

## End of the line: A poet's postmodern musings on writing

CARL LEGGO

*University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada*

*ABSTRACT: I invite and encourage students to take risks in their writing, to engage innovatively with a wide range of genre, to push limits in order to explore creatively how language and discourse are never ossified, but always organic, how language use is integrally and inextricably connected to identity, knowledge, subjectivity, and living. Informed by postmodernism, I present eleven perspectives on language and writing and eleven poems that represent and perform a creative and diverse engagement with those perspectives. My goal is to experiment with writing in order to engage in an expansive dialogue about writing, especially the conventions of teaching and promoting writing in classrooms.*

*KEYWORDS: Autobiography, creativity, discourse, poetry, postmodernism, subjectivity, writing.*

*A writer must resist the pressure of old formulae and work towards new combinations of language. (Winterson, 1995, p. 76)*

*My experience is not described or explained by language; it is language. (Griffin, 1997, p. 192)*

*There is no intrinsic order to the world itself other than the ordering which we impose on it through our linguistic description of it. (Mills, 1995, p. 52)*

### INTRODUCTION

As a student in school, I did not feel that I belonged. I played a game in school, a game of obeying the teacher's rules and following the teacher's directions. In writing classes I was always trying to please the teacher. I was convinced that teachers had a series of templates in their heads: the ideal essay, the ideal narrative, the ideal answers to questions. My task as a student was to strive to imitate that ideal as closely as I could. In school I never wrote for pleasure or for personal reasons. I never wrote about any issue or experience that was significant to me. I never wrote in order to explore or experiment. I never wrote anything in school that I really wanted to write, that I was eager to write. Instead I wrote essays and a few narratives and countless responses to questions as directed by the teachers. I understood that I was learning to write like real writers. I was being trained in the kind of composition that uses the strategies of logic, argumentation, and persuasion.

In hindsight, I can see that my school writing was akin to the writing that university professors engage in. This kind of writing takes pride in well-balanced arguments based on providing convincing evidences and statistics and on critiquing the well-balanced arguments presented by others. In a way, I suppose I should be glad that I wrote the kinds

of essays that I wrote in school because I did become a university professor. Perhaps I should be grateful that my teachers trained me well for my future vocation. Nevertheless, I am neither glad nor grateful. In fact I am cranky about the whole business of how writing is taught because most writing pedagogy is focused on a single kind of writing while precluding numerous other possibilities. In university classes where I teach undergraduate and graduate courses in writing, teaching composition, narrative inquiry, and autobiographical research, I invite and encourage students to take risks in their writing, to engage innovatively with a wide range of genres, to push limits in order to explore creatively how language and discourse are never ossified, but always organic, how language use is integrally and inextricably connected to identity, knowledge, subjectivity and living.

In thinking about language and the constitution of identity and social understanding, I find Sara Mills' *Discourse* (which leans significantly on Foucault) useful. She writes: "Discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity" (p. 15). This is the postmodern understanding of the dynamic constructive work of language. Moreover, as Mills proposes, "discourses do not exist in isolation, but are the object and site of struggle. Discourses are thus not fixed but are the site of constant contestation of meaning" (p. 16). Because discourses are not fixed, then truth and knowledge are produced or created in the interactions of people. Mills explains: "Truth...is something which societies have to work to produce, rather than something which appears in a transcendental way" (p. 18).

I resonate with Mills' perspectives on discourse (though not the relatively dry prose that she uses in her book); encouraged by her notion of discourses as a "site of struggle", I am seeking to understand how different kinds of writing can be productive in shaking up notions of rhetoric and teaching writing. Therefore, in this essay (*essai*: attempt or try) I weave poetry, quotations and musings in a text that spells out an understanding of postmodernism and composition, while also performing in the "site of struggle" in order to open up new possibilities for being and becoming in language. In this article, I present eleven statements about postmodernism and eleven poems that illustrate and perform an engagement with those perspectives. My intent is to experiment with language in postmodern ways, and to promote more creative and flexible kinds of text for inviting dialogue about issues of discourse and writing, including generic expectations, conventions, practices and purposes.

I promote the value of postmodernism for shaking up much of what constitutes the practice and theory and pedagogy of writing in school and university contexts. In *The illusions of postmodernism*, Terry Eagleton spells out a wide-ranging and eloquent critique of postmodernism, and expresses the view he has long expressed that postmodernism lacks a commitment to social, political and economic change. For anyone with an interest in postmodernism, Eagleton provides essential reading. He is not enamoured with postmodernism, but he acknowledges the plurality of postmodern perspectives. He notes that "postmodernism is such a portmanteau phenomenon that anything you assert of one piece of it is almost bound to be untrue of another" (p. viii). Regarding his own views, Eagleton explains that "unlike most postmodernists, I myself

am a pluralist about postmodernism, believing in postmodern fashion that there are different narratives to be told of postmodernism too, some of them considerably less positive than others" (p. 26). From my perspective, I focus on the positive aspects of postmodernism because, in my writing and teaching, postmodernism has opened up possibilities for creativity, knowing, being and becoming.

