OBSA 2015 – Keynote Address

Of Birth and Death: Hearing and Seeing Then and Now

-Elaine M Wainwright-

Abstract:
Two key images, one of birth and one of death, will first engage the senses as this paper unfolds. Seeing opens into hearing as each artist accompanies his image with poetic and reflective words. These, in their turn will resonate with the words of the Matthean orator who touches on life and touches on death at the beginning and end of the gospel narrative. As the paper unfolds the words of Australian Aboriginal artist, Mung Mung, speaking of his sculpture *Mary of Warmun* and of Arthur Boyd on his *Crucifixion Shoalhaven* will echo with those of a small group of Australian poets. I hope to move seamlessly from image to poetic word to gospel narrative in exploring the way that attending to image and word engaged by the senses can enable a material reading of the Matthean narrative.

The invitation contained in the brochure calling for papers for this conference asked the question: What may people who study the Bible in Oceania learn from the speakers and writers of our seas? [I acknowledge those speakers and writers and their relationship with land and sea, ~~firstly~~, the ancient custodians of our lands and ~~also~~ ~~the more newly arrived to our islands~~] **Ppt** The question in the invitation is a multi-layered one that, in its turn, informed the focus I want to take up in this paper. Let's unpack the question a little as it shaped my focus. The phrase "people who study the Bible in Oceania" turns attention to a book **Ppt**, a text that is ancient – for the New Testament scholar, belonging to the first century of the Common Era. The New Testament segment of the bible was born in a place very distant from Oceania, namely in the lands of diaspora Judaism and at a very different time— the first century CE. Traces of those lands and the people of the narrative remain encoded in the text. This book came late to Oceania **Ppt + 2**—at the end of the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries; and it came with the colonizers. Roberta Sykes, an indigenous Australian poet says of it:

> That good and holy book /
> Which came into this country
> Along with Cpt. Cook
> And metal axes
> And beads and mirrors

And money and guns.[1]

This Bible has been interpreted by 'speakers and writers' of our seas **Ppt** and, for the purpose of my paper also, it has been interpreted by artists who speak and write in a visual medium, while poets and novelists and others speak our seas [and also our lands] through words and the spaces between them. Being of Australian origin, it is the land more than the sea that is so often spoken by indigenous and other Australian artists and that will tend to be my focus.

I have entitled the paper "Of Birth and Death: Hearing and Seeing Then and Now" and have described it in this way. Two key images of profound materiality, one of birth and one of death, will engage our senses as this paper unfolds. Seeing opens into hearing as each of the two focal artists accompanies their image with poetic and reflective words. These, in their turn will resonate with the words of the Matthean orator or storyteller who touches on life and touches on death at the beginning and end of the gospel narrative. As the paper unfolds the words of Australian Aboriginal artist, George Mung Mung, speaking of his sculpture *Mary of Warmun* and of Arthur Boyd on his *Crucifixion Shoalhaven* will echo with those of a small group of Australian poets. I hope to move seamlessly from image to poetic word to gospel narrative in a spiral fashion that has neither beginning nor end. Following the curves of the spiral, I will explore the way that attending to image and word engaged by the senses can enable a material reading of the Matthean narrative, a reading responsive to this age of ecological imperatives. First let me establish a little of my theoretical framework.

A Reading Prism

I situate what I am calling a *material reading*[2], within the context of an ecological reading process **Ppt** that seeks an ethical approach to reading biblical texts in the face of the current ecological crisis. It is a reading which gives attention to 'habitat' in all its materiality/materialities as that intricate web in which other-than-human actants participate with the human and the holy in their

[1] Roberta Sykes, "Rachel" http://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/sykes-roberta/rachel-0554003 Accessed 4.9.2015.

[2] For an extensive exploration of such reading, see *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2014).

particularity and materiality. Such readings will be of the biblical text, of art and of poetry and the ways they and their materiality intertwine in the interpretive process.

