I was also the principal investigator, and the girls were reluctant to challenge me. D’Arcangelis (2018) argues that self-critical, self-reflexive research can be useful when it sheds light on “broader structures of power and meaning making” (p. 341). Performance-based research opens up space for project participants to ask, as Jacky Bratton (2003) puts it, present-minded questions of the past (even as we refuse to give present-minded answers) (p. 14). The insights the girls and I forged together during debriefing enabled the research process to become “a window into structural oppression and privilege” (D’Arcangelis, p. 340), illuminating how our experience with those structures influenced how we understood the past. As girls critically thought through engagement with the past, they began to make demands for better, more equitable futures for themselves.

Adele, *The Frog Prince*, 1896 meets 2017, and Donald Trump

Just over two years after conducting the initial *Frog Prince* research, I wanted to revisit the same script in light of some lingering questions. Clara Ryland wrote *The Frog Prince* as a play for children ages 9 to 12, with a Christmas fairy prologue to be used “if necessary.” I wanted to work with children, siblings, and friends to mimic the conditions of an extended family over the winter holidays in the 19th century. In 2017, the *Frog Prince* project replicated a Victorian holiday event in that there were four families represented, there were siblings, they ranged in age from 5 to 12, and they were all good friends. To accommodate all eight actors, we included Ryland’s fairy prologue and worked harder on the dancing aspects of the play.⁷

I focused on fostering a culture of care and caring in response to what I learned about the superficial congenial social occasion. I also kept the concerns the university student actor raised about power dynamics in the rehearsal process in mind. I kept thinking about the contrast between the strong, agentic, and resilient futures suggested by the characters in the play, and the challenging day-to-day behaviour expectations that must have influenced how much impact those performance experiences could have on 19th-century lives.



Figure 2. Clara Ryland's "Fairy Prologue" in *The Frog Prince* (2017) including the two youngest participants.
Photo by Rod Fitzsimmons Frey.

The preexisting community of siblings and friends rooted a culture of genuine care in the rehearsal hall. As I expected, the child performers had no difficulty memorizing their lines: Even the two youngest children who could not read worked with two older girls who coached them, gave them gestures to help them remember their lines, and were just as encouraging as I imagine Juliana Horatia Ewing would have expected. Parents (primarily mothers) helped children find and make costumes, spoke to me about anxieties and successes their children were experiencing as we prepared, and one advocated for her child to have a chance to try a scene again during the final performance when a cue didn't work out according to plan. In spite of the formal industry around 19th-century at-home theatricals, in fact, the occasions the scripts instigated were likely to be an aspect of what Katherine Newey (2005) describes as "a whole area of previously unrecognized women's work" that is connected to "the economy of the household and its improvement and entertainment" (p. 143). Besides that, these projects demanded the "emotion work" Alexander mentions in her plea to go beyond a focus on girls and agency in historical research (2015, pp. 123–125). In fact, the story of putting on one of Clara Ryland's "new girl" plays in the 19th century may be simultaneously the tale of mothers and older daughters maintaining the status quo of self-effacing (but lovingly given) care described by Carol Dyhouse (1981), while it is also the story of exploring alternate futures.



Figures 3 and 4. "The looks of joy on the faces of the parents, the participants and the friends" as families join *The Frog Prince* (2017) child cast for the Butterfly Polka. Photos by Rod Fitzsimmons Frey.

Community was key to the collective affective responses to the project. Following a 19th-century at-home performance, there was often lemonade or tea and a dance for the actors and their families (Bell, 1896, p. xv; Yonge, 1864, n.p.). We also invited the audience up for a post-show dance of the butterfly polka, and in my field notes I wrote, “The looks of joy on the faces of the parents, the participants, and the friends suggest to me that there is also a lot to think about here for this moment of shared community celebration.” Spectators invest differently in the performance success when they know the amateur actors than they would at a professional show⁸, because as Mary Isbell points out, the amateurs bring something the most talented professional cannot bring to the stage: “their existence in the spectators’ life” (2013, p. 3).

Far more than wanting “to act the best part, to wear the nicest dress,” as Ewing (1861) suggests, the 21st-century girls presenting this production of *The Frog Prince* told me they wanted to be funny. In a letter about the original 1896 Ryland family performance, a niece wrote that the frog sang a sorrowful ballad (“My Lodging is on the Cold Marsh”—a rewriting of the original “My Lodging is on the Cold Ground”) which was supposedly “Absolutely Killing” (which I take to mean hilarious; Chamberlain, 1895). In spite of a variety of efforts, we never achieved hilarity in the university students’ *Frog Prince*. To support the girls’ ambitions, in the 2017 iteration we abandoned the original ballad and rewrote the lyrics to Adele’s song “Hello” (Adkins & Kurstin, 2015). The frog character took the lead, and we choreographed it as a campy, full-chorus number.



