Compos(t)ing Presence in the Poetry of Carl Leggo: Writing Practices that Disperse the Presence of the Author

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Abstract

This paper was presented as part of the Carl Leggo keynote address at the third annual CSSE pre-conference for the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada. The paper explores the possibility of deconstructing "presence" in reflexive writing. The author examines Leggo's "writing as compos(t)ing" as an example of arts-informed reflexive writing that problematizes the desire for presence, and argues that Leggo's "clown" poetry interrogates notions of transparency in reflexive writing. Reflexive writing traces the presence of the writer in/through the text. It is a form of writing that celebrates the power of personal story to illuminate the intersections between self and society. The desire for presence, however, is never innocent and never without complication. In tracing that presence - in writing reflexively - the writer inscribes silence and absence while simultaneously making her/himself visible.

Introduction

Reflexive writing in social science research has become increasingly popular as a form of inquiry and representation that honours the complex ethical relation between the inquirer and the context of study. Reflexive writing traces the presence of the author in/through the text. It is a form of writing that celebrates the power of personal story to illuminate the intersections between self and society. The use of the pronoun "I" in reflexive writing evokes a sense of intimacy and presence. This I creates a form of testimony or, in some cases, a form of confession, causing one to read the text as though it were a transparent trace of the author's inner thoughts. Readers are invited to read reflexivity as a form of author presence. MacLure (2003) argues that this form of writing embodies one's "desire for presence" (p.166) and one's hope for unmediated communication.

The desire for presence, however, is never innocent and never without complication. In tracing that presence - in writing reflexively - the writer inscribes silence and absence while simultaneously making her/himself visible. Reflexive writing is as much a fabrication or obfuscation as any other form of writing. This paper explores the possibility of deconstructing "presence" in reflexive writing. The poetry of Carl Leggo offers an excellent vantage point from which to examine the desire for presence. Leggo is a prominent Canadian poet whose poetry often dwells on the lived experience of learners in diverse contexts. I have selected Leggo because of his commitment to an arts-informed approach to reflexive writing. I examine Leggo's "writing as compos(t)ing" as an example of arts-informed reflexive writing that problematizes the desire for presence. I argue that Leggo's "clown" poetry interrogates our reliance on the transparency of reflexive writing.

Writing as "Living Compos(t)ing"

Carl Leggo's (2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2004a, 2004b) poetry sustains a crystalline aspect on the problematic of re-presenting presence. Through poetry, he plays with the tension between a hermeneutics of presence and a form of deconstruction that troubles the desire for presence. Leggo (2004a) dwells on the limits of language and representation, drawing from his personal everyday experiences and memories - the "quotidian" - while remaining adamant that, "Writing is not the way by which I reveal who I am; at least no stable single sentient self" (p. 26). He describes writing as a "living compos(t)ing", whereby he is both constituted through the act of writing and simultaneously deconstructed through the tangled illusions that emerge:

> I have discovered that I am a clown-poet who sees his reflection constantly in a house of mirrors, each reflection, similar and diverse, images and colours without end, a mutable and shift-changing nexus of word-drawn lines, embodied subject positions, and multiple narratives. (p. 27)

As a clown-poet, he plays with limits, scrutinizing the circulation of a word, inverting its root meaning, and juxtaposing all contrary implications. It is this making of (non)sense that provokes the reader. Leggo (2004b) sneaks up on words "like porcupines before I

steal their quills for more writing" (p. 11). *Writing as living com(p)osting: Poetry and desire* (Leggo, 2002a) contains a series of poems that dwell on the connections between posing, composing, imposing, and decomposing. In this series of poems, Leggo triggers reader reflection on the enforced elementary school exercises that stipulate the rules for "composing lines" as punishment. The poem is physically arranged on the page to disrupt the habit of lines that begin at the left margin and "plod with mesmerized devotion to the end of the book, a composition of lines that began at the beginning of September and snaked with soporific steadfastness to summer's respite" (p. 1). Leggo bemoans the "lie" and "fabrication" of these lines, announcing,

> Now I know my writing
> is no linear composition;
> it is a living composting.
> (p. 2)

Writing as living compos(t)ing celebrates how the author is constituted (and decomposed) through language. Leggo revisits the disappearing traces of significant and everyday moments - the encounter with a coyote, the loss of once cherished moccasins - repeatedly returning to the ways in which these moments are saturated in language, "knowing once more the universe is no single verse, no unified verse" (p. 6). He aims to deconstruct the stories he tells himself so as to map the desires that inform them. Quoting Don McKay (1996), Leggo (2002a) shares how, "Poets are supremely interested in what language can't do; in order to gesture outside, they use language in a way that flirts with its destruction" (p. 15). This flirting with destruction can be considered the *catachresis* that disrupts the norm, "a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent" (Derrida in Kearney, 2004, p. 154). Leggo (2002a) relies heavily on catachresis, more so than on metaphor, but he does so in order to open a space for otherness:

