

## Complex Anachronism

### Peter Porter's *Jonah*, Otherkind, Ancient and Contemporary Tempests, and the Divine

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#### Abstract

Australian poet Peter Porter collaborated with artist Arthur Boyd to produce their collection *Jonah* (1973) based on the biblical book. Porter writes of the style of the sequence of poems as “complex anachronism,” bringing together biblical resonances with contemporary social, ecological, and political themes. The contemporary context of anthropogenic climate change invites complex questions concerning relations between humans, other species, climate, and the divine. There are no easy correspondences between the biblical Jonah narrative and the contemporary challenges of climate change. But my reading of Jonah 2:1-11 in conversation with Porter’s poetic retelling of Jonah’s sojourn in the whale and Shakespeare’s *Caliban*, is suggestive for reimagining our own complex hybrid agencies and their implications for divine-human relationships as humans face the contemporary tempests of, and accompanying, anthropogenic climate change.

#### Keywords

Jonah; Peter Porter; Australian poetry; *The Tempest*; ecological hermeneutics; climate change

#### Introduction

Disposer Supreme, I am lost in one of your jokes,  
Any other God but You would laugh to hear a plea from a man inside a  
whale

Peter Porter “Jonah’s Prayer” (Boyd and Porter 1973, 43)

Australian poet Peter Porter, who collaborated with artist Arthur Boyd to produce their collection *Jonah* (1973) based on the biblical book, writes of the style of the sequence of poems as “complex anachronism,” bringing together biblical

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resonances with contemporary social, ecological, and political themes (Porter 1987, 71). But the cross-temporal allusions are sometimes “arbitrary,” sometimes “parodic” (71), and for the reader Porter’s stance on any particular “issue” is not immediately discernible. Porter is attracted by the “picture book quality” of the story of Jonah and, as my epigraph suggests, its comic book character. Yvonne Sherwood (1998, esp. 54-55) has considered this comic or cartoon quality of the short biblical narrative, but asks why many critics only see the joke as on God’s side, presuming Jonah to be an anti-hero or “refusnik,” the butt of the satire rather than an agent in a story of divine absurdity. For Porter one of the attractions of the biblical book of Jonah to a writer is “the obsessional nastiness of God; the Jewish God, or the Christian God, whichever God you liked to deal with” (Kinsella 1993). I want to take up this question of God in an ecological context with two aspects that the biblical story and Porter’s Jonah poems suggest: the threat of storms (or tempests) and the agency of otherkind.<sup>1</sup>

The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) reports that: “It is likely that extreme sea levels (for example, as experienced in storm surges) have increased since 1970, being mainly a result of rising mean sea level” (SPM 1.4, 2014, 8).<sup>2</sup> Heightened risks from storms and storm surges are among the future risks for humans the IPCC predicts—with “very high confidence”—as arising from human-induced climate change (SPM 2.3, 2014, 15). Nonetheless, while confident about the nature of risks from such tempestuous weather events, the IPCC is more guarded about the relation between climate change and storms. Although the intergovernmental panel is highly confident that increases in the number and intensity of extreme weather events, such as tropical cyclones, as well as sea-level rise can be linked directly to anthropogenic climate change, the panel is less certain about the intensity and frequency of storms themselves, in large part because the scientific studies in this area are insufficient to draw strong conclusions (WGIIAR5 30.3.1.5, 2014, 1671). Nonetheless, climate change itself and its related oceanic effects, particularly on coastal and island communities in many regions of the world including the West Pacific and North Eastern Australia, have what we might call a tempestuous quality, both in their challenges to survival and their unsettling of modes of human thinking and behaviour, as evidenced in countries such as Australia, by climate change denial and business-as-usual economics. For other-than-humans, related changes in sea temperature are predicted to contract the habitats of some species, such as blue whales and salmon sharks, and to expand the habitats of others, such as bluefin and yellowfin tuna (WGIIAR5 30.5.6.1.1, 2014, 1695).

In this context of anthropogenic climate change, there are complex questions to be considered concerning relations between humans, other species,

<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, the term “otherkind” first appears with an ecological usage in Nash (1996, 8), where he writes: “The doctrine of creation, by a grace-filled and purposeful crafter, endows all life, human and otherkind, with a moral significance, and unites all life in a theocentric—and biological—bond, entailing human responsibilities to all our kin.” I would extend the usage for “otherkind” to suggest a shared kinship with different (other) species (kind) that has moral significance but is not necessarily tied to a Christian doctrine of creation.

