



**Wayne de Fremery, "Reprinting 'Azaleas'" (2015).**

# Literary Phenomena and Alternative Encounters

Wayne de Fremery

*When we think of books as mere objects, we lose sight of them completely. If we treat texts as woven systems of physical, human, and social agency, their unending generative nature comes once more to light. In this interview, Wayne de Fremery explores what it means to think about texts and textual transmission as living processes.*

**Your research concerns bibliography and the socialisation of 20th-century Korean literary texts – a line of questioning that challenges traditional notions of texts and textuality. What does it mean to conduct cross-disciplinary research into Korean Poetry?**

My work concerns the poetics of documenting literary phenomena and the ways in which the ‘literary’ can be investigated as lived experience. This means I work across a range of traditional literary and bibliographic scholarship, but also that I conduct artistic experiments aimed at creating new methods for documenting the elaborate technological and cultural systems that iterate texts (with a particular focus on Korean poetry). My aim is to ensure that the texts of Korea’s oral and print traditions remain alive and recognisable in the lived experience of those who grew up in eras when literature was synonymous with certain technologies, such as manuscript and print technologies, while also inspiring those who will need to keep Korea’s texts alive as meaningful expression in media yet to be imagined.

My doctoral dissertation concerned documenting books of vernacular Korean verse produced initially in the 1920s – a time of great political tumult on the Korean peninsula and generative poetic experimentation. My aim was to describe what a well-known bibliographer, D.F. McKenzie, called the sociology of texts. I tried to describe the linguistic content of the books and how they worked as literary phenomena, which necessitated describing the people who made them – the poets but also the publishers and printer and distributors – as well as the technologies they used – the kinds of presses, the variety of typefaces, and the machines used to cast the type. The simple argument that I attempted to articulate was that literary analysis is premised on assumptions about the material iteration of literary texts, many of which, in the case of Korean poetic texts from the 1920s, were incorrect because scholars had not carefully investigated how books of Korean poetry were created. Mandated by my university, I used print media to document my engagement with roughly 40 books of vernacular Korean verse and roughly the same number of periodical issues that contained the poems of a poet I am particularly interested in.

I am freer these days to experiment with the media I use as documentary tools for my engagement with Korea's texts; my more recent work has focused on documenting the social and technological systems that iterate Korea's textual record in computational environments. For example, I have experimented with collaborators on a variety of methods for describing the coding standards that underpin the expression of Korean texts in digital environments. I have also attempted to creatively document the poetic structures of Korean poems by mapping them onto visual structures and colours, including in three-dimensional virtual reality (VR) space – an investigation into alternative modes of documenting literary phenomena and expanding the palate of technological tools for bibliographic expression. These projects reflect my interest in how alternative forms of engagement with literary phenomena might enliven or detract from people's lived experience with literature: Would these alternative bibliographic expressions prompt

wonder? Would they inspire and delight? Would they instruct, and if so, how?

**A figure you have invoked in your work is Donna Haraway's 'cyborg' – a stand taken against the Enlightenment's separation between Subjects and Objects, and one that explores a more intimate understanding of how conceptual, bodily, material, social, and digital forms interact. Can you tell us more about this figure and how it frames a reappraisal of poetry and the producers of poetry?**

Michelle R. Warren points out that 'analogies have often been drawn between the human body ' and 'physical text[s ]' (traditional Subjects and Objects, respectively). 'The metaphor shifts significantly ', she writes, 'with the image of the 'cyborg' body posited by Donna Haraway.... The cyborg challenges naturalised genealogies of (textual) transmission from generation to generation, underscoring the body's construction through purposeful interventions ' (1: p.130). Let us take this apart in steps.