> In my poetry I seek
>   to dispel absence
>   by disclosing
>   possibilities
>   for presence.
>   (p. 4)

These lines violate the binary between absence and presence in the awkward intention to "dispel absence by disclosing possibility for presence". The pairing of apparently impossible tasks – "to dispel absence" when absence is always already dispelled - and to disclose possibility - when possibility is in itself a dis-closure, point to the contradictions that accompany all attempts to achieve an unsullied presence. The awkwardness of his language questions the very possibility of self-presence. In Leggo, language is seen to be rich with lovely contradictions, revealing how tentative and fluid it is. Any attempts to use language to capture a pure and unsullied presence will always suffer these lovely contradictions. Focus on the contradictions of such desire has become common in post-structuralist theory, as in the work of Maggie MacLure, Patti Lather, and Elizabeth Ellsworth, all of whom draw to some extent on the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Derrida's deconstruction of traditional notions of the "self" or "subject" speaks directly to writers who are claiming to write reflexively. In the case of Leggo, whose reflexivity

aims for a kind of catachresis of the "self" as source of signification, Derridean deconstruction offers a theoretical framework for making sense of his poetry.

<center>Deconstruction and the Desire for Presence</center>

In this section I discuss the work of Derrida as it relates to catachresis and the desire for presence. Derrida (2002) argues that the desire for presence pervades the Western cultural heritage and saturates the meaning of essence, truth, and being in Western philosophy. Troubling the "metaphysics of presence" is a crucial strategy in the critique of Western "logocentrism"— a term Derrida uses to describe blind faith in the transparency of language. Deconstruction aims to trouble the desire for presence and maintain the "structural non-knowing" (Caputo, 2000, p. 56) of both self and other. The aim of deconstruction is to carve out a new space where the desire for presence is questioned. "To deconstruct a text is to disclose how it functions as desire, as a search for presence and fulfillment which is interminably deferred" (Derrida in Kearney, 2004, p. 156).

Although Derrida argues that one can never be outside of the language of metaphysics, because one is always operating within such a language, he also claims that it is still possible to think another space or location ("topos") from which one can problematize the desire for presence (in Kearney, 2004, p. 142). He recognizes that one is always drawn to a metaphysics of presence, but demands that one trouble the implications of this habit.

Deconstruction is an attempt to disrupt any reliance on simplistic binaries of presence and absence by generating a location where one can see oneself as other - where the subject can interrogate and reflect upon its self-sustaining desire for presence. Like many post-structuralist philosophers, Derrida claims that the open anomalous space generated and maintained in particular works of art allows for this kind of interrogation. When Kearney (2004) asks, "Can literary and poetic language provide this *non-lieu* or *u-topos*?", Derrida affirms the potential of certain pieces of literature which "work around the limits of our logical concepts, certain texts which make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as divisible and questionable" (p. 144). Derrida refers to Beckett, Bataille, and Blanchot, all of whom questioned the notions of essence and self as found in earlier romantic poets. This development in poetry can be traced to more contemporary poets – such as Jennifer Moxley (2003, 2005), Jeff Clark (1998, 2004), and Carl Leggo – who are continuing to explore forms of experimental autobiography that trouble the I of self-study. In contrast to romantic poets who posit and ponder the essential self, these postmodern writers contest the notion of the "stable, secure, and full-throated 'I' of much mainstream poetry" (Yau, 1998, n.p.). They question the romantic premise that language is the trace of being. Derrida, who traces his philosophical apprenticeship back through Heidegger, nonetheless considers Heidegger's notion of language as "the house of being" to be a piece of nostalgia imbued with the Greek metaphysics of presence (in Kearney, 2004, p. 142). The distinction between postmodern artists and romantic artists can help direct an understanding of arts-informed reflexive writing. Reflexive writing that acknowledges and celebrates its artful fabrication can be seen as a form of self-writing that problematizes the desire for presence. Leggo (2004c) echoes these comments in his poetry:

> I know I can't render what I see, must
> surrender to the limits of language,
> my words no more than an exasperated
> expiration, a hint of impossibility,
> everything seen in a mist.
> (p. 34)

I am not suggesting that all reflexive writing must embrace a post-structuralist aesthetic and interrogate the desire for presence, but I do believe that certain arts-informed reflexive writing can show how to do this. In the case of Leggo, the poetry troubles its capacity to represent something outside of itself, including its capacity to represent the reflexive self. Even metaphoric language - often seen as an artful way of conveying that which cannot be expressed directly – is questioned by Leggo. In the following poem entitled "Snow", a thematic subject which seems to represent the typical public school poetry assignment, Leggo (2004c) points to the inadequacy of his metaphors by dwelling on the language of fact and visibility. His emphasis on the facticity of experience comes clearly through.

