



# TEXT

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*Western Sydney University*

**George Haddad**

*The Writer's Desk: place, subject, object*

Abstract:

This creative writing research experiments with and examines perception, orientation, and queer phenomenology to suggest that the writer's place (my desk) is not instrumental to my creative output. The creative component encompasses three brief writing experiments to produce data that is then analysed through theoretical frameworks in order to make the conclusion on my experience of the writer's place.

Biographical note:

Dr George Haddad is an author and creative writing lecturer at the Writing and Society Research Centre, Western Sydney University. His novel *Losing Face* (UQP, 2022) was longlisted for the Miles Franklin Award and shortlisted for The Readings Prize. In 2023 he was named a *Sydney Morning Herald* Best Young Novelist.

Keywords:

Perception, orientation, phenomenology, creative practice



## Introduction

The practice of writing could be thought of as being bound in experiment. Whenever a writer commits a character, word, punctuation mark to a page they are undertaking an investigation which results in an outcome. The investigation is not essentially bound to place and it could be conducted from anywhere that the writer is able to record words and through a variety of methods. This hybrid creative and exegetical text will experiment with and examine perception, orientation, and queer phenomenology to suggest that place (my desk) is not instrumental to my creative output. The creative component encompasses three brief writing experiments that take my desk as a subject:

1. I write while seated at my desk
2. I write from Little Congwong Beach on Dharawal country
3. I use a dictation app to 'write' while blindfolded and seated at my desk

The premise was to produce the writing and then through critical analysis of the results, and the application of theoretical frameworks, draw a conclusion on my experience of the writer's place. The point of also using the desk as the subject of the writing was to analyse how addressing the desk creatively would influence the data and conclusion. The parameters of the experiments such as to write from the beach or blindfolded were chosen to test how sensory engagement with place may influence the outcome.

Through this process, I came to learn that the practice of writing takes me out of place entirely and that the desk, as a place, subject, and object, is not instrumental to my creative output. The resulting vignettes are embedded within an exegesis that aims to present my findings and address the idealised nature of the writer's desk through a queer and decolonial lens. This creative writing research uses ideas put forth in writer and scholar Sara Ahmed's book *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006) as a framework for discussing perception, orientation, phenomenology and objects.

In working class Australia, we are inducted to the desk during infancy, often in the form of a high chair which serves as a confining place from which a child accesses their food on an appropriately placed table top. The high chair is most often fitted with straps that prevent the child from removing themselves. We learn early on that the high chair is a place of work. It is a place where we are expected to be obedient and productive, that is to sit tight and progress through a meal. It is a somewhat safe place where our caregivers can place us while they are occupied – perhaps even themselves sitting at a desk filling in a form or at a dining table folding laundry. A very similar scenario ensues, again in childhood, when we enter kindergarten and are allocated our own desk to sit at throughout the school year. Mine was typical, wooden, engraved and nicked by previous occupants, and it had a sizeable under-desk slot that I was fascinated with. A hidden space where I would store a Happy Meal toy that my hands covertly played with in the darkness while Miss Simpson read to the class from a book, all the while my eyes fixed on her. The illicitness of the under-desk play and how I masked it was perhaps in relation to learning early on that the desk is not a place of leisure. Rather, it is a place of work

where we are trained and expected to produce writing. It is clear that the reverence for the desk sets in early and possibly compounding this fact, while researching for this article, I am not surprised to learn that the writer's desk was most likely invented for ecclesiastical purposes (Kuiper, 2023). Years ago, when I began my Master of Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing at Melbourne University, I bought a vintage fold-down writing desk because I believed that a good and productive writer needs a desk, a place to write from. And I did write from it a few times, but much like the covert Happy Meal toy situation, the fold-down desk became somewhere to store vodka and tequila. Avoiding the desk however did not hinder my creative output. I wrote from the couch, the floor, the bed, and my creative thesis for the degree went on to win an award and be published as the novella *Populate and Perish* (2016).

