

On Writing [expressing a relation to] Dried Plant Specimens

AUTHOR BIO

Moya Costello teaches in the Writing program of the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University. She is a member of the LabX Environmental Humanities research group. She has four books and many short pieces published. Her most recent work is with dried/pressed specimens of plants from the Southern Cross Medicinal Plant Herbarium, published in the journals *Rabbit*, *TEXT* and *Plumwood Mountain*.

Moya Costello

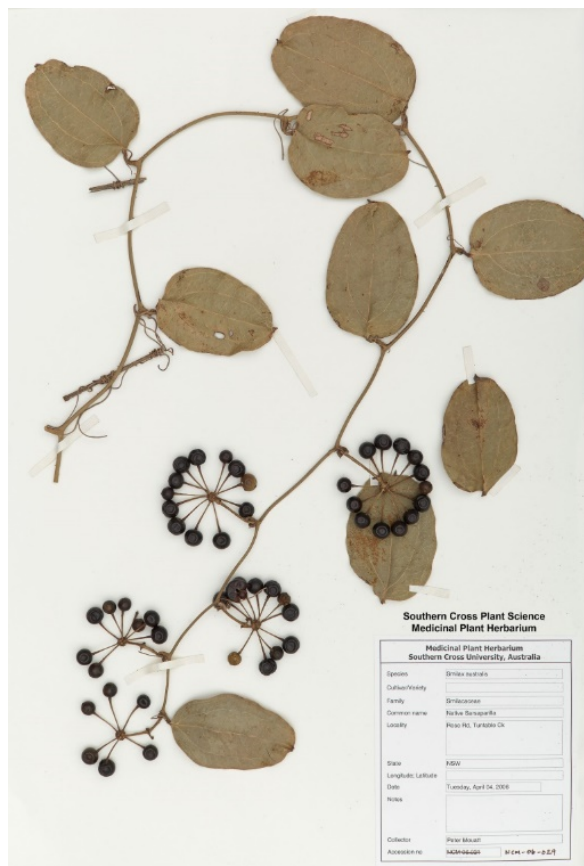
ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an instance of, or an attempt at, interspecies communication, collaboration, or convocation. I am writing dried specimens in the Southern Cross Plant Science Medicinal Plant Herbarium, Southern Cross University, Australia. Wendy Wheeler describes ecocriticism, developed late last century, as a “new critical formation” responding to environmental crises. The paper will briefly allude to these crises, and ecocriticism and its cognates, and suggested procedures for action. The paper’s primary concern is wrestling with how to do interspecies communication and collaboration as such action. As Martin Harrison asks: “What are the necessary criteria for a writing which ... fulfils an ecological requirement?” I consider Harrison’s, Ryan’s, and others’ suggestions of criteria, modes and procedures. I discuss using the frame of ekphrasis and the genre of the prose poem in my investigation of writing the more-than-human. I contest arguments about dealing with dried specimens as a limited sensory experience. And I consider the interdisciplinarity of this instance of creative writing with science.

KEYWORDS

Ecopoetics; ekphrasis; prose poem; Southern Cross Plant Science Medicinal Plant Herbarium, Southern Cross University; dried plant specimens

Fig. 1 *Smilax australis* © Southern Cross University 2016 – by Vic Szabo, used with permission.



hold

(*Smilax australis* family *Smilacaceae*. Native Sarsaparilla.)

Shrunken Spanish olives, with green snuck in out of place. Dented aniseed balls to blacken tongue and teeth, but no teeth-chippers here; rather, it sedates and anti-spasms. Drying red wine grapes, or they could just be currants. Or Pluto-blue balls on a Mars-brown bramble. A rosie ring. A star attenuation. A pronged spiral. We all hold hands. Or black-capped synchronised swimmers would be non-drupaceous vivacious. Funereal black become cocktail-hour frock. Communities, classes in their holding-together via vine stem, and string or leg-arm spiral hold. Their pond-lily leaf pontoons, mother-ships – always accessed and ring-string anchored alongside circular stemmed airy-spinning dervish-dancing altering favourably the course of any ailing. Restoring. Restoring. (Costello “hold”)

In the Southern Cross Plant Science Medicinal Plant Herbarium on the Lismore Campus of Southern Cross University, I ... What *do* I do in relation to the dried plant specimens stored on paper?

