

Strained Breath and Open Text

Exploring the Materiality of Breath in Relation to Reading Luke 4:16–30

Anne Elvey, Monash University and University of Divinity

Breathing becomes strained when bushfire smoke blankets towns and cities, as it did in the 2019–2020 summer in Victoria and New South Wales. With the Victorian Environment Protection Agency registering air quality as hazardous, P-2 and N-95 masks sold out. Perhaps as I write in autumn 2020, they remain in Australian houses as a precaution against the spread of COVID-19, a virus that strains the breath in other ways, when those worst affected need ventilators to breathe. As cities, states and whole nations shut down, and domestic and international flights are a small fraction of their former numbers, National Geographic reports that some once highly polluted cities have clearer air; moreover, pollution itself may be a factor in COVID-19 deaths (Gardiner 2020). It is too soon to say whether the global discipline of physical distancing, including staying at home, will have a lasting mitigating effect on climate change.

As ecological hermeneutics has long done, the current situation highlights the ecological reality of interconnectedness, one of the ecojustice principles of the Earth Bible Project: “Earth is a community of interconnected living things that are mutually dependent on each other for life and survival” (Habel 2000, 24). Material connections cross species and continents. One corporeal facet and sign of this connectedness is breath.¹ In this essay with the strained breath of climate change in view, I explore the materiality of breath and its relation to both ecological hermeneutics and corporealities of resistance. My focus is on material co-agencies, intertextualities and voice. Against contemporary contexts of strained breath, I apply my exploration of breath in an intertextual, performative reading of Luke 4:16–30, where the Lukan Jesus is materially engaged with biblical texts in multiple ways.

The Materiality of Air and Breath

Air surrounds us. As animals, humans breathe air. In the processes of inhalation and exhalation, air transforms us through fleshy, organic agencies of tissue and blood, and we, too, transform it. We are part of its breathy circulation. Mostly, the air and its relation to our breath goes unremarked. Mostly, our breathing goes unnoticed unless it is strained in some way, through illness or violence, or unless we consciously attend to it, for example, in meditation, playing a wind instrument or singing, or when on a cold morning breath becomes visible as we exhale warm vapour into chill. Mostly, many of us take air for granted. What is at stake when air and breath are unremarked?

¹ See my related essay “Climate Embodied: Exploring a Poetics of Strained Breath” which explores the materiality of breath in the context of climate change, through readings of three poems from Australian women poets, Jill Jones, Natalie Harkin and Susan Hawthorne (Elvey 2020a).

For Luce Irigaray (1999, 2), a forgetting of air plays into a philosophical privileging of solidity and certainty, of thinking based on firm ground. The air itself offers a different medium for philosophical becoming by way of a complex, life-sustaining materiality that is an echo and affirmation of the feminine (Irigaray 1999, 28). Air is a gift given in the flesh of the maternal body (Irigaray 1999, 28). While I am not altogether comfortable with the terminology of “the feminine,” because of its tendency to a problematic essentialism, Irigaray (1993a) situates the feminine in the context of sexual difference. This sexual difference is not based in, but rather resists, patriarchal binaries while retaining a trace of what it resists; a writing of sexual difference reaches toward a becoming otherwise for women. Irigaray (1993b, 62, 71) has described this as a becoming divine in the feminine. For Irigaray (1999, 2), air itself resists the binaries of earth and heaven. A focused remembering of the breath as en fleshed, argues Irigaray (2004 a, b), is necessary for women’s becoming beyond both the patriarchal constraints around the names, *woman*, *she*, *feminine*, and the conventional, remarkably durable, imagery of masculine divinity. As Julie Kelso (2015, 174) explains, Irigaray does not substitute a feminine divinity for a male one; rather “divinity” represents a “process of mediation between nature and culture (between body and word, for example), a process that destroys neither but enables those two principal aspects of our being to relate in a manner that cultivates *well-being*” (emphasis original). In this context, a recollection of air in its relation to the “feminine” not only unsettles patriarchal hegemony but also promotes an alternative epistemology that privileges life and its flows.

In the context of the strained breath of climate change, the forgetting of the air takes on a further nuance. Air becomes an absence in our thinking of which David Abram (2014, 301) asks: “What is climate change if not a consequence of failing to respect or even to notice the elemental medium in which we are immersed?” Risking hyperbole, he continues: “Is not global warming, or global weirding, a simple consequence of taking the air for granted?” (Abram 2014, 301). Though climate change is hardly “simple,” behind Abram’s questions is a recognition that air connects us, that climate change already inhabits our bodies because we are breathing beings who, normally, are in constant touch with Earth’s atmosphere. Exceptions, where the breather is separated from Earth’s atmosphere under a diving helmet or beyond Earth in a space suit for example, are indeed exceptional and point to the normality of our breathing as an immediate material exchange of animal and plant bodies with a wider Earth community sharing the same atmosphere.