Bibliography concerns the 'writing out' of 'books' (from generation to generation). It has traditionally been understood as the scribal practice of copying and then as the study of how books came to be 'written out', i.e., all the technologies and social practices associated with producing texts. Underpinning these practices was the belief that the texts, the human bodies, and the technologies producing them all were alienated from each other. Haraway's cyborg is an opportunity to productively complicate these separations between Objects and Subjects that have been guiding bibliographic practices. If a 'text' is not separate from its material shapes or its conceptual forms, and the experiencing body is technologically hybrid and not separate from the technologies of textuality, then we can think about text and textual transmission differently. Recognising their interrelation, as Haraway's cyborg helps us to do, reorients how we might think about

‘the copying out’ of ‘books’. We can think about the ways in which texts and human bodies are both, to varying degrees, made through ‘purposeful interventions’. We can think from an alternative vantage point about how we might intervene in the technological production of texts and the naturalised bodily practices associated with textual experience and then experiment with new methods for ‘copying out’ ‘books’.

Karen Barad has a useful term: ‘intra-action’ – interactions that do not assume *a priori* relationships between documentary apparatuses and the phenomena that they document. Thinking about textuality as the intra-action of human bodies and textual technologies expands the possibilities for imagining literary and bibliographic expression. We can understand texts as woven socio-biological/ technical institutions that prompt and enable expressive cultural memory. And we can rearticulate common metaphors for describing textual experiences, such as getting ‘lost’ in a story or being ‘immersed’ in a book, by making the metaphors literal experience through designing experiences that can be inhabited by the body in a theatre space or a virtual/augmented reality environment. Creating metaphors that can be inhabited in this way helps emphasise the ways in which the body then can be understood as a medium through which a text can be copied out. We do not commonly think of reading and bibliographic practice in these terms. Juxtaposing these new bibliographic environments and modes of expression with what has come before helps to emphasise textual production as a bodily intra-action with language as it is materially expressed.

Theorising texts in this manner also helps to expand and productively reorient thinking about specific textual formations we have typically associated with particular places or groups of people, as is so frequently done with the study of national literature. If we think of texts as woven systems created by biological/socio-material intra-actions, then we are able to investigate them without falling into confining and frequently essentialist definitions of peoples and cultures. We can investigate the marvellous specificity of

texts woven at particular historical moments by people interacting with any variety of material or conceptual technologies. We can also imagine alternative intra-active experiences and build a means for exploring the ways in which texts can be experienced in the future. For example, when 'Korea' – understood in Leigh Star's terms as a boundary object – is expanded beyond the strictures of the nation, texts associated with it become more interesting and more vital because we can think more creatively about what might be included within the boundaries of 'Korea'. 20th-century definitions of Korean literature as documents composed by people of certain national/ethnic categories using specific technologies, such as the paper page and han'guᄡ orthographic systems, can be refigured so that what is thought of as 'Korean' can be inhabited by many more people using a wider variety of technologies of knowing. This is hopeful because it means that there can be many more ways to inhabit and reiterate 'Korean' literature now and in the future.

**Is the concept of 'becoming media' suggested in cyborg textuality – a vital phenomenon in which work, author, reader, curator (and so on) are understood to participate in an ongoing process of becoming something new together?**

Sure. The idea of 'cyborg textuality' and 'becoming media' can be related – both are productive metaphors for investigating the woven nature of media. They are potent because, as your previous question suggests, they enable us to investigate experience with what we call 'texts' and 'media' with a schema that places emphasis on material details and conceptual formations that we may not have previously noticed or considered. Conceptual frames always tune us to notice certain elements of experience and not others. With each investigatory metaphor, we gain a new tool as well as new kinds of evidence. There are two important points to remember, however: The first is that the investigatory metaphor will only allow certain elements to

be noticed; the second is that the metaphor does not need to be based on any ontological belief, philosophical outlook, or conceptual system. Bibliographical study has often taken science, and particularly biological science, as a guiding conceit. (Consider stemmatics: The practice of discerning the development of a textual work by tracing the relationship between different textual witnesses, an approach that derives its analytical power from Darwinian evolutionary theory.) Noticing this is important because it allows us to frame the idea historically and consider if we would like to consider using the same metaphor as an investigatory tool. We are reminded that we can make our own conceits. Whether it is humanistic ideologies about human experience or post-human beliefs about hybridity, our philosophical engagements can be fantastically powerful tools for revealing facts about our experience. But, I would stress, we can creatively make up our own conceits and use them as the conceptual infrastructure for organising our investigations and revealing additional facts we might puzzle over in wonderment or stand beside in awe.

