

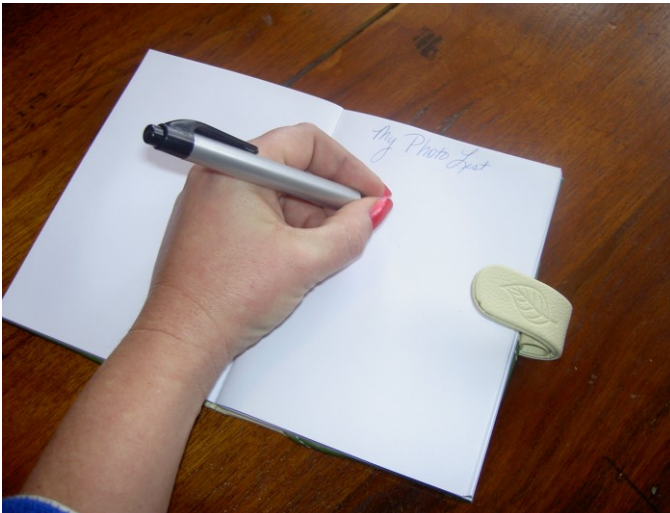
# TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

**The Creative Writer's Luggage: Journeying from Where to Here**  
*Keynote Address to 'Eight Generations of Experience:' a Symposium held by the*  
*Poetry and Poetics Centre, University of South Australia, in May 2009*  
**Graeme Harper**

*One:*

We begin Creative Writing with an act. It's most often a fairly simple act. It is the act of putting fingers on a keyboard, or pen to paper, or pencil to notepad. Because of the theme of this Symposium, let's describe that act as a migration. It's a migration of thought into action. It's a physical migration of hand to keys or fingers to pen ... And that physical movement is significant.

Physical movement is important in this instance because Creative Writing *is* physical movement. When we talk about Creative Writing we most often refer to the



acts and actions that are undertaken under the label 'Creative Writing' rather than the physical artefacts that emerge from those acts and actions. Those artefacts are many, and emerge at many points, and for many reasons – but it is most often the 'final' artefacts (those artefacts that we release under their more common titles of 'novel' or 'poem' or 'short story' or 'script', and so on) that form the physical entities we see being

associated with Creative Writing. Interestingly, these 'final' artefacts are the smallest portion of Creative Writing itself.

But how can it be that we have spent many years talking about the final artefacts of Creative Writing but very little time truly examining Creative Writing itself?

The answer is simple: we haven't. We have, however, spent much of the past hundred or so years elevating the final artefacts to the top of the tree of human worth, and largely demoting the acts and actions that are Creative Writing to second place, or worse. You'll notice I have now left off the inverted commas from the word 'final' – not because the word makes sense, entirely (given that many of those artefacts remain not final in the mind of the creative writer who was undertaking them) but because we have come to accept a degree of finality initiated by the commodity value of *certain* Creative Writing artefacts. And, from this commodity value has also flowed certain ideas about cultural value.

That is to say, we have increasingly made much of certain artefacts of Creative Writing while not making much of others; we have, likewise, made relatively little of examining the acts and actions of Creative Writing, compared to examining the final

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artefacts Creative Writing produces. So that while we have been aware that Creative Writing is act and action, that it involves human activities, we have located both its *cultural* value and its *human* value more in just some of its physical results than in its actual physicality, its physiological as well as its psychological ‘conditions of event’.

These conditions of event or, to put this another way, the activities that *are* Creative Writing rather than that are the commodity manifestations (the things) of Creative Writing, do leave additional material evidence – but much of this material evidence has gone largely unexamined. Creative Writing evidence can be discussed under a number of categories:

1. pre-working and pre-works;
2. complementary working and complementary works;
3. final works;
4. post-working or post-works.

