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Queering the shadows: performativity in literary and creative writing studies

Abstract:

As a creative writer whose work draws upon two academic disciplines (literature and Chinese studies), I feel it is critical to ask: Why do certain theoretical texts and literary works seem to act as more useful pedagogical devices for students of creative writing than others? In this paper, I examine the performative process involved in the creation of texts for the disciplines of both creative writing and literature studies, with the intent of expanding the dialogue between these two fields. In exploring several queer and feminist texts, as well as an article on queer Taiwanese theory entitled ‘Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics,’ by Jen-peng Liu and Ding Naifei, that inspired a creative breakthrough in my own work, this paper attempts to discover why some theoretical works open creative channels for writing practitioners, while others seemingly do not. The framework for this paper is informed by foundational texts that investigate language’s representational qualities, including Trinh Minh-ha’s body of work. In addition, through a close reading of ‘Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics’ (the text that inspired my creative breakthrough), I argue that representation is critical in allowing texts to enact (in form) what they teach (in content). I also discuss the implications of examining the double layering of texts—both at the level of content and form—and how, in reading texts for their performative nature, one can also uncover the inherent pedagogical project of the text as well as open the possibilities for communication and shared scholarship between the fields of literary studies and creative writing.

Keywords:

Performance Theory—Creative Writing—Queer Studies—Critical Theory

The rewrite of my novel had stalled. Writer's block mounted. I needed a creative breakthrough. An inspiration. Quite unexpectedly, this creative epiphany would come in the form of a graduate seminar on 'Queer Chinese Cultures' at the University of California, San Diego. In the course taught by a Professor of Literature, we read a variety of theoretical works, including 'Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics' by Liu Jen-peng and Ding Naifei, literary studies academics in Taiwan. The Liu and Ding article explores the epistemology of reticence as tolerance in the Taiwanese context, particularly as it applies to queer relations. The two authors, in their examination of the popular queer Taiwanese novel *The Unfilial Daughter*, also utilize a Daoist text written by the philosopher Zhuangzi in order to exemplify their theoretical and philosophical stance on the issue of reticence, drawing a connection between a discussion of shadow and penumbra to queer existence and scholarship in Taiwan. Somehow, despite this text's tangential relationship to my work, the exegetical discussion of shadow and penumbra became the necessary philosophical spark to propel my novel rewrite forward, allowing my writing to open to a new, more complex dimension; not only did I understand my characters and their story better (about the inevitable colliding of Chinese and American cultures), I also understood the best way in which to frame this story, remaining aware of the peripheral, perhaps 'reticent' narratives involved in the written form.

That a heavily theorized academic text about literature and queer theory in Taiwan could work so well in tandem with my own creative process surprised and excited me. Never before had this happened in my creative process, despite my background in Chinese cultural studies and creative writing. I wondered: How could an academic text so deeply tied to literary theory and queer theory inspire a creative breakthrough on a novel with no connection to queer themes? Was there something about the Liu and Ding text that worked on a creative level? What was happening in this particular text that allowed it to open to performative possibilities, so closely mirroring the creative process I was undertaking as a fiction writer? And finally, if we are to teach and examine literary texts for their 'performative' natures, in particular their ability to mirror both form and content simultaneously, does this open the possibility for an enhanced conversation between creative writing and literary studies pedagogies?

This experience inspired me to examine the performative process involved in the creation of texts for the disciplines of both creative writing and literature, with the intent of opening the possibility of dialogue between these two fields. This paper's argument is framed by theoretical texts that examine both the problematics of, and potential for, language's representational qualities, especially as it pertains to the relationship between form and content in literature. As Liu and Ding's work on queer theory in Taiwan has been informed by the queer theoretical texts that examine language's representational problematics and potential, I will first touch upon queer theory's relationship with performativity, surveying scholarship on the subject by Judith Butler, J.L. Austin, Eve Sedgwick, and John Searle. I will also utilize Trinh Minh-Ha's body of work to examine its relationship with performance as well as its examination of 'The Other,' a fascination in queer theory as well as creative writing texts. Finally, I follow this discussion with a close reading of the Liu and Ding article

in question, particularly examining how its performative nature worked to inspire my own creative process.

In this examination of the performative nature of both critical and creative texts, I will offer suggestions for pedagogical conversations between the fields of literary studies and creative writing. As a writer whose work draws upon two academic disciplines, I feel it is critical to ask why certain theoretical texts and literary works seem to act as more useful pedagogical devices for students of creative writing. At the heart of my investigation is the role of performance in theoretical texts, especially in regards to how performativity relates to ideas of form and content. Performance plays a critical role in attempts at knowledge production in both theory and creative works. Queer theoretical texts as well as texts examining ‘The Other,’ such as Trinh’s, potentially because of their questions of both identity and representation, inherently work more closely to the site of knowledge production and text performativity. In understanding and investigating this underlying ‘nature’ of the text, and the author’s relationship with it, it is my hope that we can make deeper connections between literary studies and its friend, creative writing.