Figures 5 and 6. Child cast of *The Frog Prince* (2017), singing their adaptation of Adele’s Hello. Children on the left sing “Hello from the other side! I must have called thousand times!” Children on the right sing “To ask you if you’re sorry for breaking my heart!”

A few days after the performance, two girls I interviewed explained through their giggles that the song “made the frog so that he wasn’t really sad anymore, just mopey!” “And it was cheesy!” “Yeah, it was cheesy and he wasn’t sad, he was mopey.” I saw that the children could take control of the room by encouraging laughter—not by acting funny for the amusement of the adults, in the way that I previously imagined the original “absolutely killing” ballad, but in performing humour that delighted the young people at least as much as it amused the audience.

The key contemporary insight connects to the complicated concerns about power dynamics raised by the university student in the first project: the contrast between the strong, agentic futures offered by the *Frog Prince* characters and the possible opportunities to challenge authority in the lives of the 19th-century girls. After we set our performance date for family and friends, women began to agitate against the newly elected Donald Trump’s words about women and set the date for the 2017 Women’s March on January 21, at the same time as we had space booked for our performance. Of course, all my young participants wanted to attend the march, and due to the busyness of life and other campus bookings, we couldn’t reschedule. The girls chose to do both. They made posters and banners, some knit pink hats, and they chanted slogans like “Girls have rights! And we’re gonna use ‘em!” After the march,

we raced to the rehearsal hall, they threw on their costumes, and, without the benefit of a final run-through, we shared their project with their families and friends. They needed to be prompted a few times and the piece was not as polished as it could have been, but those failures accentuate the significance of choosing to participate in the Women's March: Mia Perry writes, "like all disruptions to expected norms, failure reminds us of the contingency of meaning and the possibility of difference" (2015, p. 151). Months later at the playground I noticed some of the girls exuberantly singing and dancing our revised version of "Hello." On other occasions, they were belting out the Women's March de facto anthem "[I Can't Keep] Quiet" by MILCK (Lim & Gonzalez, 2015).



Figure 7. Frog Prince girls and friends at the 2017 Women's March, Toronto. Photo by Heather Fitzsimmons Frey.

At the age studies working group at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research conference, Ash McAskill (2018) described engaging in a waving game in a café with a one-and-a-half-year-old child. The game eventually included the caregiving grandmother. In McAskill's presentation she discussed intergenerational moments of connection, of being in relationship, and of the politics of relationality. She described the grandmother and child leaving with a red stroller, and said, "I am a little sad, but grateful to him for sharing his joyful energy with me. A caring moment this tired and dissertation writing human being needed. He tended to my needs in this moment. He was the one that took care of me." McAskill's words made me realize that the girls and their families had been taking care of *me*. Otherwise caught up in the demands of the show and my research, by listening to the girls tell me what was important in their lives, the researcher-participant power dynamics were stretched and altered, if not subverted.

While D'Arcangelis argues that disclosure and self-reflexive strategies will not "mitigate my power in relation to the research" (2018, p. 348), and "self-reflexivity per se will not eradicate oppressive systems" (p. 351), the very acts of listening to girls and reflecting on how girls employed laughter and genuine care to stretch power structures established by age and education in order to accommodate their own voices alerts me, as a researcher, to how the girls nudged power dynamics in the research process. By helping me to focus on the important aspects of *The Frog Prince* to the 21st-century girls, and by encouraging all of us to connect our lives to present-minded material, like "Hello," and present-minded events, like the Women's March, the participants took on "emotion work" and

had wrapped me up gently in the culture of community and care that I hoped would govern our process while illuminating the past but hadn't imagined would generously include me.

“A place where it was acceptable to be unacceptable”: Learning to dance and the power of the wince

The initial questions framing my 2018 research asked what working on a holiday family project with girls of all ages would have been like and also about learning to dance from a book. To that end, I held two dance-focused performance-based historiography sessions as part of the University of Toronto Institute for Dance Studies research pop-ups. At both workshops we danced, read scripts, examined images of characters, and tried on costumes like skirts and corsets. Participants in the first workshop were upper-level undergraduate and graduate students and two faculty members; in the second workshop, girls ranged in age from 5 to 25. A few older girls attended both, and many of their provocative questions and challenging statements about my research methodology influenced how I structured the second workshop. The self-reflexive commentary on this vignette demonstrates the importance of the double turn in girl participants' self-reflexive process, the power of the wince to expose the need for change, and the potential for learning through performance implied by Michelle Liu Carriger's "theatrical ethic of inappropriation" (2018, p. 180).