As a creative writing lecturer at Western Sydney University I often highlight to my students that a deeper and more concrete understanding of their own place and subject position makes them better writers of place in their texts. I encourage them to draw from their local to breathe reality into their stories and remind them that often when we address our immediate surrounds, it functions as a symbol for the universal. Applying this same concept to the writer's desk then leads me to consider what the desk could perhaps symbolise to me.

Ahmed describes furniture as having “technologies of convention, producing arrangements as an arrangement of things: in the presumption that life should be organized in certain ways” (2006, p. 168). Furniture becomes an “orientation device” that directs life towards efficacy and comfort (2006, p. 168). My current writing desk, the one interrogated in the following experiments, for instance, is tucked neatly in a corner of my bedroom, it is not at the foot of the bed or up against the wardrobe prohibiting me from opening the doors to access my clothing. Although the desk is physically out of the way, it is still very difficult to ignore because the built-in wardrobe is made up of three colossal sliding mirror panels. I can see the desk clearly even when I am in bed. My orientation towards the desk shapes my perception of it. And my perception of it is thus: it has a haunting presence. It is magnetic and repulsive in the same moment. It reminds me to write, it provides a surface for my computer, my wrists, but it also stifles me. I am conditioned to sit at it, and yet something in my queer body wants to turn it upside down and slide down it over the hill of my street. To me, the desk is a place, subject, object that symbolises restraint in a conventional world where productivity and efficacy are valued over experimentation and failure. In my experience, the desk is not instrumental to my creative output.

### **Experiment one: writing from the desk**

The dashing real estate agent is having his teenage son reverse the BMW out of the driveway so that he can leave in his Range Rover. They often do this. Sometimes it is the Lexus that needs to be moved out of the way. Other days they park all of the cars on the street, or across their driveway, or block the spots outside their mansion so that estate agent-dad can put his little race car on a trailer. My forearms bridge the space between the arms of the chair and the hollow desk. Chrome metal to white laminate, skin to bind them. My MacBook is half shut so I can peer through the window and watch as I type. There will be mistakes because I cannot

see the screen or the keyboard properly. Before the agent drives away, he calls his son over, puts his arm through the window, palm up, as if he is expecting his son to deposit something into it. Instead, the son's bare shoulders droop and he lazily places his own hand in his father's. Something intense and loving passes through them and then the son trudges back into the mansion and the father drives down the street, his window rolling shut.

I am suddenly aware that my shins and feet are cold. I look underneath the desk as though I might see the draught. There should be a rug underneath this desk because there is a gap between the parquetry and the skirting board, where carpet once was, that does not discriminate against all slivers of cold, thick or thin. The fireplace is to the right of the desk but we are not allowed to use it because we are piddly tenants who signed a rental agreement with a clause that says so. I put the air conditioner on. I sit back at the desk and steadily tap my fingernails against the top from pinkie to index.

There are novels on this desk, a select few, that I keep accessible for times when I forget how to write. Sometimes I do not even have to open them, touching them is suffice. I have one hand on Melissa Lucashenko's *Too Much Lip* (2018) now, and I am typing like a woodpecker with the other.

The lilly pilly outside the window is in bloom and I am convinced that the feasting myna is making eye contact with me. My partner once collected a bowl of the fruit and made a jam. Then we read about how toxic the soil is in the inner west of Sydney. We still ate the jam on scones.

A fleet of clouds blocks the sunlight. The room becomes dark enough that I should turn a light on, but I resist for no logical reason. The clouds are the same colour as this desk, the same colour as my dry cuticles, the same colour as the robe that my partner's mum is wearing in the photo where she is holding him as a newborn in Wellington Hospital. It is the only photograph we have on display in our home.

The windows need to be washed. I will send the landlord a message.

### *Analysis*

The resulting prose from experiment one (as well as the following experiments) was only edited for minor spelling and grammatical errors and so for the most part it is a first draft, or as I prefer to think of it in light of the experiment, the raw data.