**Pre-working** involves those activities that occur prior to Creative Writing and can involve such things as gathering evidence, note-taking, sketching, or any other activities that comes before the actual acts and actions of Creative Writing. And, of course, this produces pre-work evidence – whether, for example, a set of notes or simply an email to a friend talking about an idea. **Complementary working** involves those acts and actions that occur alongside each other. In many cases, these form the basis on which works ‘bounce off each other’, a short story being written alongside a novel, for example, or the writing of a piece of critical work informing the writing of a collection of poetry, or simply the many forms of daily communication happening alongside a particular creative project. The notion of complementary working recognises that Creative Writing is not separated from the world and that human activities occurring in the world often produce forms of evidence. **Final works** are, of course, those artefacts of Creative Writing released as ‘complete’ into the public sphere. In many cases who decides these are final, and what we might mean by final, is complicated – and, frequently, the concept of finality is attached more to why these works must be considered complete than it is to a more widely acceptable definition of completeness. Final works are not, as some of the narrative so far might have inadvertently suggested, poor representations of Creative Writing, but they do represent an externality which is not entirely in keeping with the fluidity of Creative Writing’s relationship with the self and society. Finally, **post-working or post works** are those activities that occur after the acts and actions of Creative Writing, whether one activity or many. As might already be realised, post-working can be the pre-working for future Creative Writing, and it can (and often does) emphasize the fact that creative writers are creative writers because they are actively engaged in one or more of the many acts of Creative Writing.

Interestingly, Creative Writing always involves some kind of technology. Whether that technology has been the relatively simple, yet extremely efficient, technology of the pencil or whether it is the more contemporary, but not always uncomplicated,

technology of the personal computer, Creative Writing has come about through the use of technologies. The reason for this will be obvious: Creative Writing involves forms of inscription – that is, the inscribing of words in some way (increasingly virtual as well as material inscribing – and inscription requires some human device, simple or otherwise.

It is, in fact, the new technologies of the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century that have alerted us to the problem created over the past three hundred years or so – the problem of concentrating far too much on artefacts or commodities while ignoring, far too often, acts and actions. Indeed, if we are to see a twenty-first-century migration it is hoped that this migration will be the migratory movements of human cultures back toward human activities, while retaining the ties with what became the commodity world of the Modernity, the period since the eighteenth century.

Since the eighteenth century, stimulated by the industrial revolution, and supported by political and economic circumstances that required commodity purchase, the activities of Creative Writing have been subject to a teleological condition in which production has been valued over producing. It would be wrong to say that it did not matter how works of Creative Writing came to emerge; however, it would not be incorrect to say that the *how* was, under the influence of commodification, far less important than the *what*.

And works of Creative Writing – certain works, released under certain conditions, often by certain individuals – gained value not only because of their commercial worth. Worth, in the case of arts products, can be defined either according to commercial value and/or according to cultural value. Final works of Creative Writing can have commercial value – and certain genres, under certain conditions, do have such value – or they can have cultural value. Sometimes a final work or works can have both of these values. The key point, however, is that these final works are not being valued because of the acts and actions that have contributed to their making. Rather they are being valued as commodities, as objects.

Technologies of the industrial revolution that supported such commodification included the increasingly efficient modes of book production and distribution, mechanised, alongside the impact of regulatory work, such as that associated with the evolution of the legal notion of ‘copyright’<sup>1</sup>, which placed the ownership of Creative Writing not in the acts and actions but in the end results. Copyright, thus, emphasized commodity exchange and, with the materiality of such exchanges to the fore, located human interaction in Creative Writing in the trading of artefacts rather than in the intersection of activities. The late twentieth century saw a fundamental technological shift in all this.

Since the late twentieth century the digital technologies of the World Wide Web and of WIFI communications have entirely altered the way in which humans form exchanges. In terms of Creative Writing, it is now possible for a creative writer to be entirely connected to the world while undertaking their Creative Writing, to be receiving and communicating information and ideas to others, while receiving from

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<sup>1</sup> For further on this see Peter Jaszi and Martha Woodmansee, eds., *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

others simultaneously. It is possible for a creative writer to release works that are ‘in progress’ or incomplete, and to do so without the intervention of others, often from the realm of their personal, domestic space. And it is possible for a creative writer to send out into the world their final work or works, when and how they like.

This shift – brought about by technologies, but going well beyond a simple device-orientation – has effectively re-focused us back toward the acts and actions of human beings, the experiential rather than the commodity nature of existence. The Web, though it certainly has offered spectacular opportunities for commodity trading, has allowed us to show ourselves to be involved in creating as well as to be the owners of creative products. And, in terms of Creative Writing, Web technologies (and, increasingly, the technologies of mobile telephony) have brought back to the fore the ways in which activities contain knowledge and can be explored for their knowledge value,<sup>2</sup> as well as for their commercial or cultural value.

*Two*

What does all this mean in terms of migration and Creative Writing?