Problems of Representation: Language, Queer Theory, and ‘The Other’

Questions of representation and the problematics of representation in the written word are rooted in the field of philosophy of language. There has been much scholarship devoted to the philosophy of language (*read: not linguistics*), including John Searle’s essay *Speech Acts*, which hypothesizes that ‘speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior’ (Searle 1992: 22). Searle was greatly influenced by J.L. Austin (*ibid.*: 19), who was also in the philosophic camp looking beyond the descriptive nature of language and instead at ‘performative utterance’ (Austin 2009: 9). Likewise, philosophy of language asks how language itself interacts with the lived world. At its root is the investigation of the connection between form and meaning, much in the way that Derrida in *Writing and Difference* describes structuralism’s orientation towards criticism as ‘meaning rethought as form; and structure [as] the *formal* unity of form and meaning’ (Derrida 1978: 5). The relationship between the performativity of language and the producer of that language (the ‘author’) is a critical element in this field. As Derrida (1978: 65) explains:

...the book is indeed the subject of the poet, the speaking and knowing being who *in* the book writes *on* the book. This movement through which the book, *articulated* by the voice of the poet, is folded and bound to itself, the movement through which the book becomes a subject in itself and for itself, is not critical or speculative reflection, but is, first of all, poetry and history. For in its representation of itself the subject is shattered and opened. Writing is itself written, but also ruined, made into an abyss, in its own representation. Thus, within this book, which infinitely reflects itself and which develops as a painful questioning of its own possibility, the form of the book represents itself.

At the heart of the act of writing is the author’s ability to create—a creation which also gives rise to knowledge production. That the act of writing can be a source of knowledge and also activism is central to queer theory, particularly queer theory’s

project of representation. Judith Butler furthers the discussion of the performative nature of language in *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Here, Butler examines ‘language acts’ (Butler 1997: 1) as well as the power language has, even on one’s own physical well-being (ibid: 5). Butler writes (ibid: 8),

We do things with language, produce effects with language, and we do things to language, but language is also the thing that we do. Language is a name for our doing: both ‘what’ we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the act and its consequences.

There is, in these readings of language, the idea of agency—both of language itself and of the producer of language. In this, the performance of a text holds much power: ‘If performativity requires a power to effect or enact what one names, then who will be the ‘one’ with such a power, and how will such a power be thought?’ (Butler 1997: 49). This fixation with the power behind speech acts is equally attractive to Eve Sedgwick, who writes, in discussing her own work: ‘one characteristic of the readings in [*Epistemology of the Closet*] is to attend to performative aspects of texts, and to what are often blandly called their ‘reader relations’, sites of definitional creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular institutional circumstances’ (Sedgwick 1991: 3). Reaching beyond what the words of a particular text ‘signify’, Sedgwick, like Butler, aims ‘repeatedly to ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially *mean*’ (ibid.: 27). This methodology for examining a text is critical in my close reading of Liu and Ding’s article and is also a useful method by which to connect literary theory and creative writing pedagogy by examining both form and content—even of texts previously predisposed to literary studies curricula and potentially exempt from such analyses.

Trinh Minh Ha’s *Woman, Native, Other* also charts a similar path in regards to its relationship between language and representation. As Trinh writes of the written product: ‘The structure [of writing] is therefore not something given, entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person’s way of handling realities, here narratives’ (Trinh 1989: 141). Similarly, in her writing, Trinh readily acknowledges her position in relationship with both the text and the subjects of her analysis: ‘In writing close to the other of the other, I can only choose to maintain a self-reflexively critical relationship toward the material, a relationship that defines both the subject written and the writing subject, undoing the I while asking ‘what do I want wanting to know you or me?’’ (ibid.: 76). Trinh’s clearly-delineated understanding of the performativity of her text is reflected in her writing’s often collaged and seemingly random structure, one that ‘is not accidental’ but that ‘invokes the speech of the Other by addressing story telling in a non-Western context where all the ends are loose ends and where theory can be picked up and dropped at will’ (Rappaport 1995: 100). Likewise, in Trinh’s filmmaking, she employs a similar technique, often interweaving citations from philosophers with quotes from her anthropological subjects as well as her own perspective (Trinh 1992). Interviews are equally important to her art—in Trinh’s film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, she uses her own interviews (which others conducted of her) to stage film performances. Then, in her written work *Cinema Interval*, she again utilizes interviews, along with