I was thirty-one years old when I returned to university to pursue a graduate degree in creative writing at the University of New Brunswick. By that time I had taught in secondary schools for eight years, and I had studied for about seven years at the undergraduate and graduate levels at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Ontario Theological Seminary. My first course in the Master of Arts program was "Postmodernism and Canadian Literature" with Dr. Barry Cameron. I had no idea what postmodernism was, but I was keen to read more Canadian literature. In the first class Cameron asked for a volunteer to read and report on Jonathan Culler's *Structuralist poetics* for the next class. My hand shot up in what I remember only as an involuntary act that was not connected to my consciousness. During the next week, I did almost nothing but read Culler's *Structuralist poetics*. I understood little. I agonized over the report I wrote, and grew more and more convinced that contemporary theoretical constructs of structuralism, semiotics and poststructuralism far exceeded my education and experience. I was almost convinced that I would never comprehend the tangled and knotted lines of postmodernism. In the next class, I presented my synopsis of Culler's book. Cameron replied that my perspective was interesting, but still fell short of grasping Culler. He was gentle in his response, and during the term and a second course in the next term, I began to understand more. I had the experience of my eyes slowly focusing so I could see with heightened clarity.

From a shaky and scary beginning I have continued to explore postmodernism with a keen sense of the possibilities for transforming my practice as a poet and teacher and language education researcher. Like Eagleton, I am "a pluralist about postmodernism, believing in postmodern fashion that there are different narratives to be told of postmodernism," but unlike Eagleton, instead of focusing on the narratives that are "considerably less positive than others" (p. 26), I choose to focus on the narratives that are more positive. As Brenda Marshall (1992) suggests, "neither innately positive nor negative, postmodernism is an opening, a space created for a particular awareness, interrogation" (p. 193).

So, informed by postmodernism, I present eleven perspectives on language and writing and eleven poems that represent and perform a creative and diverse engagement with those perspectives. My goal is to experiment with writing in order to engage in an expansive dialogue about writing, especially the conventions of teaching and promoting writing in university classrooms. Initially, I planned to provide explanations and narrative contexts, a kind of glossary, for each poem so that the reader could draw more quickly connections between the different kinds of text in this paper, but I soon realized that providing glosses for each poem would defeat my goals in this paper. For example, the first poem, "Vowels", is dedicated to Dr. Ted Aoki. Even though he retired many years ago from the University of Alberta, Aoki continued to teach courses in pedagogy, writing

and narrative at many universities, even in his eighties. His influence on a wide-ranging generation of scholars is singularly eminent, especially in reminding us to attend to language as dynamic and creative. In a conventional essay, the reader would expect to find many such elucidating explanations and clearly expressed connections, but I am not writing a conventional essay, and I need to remind both myself and other readers that this text is more about resonance than reason, more about evocation than exposition, more about performance than proof.

I agree with Griffin (1995) who contends that “poetry does not describe. It *is* the thing. It is an experience, not the secondhand record of an experience, but the experience itself” (p. 191). As Haase and Large (2001) propose in *Maurice Blanchot*, “in the informational model of language, the spoken or written word is merely a vehicle for the meaning that it conveys” (p. 27), but “in literature it is not only the meaning of words which matters, but their texture, which is to say their rhythm, colour and style, none of which can be reduced to an item of information” (p. 28). Therefore, I have deliberately chosen to present a text like a hooked rug, or a braid, or a collage – or a *métissage* which Chambers, Donald, and Hasebe-Ludt (2002) define as “a site for writing and surviving in the interval between different cultures and languages; a way of merging and blurring genres, texts and identities; an active literary stance, political strategy and pedagogical praxis” (n.p.).

## ONE

In my poetry I seek the way,  
the wisdom for living well  
in the longing of language  
to name ourselves where  
we know our long belonging.

Postmodernism acknowledges **the constructive or constitutive dynamic of language** in epistemology and ontology. Marshall (1992) explains that “postmodernism is about language. About how it controls, how it determines meaning, and how we try to exert control through language” (p. 4). Postmodernism reminds me that everything is constructed in language; our experiences are all epistemologically and ontologically composed and understood in words, our words and others’ words, discursively promulgating words. Mills (1997) notes that “the only way we have to apprehend reality is through discourse and discursive structures” (p. 54). We write the world, individually and corporately. Postmodernism reminds me to challenge the dominant discourses, supported by school and university curricula and pedagogy. I seek to write in diverse discourses that are alternative, creative and unconventional.

As I seek to make sense out of the chaos of emotions and experiences and thoughts that swirl around my head without end, I am constantly reminded that my life is inextricably and integrally connected to language, rhetoric and literary device. As William Gass (1983) notes, “one’s complete sentences are attempts, as often as not, to complete an incomplete self with words” (p. 175). Writing does not enable the writer to hammer down secure truth; writing enables the writer to explore possibilities of meaning. Writing is not

self-expression; writing is self-construction. Jasper Neel (1988) suggests that “the last thing apt to happen in writing is ‘self-discovery.’ Instead, what happens in writing is a forever becoming-present” (p. 124).

## VOWELS

*for Ted Aoki*

*with Ted I walk in the moment,  
a tangled line of metonymic moments,  
making the momentous story  
where moments are still and eternal*

always in motion, he lingers long  
in locations where he stands steady,  
sturdy, in the dizzy, always  
shape-shifting landscape of holes  
like a floating archipelago, best  
navigated by memory, and faith  
in the mysteries of the alphabet

in his words I am rendered  
pneumatic, with feet dangling  
in both the earth and the heart's  
imagining of poetic possibilities,  
still waiting for names

he holds the vowels that breathe  
life in our consonants, constantly  
ready to know the *I* in our writing,  
the metonymic wildness of *I*

he knows the messy texture  
of lived experiences, and follows  
the line of discipline to know  
the oblique, porous, capacious  
line that is no line

Ted lives in language, and  
language lives in Ted,  
drawing us to see what we  
overlook, focuses attention  
on tension, both tending  
and attending, throwing out  
lines, here and there, enamoured  
with the fecundity of conjunctions

reminds us that grammar, the letter,  
the law are chimerical, even comical,  
like an alchemist of gramarye,

transforms stone and water  
 into pigments for re-presenting  
 the world in words, always  
 both familiar and unfamiliar,  
 a seer who teaches us to see

*with Ted I walk in the moment,  
 a tangled line of metonymic moments,  
 making the momentous story  
 where moments are still and eternal*

## TWO

I can spend a whole lifetime  
 working on a single poem  
 because the poem is never  
 finished, only suspended till  
 the return, when, where ever.