Working as a writer and teacher, I decided at the turn of the century, given the critical state of Earth’s biosphere (Hamilton), that there was an imperative for me to write and teach ecocriticism. I think of writing as the

substantive part of my political activity, and of all writing as political (Costello “Irrigorous Uncertainties”). Australian writer James Bradley agrees, in relation to nature writing: “in the twenty-first century to write about nature is a political act, a way of bearing witness to the ecocide humans are inflicting on the biosphere.”

Ecocriticism is “the environmentally oriented study of literature and ... the arts more generally, and ... the theories that underlie such critical practice” (Buell 138). Lawrence Buell (5) argues for the role of the imagination – or, as Emily Potter says, literary poetics – as well as science, technology and the law, in engagement with planetary crises. Buell and Wendy Wheeler have said that nature writing re-emerged “as a self-conscious movement” (Buell 1) and ecocriticism came as a “new critical formation” (Wheeler 101) in the last decade of the twentieth century.

“I had been writing plants, objects, and cultural and natural landscapes” before that time frame, “but about that time I continued the practice consciously” (Costello “pressed specimens”), initially under the influence of Australian writers Eric Rolls and Beverley Farmer (“To See”). Rolls started me thinking at ground level, about grass, specifically *Themeda triandra*, a Sydney native grass, and Farmer about stopping and paying attention – in her case, to a blood orange, figs, irises, tomatoes, jellyfish, sea water on the shoreline, a dead moth, a dried pomegranate and more.

In relation to the dried plant specimens specifically, I think of what I am doing as supporting the Herbarium's scientific work by differently recording and communicating that work. My writing is an “aesthetical way of making knowledge” (Wark and Jandarić). My aims are to make my work with plant science overt; to have all humans value plants, and by implication, other more-than-human species; and to have all humans see our living as mutually entangled with the more-than-human. And all of this is about the defence of the planet against degradation and loss.

But I have stalled in decision-making over what verb (action) and preposition (relation) to use in what I think of as inter-species communication. I sit, certainly. But do I sit with, alongside, or in front of? And do I look, stare at, contemplate or attend to? Do I communicate or commune? I certainly think and imagine. And I certainly write. But do I think, imagine and write with, about, to or for?

I have been thinking of the plants as Other or the subaltern (Marder 127); kinship with another species does not form unproblematically (Haraway 89). So I have found the naming of actions and the expression of a relation to them as troubling, anxiety-producing. Part of the reason for the anxiety is that plants are sentient beings. I don't have exactly the same trouble with objects – wine for example. I'm an autodidact wine writer, a passionate amateur with no scientific knowledge of or formal training in wine. My wine writing is creative nonfiction, and I conceive of my wine and food writing as “public intellectual practice, linking wine as art to culture, society, politics and history.” I (very) freely make metaphor of the experience of wine, playing with the genre, “attempting a transformation of it into an expanded field”

(Costello “The Drink”). But much has been written about our relations with objects too. While not sentient, nevertheless they afford us memory and identity, as well as functionality. Wheeler’s idea of affordance is that we have a responsibility to respond to objects (135), or, as the object oriented ontologist Ian Bogost says, our relations with objects “require speculation” (5).

Yet I have four other problems with this project. I am anxious about working with dried specimens, about framing this work as ekphrasis, about the use of the prose poem, and about typical quantitative methodological questions of how many samples to select in an overwhelming number and why those particular samples.

But perhaps being problematic is not a problem. Afterall, *Staying with the Trouble* is the title of Donna Haraway’s book on “learning to be ... present ... entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (16). As well, Stephen Muecke (“New Book”) has noted that “knowledge is forged on troubling journeys, not just applied to problems by masterful humans in order to extract solutions.”

So what are ways, through creative writing, to “do” interspecies collaboration? Following is a set of lessons from various writers, which I hope are useful to me in divining a track, a way through unfamiliar and unmarked territory, or even as a score card to assess how I am going.

Martin Harrison (“The Act”) asks: “What are the necessary criteria for a writing which ... fulfils an ecological requirement?” (10).