Given that this paper and this conference seek to engage not only the biblical text but also speakers and writers of our seas and lands, the key focus of the material reading process will be the **Ppt** 'intertexture/s' of the text or its intertextuality. The intertextuality**Ppt** that will inform this paper is that of contemporary artists and poets whose work folds back into the intertexture of the Matthean text, the biblical text in focus in this paper. Attending to such intertextuality evokes new readings and new writings 'in the presence of the interpreter' Voelz says.[3] Nägele expands this a little more **Ppt**:

> A reading that does not merely follow the "nicely woven" texture of the texts but instead takes into account the cuts, the loose and frazzled threads, will enter a space between the texts, where other texts and textures are woven in the intermingling of texts and languages. There we might begin to read that which has never been written.[4]

In considering such intertextuality, Anne Elvey draws attention to the materiality of the text itself: its availability to us and to our interpretation by way of paper pulp should we have our bible in hand; by way of plastic or leather covering microchips and other electronic matter should we be engaging the text on our laptop or I-pad. The texts of our intertextual speakers and writers of our seas and lands also contribute to an intertextual reading of the materiality of the text: paint on wood or canvas, texts on pages and perhaps many other media.[5]

Of Birth: Hearing and Seeing Then and Now

Ppt .... *she was found to be with child* – and there is a moment, a gasp in the Matthean story telling community. So much plays within that moment that is swept away by the final phrase—**Ppt** *by* or *out of a spirit that is holy* (Matt 1:18).

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3 Voelz, J.W., Multiple signs and double texts: elements of intertextuality, in Intertextuality in Biblical writings, S. Draisma, Editor. 1989, Kok: Kampen. p. 27-34.

4 R. Nägele, *Echoes of translation: reading between texts.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 16.

5 Anne Elvey , .,"The matter of texts: a material intertextuality and ecocritical engagements with the Bible." In Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches, A. Goodbody and K. Rigby, Editors. 2011, University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville ??page nos.

And as we imagine that Matthean community, possibly a Pharisaic community in Sepphoris or nearby, we might hear in that space, that swept away moment, first century echoes of the words of Jane Schaberg: the endangered woman and child/the endangered woman and child![6] The genealogist has already broken the thirty-nine times chanted pattern: male was the father of male. The most jarring break for her listeners is this: Jacob the father of Joseph, husband of Mary, from whom Jesus was born. Joseph, husband of Mary, not Mary, wife of Joseph as listeners would expect; and it is of her Jesus is born, not of him [not 'male was the father of male'/Joseph was the father of Jesus]. And then that pause on the air: she was found to be with child....the community's storyteller catches her breath and continues...by a spirit that is holy. And should any have missed these words, the storyteller re-iterates almost immediately: *the child conceived in her is of/from a spirit that is holy* (v. 20).

Mary is with child in her womb – *en gastri*. This is a profound bodily experience. Anne Elvey says of this experience that the birth of the child (even *en gastri*), is the birth of the mother. The mother and the child are born in and through their interconnectedness with/in the materiality of the pregnant body. It is here that the spirit is present.[7]

George Mung Mung a traditional Warmun Aboriginal elder has captured this materiality in his wooden sculpture, *Mary of Warmun* (or 'the pregnant Mary' as it is sometimes called). **Ppt** "The figure is that of a young, unmarried Warmun girl. Her body is painted with the traditional designs. She is pregnant and carries the child in her womb-shield beneath her heart. The unborn is already a man who dances within her—*en gastri*/ in the womb."[8]

It was carved by George from the wood or bough of a tree he found deep in the Bungle Bungle ranges of Western Australia,**Ppt** it is of Earth, and it is of George's 'country' **Ppt**. It speaks the birth of the child and of his mother not only in his image but also in his words that accompany the image:

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7 Elvey, ??

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This young woman
She's a young woman, this one.
The spirit of the little baby
Comes in a dream
To his mother.[9]

His friend and fellow-elder, Hector Sundaloo (Jandany), the Ngapuny man of the Warum people said of George:

He was looking forward to a blackfella way
And a Kartiya (Whitefellas) way
He was a two-way man....[10]

Viewers can *see* and can *hear* by way of those two powerful senses/by way of image and word, that George has indeed gone down deep into his aboriginal roots, bringing alive that bough of the tree in a new way, perhaps the way of the "material sacred" as Kate Rigby suggests.[11] He has also gone down deep into the tradition/the Christian narrative of Mary with the child *en gastri.* Is there also a catching of breath, however, for those who *see* that the young woman bears the traditional designs of an *unmarried* Warmun girl and that George emphasizes that this child is "proper little one":

Proper little one
His mother says.

Do we hear echoes of what Jane Schaberg and the Matthean narrator respond to in different ways: the mother together with her child is endangered, endangered by the law? That space of the drawing in of breath in the Matthean community's theologizing; that question that the in-drawn breath raised for Schaberg – what does it mean to be with child before they came to live together? And for George Mung Mung, why the emphasis on 'proper little one' and why the markings of the *unmarried* woman? A question, an uncertainty, a space in which new meaning can be made hangs in the air, hangs around the materiality of flesh in image and word, and the sociality that accompanies the material: 'with child', 'proper little one'.