What develops in the data from experiment one is an obvious turning away from the desk even when it was intended to be the subject of the writing. Apart from a few references, the vignette wanders around the desk, primarily to what appears beyond it, underneath it. This aversion could be read as a queer phenomenology that reflexively tends to the foreground/underground as a means of disorientation (Ahmed, 2006, p. 38) from the heteronormative and the linear rather than turning towards it as regular phenomenology would have it. The prose from

experiment one is intuitive and meandering. I am not writing a novel or a memoir per se, I am facing what is periphery and writing from a point of view that is unprohibited by form, deviating from proper course and concertedly turning my attention away from the desk and through the window. The street that the desk looks over, in effect, provides the setting for drama. As a writer of mostly realist fiction, I am deliberately attuned to observe human interaction because it fuels my practice and creativity more than a static object. The desk becomes a set piece, an anchor for the self as a writer, but it is not instrumental to the writing or the drama that I create around it. Ahmed describes this as the capacity of an object not so much existing within the tool but dependant “on how the tool is taken up or put to use” (2006, p. 46). In this sense, what I ultimately write about in the experiment is determined by an orientation I have already taken. This orientation is not anchored to the desk or any given place, it exists in the metaphysical. The data addresses my view and is filtered through my corporeal existence, but my perception, that I rely on to generate creative output, is not rooted in the here and now.

There is an inescapable intentionality to my consciousness, as demonstrated in experiment one, and that consciousness does not reside anywhere or take up physical space. It is instead an intricate make-up of my histories and lived experiences. This is accessible anywhere that I exist. Writing from this consciousness then suggests that the writing itself takes me out of place and in effect back into myself. The desk loses its hold on me as a queer subject and it is not instrumental to the creative writing I produced in experiment one.

### **Experiment two: writing from the beach**

There is another desk in our home. The original desk, possibly a statelier desk. It is timber with bevelled edges and lacquer and has decorative sconces on the outer side of its two wide legs. It looks like it came from a church, the vestry to be more exact, where it would have been a table and not a desk at all. Perhaps it had a white cotton runner and the priest's paraphernalia sat atop it. I picture him standing taking one item at a time, putting them around his neck or fingers or waist as the altar boy diligently watches. Or perhaps he ate fish and chips and ketchup by himself at the table, exhausted from back to back funerals.

My partner and I inherited the desk from his sister who moved to Aotearoa to make wine. I do love it but it is covered in unread books and a bottle of Dom Perignon that a friend gifted to me for my graduation. I could move the things and reclaim the desk but the one in the bedroom might mind. That desk came about during Covid when my partner and I were both working from home. It was advertised as free on Facebook Marketplace and the person shedding it was even willing to drop it off. And they did. My partner was doing all the necessary back and forth messaging and because I never wanted the desk I protested by not looking at a photo of it. I hated it as soon as it arrived. Too white, too big for the space, and very obviously IKEA. It had two full-sized raw timber trestle legs that made it bulky and stupid looking. A week later I bought four black cylindrical metal legs and hired a circular saw from Kennard's to transform the desk. The length of the thing was fine but it was the depth I found so unnerving. It went on for kilometres demanding more output, more attention, more capacity. I imagined dropping a

pen and bending underneath the desk to find it and being lost into the abyss, enveloped by its breadth. I needed the desk to be half its depth if it were to reside in our bedroom in the nook between the defunct fireplace and the bathroom.

Circular saws are worrisome in that the blade spins so severely it could be mistaken for being supine. The machine irrefutably cut through what turned out to be a conglomerate of laminate and cardboard. At the end of the cut it took with it a seashell-sized island of laminate from the top. Perhaps as recompense for being put to work for nothing. I figured the blemish would be easily covered by books. And the nasty cut would be flush with the wall. It has been years since the desk was installed. I wonder now if the cuts have scabbed over, healed. If the ghostly flesh has fused to the wall, shot veins into the brick. I wonder too how well that desk could float. In case of a tsunami it is the most raft-like object in our home. The other desk, the priestly table, would first need to be cleared, and I fear its solidity, its story, would make it sink. Maybe in the end, the evanescence of the IKEA desk will be our saviour.

In the cyclical way that things often unfold online, we posted the hulking trestle legs back to Facebook Marketplace with the thought that no one would want them. It took four minutes for my partner's inbox to be inundated with messages from people begging him to hold on to them until they could collect on Thursday, Saturday, today, in an hour. I checked to see how much a set of the legs cost on the IKEA website and I came to know they were dubbed Mittback, that they were made from birch, and that they were sixty-five dollars each.