Postmodernism **rejects totalizing narratives**. In all my writing, I am constantly aware that there is always a multiplicity of stories. In terms of autobiographical writing, I tell myself stories that are different from the stories I tell family and friends and strangers. I know my own stories only a little. How many stories do I live in dreams and the unconscious that I have no, or almost no, knowledge of? How many stories have I forgotten? How many stories have I repressed? Daily I live stories in the body and in the imagination. I am a character in the stories of many other people, as they are also participating in my stories. What are the stories that others tell about me? All I know with certainty is that my life does not represent a single, coherent story. Instead, I am actively engaged in numerous stories, and no single story will ever be more than a glimpse into the complexity of the diverse universe that I live in. Winterson (1995) asks: "Are real people fictions? We mostly understand ourselves through an endless series of stories told to ourselves by ourselves and others. The so-called facts of our individual worlds are highly coloured and arbitrary, facts that fit whatever fiction we have chosen to believe in" (p. 59). Therefore, she suggests that, "It may be that to understand ourselves as fictions, is to understand ourselves as fully as we can" (p. 60).

### LOOKOUT (for Anna)

like the beachstones that line  
 York Harbour I have memories  
 of you, my darling daughter,  
 beyond all counting, beyond  
 all alphabets and words

no book, not even a library of books,  
 could hold all the adventures

you have lived already,  
all written in the language  
of the heart's delights

in one of my favourite photos,  
long and vividly remembered,  
a sliver of the past seized in light,  
you are a toddler, in a back carrier

strapped securely to my back  
you bobbed up and down  
as we hiked a mountain  
to Joey's Lookout for a picnic

in the photo I hold the camera  
at arm's length, and our round faces  
fill the square of caught light,  
both of us are laughing, glad  
we have climbed a steep trail,  
glad to be together, glad to be  
sharing another adventure

we stand in the centre of a circle  
of sky, ocean, forest, and mountains  
that claims our hearts, and I am  
proud of you, my little daughter,  
who lives every day with  
an insatiable desire  
for the heart's delights

but when I search for the photo  
I can't find it, a fragment of fiction  
again, holding the good stories tight

### THREE

I seek the way in my poetry,  
the wisdom for living well  
in the language of longing  
where we name ourselves, where  
we know our long long being.

Postmodernism understands that the **subject is a construct that is always in process**, and therefore identity is always changing and flexible. As Ursula Kelly (1997) writes, "the attention to ambiguity, paradox, and difference – more complex and subtle renderings of experience—is libratory, in itself" (p. 51). In my writing, I am always composing, interrogating, revising and challenging my understanding of identities – my own as well as others. I am caught up in what Eagleton (1996) calls the "social dimension

of subjectivity" (p. 91). I am always writing myself and rewriting myself, even as I write and rewrite an understanding of the identities of people I know and meet and collaborate with, even as they, in turn, are writing themselves and one another and me. As Mills (1997) explains, "the process of finding a position for oneself within discourse is never fully achieved, but is rather one of constantly evaluating and considering one's position and, inevitably, constantly shifting one's perception of one's position and the wider discourse as a whole" (p. 97).

## CHERRY

I'm sitting in the lounge of the Regal Oriental Hotel  
 with a view of Hong Kong like a fireplace full of embers  
 after flying all day across the international date line  
 (left Vancouver yesterday to arrive today, lost a day  
 somewhere over the Pacific, and like most losses, will  
 likely forget to look for it on the way back) and Cherry  
 begins to sing, and you asked me how often I have fallen  
 in love, and I said, Once, I am always falling, and I didn't  
 want to sound facetious, flippant, frivolous, flatulent,  
 flirtatious (f-words everywhere, the poet's curse pokes  
 me like a hoe), since all I really wanted was to explain  
 how falling in love is like breathing, knowing lightly I am  
 alive, and Cherry says, What would you like me to play?  
 and I think, Cherry, play me, but of course I don't say that,  
 since I don't want to sound like a lecherous buffoon  
 or a lascivious bassoon with a base note like a drunk crazed  
 barroom bore with no more sense than a lottery machine  
 where the cherries never line up, and I recall the cherry on top  
 of the sundae I ate in Disneyland in July, sitting on Main Street,  
 bought with Tigger dollars in the Gibson Girl Ice Cream Parlor,  
 waiting for a parade while the cherry sank through cream  
 and ice cream and I didn't have the heart to eat the cherry  
 like a dollop of congealed blood and hope, the stem still intact,  
 and *Twin Peaks* Sherilyn Fenn's Audrey Horne once tied  
 a cherry stem in a reef knot with her tongue and teeth, and  
 that's how Cherry makes me feel, and I say in my best Bogart  
 impersonation, Play *Yesterday*, and Cherry's songbook is thicker  
 than *Gray's Anatomy* like all the songs in the world have been  
 gathered in one place, and I know all of them or none of them,  
 and Cherry sings, and I drink a glass of red wine, and Cherry's hair  
 is no longer Filipino black, but auburn, like hers, now faraway,  
 and I probably first fell in love with her hair, the way it flowed  
 like a river in autumn, full of fallen leaves, a red brick road  
 to another world, red ribbons tied in the air to show me the way  
 back, but when I turn, heart like a butane flame in a block of ice,  
 I can't see her, but know she is there, no erasure, only écriture,  
 scratches in a palimpsest that holds close all origins and traces  
 without end, sure only our story possesses me still since Cherry  
 in the lounge of the Regal Oriental Hotel in Kowloon City reminds



me of her, as if everything I write now propels me forward to a place  
I left long ago, never left, can't return, can't remember, won't forget

#### FOUR

Working on a single poem  
because the poem is never  
finished, only suspended till  
I can spend a whole lifetime  
in the return, when, where ever.