<sup>2</sup> My referencing refers to the section number in the IPCC’s *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report: Summary for Policy Makers* (SPM) or the IPCC’s *Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Part B: Regional Aspects. Contribution of Working Group II to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change* (WGIIAR5), and the publication year and page number.

climate, and the divine. This article takes up two of these questions in relation to Jon. 2:1–11 in conversation with Peter Porter’s *Jonah* and William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*: how might we speak of divine agency in a context where human agency has overrun itself? How might the agency of other-than-humans be given weight in our thinking of this first question? I will suggest that accounting for the agency of other-than-humans implies not only an affirmation of a notion of Earth laws, including the laws that govern climate, but also a rethinking, even a resistance to, notions of divine agency as superseding such laws. I then conclude with a reflection on the hermeneutic approach I am taking in this article.

## The Storm and Storms

Not far into the biblical book, with Jonah a paid passenger on a ship from Joppa intent on fleeing to Tarshish, “away from the presence of Yhwh” (1:3), Yhwh intervenes: “Yhwh hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up” (1:4). Porter recounts this moment and the sailor’s terror in his “Recitative,” where at first the storm—“the incandescent elements tossed the ship like a child playing with finger-paints”—is for Jonah “a metaphor” as he dreams that he is with his mother; this is a psychological reading of the storm (Boyd and Porter 1973, 26). Then, while the sailors despair and “know” Jonah is to blame, his dream shifts “to [his] receiving the Babel Prize for Literature in Nineveh,” an example of Porter’s “complex anachronism.” At this point Porter’s interpretation of the biblical narrative is comic in tone—“a bunch of waves like a parabola of jellyfish broke onto the ship’s deck”—and the storm reflects Jonah’s experience of an absurdist god anachronistically shifted to a twentieth century western culture where gods and kings equally have been “tamed” (27).

But the storm will not be tamed and the crew try discarding emblems of their lusts for sex or drink, then draw lots and, as in the biblical narrative, the lot falls to Jonah, of whom the crew say:

Put him near a compass and it blinks,  
he’s a rainbow to litmus, he smells  
of gulls’ eggs, he upsets tuning forks,  
the world’s B Minor hangs about his hair,  
Prematurely grey, talkative, a failed umpire!

Is Jonah the Jonah, Lord?

“Jonah and the Sailors” (Boyd and Porter 1973, 33)

The next poem in the sequence has Jonah in the sea. As he descends, Jonah senses the sea—“Blue is the salt in his eyes”—and “feels his body for a coastline,” descending to “where the light lives / in the alimentary dark,” and the depths become “a pillow / thick enough for mother” (“Jonah in the Sea,” Boyd and Porter 1973, 34-36). The maternal reference recalls the earlier psychological interpretation of the boat rocking in the storm, but now the poem’s narrator prays for Jonah’s deliverance “to your strand, through fish / and fire and ambergris” (36), anticipating the entrance of the whale.<sup>3</sup> The form and tone of the poem is

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<sup>3</sup> For Porter, and many picture books, the large fish of the biblical narrative is a whale.

such that the reader can hear that the storm has ceased for the moment.

Porter (1987, 71) comments that his *Jonah* poems were influenced by W. H. Auden's long sequences "For the Time Being"—subtitled "A Christmas Oratorio"—and "The Sea and the Mirror"—subtitled "A Commentary on Shakespeare's *The Tempest*." Whether intentionally or otherwise, both Auden's "For the Time Being" and Porter's *Jonah* are in the tradition of biblical retellings, like the Pseudepigrapha and the interpretive expansions of midrashim. Auden's "The Sea and the Mirror" is an expansion on, or long epilogue to, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, there is a possible reference to the story of Jonah, when Alonso says of his son Ferdinand whom he assumes lost to the storm: "O thou mine heir / Of Naples and of Milan, what strange fish / Hath made his meal on thee?" (2.1.113-14, 213;<sup>4</sup> Garber 2005, 865). For Marjorie Garber (2005, 865), the reference recalls for a Renaissance audience the particular interpretation of Jonah as a type of Christ, and makes of Ferdinand, who "explicitly associates himself with resurrection," a figure of Jonah-Christ. This Christological reference is of less interest for my study than the intertextual references to the storm and the fish, to which I will return below when considering other-than-human and hybrid characters in the *Jonah* narrative and in *The Tempest*.