We have begun to see what Nägele theorized namely an intertextuality whereby the "loose and frazzled threads enter a space between the texts, where other

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10 ?
11 Kate Rigby, "Spirits that Matter," 287.

texts and textures are woven in the intermingling of texts and languages."[12] He goes on to say that "there we might begin to read that which has never been written." And as the ecocritic turns back to the Matthean text she or he engages a different type of intertext, one woven out of the fabric of an Isaian text (7:14) so that its resonances sound in the Matthean storytelling:

> **Ppt** Look, the young woman [virgin] will conceive and bear a son
> And they shall name him Emmanuel [a name which means 'God is with us'] (Matt 1:23).

In the endangered woman and child, the young woman/virgin pregnant before she came to live with Joseph, God/the holy is with us/the Earth community. **Ppt**Habitat, human and holy come together and explode into new meaning for the ecological reader engaging with text and the tradition which is threaded around and into it. **Ppt** In the child in the womb/*en gastri*, in all its materiality, God/the holy one is with the Earth community. Such a reading may again be close to that which Kate Rigby seeks to speak: "[a] new way[s] of reading earlier texts, which respond to the ... experience of the material sacred in the written word."[13]

George Mung Mung provides another way of access to the material sacred, to the with-us-ness of the holy, namely through his art and his words. The materiality of the child is visible in Mary's womb**Ppt** in a way that differs from most depictions of Mary with child – they generally do not depict Mary as pregnant at all—this image is an exception and may surprise you **Ppt**. George's speaking of the material sacred is also evident in his words:

> **Ppt** He says,
> Mother, I'm ready now
> And the old women take her away
> And the little one is born
> Down in the river here.[14]

[12] Nägele, 16
[13] Kate Rigby, Rigby "Spirits That Matter: Pathways toward a Rematerialization of Religion and Spirituality" in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 287.
[14]

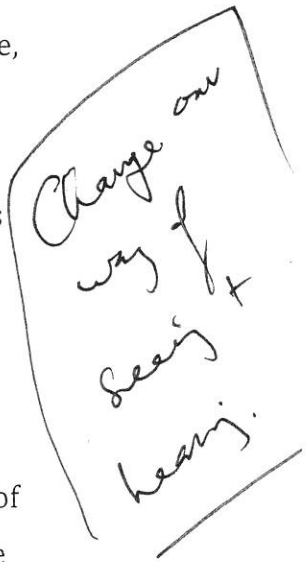
The imagined Matthean community, the Warum people of the Bungle Bungle region and we, gathered people of Oceania, have heard and seen word and image: in the endangered woman and child, the holy is present, in human flesh which, in its turn, has a rich material habitat so that **Ppt** habitat, human, and holy are inseparable. This insight, however, is not limited to a contemporary ecological reading of the biblical text but through the wood and paint of *Mary of Warmun* and the poem of George Mung Mung which accompanies the sculpture, encounter with the material sacred can take place.

Of Death: Hearing and Seeing Then and Now

As we move from a seeing and a hearing of birth to a seeing and hearing of death, I want to draw into our eco-critical journey some words from Australian poet Kevin Hart in his poem, *Facing the Pacific at Night.*

> Driving east, in the darkness between two stars
> Or between two thoughts, you reach the greatest ocean,
> That cold expanse the rain can never net,
>
> And driving east, you are a child again—
> The web of names is brushed aside from things.
> The ocean's name is quietly washed away
>
> Revealing the thing itself, an energy,
> An elemental life flashing in starlight.
> No word can shrink it down to fit the mind

... as though you had just died to birth and death [transition, in-between, something new: as though you had just died to birth and death. The inseparable, the frame around the Matthean narrative—birth and death—and yet Kevin Hart warns us against hiding behind the names already given us in the biblical narrative of the death of Jesus. They have become worn, perhaps from overuse, and do not always open us into the material sacred, do not convert us to materiality, do not call us into repent *metanoia* –the changing of our *nous*, our way of seeing, our way of hearing. It is here, perhaps that Arthur Boyd's oil on canvas entitled **Ppt** *Crucifixion, Shoalhaven* might hear us catching our breath as we suggested earlier in relation to the Matthean community's encounter with the opening verses of the birth narrative.



