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**The Arachnophobe Poet as Natural Historian:
Connecting Poetic Practice with the More-Than-Human World**



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Thesis submitted for the fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
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I acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands in which I carry out my research project, including the Kuku Yalanji people of the area I call home.

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Statement of the Contribution of Others

My primary advisor for this doctoral research project is Adjunct Professor Stephen Torre and my secondary advisor is Dr Ariella Van Luyn, both from James Cook University.

A late draft of this thesis was proofread by Jennifer Francis.

During my doctoral candidature I received an Australian Postgraduate Award stipend scholarship from the Australian Government through James Cook University. A grant from the Copyright Agency Limited contributed to my expenses for attendance at the 2013 Association for the Study of Australian Literature conference. My attendance at the 2016 Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment ANZ and Sydney Environment Institute conference was funded by a grant through the James Cook University College of Arts, Society and Education Higher Degree Research Enhancement Scheme.

The first scripts for my *Wet: An Appetite for the Tropics* project were developed with mentoring by dramaturg Peter Matheson under the JUTE Theatre Company's *Enter Stage Write* program from 2013 –2015. The first creative development of *Click!*, with director and dramaturg Dr David Fenton, director Timothy Wynn and dramaturg, playwright and actor Kathryn Ash, was part of the JUTE Theatre Company's *New Works Department* program in 2015. The second creative development of *Click!* with David Fenton in 2016 was supported by a Regional Arts Development Fund grant from the Douglas Shire Council and the Queensland Government with in-kind contributions from the Douglas Theatre Arts Group

The Regional Arts Development Fund is a partnership between the Queensland Government and The Douglas Shire Council to support local arts and culture in regional Queensland.



Except where otherwise stated, all the photographic images in this thesis are my original work.

Formatting and Referencing Style

I have used a modified form of the APA referencing style for in-text citations and the reference list. In-text citations use single quotation marks to open and close a quotation, with double quotation marks to indicate the author's use of a quotation. The reference list uses capitalisation for the titles of sources.

In keeping with this thesis as an open text, I have included some active hyperlinks in the right-hand column to facilitate connection to internet-based material without having to consult the reference list. Given the fluxes of websites, these hyperlinks may not remain current. Reference to these is not essential for a reading of the thesis.

Hyperlinked bookmarks are available in the pdf version to assist navigation back to the beginning of a chapter when the columns are read separately.

If table borders and column dividers appear with irregular widths when viewing this document as a pdf or when printing, this may be corrected by disabling the pdf viewer's 'Enhance thin lines' function.

Abstract

As a poetic natural history, this thesis captures poetry, photographs, natural histories, autoethnographic and eco-philosophical reflections in the web between a Giant Golden Orb-weaving Spider, *Nephila pilipes*, and an arachnophobic performing poet in the Wet Tropics bioregion of Far North Queensland.

My creative practice-led research was initiated by the inquiry:

How can the experience of living in the Wet Tropics, focusing on human interactions and relationships with and within the natural environment, be interpreted through poetry in live performances which are designed to engage audiences and evoke awareness of place while exploring meaningful connections to the Wet Tropics environment?

As a result of this inquiry I have written a collection of poems featuring my lived experience of the Wet Tropics, some of which are incorporated into scripted performances, alternating these feature poems with either a prose narrative monologue or a further series of narrative ‘coupling’ sonnets. Written in a modular, tessellating format, the scripts have been adapted for performances of varying lengths, environments and audiences, being most at home in intimate venues. With performed poetry synchronised to my photojournalistic images, my creative practice creates a continuity of material presence from poet and place through to a shared making of meaning with audiences. A number of these poems are to date presented only on the page, embedded in the thesis. These focus on the nexus of poet and spiders within the wider systems of backyard and bioregion, including our severe tropical cyclone-bringing weather-world.

The fear and revulsion I felt at my first startling sight of the *Nephila* in my backyard alerted me to the significance of emotion in encounters within the more-than-human world. In returning for another look, camera in hand, fascination was drawn into my emotional mix, prompting the extended inquiry: *What meaning do I, as a poet, make of a meeting with a member of another species so different from me?* In response, my investigation actuates the dynamics of the role of a poet-natural historian through sustained, repeated, continuing engagement, observing and recording inner and outer phenomena in poems, journals and images, also considering the further question: *What does it mean to be both a natural historian and a poet?*

To describe the material-poetic relationship with the *Nephila*, in an extension of Plumwood's (2002) concept of the familiar as a free-living wild animal, I define the Familiar as a specific entity, aspect or quality of a habitat or bioregion to which the poet-natural historian has developed a bond. Where there is no sign of reciprocation, this necessitates a poetic act of approach, a movement *towards*. My writing and performing *to* the Familiar in the Wet Tropics has taken on the style of poetic profusion, which approximates the environmental experience (Brathwaite, 1984) in my poet-natural historian's perception of the moods and lushness of the bioregion. Elements of this style are discussed, with examples from my work and the work of other poets writing in and of the Wet Tropics.

In conceptualising my research activities and processes, I redeploy Smith and Dean's (2009) iterative cyclic web model, following the metaphor of an orb web to show it as a recursive system that inacts fresh content and processes into the creative practice-led inquiry so that it continually enriches, re-frames and re-contextualises. A recursive interplay develops between my physical engagement with the environment in active observation and my theoretical, cognitive engagement through inductive and abductive inferencing. My inferences take the form of both hypotheses and metaphorical models, where I allow the living source of the metaphor to take the lead by providing new mappings and inviting fresh looks at the assumptions of the target domain.

Putting into action Elizabeth Sewell's (1971) postlogical thinking mode as a dance between science and poetry, while taking into account the effects of emotion, this thesis becomes a poetic and discursive artefact which evinces the relationships, processes and products of the poet-natural historian creative research mode. As embedded in the more-than-human world, this mode incorporates the extension of a field of conscious awareness into our sensory world through abduction, the poet's use of inner and outer observation, poetic reverie and unitary consciousness within a polycentric, non-hierarchical ethical and artistic view. Lived experience reveals the importance of appreciating the co-presence of earth-others and the inherent materiality of life processes, so that the effects of presence oscillate with the effects of meaning-making (Gumbrecht, 2004, 2006) in a field of relationships which is not only aesthetic but touching into an enlivened style of living that embraces Weber's empirical subjectivity and poetic objectivity (2013).

From within the emotional loop between arachno-revulsion and arachno-compulsion, I consider the relationships humans have towards aspects of the other-than-human world that induce fascination and sometimes also fear. My experience highlights how affective bonds

can form and feed into the dynamics of physical presence and creative, symbolic meaning. In the territory beyond my new-found fascination for the *Nephila pilipes*, multiple responses buzz for attention: anthropomorphic nurturing, arachnomorphic identification and a growing curiosity which morphed into intellectual avarice, a collecting of photographic data like a *Nephila*'s food cache hung on a trophy line above the web's hub. Where the processes of environmental writing involve shared lived experience in a human-and-more world, filaments of practice lie tensed between the power of interspecies contact and the threat of disastrous intrusion. When my camera's contact-lens became an impact-lens, I understood that sometimes these threads are best woven into a barrier web which alerts me to where to draw the line.

From my deepening relationship to one individual spider, a bond has grown to others of her species in my backyard. As this enhanced feeling of connection extends out more widely to my Shire and the Wet Tropics bioregion, the *Nephila pilipes* and other entities, aspects and qualities of the bioregion have become my Familiars, so that my evocations of the Wet Tropics environment find meaning in poetic acts of writing and performing *to* the Familiar.

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