**With a focus on innovation in material and communicative forms, your work explores the facets of a textual source as physical (an inscription in a book), logical (as something on which operations can be made), and conceptual (through which a work can be understood). What is the origin of this approach, and how are you developing new relationships between these different facets?**

The tripartite notion of an object having three inheritances – a physical inheritance, a logical inheritance, and a conceptual inheritance – was initially articulated by Kenneth Thibodeau to describe digital objects (the physical processes of electronic inscription that make up the storage systems of computational systems). I find Thibodeau's conception useful because it enables us to see digital documents as a variety of processes

interacting. The physical components and processes of digital objects are inherited by logical systems that are, in turn, acted upon to create a conceptual object. The conceptual object in Thibodeau's schema is what we would see on a computer screen or projected onto a wall. Seen as interacting processes that are simultaneously conceptual, logical, and physical, digital objects become wonderful tools for investigating the 'logic' of our 'conceptions' and their relationship to physical structures that are often obscured from view.

A variety of encoding systems have been developed to allow computational systems to display written languages consistently. These systems are, in part, what software works on when we 'word process', for example. Although there is nothing except the powerful logic of our historical experience to suggest it, text is displayed in these systems using traditional orthographic systems as conceptual objects that look like a printed page. Understanding the process of materialising texts as conceptual objects on our computer screens allows us to play around with their logic to create alternative conceptual objects. These alternative conceptual objects can be used to illuminate aspects of our textual experience that are less visible but, nonetheless, crucial to how we interact with a text. They can also teach us things about our texts that we could not have known otherwise – simply because we had not yet created a conceptual shape for the new discovery.

We can transform the conception of a poem, for example, as something printed on a page into something that can also be iterated in the shape of a tree or as a pendant hung from our neck. This, in turn, enables us to ask provocative questions about poetry and literature, such as whether a poem always needs to be iterated by the conceptual models of print or orality, as they have been traditionally conceived? We are presented with the productive challenge of finding a conceptual shape for poetry that can honour its long association with print technologies while simultaneously orchestrating new poetic experiences by means of alternative technologies.

My work to create poetic experiences that can be inhabited as theatrical experiences modelled on the bibliographic and linguistic cues associated with Korean poetry is one example of this approach.

**In creating innovative digital objects from poetry (such as navigable virtual environments), you are introducing conceptual models that may also obscure or negate the original in some way. In what spirit would you wish the user to engage with these new works?**

I would hope that these new conceptual models are opportunities for wonder, inspiration, and contemplation. My goal is not to obscure or negate previous iterations or anything that might be considered ‘original’. Rather, I attempt to use the power of defamiliarisation to heighten a person’s understanding of the expectations they bring to an encounter with an object. The goal of fashioning new digital objects from poetic texts is to enable those encountering these new objects a clearer understanding of the expectations they brought to the process of reading poetry and the individual texts that they expected to read.

For example, with collaborators, I have designed and built immersive theatre and VR experiences that express books of Korean poetry as navigable forests, mapping the stanzas and lines of individual poems to different tree structures. The book of poems we modelled was initially produced during the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea (1910–1945). Poems from it are frequently taught in Korean middle and high schools. As a consequence, readers approaching the poems have many expectations about the book based on their educational experiences and general beliefs about Korea’s colonial experience. Engaging the book expressed as a forest necessarily thwarts these expectations and allows participants the opportunity to reassess their beliefs about the book and perhaps, more generally, what ‘reading poetry’ might mean.