Rosemary Crumlin says of *Crucifixion, Shoalhaven* that it 'startle(s)' "because of the juxtaposition of the crucifix, Christianity's most power symbol, against the Australian landscape."[16] Shoalhaven is in the south-eastern region of New South Wales, Australia, and the viewer encounters the cross not on a lonely hill but in the Shoalhaven river against a typical bush landscape and clear sky. The audible catching of breath, however, may accompany the viewer's recognition that the figure on the cruciform is female. Here, Boyd's words are significant:

> I do not believe it is enough to say *he* represented us. I do not wish to separate the idea of suffering by allowing just the male to be seen. There has been an awakening consciousness of the potential and force of women in our time.[17]

And one could add, an awakening consciousness that women suffer profoundly in ways that often differ from the sufferings of men and rarely find their way into theological discussions. If we take account, however, of the 'material sacred' which has ~~woven~~ like a thread through this essay, what the viewer *sees* is the material body of a woman tied to that most powerful symbol of Christianity as Crumlin noted earlier. It functions, as do many forms of art, in what Timothy

[16] Rosemary Crumlin , 158
[17] Rosemary Crumlin, "interview with author, Suffold, 3 September 1987" in R. Crumlin, *Images of Religion in Australia* (Kensington: Bay Books, nx), 158.

Morton calls the "liminal space between things",[18] outside time as Kevin Hart suggests, when you have just died "to birth and death".

I was lured into that 'liminal space between things' recently as I sought a way to read the Matthean passion narrative ecocritically/ecologically. As in this paper, intertextuality came to my aid as I engaged with Manuel Villalobos Mendoza's reading of the abject body of Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. Mendoza too works intertextually with Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject as that which disturbs, crosses boundaries, fails to respect order and border—this is what Mendoza reads in Mark's passion narrative. Boyd's placing of a woman on the cruciform renders the crucifixion more abject: it disturbs, crosses boundaries, fails to respect order and boundary. I propose to demonstrate this as I bring into dialogue my ecocritical reading of the Matthean death of Jesus and Arthur Boyd's *Shoalhaven Crucifixion.*

As the ecological reader follows the Matthean narrative of the death of Jesus, it can evoke not just the abjection of Jesus but of all Earth's other-than-human as well as human constituents who suffer and endure such abjection today at the hands of others, most predominantly from human others and powerful coalitions among them. This is evocative likewise in *Shoalhaven Crucifixion* as the crucified female body is backed by the water of the river and the complex ecosystem of land and trees. Such a death is not just of the human body but Earth's others are caught up in it.

If we take up the Matthean narrative at 27:26, we hear the words: after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. It is easy for readers to miss the space between the flogging and crucifixion. The soldiers take Jesus before the whole cohort. They strip him naked twice (vv. 28 and 31), exposing him, exposing his flagellated body to their gaze, a more profound dishonouring than the flogging. Whatever violence, physical and sexual, that may have been perpetrated on the naked body of Jesus as it was twice stripped is passed over by the Matthean

[18] Timothy Morton, "The Liminal Space between Things: Epiphany and the Physical," in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 269.

narrator. It remains in that liminal space, the space between. The mocking of Jesus does not stop with the cohort–it continues on the road to the place of crucifixion and beyond. Even while Jesus is suspended naked on the cross awaiting death, his exposure to the penetrating gaze of all bystanders is not sufficient for the chief priests, scribes and elders. They continue to degrade Jesus using his own teachings against him (27.42-43). Even two bandits crucified with him join in the taunts (27.44). The final abjecting of the body of Jesus in its sociality and materiality is reached at Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, and goes beyond even Jesus last breath in 27.50.

In the space between the Matthean narrative and the Shoalhaven image, abjection of the female body is evoked. Viewers are drawn into the myriads of ways in which the naked female body is abused in many places and spaces around our world as women are raped multiple times as they join the thousands of refugees seeking safety, as they are among people on the move around our Earth as they are trafficked along similar routes to those of the refugees, as they are sold into slavery, or worked until their body can take no more as it was for Jesus on Golgotha. The words of Boyd echo again: I do not wish to separate the idea of suffering by allowing just the male to be seen.