In *The Tempest*, Prospero, the deposed duke of Milan—whose daughter Miranda will fall in love with Ferdinand—summons a storm, through the agency of the enslaved spirit Ariel, to draw his enemies to the island of his exile. Like the biblical Jonah's Yhwh, Shakespeare's Prospero exercises power over the storm, though in his case it is the illusion of a storm by which he brings to, and scatters his enemies on, the island. Auden's interpretation begins where Shakespeare left off, with Prospero freeing Ariel and returning to a dukedom that he is glad to have recovered only when he no longer wants it (1968, 203). His books that have been consolation and obsession are no longer needed as, having liberated Ariel to whom he was in turn enthralled, he faces his mortality:

But now all these heavy books are no use to me anymore, for  
Where I go, words carry no weight: it is best,  
Then, I surrender their fascinating counsel  
To the silent dissolution of the sea  
Which misuses nothing because it values nothing;  
Whereas man overvalues everything  
"Prospero to Ariel" (Auden 1968, 203)

In consigning the books to the sea, Auden's Prospero is handing over a kind of human hubris represented not only in his attachment to learning and his enslavements of others, but more particularly in the illusion of immortality that he is relinquishing. That the books are dissolved in the sea reminds the reader both of the seaway Prospero must take between the island and Milan, in order to return to his dukedom, and the storm that Ariel conjured on his behalf. Is he right though in saying that the sea "values nothing"? That humans overvalue everything?

In the contemporary storms of climate change, the sea does not abide by

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<sup>4</sup> All references to *The Tempest* are to The Arden Shakespeare volume edited by Vaughan and Vaughan (2011), giving act.scene.line, page number.

human values, but this is not to say it values nothing. Certain human overvaluations of capacities to know and invent are represented in the industrial and technological developments that have contributed in large part to global warming so that this era is being referred to as the Anthropocene (see, for example, Chakrabarty 2009). But contemporary wastage, evident in floating islands of plastic waste in Earth's oceans, arguably reflects a human undervaluation of much that is Earthy and material under the illusion that such is both readily dispensable and infinitely available. Both over- and under-valuations represent a hubris that neglects the values of the seas behaving in accord with their own "laws" or ways, complexly responsive to, and acting on, a plurality of other agents including humans, islands, and Earth's climate.

Toronto-based author Catherine Bush's fifth novel on which she was working in late 2014 is "a contemporary adaptation of Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, in which the Prospero figure is a scientist who focuses on Arctic climate" (2014, n.p.). Of this work in progress, she writes: "Set upon by climate-change deniers, he is cast out of his university position and takes flight to a small island in the North Atlantic with his daughter. There he begins to plan a rogue geo-engineering experiment that will also be a way to lure his ideological enemies to the island." (Bush 2014, n.p.). It will be interesting to see where Bush's narrative takes the reader in relation to these issues of hubris and other-than-human agents of value, as humans negotiate the tempests of climate change and climate change denial.

Focusing on the trope of "vomiting" in Leviticus 18 and Jonah 2, Brent Strawn (2012) draws implications for the contemporary situation of climate change. The response, for example, of oceans to heating due to climate change, can be construed as "the beginning of a massive geological reflux" (463). In this context, the Levitical "vomiting out for judgment" can be paralleled with the critical "or else" if humans fail to act effectively in response to human induced climate change. The "vomiting unto mission and God's work" in Jonah corresponds to "the impulse to work for change and reform so as to protect the planet and its creatures (including human beings)" (462). While Strawn offers helpful readings of the functions of vomiting in Leviticus and Jonah, and the other-than-human agencies involved, the correspondences he highlights between the biblical texts and contemporary ecological imperatives remain indebted to an understanding of an overarching divine agency, as is Raymond Person Jr's and Phoebe Stroede's (2011) retelling of the Jonah narrative in the voice of the sea.

I am taking a different approach. I will suggest that the agencies of other-than-humans are not simply a function of divine agency but are independently integral to any divine or human agency, and that recognition of this interdependent co-agency is essential for a cultural shift in response to climate change.

## **The Agencies of Otherkind in the Book of Jonah**

Raymond Person Jr (2008, 85) notes that the agency of other-than-human characters in the book of Jonah is usually overlooked by scholars. Presumed to function solely as "an extension of the human and divine characters," other-than-human characters are seen simply as "tools" of Yhwh. Person considers the way the storm takes on "a life of its own" (86-87); the lots cooperate with Yhwh in



telling the truth about Jonah; the large fish actively obeys the divine command to swallow Jonah; the plant, the worm, the wind, and the sun, each appointed by Yhwh, respond obediently. For Person, these other-than-human characters are “active, independent agents who obediently respond to the Lord” (87). In the Jonah narrative, the cattle participate with the human inhabitants of the city in adopting the symbols of repentance—fasting and putting on sackcloth and ashes (3:7-8) at the decree of the king of Nineveh—and are subjects of Yhwh’s compassionate consideration for the city and its population (4:11).