Well, almost certainly it means that in order to understand the Creative Writing of migrant writers we can feel confident in looking not only at what they produce but what acts and actions occur in this producing. We can, speaking more broadly, also revisit the evidence produced in Creative Writing and come to more actively consider the ways in which human action is, and is essential, to Creative Writing. This evidence of this might be said to be focused on:

1. the creative writer or writers;
2. acts or actions (process?);
3. personal and societal locations;
4. craft instruments and objects;
5. pre-text, final text, complementary text, post-text;
6. ‘central’ results and ‘attached’ results;
7. documents of exchange.

That is, firstly, **creative writer or writers** – evidence that is, and that can be, found in the actual lived lives of creative writers, migrant writers included, of course. This is not simply biographical criticism, which may or may not delve into Creative Writing actions as they occur; rather, it is the evidence of lives lived in which the activities of Creative Writing form a portion and in which their activities intersect with other human activity.

Secondly, evidence that can be seen in the micro and macro Creative Writing activities themselves, the **acts and actions**. I am defining acts here as things done and actions as a collection of acts. This evidence can be observed during the activities or considered after or before the activities – while the dynamic of the consideration will be different the essential point remains: that this is evidence of movement, fluidity,

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<sup>2</sup> See Graeme Harper, *On Creative Writing* (Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 2009).

interaction, evidence of doing. For those of you have an interest in the movements of migration – and no doubt there are many – this evidence might also be considered evidence of a journey, a journey that might indeed still be occurring.

Thirdly, evidence of **personal and societal locations**. We could call this space and place, perhaps. The personal space – for example, a creative writer’s room, desk, home. The public space – for example, the nation or city in which the creative writer works, the cultural location.

Fourthly, **craft instruments and objects**. The impact of technologies has already been mentioned and it should, indeed, never be suspected that instruments of inscription are mere devices. The evidence of the impact, and input, of craft instruments and objects is extensive, yet barely examined so far in the history of Creative Writing study.

Fifthly, the already outlined evidence found in **pre-text, final text, complementary text, post-text**. Some of this evidence (that is, final texts) is already widely examined. Other elements – the pre-texts, for example, or the complementary texts – have been examined if the creative writer associated with them has reached a certain level of fame or cultural significance. No criticism of that condition is implied, but it’s certainly true that examining such evidence for those reasons is not examining evidence of Creative Writing in itself but examining evidence of something else.

Sixthly, evidence that might be grouped under the terms **‘central’ results and ‘attached’ results**. That is, the many textures of physical evidence that reflect activities intersecting and interacting, and that do not necessarily produce just one result, or that produce results that are metaphysically as well as physically connected.

Finally, the evidence that is **documents of exchange**, and this also is considerable. This can be formal commercial documents and market-orientated evidence. It can also be personal non-market exchanges (for example, letters, emails, even conversations). It can be shared economies – so, the economies of poets or the economies of screenwriters; in these cases the documents of exchange may be similar in some instances and entirely different in others. Documents of exchange can also include non-conforming exchanges, those kinds of human interactions that do not fit easily into such definitions as ‘textual’ or ‘verbal’, ‘cultural’ or ‘commercial’, exchanges also of a highly personalised type whereby individuals find connective modes to associate with each other.

Finally, evidence of Creative Writing can also include **inter-market, inter-cultural exchange**: Imperialism, Colonialism, for example. This is holistic evidence in which the functions and structures of societies and cultures represent evidence and provide insights into how Creative Writing is being undertaken, and has been undertaken. This holistic evidence, while lacking in the closeness of a relationship with an individual creative writer, can provide material for considering how societal entities generate their own sets of accumulated evidence, how they value this (for example, in creating heritage archives and institutions) and how they perpetuate a belief in such holistic identity.

### *Three*

The creative writer's luggage contains all this! Each individual creative writer carries with them on their journey the evidence of their acts and actions. After all, Creative Writing does, indeed, involve acts and actions. Where we have concentrated in the past on the final results of such journeys – the arrivals, if you like – we now recognise, not least because of the impact of late twentieth-century digital technologies, that human journeys are far more than the packaged commodities of their completion. We also realise, whether migrant creative writers or indigenous ones, that the journey once begun does not end with one arrival but continues on to offer many arrivals, many finalities. We know too that in the acts and actions of Creative Writing we creative writers both observe and report on the world and, in so many ways, we make the world too. Creative Writing is, after all, both an art and a mode of communication, a personal activity and an activity we share between human beings. In the creative writer's luggage is packed not only the artefacts of creating but also the speculations on the world we can make.