It is important to note that the theatrical and VR experiences are explicitly designed to allow those who inhabit them to navigate through the forest 'toward' more familiar, and earlier, representations of the book. A user wishing to see the digital text of a poem used to model a tree in the forest can touch a tree in the environment and see the digital text. If a participant wishes to see images of the printed text upon which the digital text was based, s/he can navigate through the digital text to images of the book's first printings. There is no way to reach the 'original' – whatever that might mean – in the environment. It is hoped that the journey toward the idea of an origin inspires wonder about the book as it was produced initially, and curiosity in how the book has been iterated since its initial production (by individual editorial, social, educational, and any number of technological systems), so that we can think creatively about conceptions of historical periods, what constitutes poetic experience, and how we might reiterate the book into the future.

**If these new relationships being created between physical/digital objects and environments are, in essence, exploratory and not yet complete, where do you see the potential for new conceptual models to emerge?**

New conceptual models will emerge through detailed and creative exploration of the ways in which we create and interact with the socio-technological infrastructure of what we call texts, since texts now are at once physical/digital objects/environments. Our textual systems are, and have been, so complex that we only capture a small portion of their complexity with any textual presentation or description of a textual event. The work of making new conceptual models will entail getting dirty with the material details of the systems and procedures that create textual experiences in order to have better bibliographic and artistic control over the breadth of textual complexity and its expressive power. I should stress that

I do not mean anything like monopolistic control over textual production when I talk about bibliographic and artistic control. Rather, I mean the ability to see the complexity of textual expression with greater precision and understanding so that we can better choose the creative constraints within which we choose to create and document textual experience. New conceptual models will be generated by those neck-deep in the material and conceptual minutia of textual experience groping for a way to describe and express the rich complexity they discern.

**These new models have a built-in capacity to support probing questions into Korea's cultural record and enable direct action of different kinds in turn. Can you envisage new forms of memorialisation, political action, and cultural discourse emerging from your work?**

Yes! The ways in which Korea's cultural record is curated will determine how Korea's past is memorialised, what kind of political action becomes tenable, and what shape cultural discourse will take going forward. Any method we use for organising, preserving, and reiterating materials associated with Korea's cultural past needs, also, to be understood as a political action. The ways in which we can imagine the unfolding of these process are, of course, manifold, although it is difficult to convince people of this truth ; I suspect this is because we think of curating the cultural archive as a kind of bureaucratic process associated with paper-based practices, rather than a lived, artistic engagement that can be conducted in any media.

My work aims to focus attention on these facts so that there can be a healthy, informed, and creative debate about ways we might sustain Korea's cultural record in the present – so that memory practices, cultural discourse, and political action can serve truth and the health of individuals and communities. An individual's sense of well-being is tied to her or his sense of belonging – to a partner, to a family, to a community, to a

place, to a tradition. And there is no greater danger to a person's well-being than the revelation that one's sense of belonging has falsehood as its foundation. Those of us working hard to curate this record face some significant challenges (as well as some fantastic opportunities). A variety of forces threaten materials created during Korea's colonial occupation, for example. Korea's literature was frequently printed on highly acidic paper, and that paper is now burning itself up. Ironically, this might not be the largest problem in bringing this cultural record alive for people; neglect – whether wilful or tacit – takes that prime position (for example, when linked with lingering resentment over the colonial occupation).

The huge amounts of digital information created since the mid-1990s present another enormous challenge to curators of Korea's cultural archive. As far as I know, there is no archive of historical software anywhere in Korea that will enable curators and archivists, let alone the public more generally, to access digital documents created even five or ten years ago, let alone twenty or thirty. Nor are there truly long-term plans for sustaining access to the rapidly expanding datascape that constitutes the cultural interaction and exchange of our present historical moment. If not addressed immediately, there is a good chance that, fifty years from now, we will be looking back at a Dark Ages caused, ironically, by the digital brilliance of our contemporary experience and our short-sightedness.