According to Tova Forti (2011), the role of other-than-human characters in the book of Jonah, points to a universal providence, that extends not only to the human characters of Nineveh, but also embraces the other-than-human characters. As Person (2008, 87) notes, the character of Yhwh nonetheless is in control and while both human and other-than-human characters may actively respond in obedience to Yhwh’s command, disobedience is ultimately futile. Nonetheless, Person suggests (cautiously) that the satire of Jonah is directed not only against “a prophetic ethnocentrism but also anthropocentrism in general” (89). He relates this to Phyllis Trible’s earlier rhetorical critical reading of Jonah, where she identifies theologies of both repentance and pity, and writes: “An ecology of pity becomes the paradigm for a theology of pity. That theology embraces plant and animal, perhaps even a worm.” (1994, 223). But, like the agency of Jonah, the agency of the other-than-human characters is held within a paradigm of an overarching divine agency, with which they can cooperate, but from which they are not entirely free.

Val Plumwood’s (1993) analysis of a logic of colonisation is germane to this characterisation of an assured divine agency, which Porter interprets as “obsessional” (Kinsella 1993). For Plumwood, a colonising logic inheres in a system of binarization, of divine-human, human-animal, heaven-earth, spirit-matter, man-woman, master-slave, self-other, and so on, such that the first term in each pair is both accorded superiority over its partner and identified with every other superior term (41–68, esp. 43). The tragic irony is that the first term is actually dependent on its supposed opposite, but acts as if this is not the case. The book of Jonah, as Person (2008) reads it, is ambivalent about the divine dependence on other characters, including humans, seas, fish, plant, worm, sun, winds, and cattle. The co-agency of these characters in responding reluctantly or immediately to the divine command suggests a divine dependence on their action; however, the overall control of Yhwh such that the divine will is ultimately unavoidable suggests at the very least a trace of the master-slave logic that Plumwood describes as a colonising one, and inevitably excuses Yhwh from the Earthy web of interdependent agencies that bind the other characters. Acknowledgement of the interdependence of Earthy agencies (human and other-than-human) is central to the question of contemporary climate change. While climate change may be human-induced, it is hubristic to understand the word Anthropogenic outside the complex interdependencies of human agency. At the very least, climate change is not so much the result of deliberate human choices to change the climate per se, but the effect of multiple actions with other primary objects. That human action can affect the climate, however, is evidence of human interconnectedness with Earth; that this was not widely anticipated and is still met with denial points to the continuing appeal of a colonising (master-slave) logic that sees humans and habitat, humans and other-than-humans, as independent.

## Hybrid Characters as Speaking Earth: Caliban and Porter's Jonah-Whale

For Plumwood (1993, 48-49), the master is always dependent on the slave, although this dependence is usually denied. When we come to Auden's Prospero, notwithstanding his tone of superiority, Prospero expresses a sense of complex interdependency with the slave, describing himself to Ariel as "a master to need you for the work you need," suggesting that Ariel might yet miss his servitude and the exercise of agency it both required and allowed (1968, 206).

In Shakespeare's *The Tempest* Ariel is only one of two characters in servitude to Prospero, the other being Caliban. Both came to the island prior to Prospero, when Sycorax pregnant with Caliban was exiled there. Ariel was imprisoned "in a cloven pine" by Sycorax because he refused to enact "her earthy and abhorred commands" (1.2.273, 191). When he arrives, after the death of Sycorax, Prospero both rescues Ariel and binds him to his service. According to Prospero, Caliban, a creature at the edge of humanity, is only enslaved after he sought "to violate / The honour" of Miranda (1.2.348-49, 196). This claim may need to be treated with suspicion, for while some commentators read Caliban's response that had Prospero not prevented him, he might have "peopled else / This isle with Calibans" (1.2.351-52, 197), as an admission of guilt (Vaughan and Vaughan 2011, 197), it may instead be a slave's ironical jibe at his master's expense.

Shakespeare's Caliban has fascinated scholars, writers and artists, for many reasons including his relationship to the island and the questions raised in the play about whether he is human or animal (see, for example, Love 2010; Peterson and Goodall 2000). In Act 2 of *The Tempest*, on seeing Caliban, Trinculo says: "What have we here, a man or a fish? Dead or alive? A fish: he smells like a fish, a very ancient and fish-like smell, a kind of—not the newest—poor-John. A strange fish!" (2.2.24-27, 230). Garber (2005, 865-66) proposes that the fish—which Alonso presumes in Act 1 has swallowed Ferdinand—"comes to life" in Act 2 in the figure of Caliban "who has swallowed up his strange bedfellow, Trinculo" in a comic scenario where "Trinculo / Caliban becomes a monster-of-a-man, with two heads and two voices."