Florence Bell's volume *Fairy Tale Plays and How to Act Them* (1896) offers detailed instructions and diagrams for dances such as quadrilles. While she includes one solo dance reminiscent of a skirt dance, it seems likely that Bell believed that girls dancing as Orientalized characters would dance according to their imaginations. I wanted to better understand two things about using this manual: (1) what it would be like for an older girl to try to teach a group of girls of various ages (as in a winter holiday family gathering) to do one of the dances represented in the diagrams; and (2) how the experience of dancing according to the book's instructions was different from dancing based on imagination. To address the second question, we could not ignore the racism inherent in the 19th-century scripts.

The 19th-century attitudes toward dancing that made it possible for Bell to believe that a girl would need to be taught certain kinds of Eurocentric dance forms but the same girl could imagine, embody, and represent the unknown (but supposedly knowable through the imperial project) are profoundly tied to 19th-century English ideas about race and supposed English superiority (Lesko, 2012). In at-home theatricals, systemic racism and imperialist discourses are at the heart of representations of "Oriental" and so-called gypsy (Romani) people and their dance forms. Today the pervasive essentializing of Romani people can turn them into nearly mythical fairy tale characters—except they are not. While planning my research, Alice Merton's popular song "No Roots" (Merton & Rebscher, 2016) regularly blasted on CBC Radio, claiming "I've got memories and travel like gypsies in the night"⁹ and I made the decision to focus on the gypsy trope in 19th-century literature, aware that it is racist, knowing that the stereotypes continue to operate largely uncensored in popular Canadian culture, and that many 21st-century non-Romani research participants may have unthinkingly acted in ways that racialize Romani people. In order to examine the different ways of approaching dancing, we had to confront the racist tropes and our own possible engagement with them and consider what white, 19th-century girls were getting out of taking on so-called gypsy characters too.

The stereotypes embedded in Bell's passionate, strong, and powerful characters promised 19th-century white, middle-class girls a chance to imagine themselves differently in a world that minimized their significance. In her study of 19th-century children's geography primers or textbooks, Megan Norcia (2010) asks, "was there a route to agency/authority/autonomy for 19th-century women that did not go through the patriarchal imperial master

narrative, which expropriates agency and freedom from others to shore up its domain and power?" (p. 145). The primers Norcia examines also essentialize and racialize non-English peoples, and like the theatricals, invited housebound girls with limited future options to imagine themselves otherwise, granting white girls the possibility of more power, even as they became complicit in the imperial project that subjugates non-English people. Most felt white girls were immune to negative connotations associated with racialized others because by the 19th century, innocence had been "raced white" (Bernstein, 2011, p. 8), and therefore, whiteness was equated with goodness, and would protect young white thespians. Michelle Liu Carriger (2018) argues that in order to go beyond binary right/wrong discussions regarding cultural appropriation, cultural appreciation, and racism, we should restore "context detail, history and complex considerations," which, she contends, "are most important in forging long-term solutions to the problems of cultural exchange and hybridization" (p. 169). In a project that uses embodied practice as a way to get at difficult information, I structured the research workshops to highlight, rather than obscure, the systemic racism operating in the scripts, and encouraged research participants to consider how white, 19th-century girls related to these tropes.

I'm inspired by the concept of "interest" that Roberta Barker brought to my attention at the "Playing with History" symposium Marlis Schweitzer and I hosted at York University in October 2018. Barker explained that in 1761, Pierre de Beaumarchais defined interest as "the involuntary sentiment whereby we adapt ourselves to [a dramatic] event, putting ourselves in the place of the person [we are watching on stage]." Barker called this feeling fundamentally sentimental (that is to say, grounded in sentiments or emotions). Using Rebecca Schneider, she argued that through embodiment and performance, not only do reenactments offer an opportunity to better understand the past and our relationship to it, our choices about what might hold interest indicate a great deal about us as researchers. The double value of the concept of interest is clear in the context of at-home theatricals. In homes, 19th-century girls were invited to try on roles that might hold interest for them (a concept that continued to circulate in the 19th century) and, in turn, invited their audience to be interested in those characters. If, in the 21st century, we revisit specific dance instructions, and certain characters, what is our interest there? When is it productive to separate our interest in the character's actions, dancing, and behaviour from our interest in the girls who performed them, or from our interest in the racializing discourses embraced by the playwright, and when is our interest so tightly wound up in those factors that they are difficult to tease out? Julia Salverson (2008) argues in favour of conducting creative research like a clown, with an "insistence on engagement based in availability and the willingness to step forward without certainty" (p. 246). She suggests that "the goal is relationship, not success" (p. 246). As I prepared this research workshop, I focused my interest on the 19th-century thespians and on the encounter—the brief (imaginary) relationship formed between the 19th-century girls and the 21st-century girls in the workshop. In addition, D'Arcangelis (2018) suggests using Ahmed's idea of the double turn as a way for white, settler scholars aiming to dismantle colonial structures, to perform self-reflexivity: "The task for white subjects would be to stay implicated in what they critique, but in turning toward their role and responsibility in these histories of racism, as histories of this present, to turn away from themselves, and towards others" (Ahmed, 2004, para. 59). My intention was to establish research conditions in which we could embody and discuss 19th-century amateur dance practices, turning toward the racism of the past that lingers in the present, but turning away from it by creating knowledge that might draw and direct girl participants toward possible ways to dismantle privilege in their daily lives and, simultaneously, to seek out relationship.