Postmodernism contests and complicates **the understanding of truth and fiction**. As Marshall (1992) suggests, "We give up the luxury of absolute Truths, choosing instead to put to work local and provisional truths" (p. 3). And Cameron (1986) explains: "Through language, we imagine everything and everyone, we invent everything and everyone, we remember everything and everyone – including ourselves. Insofar as experience is available for comment, insofar as it has meaning, insofar as it is present to us – immediately in front of us now – it is available only as fiction: *fingere* (to shape or to make)" (p. 71). For me this perspective is liberating. As a young man, I was sometimes enamoured with fundamentalist perspectives that claimed that truths were eternal, constant, unchanging. When I began finding my way as a writer, I learned quickly that writing does not allow me to pin truth to the wall. Instead, writing is always opening up new gaps and fissures for seeing the world in multiple ways. I no longer seek truths in my writing. Instead I seek truthfulness in the stories that I make up, the fictions that provide foundations for seeing and knowing and becoming. Stanley Grenz (1996) writes that "living in a postmodern society means inhabiting a film-like world – a realm in which truth and fiction merge. We look at the world in the same way we look at films, suspicious that what we see around us may in fact be illusion" (p. 33). In my experience, this way of living is full of hope and meaning and vitality. As Martin Amis (2000) acknowledges, "All writers know that the truth *is* in the fiction" (p. 28).

#### IF I BUMP INTO YOU IN WAL-MART

*when the longing is a long error,  
how can one still long for so long?  
(Barbara Cartland)*

If I bump into you in Wal-Mart,  
I will say, Hi, how are you?  
I guess. What else could I say?

Should I rehearse as I would rehearse  
for any urgent contingency?  
In case of fire, pull alarm.  
For an emergency, call 911.  
In the event of an earthquake,  
stand in a door jamb.

If a drowning person panics  
and clings to you, kick him  
in the groin.

Or perhaps I will run away (you know I can),  
just turn and run as fast as my middle-aged  
Ben Johnson legs will propel me, faster  
than a horse or a train or a speeding bullet.

Or perhaps I will be fixed like a mosquito mired  
in mucilage, Maxwell Smart stuck in instant cement  
(with no shoe phone for help), a guppy in Epson salts,  
transfixed like a zombie in *Night of the Living Dead*.

Or perhaps I will be somebody else, and contort  
my face like Jim Carrey or yank it off like Tom Cruise  
or imitate an accent or whistle Dolly Parton tunes  
or respond to a name like Dickie or Jim or Bob or Dave.

Or perhaps I will be stricken with catalepsy or epilepsy  
or narcolepsy or amnesia or consumption or glossolalia  
or soap opera afflictions that render me unfamiliar  
or heatstroke or cardiac arrest or at least heart-burn.

Or perhaps I will say, What are you doing here,  
with the conviction of muddleheaded epiphany, like  
I don't know you returned years ago, stayed, now  
live down the road in a whole story, evermore.

## FIVE

In my poetry I seek the way,  
to name ourselves where  
in the longing of language  
we know our long belonging,  
the wisdom for living well.

Postmodernism understands **discourse as personal and political**. Marshall (1992) explains helpfully: "The postmodern moment is an awareness of being-within, first, a language, and second, a particular historical, social, cultural framework" (p. 3). Though Eagleton (1996) argues that postmodernism is too little grounded in political, social and cultural agenda, that perspective can be turned on its head by simply acknowledging the ways that discourse is always personal and political, the ways that discourse always develops and works in contexts that extend far beyond any individual subject, and indeed hold all subjects in a network of relations. I agree with Kelly (1997) that from postmodern perspectives, "the importance of the subject as a central point of transformation is not lost but reinscribed with ... greater political potential" (p. 49).

## SCRIBBLED SUBJECTS

in the verdant Azores,  
a volcanic archipelago  
anchored in the Atlantic Ocean,  
an impertinent eruption  
from the centre of the earth,  
I heard a philosopher

who was rather beautiful  
(especially for a philosopher  
with blond hair and long legs  
in a meticulously cut black suit  
and lavender ice blouse  
like few scholars favour,  
no drab, dowdy bookworms,  
at least my keen preference)

with enough lava in her eyes  
to shrivel your heart, spewed  
her words with a TV evangelical  
preacher's scary conviction

the philosopher said,  
stories are not meant  
to pull us out of the world,  
but to reconcile us to the world

and I wanted to ask,  
where is the world?

the philosopher said,  
the danger of story-telling  
is the failure to look  
at the horrors of the world

and I wanted to ask,  
how can a story hide horror?

the philosopher said,  
stories are a search for revelry,  
the reprehensible narcissism  
of poetry lost in an evil world

and I wanted to ask,  
why is revelry unworldly?

and the philosopher cited  
Arendt, Benjamin, Camus,  
worked her way through the alphabet

with a Pentecostal pastor's passion  
for railing against revelry

but told no stories, not even  
an anecdote, knowing how  
the wild revelry of stories  
always refutes containment  
in the linguistic contortions  
of philosophers with words:  
bloodless, blonde, bland

and I asked,  
do you ever laugh?