### *Analysis*

Unlike the data from experiment one, the results from experiment two evidently address the actual desk. This is especially interesting given that I was writing while away from the physical desk and instead from a rock platform overlooking Little Congwong Beach on Dharawal country. I typed the data into the notes app on my iPhone, glancing up from the screen every so often and at my surrounds. Little Congwong Beach is an unofficial nude beach popular with Sydney's queer community. It is a place I have been visiting for seventeen years where I have felt free and comfortable to embody my queerness. And yet, when analysing the results, the writing seems primmer and more whimsical than in experiment one, for example the use of the words "possibly", "perhaps", and "figured". The writing appears to be more 'English', more romantic, and on a few occasions relies on fraught description: "sea-shell sized island" and "we posted the hulking trestle legs back to Facebook".

The sentences throughout are also longer, more classical. In a sense I have counteracted the learnt and nurtured queer habitus of the beach, by defaulting to a more heteronormative and colonial voice than I usually employ in my creative writing. I manage to draw on memory and to write about the desk that is some twelve kilometres away, but I mostly defy the place (and its social understandings and inscriptions) that I am writing from (Probyn, 2005, p. 49). The writing, more narrative-like and linear, seems to be activated by memory and association, rather than the beach before me and its social gestures. What becomes evident is that I am instead writing from even deeper within me than in experiment one. The writing style taps into my

socialised behaviours and baseline norms, again this is a facet of my identity and capability that I am able to access from anywhere. The beach is not instrumental to the creative writing I produce.

The resulting prose in experiment two addresses the arrival of the desk. When discussing the “arrival” of an object, Ahmed notes that “The object could even be described as the transformation of time into form...the ‘direction’ of matter. What arrives not only depends on time, but is shaped by the conditions of its arrival, by how it came to get here” (2006, p. 40). She uses the example of a sticky object displaying what it has come into contact with on its surface as its own personal history and suggests that an arrival does not simply happen, an arrival points towards a past and a future. It is fascinating to me upon analysing the data from experiment two, while the desk is far away, that I narrativise its arrival, its history, and its potential. I tell the story of physically transfiguring the desk to my personal standard. A Marxian critique would note the labour and industry that I draw on, the mentions of “IKEA” and materials, that apprehend the desk as being more than just there. And yet it is not just there at all, it is, as mentioned earlier, around twelve kilometres away. In experiment one, while at the desk, I write away from it, and at the beach I ignore the social inscriptions of place but I am able to reconstruct and theorise the desk. In both cases the physical place is not instrumental to my creative output.

### **Experiment three: ‘writing’ while blindfolded**

I can’t remember the last time I was blindfolded but it was definitely as a child. This time I’m on the first floor of a Victorian mansion that was split up into six apartments in the eighties. There is a crude brown brick extension attached to the front of the building so that if you looked at it from the street, the only hint of it being an old Victorian mansion is the frill at the top of the original façade. Sometimes dogwalkers across the road stop to puzzle over the mess and I watch them from the window until they leave. I’ve become quite fond of the silly building. Maybe its disorienting presence in rich and tidy Sydney is a queer comrade of sorts.

I’m doing this in the evening. I keep thinking about making a cup of tea or going to the loo and I can’t decide which to do first. Someone from the neighbouring building is sorting their garbage into the bins. It sounds like they are pouring soup into the compost and then there are very equally measured pings of cans being dropped into the recycling bin. I want to record the sounds and then layer the track with a poetry reading. Who’d care to listen?

Something about this whole experience is making me terribly nostalgic. An A380 is gliding overhead and I think about going somewhere I’ve never been for a split second and my body tightens like it’s ready for a cry. What would that place be like? I picture a purple beach and I’m a naked giant ambling over the sand.