> Snow
> we just returned from snow-shoeing
> around the arc of York Harbour,
> a quick-tempered, erratic day, at least
> some of the time, since already the snow
> has started and stopped a few times
> like it is not sure its heart is in winter,
> and the sun sometimes cast a Carribean gold,
> soon diffused by fog's quick stealth,
> and how snow reduces visibility to zero,
> except visibility is really expanded
> inestimably to billions of snowflakes
> (and somebody claimed no two
> snowflakes are the same, a bold claim
> since clearly no one has ever counted
> and compared all the snowflakes in
> the world's history of winter), and
> visibility, the ability to see sure,
> is magnified to billions, at least,
> and I see snowflakes chase one another,
> march together like obedient soldiers,
> dance up a storm, while the scrawny
> fingers of the birch tree try to catch
> some with more success than I
> can catch the wide wild ways
> of snow in this poem, or any poem
> (p. 35)

According to Derrida (in Kearney, 2004), poetry that works only through

metaphor fails to sufficiently rupture the relation of reference between the work and that which it addresses. Metaphor relies on the notion of indirect reference but continues to assume a system of total meaning, which is temporarily obscured by the indirectness of the reference. The metaphoric play of meaning occurs within a well-defined domain of possible associations brought to the text by the reader. Metaphoric meaning, although indirect, is never disruptive of the underlying rules that govern meaning making.

Instead of metaphor, Derrida (in Kearney, 2004) suggests we might aim for *catachresis*, which he defines as a kind of writing that stakes out the deviations of language, "so that the text produces a language of its own, in itself, which, while continuing to work through tradition, emerges at a given moment as a monster, a monstrous mutation without tradition or normative precedent" (p.154). *Catachresis* is the violent production of meaning, whereas metaphor submits to an original property of meaning. Although some might debate just how "monstrous" these mutations are, one finds evidence of these sorts of disruptions in Leggo's poetry when he sneaks up on words to steal from them and dislodge their claim to reference, or when he dwells on the reader's positivist notions of visibility during a snow storm. Leggo is interested in the disruption of reference, in the surprise of an unlikely metaphor, in the way one might compost the residue of past language use while composing new lines of lived experience. In this way, the "Snow" poem is a tribute to the facticity of language.

This same tribute to facticity, to the detachment of language from meaning, this "bad" attitude towards language, can be considered a deconstructive method. Caputo (2000) declares, "deconstruction is bad and it makes no bones about it" (p. 55). But Derrida (in Kearney, 2004) also argues that deconstruction is a humble and positive response, a form of responsible anarchy that creates a space for ethical reciprocity. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the other of language and is not simply a suspension of reference. Derrida argues that the nature of reference is far more complex than one might presume and that the other beyond language is always already inscribed through language. As he says, "deconstruction is not an enclosure in nothing, but an openness towards the other" (p. 155).

Leggo's compos(t)ing poetry exemplifies this openness towards the other. He dwells on the impossibility of an unadulterated reflexivity in ways that are both discomforting and highly responsible. He denies the transparency of language and one's ability to sustain self-presence. His relation to language is akin to Derrida's responsible anarchy. Leggo plucks and troubles words with the aim of creating an ethical reciprocity between author and reader. He treats language badly precisely because he is both enamored with and enabled by it.

The Reflexive Self

Leggo's use of the signifier "I" in his poetry marks the text with reflexivity, and yet the "I" of a clown-poet marks a very different kind of reflexivity than that of a naïve claim for self-presence. When Leggo declares "I" in a poem, he puts his avowal into play, subverting any tendency to read the text as a deposition or testimony. Testimony, as Carspecken (2002) claims, "is only intelligible against the horizon of a notion of time" (p. 72). The act of testimony relies on people's shared understanding of a historical and political time, a time-space continuum within which people might witness and attest to

each other's actions. Testimony relies on one's "being present" at the scene of the incident, and addresses the listener as judge or jury. Reflexive writing also relies on one having been present (present to oneself) during some past incident, and then addresses the reader in the intimate language of inner thought and reflection. Reflexive writing is often granted the authority of testimony, especially in regard to it being an accurate account of the composing process. The time and place of one's reflexive self is frequently a specific location in the temporal development of the reflexive text. As Richardson (2001) states, good reflexive texts most often convey their reflexivity by tracing the temporal process of their production: "How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered?" (p. 251). Leggo (2004a), on the other hand, discredits his own claim on the present moment and denies the possibility of precipitating out of time and into presence. He reads his own work as saturated in delay, suspension, deferral, attending to the construction within the text of its own timeliness. "Perhaps there is no present, except as an illusion constructed in the past like stars long extinguished even when we see their light. So, we navigate ourselves by stars that may no longer exist" (p. 22).