I guess my question wasn't  
sufficiently philosophical,  
since the Azorean sun was suddenly  
tepid in her glare like a ray gun

and I'm still dabbing Ozonol ointment  
on the burning circles of my skin

## SIX

Because the poem is never  
finished, only suspended till  
the return, when, where ever,  
I can spend a whole lifetime  
working on a single poem.

Postmodernism promotes **understanding as fragmented and knowledge as partial**. Eagleton (1996) claims that "those who are privileged enough not to need to know, for whom there is nothing politically at stake in reasonably accurate cognition, have little to lose by proclaiming the virtues of undecidability" (p. 5). But this is a troublesome comment because Eagleton is making a claim that a privileged economic status includes a privilege to play with language and ideas. What is needed is a broader imagination about our roles in the world. Eagleton pontificates: "There is a thin line between claiming that totality is sublimely unrepresentable, and asserting that it doesn't exist" (p. 6). But while there might indeed be such a thin line, this does not mean that the first claim entails the second possibility.

I prefer to try on the usefulness of a concept before rejecting it forthright for its inadequacies. I agree with Marshall (1992) that "one thing that all this 'awareness' means is that as thinkers we need to hold in our minds a space for interpretations that are other than ours" (p. 188). I live in the world as a Christian believer. I have completed formal theological training, and I regularly participate in a local community of Christian believers. The former pastor of that community often referred to postmodernism as diametrically opposed to Christianity. He believed that postmodernism undermined the

truth-claims of Christian theology. But his views were not based on an extensive knowledge of postmodernism. In effect, he was parroting a dismissive view without really knowing what he was dismissing. Some Christians, and many others as well, dismiss postmodernism for claiming "to know only one thing: the impossibility of knowing" (Grenz, 1996, p. 121). But postmodernism does not claim a cynical or hopeless agnosticism; instead postmodernism promotes openness and flexibility in truth-seeking. The postmodern approach acknowledges that none of us knows the whole story, and that all our stories are parts of an evolving network of knowing and not-knowing that comprise our living journeys in language and discourse.

## VOLUPTUOUS

After five years as a monk on a mountain top

Leonard Cohen said:

*Religion is my favorite hobby.  
It's deep and voluptuous. Nothing  
is comparable to the delight  
you get. Apart from courting.*

And Hugh Hefner, papa voluptuary of the catholic court of sexual liberation, vital again with Viagra, bursting like Niagara, is a voracious septuagenarian squiring a voluminous bevy of buxom playmates.

And for a quarter century the Pope has railed against sex outside procreation for Rome's advantage, like a volcanologist intent on corking the vulgar vortex of pleasure that erupts in the body with a vulture's screech.

And Augustine knew the hole in the heart, God alone can fill, a votary who voted for God after a long long time lost in the valley of epicurean epiphanies with enticing smiles he could never forget, other echoes of vocation.

And Heloise the Abbess wanted Abelard, and only Abelard, but couldn't have him, and so settled for God with grudging resignation, but never forgot Abelard's vivid voice calling out prayers of adoration for Heloise.

And Anglicans, humourless ever since the shame of King Henry's courting, are everywhere entertaining voltaic schism before they acknowledge gay courting, convinced two men kissing will spell a virulent voodoo.

And evangelists named Jim or Jimmy (never James), always voluble and volatile, know religion and courting are one, but still weep a crock of crocodile tears on TV because voluptuous religion is a void for donations.

And at least one president revelled in the luxuries  
of contraband Cuban cigars and Saturday night vulva worship  
followed by the pleasures of Sunday morning vows  
complete with paparazzi and an organ voluntary.

And Pastor Seymour, after two decades, stopped writing  
his sermon. God doesn't love me anymore. I don't love  
my wife anymore. I need somebody else to love me.  
And found her on the Internet where prayers are answered.

And perhaps the whole lusty affair should be sent to Judge  
Judy's court where the law reigns with a thin sharp face  
and a scathing confidence in the separation of prose and poetry.  
Judge Judy would fine Leonard Cohen for inadequate rhymes.

## SEVEN

In my poetry I seek the way,  
working on a single poem  
in the longing of language  
because the poem is never  
finished, only suspended.

Postmodernism promotes **critique, interrogation, and resisting closure**. As Kelly (1997) proposes, "seizing the importance of re-presenting and re-writing our selves as we reconstruct our visions of world communities entails deconstructing the stories we tell (of) ourselves and the desires that inform them" (p. 49). Postmodernism promotes a multiplicity of views and diverse interpretations. Eagleton (1996) complains that "grasping the shape of a totality requires some tiresomely rigorous thought, which is one reason why those who don't need to do it can revel in ambiguity and indeterminacy" (p. 12). But I claim simply that no one can grasp the shape of a totality. That doesn't mean we can't try, but a little humility is needed in the process. Like Eagleton, Grenz (1996) claims that "the postmodern understanding of truth leads postmoderns to be less concerned than their forebears to think systematically or logically" (p. 15). This is a nonsensical comment. The real problem is whose systems of inquiry and whose strategies of logic are being used to think.