How can we think, speak, and write about plant life without falling into human-nature dyads, or without tumbling into reductive theoretical notions about the always complex relations between cognition and action, identity and value, subject and object? A full view of this shifting perspective requires a “stereoscopic” lens ... to alter our human-centered viewpoint. Plants are no longer the passive object of contemplation, but are increasingly resembling “subjects,” “stakeholders,” or “actors.” As such, the plant now makes unprecedented demands upon the nature of contemplation itself. (Punctum Books)

Harrison (“Tenth Muse”) said the critical question is: “How to get the words to ‘do’ something they do not normally do? [H]ow do you get language to see, hear, taste and touch? such that the finished poem is concerned with one’s responsibilities in terms of representing the world?” Harrison (“Act of Writing”) has three conditions to be met by a piece of writing which fulfils some order of ecological requirement. The first is to be “undetermined, evolving, ergodic or not fully resolved.... The work of writing is to be an evolving act of attention and attentiveness” (10). The second is a reference to a “sense of intervention and participation in the natural world” (10). Thirdly, Harrison wants to position discourse “outside of the discursive self” (10). “[W]riting cannot ... be tied to the assumption that individuation is the main

aim of acts of imagination,” because this emphasis “predisposes us to think that only humans speak” (11).

Marion May Campbell is similarly concerned with the “violence [that] grounds representation and the claims to universality of the sovereign patriarchal subject.” So I am grateful to Wheeler’s positive positioning of, by way of contrast, interpretation, which she sees as an act of “being open to the other ... in a process of intersubjective world changing and making” (133-134). Indeed, much commentary on the arts generally (Grosz for example) points to its generative capacity for empathy and becoming by “brokering a new relationship with degraded environments, displaced others and ... an impoverished imaginary” (Carter xii).

The aftermath of the early term “nature writing” has seen its substitution by a couple of other terms besides ecocriticism – and suggestions for methodology. John Ryan (“Palm-like Fingers”) has discussed “poetic enquiry,” although in the context of living plants. Ryan takes poetic enquiry about plants and humans to be about human sensory, historical and cultural engagement; the use of particular languages; a meeting with the sciences; and the production of knowledge. Ryan (“Australian Ecopoetics”) asks for the following requirements and skills: “a commitment to ecoregionalism, the study of Indigenous environmental knowledges, competence with natural science, interest in the human senses and appreciation of the dynamism of flora and fauna.”

There are similarities with Stuart Cooke’s use of the term “ethological poetics”:

The vision of the more-than-human is at once the arrival in human language of a thoroughly alternative semiotics, and a reappraisal both of what poetry is and where it might come from. In turn, the poems compel us to attend to the territory of their creatures, and often to surrounding territories as well. Together, they are poetic manifestations of the ethical reconstitution ... [of] “responsibility and accountability for the lively relationalities of becoming of which we are a part.” (Cooke “What”)

So my anxiety over the plant specimens as Other may well be a result of an “old ethics” of conceiving of them as “a radically exterior Other” and of an exchange, then, “between essentialist categories” (Cooke “What”). As Stephen Muecke questions: what if we wrote from the “necessary ... convocation [we have] with non-human things?” Also intriguing in terms of method is his request that we let “stuff talk to the writing” (“Momentum” 292), meaning not a writing about, but a writing with?

There there’s Freya Matthews: can one somehow manage “to slip under the psychic skin of the world, and ‘enter’ its subjectivity,” to experience the “‘outside’ as ‘inside?’” And, indeed, she sees poetry as one method of doing this, using the “poetic language of *things* as opposed to the conceptual

language of words,” “where meaning is conveyed predominately through objects and circumstances rather than through abstract discourse.”

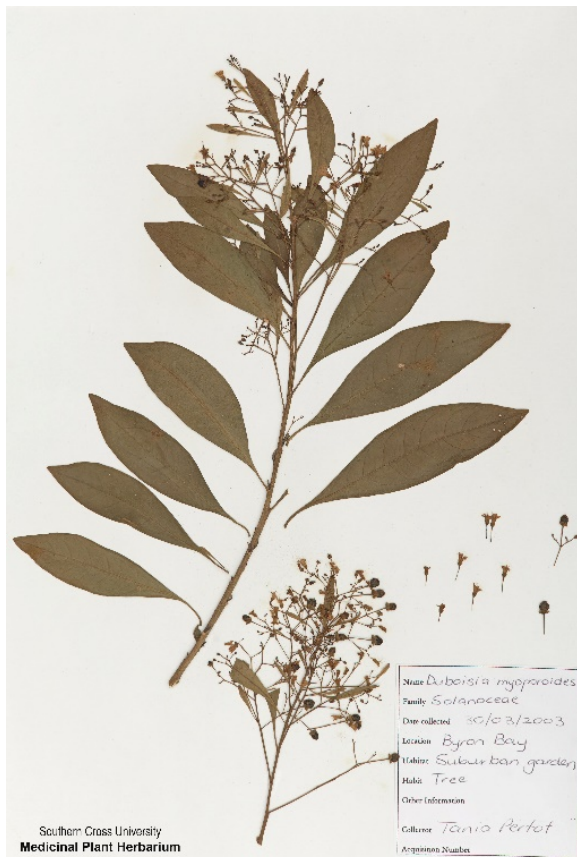
So, are these lessons helpful in finding my way? What is my score? I have to stumble over the first step and/or fail the first le(s)(i)on.