While like Ariel, Caliban is in servitude to Prospero, they are otherwise opposites: Ariel, associated with spirit, is invisible to all but Prospero and the audience; Caliban is linked with matter and Earth—"What ho, slave! Caliban, / Thou earth, thou: speak!", demands Prospero—and with the island of Prospero's exile—"This island's mine by Sycorax my mother," says Caliban (1.2.314 & 332, 193-95). Caliban, born on the island, and the only "human" character there when Prospero arrives, is characterised thus as "speaking earth." But the contrast between Ariel and Caliban plays into the spirit-matter dualism that Plumwood (1993) describes as problematically devaluing Earth, and denying human dependence not only on other humans but on many other-than-humans. Nevertheless, the character of Caliban suggests that the distinction between human and other-than-human is less clear than is usually supposed and perhaps he is even a humanised other-than-human character (Peterson and Goodall 2000, 14-15). His portrayal as monstrous reflects the unsettling character of his hybrid status. But it is precisely this status that offers a way back to the Jonah narrative and the sojourn

of Jonah in the fish.

Porter's fish is a whale which becomes a kind of country, "Whaleland," in which Jonah finds himself embedded, temporarily as it turns out. First "Whaleland" is the divine that engulfs Jonah, Yhwh's "tunnel of love," but then perhaps also "Plato's Cave or Whaleland One / The schizoid hanging gardens poised / Over the city of madness?" ("Whaleland Sonnet One", Boyd and Porter 1973, 39). But in this place childhood returns, as site of both fun and parental discipline. Ironically, this is a space of divine comfort—"This is a good land / And a good God, not difficult to please" (40). Porter's whale is in some ways both God and Boyd, as if Jonah/Porter is being encompassed and painted by the divine and the artist as he writes. From Whaleland, Jonah prays with anachronistic references to psychoanalysis and counter-transference: "I'll believe it if You say the whale is Me and the acid intestines are only my own remorse"; but then says Porter's Jonah: "I cry to You from this blubber redoubt—I don't want protection, I want Life!" ("Jonah's Prayer", Boyd and Porter 1973, 44). The complex anachronism Porter employs allows a reading of his Jonah and the whale as a hybrid character like Caliban, a fish-man, where at one level this hybrid identification is psychological but at another it is an identification with Earth. The whale is not simply a sea-creature but itself a country, perhaps an island. Swallowed by the whale, Jonah is no longer in the sea, but *in* (not *on*) the land, Whaleland. The hybrid character of Jonah's sojourn in the whale in Porter's poems offers a key for reading Jon. 2:1-11, the biblical moment of Jonah's stay in the great fish, as a moment of fish-human hybridity, in which both human and fish may together be "speaking earth." These tropes of other-than-human/human hybridity and of "speaking earth" are important for my intertextual reflection on Jon. 2:1-11 in the context of climate change. They relate first to the question of the interdependencies of human being and agency with other-than-human beings and agencies, and second to the responsibility to recognise in climate change a response to Earth laws which transcend human intention and bind human action as interaction.

## Jonah 2:1-11

The biblical book of Jonah is short on detail about Jonah's sojourn in the fish. After the crew toss Jonah into the sea (1:15), inducing fear of Yhwh in the sailors (1:16), the narrator tells: "But Yhwh provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights" (1:17 NRSV; 2:1 MT). During this time, Jonah prays a psalm (2:2-10)<sup>5</sup>, and then the narration continues: "Then Yhwh spoke to the fish, and it spewed Jonah out upon the dry land." (2:10 NRSV; 2:11 MT).

The NRSV titles Jonah's prayer "A Psalm of Thanksgiving." There is disagreement among biblical scholars concerning the extent to which the psalm fits the context or was a later insertion (e.g., Wolff 1986, 129-30; Ceresko 1990, 581; White 1992, 213; Watts 1992, 141), and whether it is a psalm of thanksgiving or intended to be read ironically (Trible 1994, 171-73; cf. Benckhuysen 2012). As Gerhard Sauter (2003, 149) comments, the prayer—with the awareness of God it implies—is "surprising" in the context of Jonah's apparently dire situation, in the

<sup>5</sup> Unless otherwise noted, biblical references are to the Hebrew Text.



belly of a great fish. Nonetheless, there are verbal connections with the narrative elements: the repetition for instance of “belly” (מֵעָה 2:1, 2; בֶּטֶן 2:3; LXX has κοιλία for all three instances); the multiple mentions of deep, seas, flood, or current, billows and waves, waters and seaweed (2:4; 2:6), all recalling the context of Jonah’s being tossed into the stormy seas; and the assertion that “Deliverance belongs to Yhwh!” (2:9 NRSV; 2:10 MT) followed by the narrator’s reference to the deliverance of the exodus with Jonah being “spewed ... out on the dry land” (יִבְשָׁה 2:11; Exod 14:16, 22, 29). Despite differences in style that make it highly likely the psalm is a later insertion in the text, the intra-textual references tie Jonah’s prayer to its context, and the references function inter-textually to recall biblical narratives of creation and liberation as well as Psalms.