**At an institutional level, you are creating new fields of research. What are they, how have they come about, and what is their relationship to more established disciplinary traditions?**

Computational bibliography and the sociology of data are phrases of my invention, and the working title of a book I am writing. 'Computational Bibliography and the Sociology of Data' proposes to expand the scope of what bibliography describes and to diversify the forms used in bibliographic description. As I have been describing, and as an etymology of the

word ‘bibliography’ suggests, bibliographers in the past used bibliographic forms – books – to document and investigate books. ‘Computational Bibliography and the Sociology of Data’ suggests documenting computational systems using computational systems. Since computational systems and the data they express are social entities, this documentary practice is a kind of sociology – one that is facilitated by new forms of descriptive bibliographic expression that aim to pre-figure and constitute fruitful methods of scholarly investigation and meaning making. How, for example, might we use the creative force of computational systems to document the proprietary software systems – including all the people and technologies – that iterate the books we read on our electronic devices or the algorithms that suggest books we might like to read? As my book argues, answering these questions is a matter of attending to and documenting the technologies and the communities that use them. Those familiar with bibliographic research will recognise that my book is deeply indebted to D.F. McKenzie and his ‘Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts’, which helped to reorient and expand the focus of bibliography in ways that are still productive. This is especially true now when what we mean by ‘book’ is evolving and computational systems as expressive mediums present us with new opportunities for documenting our changing relationship to what we call ‘books’.

**This bringing-together of different methodologies has led you to combine forms of geospatial and textual analysis to bear on the different forces at play in shaping the production of texts. Can you tell us more about this research and your findings?**

‘What we call literature is an institutional system of cultural memory’, writes Jerome McGann (2: p. ix). Since I am interested in what our systems of cultural memory evoke and *how* institutions of cultural memory have been shaped, there is no avoiding the role played by place in literary formations:

Memory and its institutions are always spatial – practically and imaginatively. What we call literature helps us to imagine or reimagine the contours of the most familiar street of our hometown, or what might constitute a ‘street’ in alien civilizations. Literary studies, of course, frequently organises texts according to ideas about national boundaries and characteristics – ‘Eastern’ literature, ‘American’ poetry, ‘South Korean’ fiction, and so on. These generic categorisations can generate meaningful ways to know texts. My work attempts to provide additional ways to know textual bodies, such as through mapping the people and materials used to create our institutions of cultural memory with a kind of forensic precision that has not been previously attempted.

While working on my doctorate, for example, this meant collecting and organising information about the places where books of vernacular poetry were physically produced. Japanese law required the names and street addresses of publishers, printers, and distributor(s) to be included in the colophons of all books. This was a security measure that enabled Japanese police to find anyone printing subversive materials. Publications would also include information for book buyers, such as bank account details and contact numbers. By organising this information, I discovered something previously thought to be outside the realm of literary study: I learned that more than half of the books of vernacular poetry produced in the 1920s recorded by Korean bibliographers were created at one geographic location, with more than a third produced by one man, No Ki-joŋ, working at printer and publisher Hansoŋ Toso Chusikhoesa at Kyoŋsoŋbu Kyoŋnji-dong 32-poŋnji (in what is now called Insa-dong in Seoul). Here we see how one individual can play a tremendous role in shaping cultural memory through the ways in which poets and other literary artists express themselves with the technologies available at a given historical moment. This makes clear that concepts such as ‘Korea’ and ‘Korean literature’ are best shaped in productive tension with such specificities in mind.