Ryan (“Palm-like fingers”) has said of “taxonomic representation” that it valorises the visual over other senses (8). And in her work, visual artist Janet Laurence (Gibson 5) has referenced plant specimens as fetishised objects. Further, here is what Jane Bennett has to say: “[M]y hunch is that the image of dead ... matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption” (10).

But for me, the dried specimens, particularly under a dissecting microscope, have liveliness, or, in fact, the “dynamism” of the living plants referred to by Ryan (“Australian Ecopoetics”).

Imagery is a basic component of poetry. Metaphor itself is “the language of discovery,” conveying the “living manifoldness of existence,” refiguring reality (Brady 22). So, in the prose poem that opens this paper, I see the Native Sarsaparilla seeds dance and swim, as in “[a] rosie ring” or as “black-capped synchronised swimmers.” And in “bent askew” (“pressed specimens”), I see the dried flower heads of the Corkwood, *Duboisia myoporoides*, doffing caps and twirling skirts:

Fig. 2 *Duboisia myoporoides* © Southern Cross University 2015 – by Vic Szabo, used with permission.



bent askew

(*Duboisia myoporoides* family *Solanaceae*. Corkwood.)

There's a pixie (littleness implied) about the cap with its (tiniest of) fragile spikes. Dare I call it a spike? Possibly a crown, or "berriness" about that cap. The cap's fringe is a vase base. The small flower pops open often (I imagine) – the *Duboisia myoporoides* doffs its cap – like a fan, a skirt twirl. The flower dried then to the tiniest straw broom, dilapidated. And the leaf: a rib or an oar of a spine, its "wavy margin" attesting to not-incongruity, being hairless, soft, pale, attenuated, blunt-pointed. A pixie cap left in a flower base: the flower snuck out while the cap snuck in. *Duboisia myoporoides* is medicinal: those kiddie pixie caps – a spray of pollen drops, dust, spots – for motion sickness (flying, boating: WWII) and gastrointestinal illness. Those spikes bent askew.

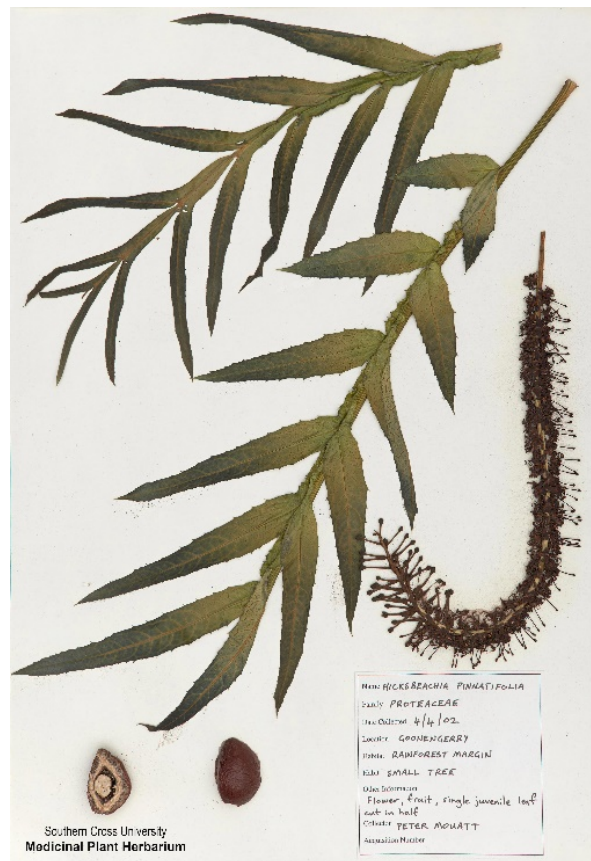
The prose poems do evoke the senses of touching as in "soft ... blunt-pointed" ("bent askew"), and tasting as in "[s]hrunken Spanish olives ... [d]ented aniseed balls to blacken tongue and teeth ... [d]rying red wine grapes, or ... currants" ("hold"). They might also suggest hearing: the singing of the nursery rhyme "Ring a Ring a Rosie" in "hold," and the rough scraping of a dilapidated straw broom in "bent askew."