Whether intentionally or otherwise, Jonah 2:1–11 and the wider Jonah narrative of which it is part plays with the expectations of the reader. Within a book that parodies the genre of prophetic narrative (Miles 1975), the fish that Yhwh directs to swallow Jonah is first male (2:1) then female (2:2) and later male (2:11). The psalm’s parallelism departs from the norm when it speaks of Yhwh’s answering the petitioner’s distressed call (2:3) before hearing the petitioner’s voice (2:4; cf. Pss 18:7; 130:1-2a; see Sasson 1995, 168). At one level Yhwh’s answer following immediately on the cry of distress resonates with the divine response to the Israelites in Egypt (Exod 2:23-25; 3:7), where for Walter Brueggemann (2001, 11), the cry is the beginning of protest or criticism. For Jonah, the protest is not only against the empire represented by Nineveh, but also against Yhwh. The parallel call-response of the opening verses of Jonah’s prayer are in the first person, with the references to Yhwh moving from third person (“I called to Yhwh out of my distress, / and he answered me”, 2:2a NRSV) to second person address (“out of the belly of Sheol I cried, / and you heard my voice”, 2:2b NRSV). At one level the parallelism is unremarkable; at another the subtle shift from third to second person suggests a distance being negotiated.

Without the psalm, the narrative has a chiasmic structure:

- A: Yhwh’s appointment of the great fish to swallow Jonah (2:1a)
  - B: Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights (2:1b)
  - B\*: Jonah prayed to Yhwh from the belly of the fish (2:2)
  - A\*: Yhwh spoke to the fish and it vomited Jonah to the dry land (2:11)
- (Trible 1994, 157)

Inserted into the episode, the psalm is embedded in the second half of the chiasm, as Jonah is engulfed in the fish. The narrative forms the belly into which and from which Jonah’s prayer is spoken. In 2:3, the belly of the whale becomes for the speaker the belly of Sheol, but later Sheol is the Pit, and the reference is to the underworld beneath the waters (2:7). The references to belly (particularly in the Greek translation κοιλία) remind the reader not only of the fish’s “hellish” digestive tract, but also of its womb, especially with the shift to the feminine in 2:2. Verses 1 and 11 take the narrator’s perspective: with the narrator, the reader sees the male fish first swallowing then vomiting up Jonah. Verse 2 takes Jonah’s perspective, as he speaks from the belly-gut-womb of the female fish. From this perspective, as is the case with the body in pregnancy, self and other, the fish and Jonah, are simultaneously one and two. Although Jonah is not ultimately digested

by and assimilated to the fish, for his sojourn in her belly the delineation between self and other is broken down, and as is the case with Shakespeare's Caliban there is confusion of fish-man. It is little wonder that the inserted prayer is subtly unconventional and seemingly out of place, and that its imagery and that of the surrounding narrative evokes not only deliverance but genesis (compare especially the reference to dry land in Jon. 2:11 with both Jon. 1:9 and Gen. 1:9). The God who has power to command and to put Jonah into mortal danger as well as rescue him is the maker of sea and dry land (Jon. 1:9), but in the belly of the fish, Jonah is neither immersed in the sea nor safe on dry land.

Where the biblical book of Jonah provides a psalm to fill the three days sojourn in the fish's belly, Porter fills out the narrative of Jonah's engrossment in Whaleland with two sonnets, a prayer, and journal entries for seven days, beginning Tuesday and ending Monday (Boyd and Porter 1973, 46-53), before Jonah makes a contract with the whale (54-56). The journal entries interweave the experience of Jonah's melancholy anticipation of death, and his ambivalent relationship with God, with wry description of the environs of the whale's gut. Here where the walls are hung with polyps, Jonah can camp and explore. He gathers little fishes to satisfy his hunger. He finds a skeleton of a man and, happening to have papyrus in the pocket of his tunic, writes an epitaph for him. He experiences the "turbulence of digestive juices" that follow "the wonder of the whale's farting" (50). He rescues a still living seagull swallowed by the whale, and in Porter's absurdist melodrama, the seagull brings a "new spirit" to Jonah, and he views his fate differently (53). On the final day of the journal, Jonah "pregnant with his own future" farewells "this single [the whale] among God's creatures: we shall never meet again in this ill-governed universe" (53). As I suggested is the case with Jonah's cry in 2:2, Porter's Jonah is protesting against God.