The characters that had particular interest for me included both the "racialized characters" and "the bad girls." Sometimes in 19th-century scripts, the so-called gypsy or Orientalized characters were both. I wanted to share both racialized and raced-white characters with my workshop participants to help pare away what racialization in the texts did and to contextualize our approach to dancing. After reading Florence Bell's "Little Red Riding Hood" (1896), one participant remarked gleefully, that Jenny (Red Riding Hood's name in the script) "is so bad-ass!"

Another participant liked Neighbour Slapps, the tough, cranky, busy-body female neighbour who saves Jenny from the wolf by beating him to death with her umbrella. Girls who read Florence Bell's "Ali Baba and The Forty Thieves" laughed with delight as Morgiana solved the mystery, dispatched the robbers, managed the servant boy, danced seductively, and killed the robber captain to ultimately save the Ali Baba family from disaster. Those who read Charlotte Yonge's *A Strayed Falcon* (1864) were intrigued by the clever "gypsy" thieves who tricked their way into riches.

Afterwards participants between the ages of 9 and 13 asserted that it was always more fun to play the villain characters. On paper surveys, several younger girls wrote that doing theatricals would be a chance for 19th-century girls to "be free" or to "try something new" or to "be different." These statements echoed an undergraduate participant's remark that at-home theatricals offered "a place where it was acceptable to be unacceptable." In theatricals, 19th-century girls had permission to dress like boys, to have sword fights, to be powerful heroes, to be sassy, lazy, and talk back to their elders because the expectation was that, in spite of the high *interest*, the transgressive behaviours would remain in the space of imaginary play. Rahman et al.'s (2012) study of 21st-century cosplay¹⁰ practice in Hong Kong suggests that cosplay "allows enthusiasts to momentarily change their identity in order to create an exciting, extraordinary and contented self rather than attempting a real-life transformation" (p. 334). Many participants in my study wanted to identify with the bad-ass characters, but they had no desire to attempt a real-life bad-ass transformation. Did the "space where it was acceptable to be unacceptable" ultimately neutralize the powerful explorations that took place there, making it easy to leave radical ideas and behaviours behind? Current drama-in-education thinking suggests that dramatic play has the potential to offer provocative spaces for critically thinking about the self and possibilities¹¹, and while 19th-century girls may not have wanted to *be* bad-ass, experimenting with how it felt meant that perhaps, upon reflection, those possibilities could influence quotidian life.

In the first workshop with the upper-level undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty members, we examined 19th- and 21st-century iterations of the "gypsy" stereotype, in literature, of 19th-century children's costumes held in museums and in 19th-century fancy dress (costume) guides.¹² With the exception of the images accompanying Arden Holt's (1887) costume recommendations, participants pointed out the very common depiction of young barefoot women in a stooped, subservient begging posture, even when the character was not begging in the text. We compared those images with the widely available costumes available on eBay in 2018. We also discussed the racism Romani people are currently experiencing. The workshop included white participants and racialized minorities, first-generation Canadians and those whose families had been in Canada longer, but notably, there were no Romani people or experts in Romani culture. This probably mirrors the situation in a 19th-century English at-home theatrical: Romani people were almost certainly outsiders and completely other to the girls' experiences and their at-home theatrical imaginings.

In the workshop with participants aged 5 to 25, we also discussed imagery from 19th-century children's books and fancy-dress costume advice, so-called gypsy dances and skirt dances of the early 20th century, and we also read scenes from Charlotte Yonge's (1864) *A Strayed Falcon*, featuring appealing but villainous "gypsy" characters, and noticed the embedded stereotypes about passion, kidnapping, thieving, fortune telling, and magic. As before, we discussed how playing those characters might have been appealing to white middle-class girls in the 19th century, and we also discussed contemporary racism against Romani people, Halloween portrayals of gypsies, and the precarious status of Romani people as refugees in Canada.¹³ One 17-year-old girl, who later told us that one of her dearest friends is Romani, railed against ignorant racism against Romani people in Canada. She spoke vehemently about the frequent neglect of the Romani experience of the Holocaust and her understanding of the crisis in Europe today. I was grateful because she provided the contextualizing voice I hoped would be present in this multi-