Still, in wordage such as "ring-string anchored" ("hold") or "attesting to not-incongruity" ("bent askew"), it seems obvious to me that I don't know what I am doing: I am grasping at language, straining towards how to write in this project. The prose poems are perhaps performing my anxiety. They are thick-language based, mouth-filling (like the language of botany too) and, in that, expressing the mess of attempted understandings.

I am aware of Wheeler's warning: "[W]e may misread cultural difference as sameness, and ... anthropomorphise the natural world" (155). Thankfully, in his discussion of the ecopoetry of the preeminent Australian poet Judith Wright, Cooke ("Unsettling") notes the problem of language is "between an idealised" one "that seeks precise definition ... and a hazy" one "that evolves according to the pressures of 'reality,'" verifying an "incomplete understanding ... a knowing of the world as an evolving, uncertain process rather than as a completely surveyable object" (199).

More positively, so far with the dried specimens, I am heading toward fulfilling two of Ryan's ("Australian Ecopoetics") imperatives: a commitment to ecoregionalism and competence with natural science. Both a sense of ecoregionalism and the quantitative methodological question are partially fulfilled by my selection of native plants that are found where I live. I work with botanical and Indigenous reference books. Hence, on occasion, I make use of the poetic, sensually mouth-filling vocabulary of botany: see the phrases in quote marks below in the prose poem following:

Fig. 3 *Hicksbeachia pinnatifolia* © Southern Cross University 2016 – by Vic Szabo, used with permission.



all manner of

(*Hicksbeachia pinnatifolia* family *Proteaceae*. Red bobble nut.)

Thin and fat. Juvenile and middle-aged (spread). Sharp once and now wave point. Tiny hooks, thornlike, to capture, as if evolved from scary to style: pin-pointed many-crests or “prickly-toothed wing.” Its man(y)-legged/feeted “very numerous in long.” “Inflorescence” not “indeterminate” but, rather, caterpillar compounded. Its length a longship, the “common axis” many-upright-oared and its hull rucked flounces, dried fruit strips of plum, mango and peach, fig and fire sticks. Those lizard-skinned leaves, and the hairy-headed seed and white almond resting on a leather base: some dried-blood raw-meated walnut husk with dust trim at its base whorl smoothed by finger swirl. A secret chocolate heart of layers white and dark. Its precious dark-plum red-rinsed shell – a battle-embellished armour plate as ma(i)ssive protection against all manner of imagined battering. A stern hut. A shield ribald with courage. A dome of deep satisfaction. Ferrero Roche chocolates with internal balls doubling contrast. Miniature piñatas. Leaves: sanguine-turmeric-tangerine thin-veined thin. The vessel of the heart, a bopple nut, north of the Bellingen River, NSW, across the border, to Springbrook, Queensland.

I refer to the medicinal function of plants – for example, the Native Sarsaparilla in the prose poem that opens this paper: “it sedates and anti-spasms.” And Indigenous knowledge is incorporated into the following prose poem:

Fig. 4 *Castanospermum australe* © Southern Cross University 2016 – by Vic Szabo, used with permission.



pod boat and seed ball

(*Castanospermum australe* family *Fabiaceae*. Black bean)

Boats, we think of. A mini Viking boat (a robustly imaginative projection): with the curved bottom and pointy ends, the curve forming the basin (with fraying rims). The pod ‘skin’: a pitted Mars landscape, or the Australian red centre (maybe). A creamy basin-cover, mush-soft, a sticky marshmallow, a yum ecru.