### CROSS-WORD PUZZLE (*York Harbour, May 13, 2004*)

in this still sacred place of solitude on the edge  
of the North Atlantic we live each day with sturdy  
rhythms and hold one another in the heart's light.

yesterday you raked autumn hay in the backyard,  
while I took a respite from revisions to a slow essay,  
and through the patio door watched you long.

on this four-year anniversary since we married,  
again, and added another surprise twist to our story,  
sewn with jagged and joyful seams, we are here.

we wear two wedding bands, the past, and more past,  
reaching into the eager present and future, nothing  
remembered, nothing forgotten, all stored, restored.

we have turned a circle of seasons, and though  
we will never leave this place, we know, too,  
we will never return since all turns are new, always.

today we biked four hours, a scribbled, scrawled loop  
on a trail built for caribou and ATV's, on mud paths  
our legs couldn't hold, and you took more risks than me.

you shot down hills like somersaults, paused to photograph  
my descent, laughed with my chasing you over shards  
of rock, washouts, jagged ruts in the marsh of tangled roots.

our stories intersect like words in a crossword puzzle,  
letters shared, vertical and horizontal lines woven  
into a quilt of many colours to keep us in any season.

we stopped at Sheppard's Grocery in Lark Harbour  
to buy champagne, and tonight we will celebrate our  
long lasting love, elastic even, while watching *Survivor*.

## EIGHT

The wisdom for living well  
is to name ourselves where  
we know our long belonging  
in the return, when, where ever,  
I can spend a whole lifetime.

Postmodernism promotes **text and intertextuality**. In writing I enter into an intertextual relationship with a discourse community. I agree with Derrida's (1981) observation that "above all it is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write, the 'books' in whose margins and between whose lines I mark out and read a text simultaneously almost identical and entirely other" (p. 4). I know that all my writing is part of a vast network of texts, and I know that nothing I write is singularly original, even at the same time that I seek to push the limits of language and genre and conventions. As Rasula and McCaffery (1998) write: "Language bears a reliable profile of the repeated and the constant but offers too a contrary pull toward variety, novelty, and transgression. The very ability to actively transpose seems to presuppose an agile system of combinatory units" (p. 199). And I know "the self does not exist in isolation" (Griffin, 1995, p. 50) because identity is

“less an assertion of independence than an experience of interdependence” (Griffin, 1995, p. 91). I especially resonate with Foucault’s (1990) conviction: “When language arrives at its own edge, what it finds is not a positivity that contradicts it, but the void that will efface it. Into that void it must go, consenting to come undone in the rumbling, in the immediate negation of what it says, in a silence that is not the intimacy of a secret but a pure outside where words endlessly unravel” (p. 22).

EX

I’m late, she said, because  
I had to bury the ex

with her Belfast accent  
I thought she said,  
bury the axe

and almost responded,  
with a pastor’s calm demeanour,  
forgiveness is healthy

but realized she meant  
the ex-wife of her new husband  
who sobbed how evil he’d been

since his first wife died terribly  
(not that death can be anything else)  
with a tumour that broke her heart

and I thought she said a rumour  
broke her heart, and in the midst  
of death and grief, could only think

about humour like a crazed wheel  
drawing rosettes, writing life  
like a Spirograph in circles

and swirls with the art  
of mathematics if only  
you can live long enough

to learn how a fixed point  
on a circle rolls a straight line  
to scribe a cycloid

like Cyclops with his one eye  
poked out by Ulysses,  
screaming blind in circles

and I knew anew why,



as a young man, I left seminary  
prematurely, just in time

## NINE

In the longing of language  
I work a single poem, till  
the return, when, where ever,  
suspended only because  
the poem is never finished.

Postmodernism promotes **the subject as embodied**. According to Eagleton

(1996), "the postmodern subject, unlike its Cartesian ancestor, is one whose body is integral to its identity" (p. 69). And Grenz (1996) understands that "postmoderns look beyond reason to nonrational ways of knowing, conferring heightened status on the emotions and intuition" (p. 14). In an intriguing perspective, Rasula and McCaffery (1998) claim that "we don't have to mean when we speak: language makes meanings for us. This is the glossolalian given. It is we who interject, extrude, and precipitate its disarray. We are language somatized" (p. 130). And so my poetry is often personal, autobiographical, located in the quotidian experience of every day. Above all, I locate my poetry in experiences of the body because my sense of knowledge and identity, my interrelationships with others, my understanding of subjectivity are all caught up in language and living in the corporeality of the body. I am a living body, a writing body, a teaching body, a knowing and being and becoming body.

## FIRE PIT

in the first light of winter morning,  
drawn still, faint, tight in York Harbour,  
I woke reluctantly to take the garbage out,  
and face once more the weekly contest  
with cunning crows, spied through sheer  
curtains, ready to hurl curses and threats,  
not glad, when they plunge like kamikaze  
pilots, focused solely on the target,  
my Glad green garbage bags

last week the crows took advantage  
of my need to pee and successfully  
attacked, and I had to tramp out  
in the cool bitterness again to pick up  
the garbage, now strewn along  
the shoulder of the highway,  
and found scraps of poems, drafts  
I scribbled during the week, littered  
here and there, crumpled reminders

that like many editors, the crows were  
obviously not impressed with my poems

a little later Lana and I, known in town  
as the joggers, apparently the only ones,  
ran around the harbour, waved to Dave  
the mayor who is always here and there,  
seems everywhere, full of laughs and stories  
and plans, and saw Glenda open her store  
where she bakes bread and cookies like  
old-fashioned moms once baked, before  
Tim Horton's and Dominion Superstore,  
and a golden Lab leaped out of his yard  
and chased us with raucous barks, clearly  
glad for companions on this idle morning

I passed much of the day with poetry,  
others and mine, letting words seep into  
my body like night frost in morning stone,  
and in the late November afternoon,  
Lana and I cleaned out an old fire pit  
in the backyard near the cliff hanging  
over the ocean, found the pit by poking  
around in the tall grass and tangled  
alders, discovered a buried ring of rocks,  
and like archaeologists conjured images  
of a past, at least a few years old,  
recalled traces of the people who lived  
here before us, people we know nothing  
about, just as the people who move in  
next year will know nothing about us,  
except in the traces we leave, likely  
indecipherable, since who will ever  
know we cleared the fire pit because