The desk. I’m meant to be talking about the desk. Well it is definitely here. I can feel it at my elbows and when I plunged my head back just then to stretch out my neck, the desk wobbled so lightly and the pens I keep in the tin mug jingled. I use those pens as rarely as I use cash. A

writer friend of mine wrote her entire novel manuscript by hand recently and then typed it up which, I won't lie, I found bizarre. I'm terrible at writing – handwriting that is – but also maybe writing. I'd just feel like so much less attached to a manuscript if I wrote it by hand. The act of filling the notebook would be enough and then I'd easily archive it and forget about it. I'm much more likely to re-open a document on my computer than to rifle back through a notebook. Now it sounds like I'm being a judgey bitch. It's actually so cute that writers have their own processes, quirks, and places they prefer to write from. And if I'm being honest, I love hearing about it.

### *Analysis*

The paragraphs in the transcription of experiment three indicate natural pauses in my speech during the recording. I aimed to keep the transcription of the audio as authentic as possible by including contractions and slang.

When analysing the data, it appears that the deliberate act of not seeing the desk disrupts familiarity and symbolism and so the desk becomes the object of sensory experience which activates a new type of knowing (Ahmed, 2006, p. 164). This complicates the writing and, by my own judgement, dilutes its quality. For me, good writing happens when I am not restricted by anything – physically or creatively. The deliberateness of the blindfold perhaps made me more conscious of the experiment and my output. In my writing practice, I rely heavily on my mind's eye and so blindfolded or not I am accustomed to turning inwards. Restricting my sense of sight made the construction of text difficult both because I felt constricted and because it was difficult to verbalise my ideas as opposed to writing them. This is not to say that seeing a place while writing is synonymous with writing from that place – as evidenced in experiment two.

Ahmed describes disorientation as the “becoming oblique of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle” (2006, p. 162). When setting out the parameters of the experiment, I chose to physically restrict my field of vision to enforce an obliqueness and to test the relationship between my interiority and exteriority. And it does seem to play out in the data seeing that although I am blindfolded, I nevertheless address the surface of the desk “at my elbows” and its sounds (both exterior), but it is at once combined with internal feeling and thought. This new angle of what is given (the desk) generates writing that is more personally vulnerable and haphazard in comparison to the results from the previous experiments. The writing is self-conscious and reflective. I turn inward to write about the outward, at one point even reminding myself to write about the desk. What persists is that, even while at the desk, I continue to write away from it, affirming the results from experiment one.

Attempting to make the familiar desk strange by blindfolding myself, removing one of my senses, was counterintuitive to the queer phenomenology I reflexively bring to any place. The blindfold only served to confuse the sensitivities I have towards the desk which are already queer due to my critical position of it as being revered which stems from its colonial and



patriarchal legacy (Ahmed, 2006, p. 31). My innate scepticism of the desk forces me inwards in an attempt to generate writing from memory, perception, experience and self-narratives. Blindfolded or not, the writing is not activated by the desk.

## Conclusion

This creative writing research centred involved three experiments to better understand my connection between place and writing output. The data from the experiments was analysed using scholar Sara Ahmed's ideas on perception, orientation and queer phenomenology.

In experiment one I tasked myself with writing about the desk while seated at it. The results suggest that my perception and the practice of writing is not rooted to place as the data wanders around the desk and addresses the foreground/underground through my queer phenomenology.

In experiment two I attempted to write about the desk while at a local beach popular with Sydney's queer community. What ensued was that I was able to address the desk and its origins through memory and association while being far removed from the physical object. The writing also defaulted to narrative conventions that defied the social inscriptions of the beach.

In experiment three I aimed to address the desk while blindfolded and seated at it. The sensual disruption made for writing that did not significantly address the desk and instead further turned my perception inwards. The writing was self-conscious, activated heavily by personal experience rather than by the desk being a productive writing place.

Taken together, these experiments suggest that my creative writing output is not contingent on having a desk to write at. Instead, my writing is a product of my individual consciousness, my unique sensibilities, and my impulse to turn inward and draw from personal experience, regardless of my physical location. The desk has held symbolic significance throughout history as being a productive place for writing to occur, but these experiments show that it is my perception, orientation and memory (untethered to any place) that are responsible for my creative output.

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