age grouping. Other theatre makers and scholars I know have worked with Romani people to theatrically share some of their difficult stories (Gallagher, 2015; Kazubowski-Houston, 2010, 2011). Gallagher (2015) writes that to avoid reinscribing trauma, “if the stories . . . are meant to connect our past to an imagined future, we can privilege that over the compulsion to get it right” (p. 18). I, too, hoped to use these workshops to connect the past to an imagined future, but 19th-century middle-class white girls did not have Romani people’s guidance, and neither did we. This time, in spite of efforts to recruit a range of young women, the group was not as visibly diverse. While a third of participants identified as Jewish (some called this an invisible minority) and two participants were half Taiwanese American, all the participants could easily “pass” as white. Romani absence was a constant imagined presence for the 21st-century girls who dared to consider how things could have been different.

The way we approached dancing in the first workshop provided insights into how some young people in 19th-century middle-class homes probably experienced dancing. First, I taught the participants a simple square quadrille—a popular Victorian dance frequently suggested in theatricals. Participants described the dance as very upright, elegant, and presentational, and they enjoyed learning to do the figures correctly. In contrast, when we attempted to imagine the dances girls might have done for the so-called gypsy characters, we watched some late 19th-century and early 20th-century films on YouTube, tried on some wide circle skirts, and keeping in mind the 19th-century images we looked at, moved to the music of The Gypsy Kings. Participants laughed, swirled their skirts, and spent time spinning. No one adopted the “begging” posture we saw in the 19th-century books. They grinned and chatted a bit as they moved, and while they did not attempt anything too physically risky, they experimented and took chances with their steps.

Afterwards, participants debriefed about the fun of dancing and the anxiety associated with being uncertain as to whether they were “getting it right.” It was easy to imagine the pleasure and perhaps awkwardness young 19th-century girls could have felt in allowing themselves to explore their bodies and move in ways that were foreign to their daily lives of corsets and contained and regulated gestures. As I considered the implications of whether or not 19th-century participants would have understood that there were actually techniques and steps associated with the type of dancing they attempted to portray, one black participant commented that “we were having fun being racist.” In spite of my efforts to expose and unpack the way Romani people were racialized in literature, the *doing* of the dancing temporarily obscured the racism for those of us who had the privilege of not being the objects of racialization in this encounter. The comment froze me. Julie Salverson (2008) argues that in creative inquiry that kind of freezing “is the retreat that often occurs in elements of scholarship and practice that are preoccupied with the sometimes claustrophobic relationship between ethics, critical analysis, and loss” (p. 246). Caught up in a world guided by the imperial project, systemic racism, and patriarchy, white, middle-class girls benefitted from the opportunity to reimagine possibilities for their own lives and limited options, at the expense of Romani people. In the 19th century, the middle-class girls may not have seen their privilege or the racism, but now, in the 21st century, if we *know* that the performance-based historiography work we are doing racializes Romani people, what are we doing? Rather than hiding behind unproductive guilt and shame (Ahmed, 2004), or, as D’Arcangelis (2018) cautions, imagining that confession of privilege will lead toward the disruption of power relations (p. 342), I continued to follow Salverson’s advice to conduct research like a clown, stepping forward without certainty, and aiming for relationship, not success (2008, p. 246). In these 19th- and 21st-century encounters, the relationship I hoped to create was between the girls across centuries, while fostering an awareness of the absent Romani people that encourages a rethinking of what that relationship could become today.

In the second workshop we also approached a Eurocentric dance first, and to explore my question about learning to dance from the book, 36 hours prior to the workshop, I asked two “older” girls (in their early 20s) to each prepare to teach one of the dances in Bell’s (1896) book. I suspect the process was similar in 19th-century homes—someone

tried to figure it out and then taught the others. The space was full of happy laughter as girls attentively learned to dance together with so many different heights represented, and the older girls generously and gently helped the younger girls keep up, reminding them which step to do when. Rather than note upright, elegant, presentational postures, the girls in one group were very amused by some of what they called the “mechanical” dance gestures they had to adopt. One of the older girl teachers said that the diagrams in Bell’s book were easy to follow and that “it was fun working with different ages. I usually found that the older girls helped/guided the younger girls.” Later when girls read scenes aloud from 19th-century scripts, the littlest ones who could not read had nothing to do but sit and listen—and they did. In fact, they seemed content to be with the older girls, perhaps to be a part of something the “big girls” did. Multi-age creative groupings put into action relational care that was truly inspiring. The emotional labour and sometimes joy in taking care were clearly central to understanding the experience of the workshop participants and, I posit, the girl participants of the past.