My more recent work attempts to map the people, places, and institutions that are iterating Korean texts in computational environments. I am curious to know if there is a place comparable to Hansoŋg Tosoŋg with someone like No Ki-joŋg overseeing its production. Initial indications are that there is not. While much of Korea's printed literature is made in places such as Paju, a city near Seoul where many of the important publishers and printers have recently relocated, my sense is that the geography of 'Korean' textual production is quite global. Korean authors who split their time between Seoul and New York will use software adhering to common international standards to create manuscripts for publishing houses in Paju, New York, and London (with portions posted online using social media platforms operating out of Silicon Valley and Pangyo). The challenge is finding ways to document and map these geographies so that we can better understand the ways that we know ourselves in our history and the places we inhabit – a challenge that necessitates new kinds of cartographic tools.

**With the development of innovative approaches comes an active negotiation with disciplinary, cultural, and social norms. Do you see these new models as capable of driving innovation in scholarship? As such, how have others responded (both within Korea and beyond) to these new ways of working?**

Will the models and methods I am investigating drive innovation in scholarship? I hope so! I would also hope that they drive innovation in the arts and in the ways we craft our institutions of cultural memory. But, as the framing of your question suggests, any such effects will require long-term disciplinary, cultural, and social negotiations, a process that will also take from me the methods and models I am developing – if indeed they were ever 'mine'. This process was hard for me to come to grips with at first. I used to be annoyed when those in a given field (whether literary studies, bibliography, design, or information science) became uninterested when I talked about practices outside of their immediate interests. Poets

and artists thought of me as a scholar because I would ramble on about historical and theoretic minutia rather than devoting myself to *making* art. Scholars thought of me as a quixotic poet and artist who spent too much time designing books and *playing* with technology. It was only later that I understood that my job, however defined, was not just to persuade people of the value of the ideas I presented but to enable others to adopt the ideas as their own. I realise now that I was not giving researchers in information science, for example, Korean poetry as something that could enliven their practice; nor was I enabling those in literary studies to take bibliography and various practices in media studies to enliven the study of literature.

There are small indications that my ideas are becoming less and less my own, which makes me hopeful. Scholars in information science, for example, are increasingly interested in data and perspectives from literary and cultural studies. Those in literary and cultural studies recognise that computational systems are profoundly changing the ways in which we form our cultural experiences and memory. Bibliography and literary studies, what were once called 'lower' and 'higher' criticism, are increasingly approached as an integrated field by scholars. Moreover, I sense that evolving ideas about the art of scholarship and the scholarship of art are reshaping institutional practice and the ways that scholars and artists express themselves. Traditional formations such as the journal article and the academic monograph are now being interrogated, with many beginning to wonder if they are the only standard by which academic achievement can be measured. Those of us who love these forms are excited by this development because we can continue to use familiar expressive practices while also imagining new ways to express our discoveries.

Wonderfully difficult and vitally important questions about our beliefs concerning the boundary between scholarship and artistry are posed when artist-scholars culture human cells for aesthetic ends and engineer RNA sequences to produce proteins encoded to spell out poems. I sense that some scholars would not take offence if they were called artists. Similarly, I

think fewer poets and artists would be offended if they were called scholars and scientists. In short, I am excited by the possibilities these hybrid orientations present while cognizant of the fact that boundary making and the evolving practices that have individuated scholarly from artistic practice, as well as academic disciplines from each other and ‘industry’, have often served immediately useful and vital purposes. It is an exciting time to be curious.

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## Author Biography

Wayne De Fremery is an associate professor at Sogang University in Seoul, in the School of Media, Arts, and Science. His research concerns bibliography and the socialisation of 20th-century Korean literary texts. Wayne holds a bachelor’s degree in Economics from Whitman College, a master’s degree in Korean Studies from Seoul National University, and a doctorate in East Asian Languages and Civilizations from Harvard University. Books and journals designed by Wayne have appeared with the Harvard Korea Institute, the University of Washington Press, and his own award-winning press Tamal Vista Publications. He holds three patents for inventions that creatively document and preserve culture and, in 2017, became a member of the Korean Agency for Technical Standards – the first non-Korean citizen to represent South Korea on an ISO committee. More on his work can be found at <http://www.pwdef.info/index.html>.