This God has, it seems, spoken to the whale who, says Jonah, "has hearkened to God and is to conclude a treaty with me to discharge me on the land" (Boyd and Porter 1973, 53). As in the biblical narrative, the initiative is God's but Porter's poems introduce a new note. The agency of other-than-human characters goes beyond a responsiveness to divine mandate when Jonah and the whale enter a contract. The contract in four parts sets out the responsibilities of each party, namely Jonah and The Whale, beginning:

that the party of the first part, hereinafter known as *The Whale*, shall undertake to deliver the party of the second part, hereinafter known as *Jonah*, by means of vomiting, expelling or otherwise voiding the said *Jonah* on to a beach, promontory or any secluded part of the adjacent coast at the earliest opportunity before the New Moon, always allowing for local impediments and hindrances offered by tide, weather or any other natural hazard. (54)

The second part of the contract concerns Jonah's responsibility to assist The Whale "by journeying to the screen of membranes at its throat and tickling or titillating these parts to hasten the epiglottal reflex." The contract further enjoins Jonah to agree to follow "*The Whale's* instructions at all times and, while remaining in its belly, to abjure fire and trenching implements." Jonah must also undertake not to take anything from the body or internal environs of The Whale that he might later sell "on his return to the outside world" (54). In these first two

parts of the contract there is a mutuality between Jonah and The Whale, signalled by the shared responsibility for Jonah's being delivered to land by way of vomiting and also by the way "*The Whale*" capitalised and italicised becomes a proper legal name for the whale.

The contract's third and fourth parts signal a shift. Both relate to actions beholden on Jonah. First, Jonah is "to set up an altar to the God of *The Whale*" and there to "publicly honour, in a litany of his own devising, all Whales, Leviathans, Sea Cows, Sea Lions, Sun Fish, Devil Rays, Mantas" even "Moby Dicks" and "Aquatic Dirigibles," "Basking Sharks and every large denizen of the Deep whatsoever" (56). Second, Jonah must "actively foster the preservation of Whales and seek ordinances of governments and individuals that they will never engage in hunting Whales and kindred sea-dwelling species" (56). So, the contact moves beyond Jonah's immediate need for rescue and God's response through the agency of the whale, beyond the co-agency of human and whale who enter a binding agreement for the release of Jonah, to a human commitment (represented in the figure of Jonah) to honour the (spiritual) culture of whales and to act in solidarity with whales for their survival. While Porter's whale does not speak, in the mutuality of the contract—undertaken while Jonah is still in the whale's belly and which "both parties [have] signed and set their seals to and called upon the Heavens to ratify ... in all particulars" (Boyd and Porter 1973, 54)—the two-in-one fish-man is giving voice to their-its co-agency. That this fish-man is also characterised as a "land"—"Whaleland"—implies that the contract-making character is, like the "monstrous" Caliban, a type of "speaking Earth," which has its own laws (evidenced in *The Tempest* by Caliban's intimate knowledge of the island). With a contemporary context of climate change in view, one challenge is to consider the ways in which a "speaking Earth" with its own laws might be affirmed by those nations and cultures whose economies and industries most contribute to global warming. In "Jonah's Contract with The Whale," these laws are typified in the "earthiness" of the treaty that references, for example, the mechanics of vomiting, such as "the epiglottal reflex."

Can Porter's movement in the contract (between Jonah and The Whale) toward an affirmation not only of human solidarity with otherkind for their survival but also of shared Earth laws be brought into conversation with the biblical story? I return to the prayer inserted into the belly of Jonah chapter 2, while Jonah is in the belly of the fish. One option is to note that the relationship between Yhwh and Israel is always already implicated with Earth laws, particularly insofar as it concerns ארץ (land/Earth), and to explore how this relationship is implied in the psalm of Jon. 2:2-10.

The psalm moves between Jonah's cry, the seas and the sanctuary/temple, as follows:

call-response (2:3)

divine action and/as action of seas (2:4)

- reference to holy temple (2:5)
- the action of seas (2:6-7a)
- imprisonment and divine rescue (2:7b)
- reference to holy temple (2:8)
- comparison with idolators (2:9)
- promise to give thanks and offer sacrifice (2:10a)
- affirmation that rescue belongs to Yhwh (2:10b)