In contrast, the process around working with the “gypsy” dance style was contained chaos. As before, with only their imaginations to guide them and with fun rehearsal skirts to throw on, the dancing was entirely exploratory, based on very limited and probably inaccurate information. The little girls joined older girls in small groups, and the movements they proposed were enthusiastic and uninhibited, and the older girls copied their experiments: spinning, whirling, swishing skirts, high kicks, slightly ornamented arm movements, and physical gestures that required a full-body bend at the waist. In post-workshop surveys *all* of the participants aged 17 and under preferred the so-called gypsy dances to the dances the older girls taught. Two older participants said they felt uncomfortable and wished there had been a Romani person there to shed insight on the culture, and perhaps a dance expert to teach some of the steps. One wrote, “It felt a little weird because I felt like I was trying to mimic stereotypes—and I was having fun doing it. I think if I knew more about the techniques of that style of dance I would feel less weird because I would be practicing the dance as they did, rather than making it up.” However, most girls didn’t intellectualize the chance to move, and they gave themselves permission to explore what their bodies could do. In keeping with Megan Norcia’s (2010) observations, we may not have wanted to vilify girls of the past who probably also had fun exploring what their bodies could do, who had very little power or opportunity to make choices or shape their communities, even as we criticized the society they occupied that gave white girls, and not others, the somewhat limited privileges they had access to.

During the first workshop debriefing, I invited participants to further discuss the comment “having fun being racist.” I told the university student and faculty participants about my desire to do similar work with younger girls to see if they and their bodies offered different insights into ways of learning and creating the dances, but asked if they thought I could do so responsibly and ethically. The girls ultimately agreed that, with context, the conversation could productively expose younger participants to conversations about racism. D’Arcangelis (2018) argues that self-reflexive work can expose broader structures of power and meaning-making: I had to create conditions to encourage girls to scrutinize our work, as well as its implications for girls and power in the 19th-century and for meaning making in their own lives.



Figure 8. “The girls” aged 5 to 25, dance research pop-up at the University of Toronto. Photo by Heather Fitzsimmons Frey.

During debriefing after the second workshop, the last reflection question was “Would you like to make any comments about performing so-called gypsy characters and “having fun being racist?” Using the undergraduate participant’s phrase from the first workshop, this question seemed like a productive way to respond to Michelle Liu Carriger’s (2018) call to action:

To address the long sticky history of how representation—impersonation, surrogation, performance—has been used to oppress, to insist on recognition of the fact from those who feel no such weight when they don (for example) a kimono, constitutes a right and an injunction of ethical representation that is the responsibility of everyone. (p. 182)

I could see a girl striving for relationship in the encounter when a 24-year-old girl mused, “Knowing what we were playing and knowing it is racist makes the performance for me remain in the confines of pretend, and in a way, thinking of it as an experiment to see if I could try to understand a 19th-century girl outlook. *But* to them would they even think they are being racist? Or would it just seem normal?” And I could see the presence of contextualization when an 11-year-old wrote, “Discrimination and stereotypes should never be used as a game. People’s traditions aren’t games. In the plays, I was acting as a ‘gypsy.’ The older stories were written by people with older beliefs.”

But the process remained flawed, as the girls’ commentary and questions revealed. In the context of his research in blackface minstrelsy, Stephen Johnson (2018) describes the “wince” in practice-based historiographic research as the reflective reaction of the researcher in a place where boundaries are crossed, where good art is probably not created, and where, perhaps, profound learning can happen. He asks researchers to consider:

Do I learn more when I am confronted by the false promise of narrative, by the inelegant, ungainly colliding of the partly or poorly trained or embarrassed or ill-prepared or inappropriate body-in-performance, attempting to understand the past?

Do I learn more from the smile I wear when I watch some of this work—or from the wince I wear the rest of the time? (p. 9 of Johnson's speaking notes)

In my position of power as workshop leader, I did not want to compel participants to embrace racism, but by encouraging a brief relationship between 19th- and 21st-century girls, I did want to problematize and better understand the appeal and consequences of the behaviours of the past. Yet the emotions and ideas are complicated. The high school student who had spoken so passionately about racism against Romani people wrote anxiously:

I feel uncomfortable at the idea of a “having fun been racist.” I noted that all the girls in the room were white (or white-passing, such as myself). I think Romani people are still very unrecognized and marginalized today; their struggles and stories are still quite unknown, as is their culture. With that in mind, I wonder how much our dances resemble anything they may really have done. *It didn't feel racist.* I wonder why. Is that because it was so removed from Romani culture and practices? Because I'm so unused to talking and thinking about Romani people? Because we discussed the ideas beforehand and acknowledged the racism? Or just because I didn't process or acknowledge that I was being racist. Or something else. I don't know. (emphasis added)