Aaron and Anna and Nicholas are coming  
from Vancouver soon, and we will gather  
on the eve of Christmas for a wiener roast  
like we have often convened at Garry Point  
on the Gulf of Georgia, faraway, our lives  
written in the rhythms of reiteration

and while no crows have yet scrutinized  
these scraps scribed in the quotidian, they  
are a quotient of words I leave so others who  
come after us will find a bracelet of beachstones  
reclaimed by Lana and me in a November  
afternoon, where in late December snowlight  
and firelight, we roasted hot dogs with our  
children, more traces of our presence, the places  
where together we have tarried a little while

## TEN

I can spend a whole lifetime  
 in my poetry, seeking the way,  
 the wisdom for living well,  
 to name ourselves, to be, where  
 we know our long longing.

Postmodernism promotes **the local as opposed to the universal**. Instead of focusing on metanarratives to explain and construct a sense of universal understanding of experience in the earth, postmodernism focuses on local narratives. Grenz (1996) notes that while “scholars disagree among themselves as to what postmodernism involves,” they have still reached a consensus that “this phenomenon marks the end of a single, universal worldview. The postmodern ethos resists unified, all-encompassing, and universally valid explanations. It replaces these with a respect for difference and a celebration of the local and particular at the expense of the universal” (pp. 11-12). Postmodernism simply acknowledges the complexity of the world.

For many years, I have been writing autobiographical poetry about growing up on Lynch's Lane in Corner Brook, Newfoundland. So far, I have published two books of poems, and a third titled *Come-by-chance* will be published soon, and I now acknowledge that the stories of my backyard are inexhaustible. I write about people and experiences that I never wrote about in school where I tried to mimic the writing I read in class anthologies. For many years I heard a persistent voice of caution that it is not sufficient to write about ordinary people, places, emotions and experiences. It took me a long time to know the extraordinary in the ordinary. In *Pedagogy of the heart*, published posthumously in 1997, Paulo Freire acknowledges from the perspective of a long life nearing its end that his childhood backyard was a space connected to many spaces:

My childhood backyard has been unveiling itself to many other spaces – spaces that are not necessarily other yards. Spaces where this man of today sees the child of yesterday in himself and learns to see better what he had seen before. To see again what had already been seen before always implies seeing angles that were not perceived before. Thus, a posterior view of the world can be done in a more critical, less naïve, and more rigorous way (p. 38).

In my poetry I seek to know the spaces of my childhood backyard, and how this specific geographical space represents a location for locution in the bigger world because Freire encourages me that “the more rooted I am in my location, the more I extend myself to other places so as to become a citizen of the world. No one becomes local from a universal location” (1997, p. 39).

## CROQUET

Mel Mercer built the first patio in Humber East,  
 a rectangle of concrete slabs no bigger  
 than a family cemetery plot, and he built  
 the first barbecue, too, an oil drum cut in half,  
 filled with charcoal briquettes, and all summer  
 long he called the neighbours together  
 to sip Scotch and croon with Perry Como  
 and eat tenderloin steak wrapped in bacon.

Billy Mercer sat on his verandah in the dark,  
 rocked in a white wicker chair, and watched  
 the parties on Mel Mercer's patio, more  
 fun than anything on CBC, he said. Even  
 though Mel Mercer always waved, Join us,  
 Billy Mercer wanted only to watch, knowing  
 the see-saw balance between nephew and uncle  
 augured accurately the alignment of planets.

But everything changed the forest fire summer  
 Carrie counted her Gold Stamps from Coleman's  
 where every payday she picked up groceries  
 and burned a Gold Stamp shopping spree  
 like a winter-crazed prospector across the catalogue:  
 lawn chairs, plastic tumblers, a card table.  
 Everything we wanted Carrie got with Gold Stamps,  
 till there was nothing left to get except a croquet set.

A few times I had seen croquet played on TV,  
 aristocratic, civilized, genteel, British, but  
 on Lynch's Lane with no level yard for croquet,  
 we had to pound the wooden balls up the hill,  
 nudge them down the hill through stubbles of grass,  
 and never smack the balls into Skipper's rows  
 of potatoes. Everything connected, like one ball  
 conking another, Carrie's croquet convened chaos.

Day after day Billy Mercer watched us play croquet.  
 So his daughter bought him a set at Canadian Tire, but  
 Billy Mercer wanted what no one on Lynch's Lane had:  
 a level front yard like a TV suburban manicured lawn.  
 He worked out the mathematics (asked to help, I  
 nodded at his sketches with my grade nine geometry)  
 of moving the back yard to the front yard, and excavated  
 and dumped tons of clay and rock, a new Antaeus.

Mel Mercer looked out his kitchen window  
 and saw a wall of grass and gravel like a tsunami  
 poised to crash on his patio. Angry hot, he told  
 anyone who would listen, some who wouldn't, all

the stories best kept between uncles and nephews,  
 stories bumped stories, the hard crack of croquet balls  
 caught in the slate gray sky over Humber East, echoes  
 off a patio, verandah, yard, now always winter empty.

## ELEVEN

I seek the way in poetry,  
 living wisdom for wellness  
 in the language of longing  
 where naming ourselves  
 is knowing our long belonging.