After the opening call-response (2:3), where the references to Yhwh move from third person to second person address, the petitioner addresses Yhwh as the agent who “cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas” (2:4a; 2:3a NRSV). Then, the waters themselves become agents: “the flood surrounded me; / all your waves and your billows passed over me” (2:4b; 2:3b NRSV). A second time the agency of the seas is referenced (2:6-7a). The elements are no longer qualified by the possessive pronoun “your” (as explicitly belonging to Yhwh), but apparently have independent agency. This raises a further point of reflection in relation to climate change: not only is the interdependence of human agency to be considered but also the relation of divine agency to other-than-human agencies. Between the two descriptions of oceanic agencies (2:4b; 2:6-7a), which belong to and are more than the province of Yhwh, the speaker describes his alienation from Yhwh and signals this by his absence from, and implicit longing for, the holy temple (2:5).<sup>6</sup> This holy temple returns in verse 8, but with a shift of emphasis: paralleled with the speaker’s rescue from the Pit (Sheol)—the land beneath (2:7)—is the affirmation that even from a distance Yhwh who dwells in the temple hears Jonah’s prayer (2:8). In contrast to the idolators, the speaker promises to give thanks and faithfully offer sacrifice [in the temple] (2:9-10a). The psalm could be read conventionally with the actions of seas, deep, waves, waters and seaweed as a combined metaphor for the tempestuous experience of alienation from Yhwh, and with the longing for and promise of return to the temple as expressing a restoration of right relationship with Yhwh, a rescue. But the embeddedness of the psalm with Jonah in the belly—of the narrative and of the fish—allows a reading focusing on the juxtaposition of oceanic agency and the divine-human binding that the symbols of temple and sacrifice suggest. Here, the voice of the fish-man, heard by Yhwh in his temple, brings the temple into the body of the fish. Moreover, not only Jonah but also an illusion of independent divine agency has been swallowed by the fish. What is spewed out when the fish is caused to vomit?

The illusion of independent human agency that the notion of Anthropogenic climate change suggests, stands in parallel with the illusion that divine agency is independent of the agencies of humans and most particularly of other-than-humans. The biblical binding of divine and human occurs rather in relation to an Earthly binding where divine and human actions are always enmeshed with and dependent on other-than-human agencies. This complex interdependence can be imaged by the hybrid fish-man who as “speaking earth” brings a divine-human binding (symbolised by the temple) and an oceanic agency together in the body of Earth (symbolised by Whaleland). For those of us to whom such a way of thinking hybridity is alien, a response to climate change needs to

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<sup>6</sup> I have used the male pronoun for the speaker of the Psalm, since in the narrative context it is spoken by the male character Jonah.

include a re-imagining of our own hybridity as a place from which to speak and act.<sup>7</sup>

## Conclusion

In the biblical narrative, Jonah acknowledges his own complicity in relation to the storm acting as it does (1:12). This acknowledgment takes him into the belly of a great fish where the distinctions between self and other are made complex and where the voice of the fish-man brings the divine-human relationship into the belly of the fish, so that the vomiting is an exercise of co-agency (in parts involuntary, as vomiting is) from inside. Does the divine compassion for the more-than-human population of Nineveh emerge in the process?<sup>8</sup>

There are no easy correspondences between the biblical Jonah narrative and the contemporary challenges of climate change. But my reading of Jon. 2:1-11 in conversation with Porter's poetic retelling of Jonah's sojourn in the whale and Shakespeare's Caliban, is suggestive for reimagining our own complex hybrid agencies and their implications for divine-human relationships. Anthropogenic climate change challenges hubristic illusions of human-separateness and the behaviours stemming from these illusions, and requires a thinking of what it means to be human as already hybrid (we are already inhabited and sustained by multitudes of bacteria, for example) and co-agential. Such co-agency implies a more complex picture of divine-human relationship, so that it matters (it materialises) if scholars characterise the divine as ultimately outside the dependency on the other agencies on which godly agency relies. Relationships between humans and the divine are always already entangled with more-than-human hybridities and co-agencies. While it may be encouraging to argue that reaffirming the sovereignty of God over creation could enable humankind to face the judgment of anthropogenic climate change and respond as if commissioned by a sovereign God to do so, notions of sovereignty are part of the problem when ironically they support the human hubris that has brought us to this juncture (cf. Strawn 2012).

In the intertextual approach I have adopted in this essay, I have taken up Porter's poetic approach of "complex anachronism," and have brought a number of texts into conversation across genres and times to suggest not a correspondence between the biblical book of Jonah and our contemporary grievous situation as oceans heat up, glaciers melt and extreme weather events occur when Earth enacts its own laws in response to climate change. Rather I have performed a conversation between Porter's *Jonah*, some of Porter's influences in Auden, behind Auden, *The Tempest*, and the biblical book of Jonah. Central to this conversation have been two tropes: other-than-human/human hybridity and a "speaking earth." In contrast to a reading of Jonah that sees in divine sovereignty an answer to contemporary climate change, my approach considers that the idea of sovereignty is part of the problem and proposes a more subtle understanding of interagency suggested by the text itself. My complex, anachronistic conversation suggests that we craft our responses to climate change conscientiously and humbly as hybrid,

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<sup>7</sup> I recognize that for many human cultures, such as Australian Aboriginal cultures, the issue of human/other-than-human interdependencies is understood differently than in cultures deeply informed by the kind of colonizing logic Plumwood (1993) describes.

<sup>8</sup> To respond to this question requires a further study, beyond the scope of the current essay.



co-agents with otherkind, where divine rescue, if there is any, is part of the spewing forth of our illusions of human (and divine) mastery.

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