The clown-poet troubles the desire for presence. He detaches the present moment from its ontological primacy. Playfully enacting this reversal is a common postmodern act. Instead of the primacy of the present moment, postmodernists posit the primacy of temporal indeterminacy. Ellsworth (2005) argues that the "field of emergence" (p. 33) [drawing on what Massumi (2002) calls "ontogenetic indeterminacy" (p. 9)] is a fluid unstable process that actually precedes and "back-forms" any notion of presence. Ellsworth (2005) asks for an examination of "transitional spaces" that are neither now nor then, neither self nor other. She writes, "The time of that emergence...is a time when the past and the future 'smudge'" (p. 34). The time of emergence, accordingly, cannot be decomposed into positions (fixed locations) and discrete moments of self-presence. The path of becoming cannot be traced through static moments of being. A desire to locate the self in the present moment fails to honour the complex continuity of learning and becoming. Presence, in a reversal of the usual logic, is the trace of movement. Massumi (2002) describes this new primacy of movement as a way of problematizing the notion of presence.

> Position no longer comes first, with movement a problematic second. It is secondary to movement, and derived from it. It is retro movement, movement residue. The problem is no longer to explain how there can be change given positioning. The problem is to explain the wonder that there can be stasis given the primacy of process. (p. 7)

Ellsworth (2005) argues that new "anomalous" pedagogies drawn from the arts have the capacity to address "a student that is not coincident with herself, but only with her change. They must figure out how to address a learning self that is in motion" (p. 7). According to Ellsworth, the encounter between an artwork and its audience is a space of speculation and indeterminacy. It is always a space of potential transformation, insofar as it refuses to prescribe the emergent structures of its meaning (p. 27). A transitional space operates like a dynamic threshold; it brings self and other into play, undercutting all notions of oppositional positioning. Ellsworth aims to theorize a way of putting self and other into play so as to sustain an ethical inventiveness to that relation. She refers to the art work of Shimon Attie, Anna Deavere Smith, and Maya Lin, among others, as

"anomalous pedagogies" which, she hopes, will "teach" people how to disperse the place of the teacher, not simply by advocating for "artful" instructional skills, because these may still presuppose a static subject or student, but rather by crafting environments in which both teacher and learner are "in the immanent relation that is change itself " (p. 34).

Ellsworth's focus on this "immanent relation" is an attempt to attend to the facticity of learning in ways that honour difference, diversity and surprise. This attempt to theorize subjectivity through the deconstruction of presence speaks to the clown poetry of Leggo. Like the artists studied by Ellsworth, Leggo (2002b) asks that one use language and live language in unpredictable and anomalous ways, that one performs the doubling act of asserting and erasing one's claims to a shared reality. He asks his readers, "Will you be my glosser?" (p. 6), inviting readers to interpret his text, but demanding that they "read the spaces in the words where the unwritten is written" (p. 6). The poems in *Beyond the alphabet: Rapture resists capture* (2002b) instruct readers to interfere with meaning, to disperse the ground of meaning itself by inventing a "glossolalia" - an incomprehensible system of signs from an imaginary language. Leggo creates an "anomalous pedagogy" that sustains the necessary indeterminacy that is the very condition of urgency and presence for the other.

Conclusion

The desire for presence is problematic precisely because it too often ignores the ways in which one's presence erases that of the other. In reflexive writing, there is often little recognition of the need to problematize the self-as-signifier, and see the self as other. And yet one could claim that it is only when one can see the self as other that one has invited the other in. The heightened presence of the present moment, the hyperactual of reflexive writing, is too often employed to avoid difference and alterity and thereby shirk responsibility for the radical other. I do not mean to suggest that it fails to front the presence of the author, but rather that it fails to invite the other to breach the work. It fails to recognize that reflexivity itself can be an oppressive desire for presence through which one disallows any untimely or anachronous irruptions.

Anomalous writing practices, like the poetry of Leggo, assist in interrogating the desire for presence in reflexive writing. In this paper I have focused on aspects of his poetry that speak to this particular issue. Leggo uses the first person "I" throughout his poetry, recounting personal experience, sharing theoretical ruminations, and exploring the intersections between self and society. As a "clown poet" he uses language playfully and unpredictably and creates a space of indeterminacy where the writing enacts the double-bind of self-expression. He strives to communicate his life history while problematizing the desire to narrate and describe his lived experience. Leggo's writing as compos(t)ing invites the other in to breach the work, to trouble the apparent transparency, and to contest his claims for self-presence.

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