Postmodernism promotes **community based on diversity**. The notion of unity in community has an enduring appeal, but out of my lifetime of active participation in many communities (scholastic, academic, rural, urban, spiritual, athletic, industrial, familial), I now interrogate conceptions of unity in community. William Corlett (1989) "attempts to celebrate both community and difference" (p. 6). Corlett observes that "bringing unity seems always to require silencing the so-called parts that do not fit the holistic vision, and I want no part of that" (p. 6). Instead Corlett celebrates "the infinite difference of fellow beings" in community without unity (p. 22). For Corlett, "to live extravagantly is to give gifts freely, to cultivate one's gifts in all directions" (p. 211).

Teachers and students need to embrace Corlett's vision as they revel together in story-making that celebrates both community and difference, as they revel in the explosion of stories, common and unique, that frame and structure our lived experiences. Therefore, I promote a conception of community that is not based on a counterproductive emphasis on unity. As Suzanne de Castell (1994) observes, "morals, values, beliefs, language and ...literacy are...created and sustained in communities. They are not otherwise either possible or meaningful" (p. 62). De Castell adds,

We are not, except in the most abstract and artificial of senses, ever simply individuals. We are concretely, always, embedded in differentially constraining and enabling social relations; what happens to us, what we are allowed to or allow ourselves to learn, and most important of all, what that learning is good for, is not a function of who we are as individuals, but of who we are in social relations of membership in particular communities (p. 63).

As Haase and Large (2001) note, "the human community rests on communication by way of language" (p. 98) and "we become individuals by being inserted into this community of language. Consequently, such linguistic communication makes up the very nature of our existence" (p. 98).

In my teaching practice I have been profoundly influenced by Ted Aoki (Anon, 1994), who understands that "living in the spaces is what teaching is" (p. 10). For Aoki "the important thing is to understand that if in my class I have 20 students, then there are 21 interspaces between me and students. These interspaces are spaces of possibilities. So

what we allow to happen, what can be constituted and reconstituted in those interspaces is what we mean by life in the classroom" (p. 10). Of course there are also interspaces between each student and all the others, contributing to an intricate network of lines and spaces of connection and communication, perhaps without end.

## RHIZOME

Newfoundland is faraway  
and Lynch's Lane lingers

in imagination and poetry,  
bulldozed daisies of memory,

but last night my mother called  
with more stories:

Cindy Mercer, my third or fourth cousin perhaps,  
but definitely a Mercer like my grandmother and mother,

met a man through the Internet,  
moved to Australia and married him

while Cindy Mercer's father said,  
Nice as you could meet anywhere,

like there was some doubt, some  
need to defend Australian niceness,

and in an April morning with a muffled breath  
of spring, Sal Mercer, who never spent a cent,

hiked the Heights to the new Wal-Mart  
but collapsed as the automatic doors opened,

gone before the ambulance arrived, almost  
nine decades of stories, one of the few left,

except there are Mercers everywhere

married in Australia  
on their way to Wal-Mart  
seeking poems in British Columbia

like holograms, the part in the whole,  
rhizome connections in the earth,

the sheer certitude of lives  
spelling out in fractal inevitability

A whole lifetime spent on  
 the workings of a single poem  
 never finished, only suspended  
 till the poem returns where,  
 when ever because.

## REFERENCES

- Amis, M. (2000). *Experience*. New York: Hyperion.
- Anon. (1994). Interview with Ted Aoki. *Teacher*, 6(7), 10.
- Cameron, B. (1986). *John Metcalf*. Boston: Twayne.
- Chambers, C., Dwayne, D., & Hasebe-Ludt, E. (2002). Metissage. *Educational Insights*, 7(2) Retrieved September 11, 2006 from <http://ccfi.educ.ubc.ca/publication/insights/v07n02/toc.html>.
- Corlett, W. (1989). *Community without unity: A politics of Derridian extravagance*. Durham: Duke UP.
- Culler, J. (1975). *Structuralist poetics: Structuralism, linguistics, and the study of literature*. Ithaca: Cornell UP.
- De Castell, S. (1994). Literacy as social relation, *Research Forum*. 12, 59-64.
- Derrida, J. (1981). *Positions* (A. Bass, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Eagleton, T. (1996). *The illusions of postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *Maurice Blanchot: The thought from outside* (B. Massumi, Trans.). New York: Zone Books.
- Freire, P. (1997). *Pedagogy of the heart* (D. Macedo & A. Oliveira, Trans.). New York: Continuum.
- Grenz, S. (1996). *A primer on postmodernism*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing.
- Griffin, S. (1995). *The eros of everyday life: Essays on ecology, gender and society*. New York: Doubleday.
- Haase, U., & Large, W. (2001). *Maurice Blanchot*. London: Routledge.
- Kelly, U. (1997). *Schooling desire: Literacy, cultural politics, and pedagogy*. New York: Routledge.
- LeClair, T. (1983). Interview with William Gass. In T. LeClair & L. McCaffery (Eds.). *Anything can happen: Interviews with contemporary American novelists* (pp. 152-175). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Leggo, C. (1994). *Growing up perpendicular on the side of a hill*. St. John's: Killick Press.
- Leggo, C. (1999). *View from my mother's house*. St. John's: Killick Press.
- Marshall, B. (1992). *Teaching the postmodern: Fiction and theory*. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, S. (1997). *Discourse*. London: Routledge.
- Neel, J. (1988). *Plato, Derrida, and writing*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP.
- Rasula, J., & McCaffery, S. (Eds.). (1998). *Imagining language: An anthology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Winterson, J. (1995). *Art objects: Essays on ecstasy and effrontery*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada.

Manuscript received: May 5, 2006  
Revision received: June 25, 2006  
Accepted: September 14, 2006



Copyright of *English Teaching: Practice & Critique* is the property of University of Waikato and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.