She also approached me after the workshop and said, “I didn't *feel* racist when I was dancing. What does that say about me?” While we were talking about complicated contexts such as privilege, an 11-year-old girl handed me her almost finished survey and told me that she didn't feel like answering the last question “because I don't really know about having fun being racist, and anyway, I don't want to do that.” It was a “wince”-worthy moment. Had the younger girl separated the research activities from her own self so that she could not see that aspects of our dancing essentialized Romani people whether we wanted them to or not, or perhaps, was she suggesting that the research was fine because “real life” operated differently? Were the implications of the question too uncomfortable to think about in a direct way? She ran off before we could discuss the comment. Carriger (2018) enjoins researchers to recognize when, perhaps because of their privileged bodies, they do not feel the weight of oppression in representation (p. 182). Both these girls noted that they felt a lack of weight, and in this case, while I ensured that the research process was historically contextualized, only the girls who felt the absence of Romani people in the workshop space made the double turn and imagined implications of the project beyond the room. The wince means, of course, that I must consider what the wince teaches about conducting research with girls in the future. While D'Arcangelis (2018, using Ahmed, 2004) argues that guilt and shame are unproductive, the wince is different. When we wince, we are startled. We recognize something uncomfortable, possibly unintentional, but that once remarked upon, cannot be ignored. Perry (2015) writes that “the perseverance of the practitioner of failure therefore, becomes a revolutionary model of alternative possibility” (p. 151). In acting out failure, we may see the possibility of change. As Johnson (2018) argues, “I wince, and I learn” (p. 9, unpublished speaking notes).

I believe that in aiming to learn more about girls, dance, and at-home theatricals, I had inadvertently replicated one of the 19th-century appeals that at-home theatricals might have for young girls and had, as an undergraduate student put it, created “a place where it was acceptable to be unacceptable.” In the 19th-century, theatricals gave girls space to experiment with challenging behaviour expectations governing their lives. Girls performing the same theatricals in the 21st century did not defy their community's behaviour expectations when they pretended to be boys, refused marriage, or acted wild. However, like the 19th-century girls, they did indulge in racializing play, which is unacceptable today, even if it was unremarkable in white homes of the past. In both eras, the girls occupied a theatrical space where the unacceptable could be lived out for a short time. Elizabeth Ellsworth (2005)

argues that a “transitional space” is a place which may “provide 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 the interaction” (p. 32). The opportunities to act, and change, and alter the way we might create our own futures are the positive aspects of the transitional space. However, if the space simply offers its consent for poor behaviour, that is dangerous. Supportive debriefing is essential. Carriger (2018) proposes a “theatrical ethic of inappropriation” (p. 181), asking artists and scholars to consider “what dynamics appear when we restore context to cross-cultural performance” (p. 180) and “what group defines the meaning of the performance” (p. 180). She also calls on artists and scholars to reflect on when we can “use our opportunities for thought and debate[,] not to insist on simplifying and binarizing the situation, but on complicating and expanding it” (p. 180). Her analysis suggests that embedded in our 19th/21st-century encounters was, indeed, the recurrence of the “troubling dynamics of nineteenth-century orientalist exoticizing” (p. 180), but that “every repetition also constitutes a difference” (p. 180), suggesting that the key to rethinking, and breaking, cycles might be a different sort of repeating. Critically working with context, could performance-based research spaces with girls support a different sort of repeating? Were the girls and I turning toward our responsibility in the history of racism, and turning away from ourselves and toward others (Ahmed, 2004)? In the transitional space, sometimes I believed we collectively created powerful knowledge about 19th-century girls, community, racialization, and dancing, and about 21st-century girls and power structures. And sometimes, I winced. Discussing performance, Carriger argues, “the possibility that we might understand *something*, even partial, flawed, or silly, across the boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, nation, and so on, is a possibility that we cannot afford to give up” (p. 180), but we also know we cannot afford to ignore the wince. Working with girls to trouble structural inequalities through research is challenging. In learning to look toward responsibility, in turning away from ourselves, and toward others, we may *wince* but when we do, we learn.

From the wings: A few thoughts about girls, vignettes, and self-reflexive writing

Placing girls at the centre of the research, and viewing them as people who drive the research trajectories, radically changes the research experience and analysis. These various performance-based historiography projects, with their focus on encounter, require living, breathing girls to embody aspects of the past. As their bodies make discoveries about, and perhaps relationships with, 19th-century girls, it is their minds, their ideas, their flashes of insights, and their critical reflections that have the potential to instigate social change, aligning their experiences with the rights-based approach to girl studies research. It may seem obvious, but as active and present people in the research process, girls’ potential for self-reflexive thought enhanced and shaped my own critical thinking, helping me complicate my own storytelling so that it clearly pointed toward structural inequalities, power dynamics, and structures of meaning making. When their comments made me wince, I knew I had to reconsider my approach in the future.