film scripts and photographs, to illustrate how intervals (breaks) in film and writing can elucidate the ‘threshold of representation and communication’ (Trinh 1999: xiii). In the entirety of her work, Trinh enacts a ‘reflexive performative’ (Rappaport 1995: 102) as she attempts to write and represent the post-modern, post-colonial story of women, the native, the Other, and above all, the writer him/herself. In doing so, Trinh, like so many of her predecessors who were doubly aware of the performative as well as knowledge-producing potential of writing, has created a body of work that enacts its subject matter in the most pedagogical manner.

Penumbra Questions Shadow, Author Questions Text

With this ‘shadow’ of the theory of performance framing us, I turn to the Liu and Ding article with the intention of discovering why the text’s discussion of Taiwanese queer reticence could have the power of opening up new understandings of my own creative process. Critical to reaching this point is to ask: How is Taiwanese queer reticence represented in this text and how does this representation become performative?

To begin, it is useful to understand how the concept of ‘queering’ can be applied to as yet unconnected academic disciplines and pedagogical frameworks. For example, Helen Leung finds the definition of ‘queer’ to be particularly useful in her examination of Hong Kong cultural productions. She writes, ‘... “queer” provides me with an analytical framework to look for what denaturalizes, disrupts, or resignifies the relation conventionally drawn between gendered embodiments, erotic desire, and sexual identities’ (Leung 2008: 2). Leung elaborates upon this by further questioning the ability to tell ‘the story’ of Hong Kong. Like in a work of fiction, ‘representational pressure’ (ibid.: 6) constantly frames narrative construction for theoretical texts. For Leung, this pressure is tactfully handled in her framing of her work within the confines of a ‘preoccupation of representation (or more precisely, with the unrepresentable)’ (ibid.: 5), and she highlights this preoccupation within a broader range of Hong Kong cultural studies.

Like for Leung, this representational and performative pressure is evident in the Liu and Ding text, particularly in the way in which the authors use the metaphorical example of ‘shadow and penumbra’ in order to represent their philosophical and theoretical stance on queer Taiwanese studies. Because Liu and Ding’s work, aptly titled ‘Reticent Poetics, Queer Politics’, examines how ‘deviant’ sexualities in Taiwanese literature are kept ‘in the realm of ghosts and *wangliang*’ (*wangliang* meaning ‘penumbrae’ in Mandarin) (Liu and Ding 2005: 30), the paper becomes not only a ‘descriptive analysis of certain effects of homophobia, but also an enactment of exactly the opposite of the ‘reticence’ with which it is preoccupied. Instead, Liu and Ding’s work enacts a ‘coming out’ against the ‘reticent shadowy homophobic forces’ (ibid.) it strives to unearth through its close reading of *The Unfilial Daughter*, a popular Taiwanese lesbian coming of age story. Reticence, as Liu and Ding discuss, is a part of the pantheon of ‘“traditional” poetics-aesthetics’ and is therefore linked to Taiwanese literary production and critical literary theory. The authors also establish an early connection between reticence in literature and reticence in queer Taiwanese

politics (ibid.: 33), highlighting their understanding of the political nature of their own work and their acting 'out' against reticence (and exposing of reticence, allowing it to 'come out') as a politicized act as well.

Liu and Ding utilize their discussion of penumbra (also known as the shadow of shadow) in order to 'enact' their own understanding of the way in which reticence functions in not only queer Taiwanese literature, but also queer Taiwanese theory. As they write, 'Not only does reticence produce shadows, but there is also the nearly indiscernible shadow of a shadow, which is a 'shade' (*wangliang*)' (ibid.: 33). After their close reading of *The Unfilial Daughter*, in which Liu and Ding seek the 'meaning' and 'reticence' of the text, the authors do not elaborate upon their own article's abrupt shift from a close structural analysis of the novel, to a rather lengthy quotation of a Daoist fable by Zhuangzi. Rather, Liu and Ding merely state the following before launching into a section devoted entirely to the fable's preoccupation with shadow and penumbra: 'Isn't it time to forge another paradigm, other models of thinking, acting and feeling enabling and empowering non-reticent acts and feelings, allowing non-reticent lives to articulate the challenging legitimacy of their spaces?' (ibid.: 49). From here, Liu and Ding cite the Daoist fable that, in their words, 'explicates a philosophical thought by way of the question-answer between penumbræ and shadow' (ibid.: 50). Their discussion highlights, without explicitly linking the text to their overarching theme of reticence in queer Taiwanese culture, how 'penumbra [is]... seen as not having character(istics) while [its] form-substance cannot be outlined' (ibid.). Further, they state that penumbræ 'remain in the margin of shadow where people cannot see them, stealing a life' (ibid.). In the Daoist fable, as Liu and Ding cite, it is penumbra who questions shadow repeatedly, ultimately frustrating shadow so much so that shadow notes that it is only 'dependent on the substance from which [it] is thrown' much like penumbra itself is dependent upon shadow (ibid.). In my reading of this text, I found myself questioning: Who is substance in queer Taiwan? And furthermore, what is substance in the act of writing?