Seeds: macaroons, with their cream-filled smile; or a boating-loving ball safely stowed; or red cricket-ball bulge, worn to brown, with stitched stripe – a place to half, the place where it does split into its two seeds. You could (easily) thin-slice through the ovule ballooning from its flat middle-mark. Indigenous peoples slice, smash, pound, soak, shape, roast. I throw shooter/yorker seed balls arhythmically in maiden overs into the bush to colonise. We could name our place, which is not our place, where I bowl these seed balls, Blackbean Place. Nomenclatures abound like Norse myths, Aboriginal Dreamtime: Bean Tree, Black Bean, Moreton Bay Bean, Moreton Bay Chestnut.

And the leaves: angled elegantly with separate oaring. The elongated ovular, narrowly ovate tapering, individually matching, in a flattened way, the outline, the shape of the pod boat, sinking, splitting, opening for sp[r]outing of the seed ball.

These prose poems seem to me, too, to adhere to Matthews' insistence on thingness or objects and circumstances. For example, see "a boating-loving ball safely stowed" in the above prose poem. Or in "all manner of" above, I compare the seed pod to a "battle-embellished armour plate as ma(i)ssive protection against all manner of imagined battering. A stern hut. A shield ribald with courage. A dome of deep satisfaction."

The individual prose poems that have been published, under the overarching title of "pressed specimens," are accompanied by recording photographs from Vic Szabo, Plant Science, Southern Cross University. Am I responding to/working with art works? Are the dried specimens works of art? Are the photographs – which are scientific, objective recording ones – works of art?

According to Cassandra Atherton et al, ekphrasis is a poem that "evoke[s] and/or respond[s] to a work of visual art." "Notional ekphrasis" is a poem "that evoke[s] a work, or works, of art imagined by the poet rather than referencing an actual artwork." Perhaps my work here fits with the definition of notional ekphrasis, because I imagine the dried plants to be works of art.

Other scholars assess ekphrasis as being problematic, because it embodies "a tension between image and word – almost as if these strands of ekphrastic writing are in a struggle for precedence" (Atherton and Hetherington). But I think Ashley Haywood's definition of ekphrasis is suitable for me to work with in this project: ekphrasis differently articulates "nonverbal, aestheticised objects" (107), and ekphrasis "can be thought of as ... [carrying] on with newness," giving "additional meaning" to the original (110-113). These descriptors of the work of ekphrasis, I would suggest, sit well with my sense of what I, as an arts practitioner, am doing in my work with science: differently articulating the nonverbal, producing knowledge.

Though working in the genre of the prose poem in my list of problems above, the prose poem is for me the least problematic. It's an appropriate genre to use in this project for the following reasons.

The prose poem is more modest than the high art of the magisterial-like knowledge of the lyric poem. The prose poem is "more patient, more subtle" (Burns 29). It is neither brash nor quick-smart. Being a hybrid of the prose sentence and the poetic line, the prose poem is an example of an indeterminate form. Such hybrid literary works, James Ley says, "explore the limits of expression and thus the boundaries of the self." Its problematic nature is obvious, "threatening to be one thing and refusing to be another" (Brophy). In brief block text, it can look "flat and one-dimensional" (Costello "To See") on the page, easily overlooked or dismissed in its oddity. But, in

that, it is not undemocratically authoritative: as a writerly rather than a readerly text, it attempts “to provoke the reader into participating in what the work offers” (Shapcott). And its work offers, as Hazel Smith says, “a panorama of ideas ... [as] the phrases surge relentlessly forward” (15). So as a form, the prose poem will potentially not over-ride plant-being; it acknowledges the condition of inexpressibility and the problem of language and representation; and it aims to engage a reader in interpretation.

As I write this paper, I have only nine poems. I see my process and procedure so far as experimental, as attempting, but invariably failing, Muecke’s “convocation.” I haven’t fully accommodated “the unprecedented demands upon the nature of contemplation itself” (Punctum Books). When I string the titles of the nine prose poems together, most of them fit with Harrison’s requirement to be undetermined and evolving, suggesting waywardness or the messiness of inconclusiveness: “all manner of,” “is not,” “not quite,” “bent askew,” “it could be,” “flung” (lower-case used consciously). With difficulty, I can rehabilitate my essentialist thinking – the difficulty coming from the necessary recognition of differences between species. Differences mean border spaces, though porous, still exist. And, staying with the trouble, I can foreground the work of interpretation and curb the idea of representation.

“However precarious or small it might be[,] each achievement matters. None will suffice to appease Gaia, but all will contribute to responding to the trials that are coming, in a mode that is not barbaric” (Stengers 153).

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