Performance-based historiography, like any kind of performance research, can be risky. This performance-based research project, in its effort to understand 19th-century girls and the power that at-home theatrical explorations might have had in their lives, ultimately taught me about the 21st-century girls who participated and their hopes for a more equitable future for themselves and their communities. As they spoke about systems of oppression that they wanted to dismantle, they also demonstrated that effort is required in care, and that it has far more value than congeniality. Girls drew attention to ways that they could subvert power, that they could seize control of a creative project, and that they could ask thought-provoking questions that would change the way I approached future research. They pointed out how much pleasure there is in learning through moving and doing, and that there is also fun in believing it is possible to move “correctly.” They made observations about defying behaviour expectations by being “bad ass,” about the absence of Romani people from our research process, about respecting dance skills and techniques, and about creating communities of care. In my self-reflexive process, inspired by

Carole D’Arcangelis (2018), I repeatedly saw that the richest insights and most powerful observations on structures of meaning making or power relations came from the girls themselves. In our space where it was “acceptable to be unacceptable,” listening to each other and listening to girls meant that they could critique the research, girls’ history, contemporary society, and the legacy historical systemic injustices bring to the present, and they could imagine a different future that they, perhaps, might be able to shape.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Examples of these are described and cited in my dissertation (Fitzsimmons Frey, 2015).
- 2 As for the idea of being a 19th-century girl as opposed to a boy, Sally Ledger (1996) suggests that gender was arguably the most destabilizing category in the cultural politics of the fin-de-siècle (p. 22). As newspaper writers thought about dandies in their dapper suits, “new women” riding bicycles and wearing bloomers and demanding the vote, and “new girls” (Sally Mitchell, 1995), the concept of “girl” was a fascinating and often anxiety-provoking category to 19th-century writers. Today, in the 21st century, when people understand “girl” quite differently, I made my working definition clear in my calls for participants, included anyone who self-selected for the research, and did not exclude anyone who did not identify as a girl. Two people who identified as male participated in research workshops.
- 3 I shared selections of my archival research with participants, including excerpts from letters and diaries, as well as drawings and cartoons in journals. For more details on some of these 19th-century resources, see my article “An Ethical Approach to Encountering Nineteenth-Century Girls” (Fitzsimmons Frey, 2016) or my dissertation *Victorian Girls and At-Home Theatricals: Performing and Playing with Possible Futures* (Fitzsimmons Frey, 2015).
- 4 See, for example, Florence Bell’s (1896) retelling of “The Sleeping Beauty” or Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker’s (1881) “The Bear Prince.”
- 5 The acting vernacular of the 19th century would have been “gestural” acting, and young 19th-century people would have assumed that was the correct way to act. Similarly, 21st-century young people generally assume that they should be acting with a “realism” style, largely borrowed from film and television. Instead of teaching new acting skills, since our process emphasized the condensed rehearsal period, we incorporated skills young amateur actors already brought with them.
- 6 Sally Mitchell (1995) coined the term “new girl” after the new woman of the late 19th century. Her work focuses on literature, especially L. T. Meade, but I argue that the term can also be applied to plays intended for girls to perform that also offer similar explorations of agency and possibility. Besides Clara Ryland’s *The Frog Prince*, we considered plays by Florence Bell, Kate Freiligrath-Kroeker, Amy Levy, and Louisa Powell MacDonald, as well as an anonymous Cinderella from the 1870s.
- 7 We planned to rehearse and present in four days, after about 18 hours of rehearsal. Some children practiced their lines at home on their own time; others did not.
- 8 The letters Beatrice Chamberlain (1895) wrote to her brother Neville about her nieces and nephews performing in the original productions of Ryland’s plays also indicate delight in knowing the children on and off stage.
- 9 See Papadopoulos (2018) for a critique of the song.
- 10 “Cosplay,” a conjunction of costume and play, originated in Japan and now is popular throughout Asia and North America.
- 11 See, for example, Gallagher (2001), Hatton (2013), and Neelands (2009).
- 12 Kathleen Gallagher (2015) writes about creating a theatrical piece with Hungarian Romani youth in an effort to improve their education in Canada and support their case for a successful refugee claim. Judging from stories of the young people’s lives, we found the simple, stark, and brutal theatricalization of their memories was completely different from “gypsy” characterizations in the white-authored 19th-century script we examined.
- 13 For example, while more than 11,000 Hungarians made refugee claims in Canada between 2008 and 2012, claiming ethnic persecution, very few succeeded. Instead, “they encountered racist rhetoric drawing on stereotypes” (p. 771). For more information about Hungarian Romani refugee claimants in Canada, see Rehaag, Beaudoin, and Danch (2015).