As occurs in the fable, the act of questioning is central to reformulating the 'substance' of a text. In the case of Liu and Ding's work, penumbra's questions function to illustrate how 'the many effects of homophobic forces, like shadow in Zhuangzi's fable, must be questioned' while also 'the answers must... be read anew, rethought, so that that which is reticent might be formulated and spoken' (ibid.: 51). Indeed, in allowing penumbra to speak for them, thus enacting the political and performative project inherent in the Liu and Ding text, the authors have given the reader a guidebook to follow: *as shadow does, so we hope you (reader) and Taiwanese culture to do*, their instructions would likely state. But to speak imperatives is not the most productive method for teaching a lesson. Instead, lessons are told in stories, and therefore are implicit in the fable Liu and Deng retell in which penumbra bases itself upon shadow and thus upon substance (in writing, this act comes in the representative qualities of language itself). In other words, the performative nature of a text is that which points beyond the content, beyond even the signifiers of language, and instead to something greater that lurks beneath: the pedagogical nature of the text. By doing so, performative texts allow creative practitioners access to a deeper understanding of writing's instructive and

transformational power. As the character Venn says in Delany's *Tales of Neveryon*: 'And of course I haven't told you what I'm trying to tell you about. No, not at all. I have just given you an example of it' (Delaney 1993: 88). The best texts, even those in literary studies, do not instruct merely by way of blunt direction, but also, and perhaps more successfully, through the written form's performative and exemplary potential.

In Conclusion: Prospects for 'Pedagogical Performance' ¹

The Liu and Ding article is just one example which, when read not only for its content but also its form, points beyond the text to a greater lesson meant to be taught. In my research on this subject, I found a number of other texts, especially in the realm of Chinese queer theory, which could work equally well for the purposes of a close study of their performativity. First, Hongwei Bao's article, 'Digital Video Action: Narrating History, Memory and Trauma', through its examination of queer Chinese film, enacts a political agenda on par with the theoretical stance it espouses (Walter Benjamin's) while simultaneously charting the author's own relationship with queer Chinese film. Secondly, a study of queer Hong Kong film by Olivia Khoo, 'The Ground Beneath Her Feet,' through its own written form, exemplifies the 'movement' underpinning Hong Kong's first lesbian film. It is interesting to note that while Bao and Khoo take film as their central object of study and their critical texts enact the performativity of these films, literary theory, in its fixation on creative works in the written form, is equally likely to perform such a dual function.

Finally, in the particular case of Liu and Ding's work, the ultimate lesson learned through the performance of the text is one with a political tint—the authors attempt to enact a form of reticence (in the Daoist fable) while simultaneously aiming to act against reticent forces (the implicit homophobia of which they write). Ultimately, their asking: 'Isn't it time to forge fully another paradigm...?' (Liu and Ding 2005: 49), not only poses a question, but also, in the form of their article as a whole, provides an answer: *yes*. Like Liu and Ding, this paper challenges the traditional barriers between literary and creative writing studies to purport that we really are not that different after all. Rather, all writing is an act of performance and within that performance is the intention for knowledge-production, hence pedagogy. As such, if both disciplines open themselves to the reading of texts for their performative and pedagogical natures, there is the likelihood for increased communication and understanding as well as new knowledge-productions created at that shared site—'fully another paradigm' indeed.

As Trinh writes on this subject, 'Writing may be viewed as that which does not translate a reality outside itself but, more precisely, allows the emergence of a new reality' (Trinh 1989: 22). Or as my own protagonist, informed by the Liu and Ding article, attempts to understand performativity during a puppet-making scene in Beijing: 'I dreamed they dreamed of puppeteers with hands the size of heads, fingers with enough grace to lift the weightless, the futile hope of making shapes without the sun' (Solimine 2010). I can only hope the writing of this particular paper was not a futile act.

Endnote

1. Thank you to Anna Joy Springer, Assistant Professor of Writing at the University of California, San Diego, for this particular terminology.

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