The ecocritical reader will not only be attentive to the gendered space between male and female but will be attentive to other materialities touching death. The very cosmos itself is caught up in Jesus' final moments as darkness covers *pasan tēn gēn*/all the earth/Earth from noon until three (27.45). It is as if Earth mourns the profound and absolute abjection of Jesus and carries this across time to catch up all who suffer both male and female. The cry of Jesus concludes the relentless process of degradation/abjection—my God, my God why have *you* (the Holy One) abandoned me.[19] This can be the cry of all who suffer today both male and female gendered humanity but also all the more-than-human constituents of Earth, all in-habitants of every habitat that is being degraded, abjected at this time, as was the body of Jesus.

[19] As is well known, these words on the lips of Jesus evoke the cry of the innocent suffering one of Ps 22 and hence can also evoke the cry of innocent and suffering Earth.

> *Why have you abandoned me? Why leave me/leave us to those who strip bare the Earth, penetrate its core and all its corners, ravaging its clothes dividing them as spoils, abjecting it in myriads of ways until finally bringing it to the moment of death? Why have you abandoned this Jesus on the cross, this woman on the cross, this Earth upon a cross?*

Such a cry is powerful and it is repeated: Jesus *again* cries out in a loud voice and gives over/gives up his last breath, his spirit (*pneuma*) (v. 50). The *Emmanuel*, the one in whom G*d was/is with the Earth community (Mt. 1.23) enters not only into life in human flesh (1.18-23) but also into another material process of the life-cycle: death. Donna Haraway's reflection on the death of her father may provide us with a short but significant intertext here. She distinguishes between 'body' and 'corpse' and says that at death, the body is no longer there—'that body which is always in-the-making; it is always a vital entanglement of
into fleshly pres

Shoalhaven Crucifixion, the work, the word of one who speaks our land and our shores does not give the woman voice. But there is another voice that speaks lament, not so much in words but in a "wail for the dead". It is Oodgeroo Noonuccal, whom some may know as Kath Walker, who proffers her writing as an alternative to the Bible. She is an indigenous Australian poet, Stradbroke Island off the coast of Brisbane/Minjerribah being her country and Nooonuccal her tribe. As we listen to her words, we might imagine the crucified body of an indigenous woman on the cross against the backdrop of her country.

> Dim light of daybreak now
> Faintly over the sleeping camp.
> Old Lubra first to wake remembers:
> First thing every dawn
> Remember the dead, cry for them.
> Softly at first her wail begins,
> One by one as they wake and hear
> Join in the cry, and the whole camp
> Wails for the dead, the poor dead
> Gone from here to the Dark Place:
> They are remembered.
> Then it is over, life now,
> Fires lit, laughter now,
> And a new day calling.[21]

Lament enables what Stacy Alaimo calls "work to reveal and reshape the flows of material agencies across regions, environments, animal bodies, and human bodies."[22] Oodegroo's evoking of the flows of cosmic forces, the wail rising up from human bodies and the remembering of the dead could overwhelm but there is a 'catching of the breath'—then it is over, life now'. And that life, like the remembering of the dead, 'reshape(s) the flows of material agencies.'

Conclusion

Kate Rigby suggests that "material ecocriticism, ... might give rise to ...new ways of reading earlier texts which respond to the ... experience of the material sacred

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[21] "Dawn Wail for the Dead," in *Aboriginal Culture Today*, edited by Anna Rutherford. Kunapipi: Dangeroo Press, 1988.

[22] Stacy Alaimo, "Oceanic Origins, Plastic Activism, and New Materialism at Sea," in *Material Ecocriticism*, edited by Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 187.

in the written word."[23] I have sought to demonstrate in this paper that such ecocriticism of biblical texts can be well served by an engagement with the speakers and writers of our seas whose contemporary art in myriad forms function intertextually with those biblical texts. It became clear that there is neither a clear beginning or clear end for such intertextual dialogue. Rather, the entry point can shift from biblical text, to image or carving or to current ecological exigencies. The interpreter needs to be alert to what is required of one's senses, especially seeing and hearing, as the eye or ear moves from cry of the Earth, to text, to colour on wood and canvas. There is already a materiality in the reading process and dialogue with ecocritics such as Rigby, Morton and Alaimo provide some directions or indicators of the way forward even if not the surety of a map.

It has emerged that there is often a catching of the breath or a hair's breadth between "reading what is written" and what has "never been written", reading the space which the image and the word create. To read the biblical text and its more current evocations in word and image is to make meaning anew. Today, the voices of those of us who interpret the biblical text in our lands, in our islands, can join with the many who speak and imagine our islands anew as together we face one of our greatest challenges: awareness of and ethical response to the claim of the 'material sacred' in Oceania.

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[23] Rigby, "Spirits that Matter," 287.