When we breathe, we are co-agents in vast processes of material exchange that connect us across species, continents and times in the circulation of air. William Bryant Logan (2012) describes air as “the restless shaper of the world.” He writes, moreover, that “the atmosphere is regulated by the living. ... breath is being, and ... creatures are the expressions of its existence” (Logan 2012, 320–21). Kate Rigby (2015, 148) suggests that for Earthy beings, including humans, “air is about as close as it gets to an unconditional good.” Nonetheless, it is a good that can be withdrawn (Rigby 2015, 149). The air, with its energetic exigencies of weather, its agencies in relation to climate, pollution, contamination and storm, is not only a material necessity for human existence, but its necessity also places air and our relation to it at the nexus of death and life. Air is an instance of what I have described elsewhere as “the material given,” for which bodies, pregnant bodies and Earth are paradigms, a gift-life necessity (Elvey 2005, 101). The

material given has a quality of “pre-proprietion” and can be described in Derridean terms as “aneconomic,” that is, the material given embodies, or I could say en-matters, a logic of being as “encounter” in which self and other are enmeshed (Elvey 2005, 98; Spivak 1993, 148; Derrida 1992, 7; Mathews 2003, 83–88). The logic of the material given precedes and unsettles a logic of capitalist exchange even where bodies themselves, for example, are subject to trafficking and other forms of coerced labour. Air, too, has these qualities of economic unsettlement even as global consumerist capitalism and its meta-industries impact Earth’s atmosphere in ways that engage multiple more-than-human agencies (Guess 2016, 79–84). In an interview with Maude Barlow, Helen Caldicott (2011, 9) contrasts the privatisation of water, through bottling for example, with the failure to date of capitalism to privatise the air; Barlow replies that “carbon-emission trading” is a form of privatisation of the air. Nonetheless, attempts of capital to “own” the air are unsettled by the fluid agencies of air itself and our bodily enmeshments with air as we breathe.

Ecologies of Breath and Corporealities of Resistance

Recollecting our corporeal enmeshments with air prompts for me a thinking of the breath in literature, through the relation of a text to the embodied capacities of speech and voice. Speaking and hearing, writing and reading are material, embodied acts. Speaking and hearing are mediated by breath and air. Writing and speaking, and likewise reading and hearing, are sibling processes where the priorities of one over the other shift and circle. Arguably orality precedes writing (Ong 1982, 115), though perhaps the uses of language in speaking may be understood as a form of writing, perhaps a writing with the breath on the air. Oral or vocal composition, which may be described as a kind of storytelling, is more-than-human, and places the human as animal in a breathing world. Logan (2012, 18) explains: “All creatures tell each other stories and call to one another through the medium of the air.” Storytelling is a material act, mediated “by chemical signals, by odors, scents, perfumes, stenches” or waves that act on the air to form sounds (Logan 2012, 18). Human oral performances come to us through the medium of air. But written language also encodes breath (Abram 1996, 99).

Orality and performance studies remind us that biblical texts are full of breath. Through rhythms and pauses, repetitions and punctuation, a text encodes the breath. Richard Horsley (2011, 151) suggests that this encoding of breathy oral performance in a text can be approximated by the way a text is set out on a page (see also Elvey 2015, 76–77). A seemingly intangible voice or voices emerge in the interplay of text and reader, recitation and audition. The reader’s breath becomes the medium of a biblical text, as it is also for the reader of a poem (Pinsky 1998, 8).

Voice connotes more than speech. Voice can also be understood as a breathy relation to freedom. A focus on breath, argues Irigaray (2004b, 159–60), is a necessity for women in coming to voice in their own bodies and beyond patriarchal identification of women with bodies. This breathy necessity pertains not only to women under patriarchy but especially also to any persons who are subject to the complex intersectionality of racist, classist, sexist, heteronormative violence. Multiple emergences and exercises of voice, of voices, can be performances of resilience and resistance, unfolding in a claim for freedom from oppression (e.g. Crawley 2017).

For the Earth Bible Team, Earth itself is voiced: “Earth is a subject capable of raising its voice in celebration and against injustice” (Habel 2000, 24). This ecojustice principle underlies the ecological hermeneutic of retrieval, the third of three key ecological hermeneutics (Habel 2008, 3–8). Applying an ecological hermeneutic of suspicion, the reader is alert to the anthropocentric (including androcentric) biases of a text and the ways a text represses or elides Earth and human enmeshments in Earth (Habel 2008, 4). With an ecological hermeneutic of identification, the reader engages empathically with Earth through a conversion to a wider sense of ecological self (Habel 2008, 4–5; Balabanski 2013, 25–27). Using an ecological hermeneutic of retrieval, the reader attempts to write creatively *with* Earth, foregrounding an Earthy subjectivity and voice, through a process of recollection and imaginative reconstruction (Habel 2008, 5). Voice is communal, social, ethical, Earth-breathed; it is part of hermeneutic, poetic becoming in the space of colonialism and climate emergency. Voice is embodied, and human voice relates to Earth voice through the material givenness of bodies and Earth, air and breath.

A hermeneutic focus on air and breath, moreover, connects readers with histories marked by ecological and social violence enacted on bodies and Earth. In this moment of ongoing colonialism, race-based violence and anthropogenic climate change, interpreters need to think beyond the individualised body to reckon with both the entanglements of human oppressions and the scale of climate change, globally, geologically, across species and into a deep future (Clark 2015, 72–73). This reckoning can inform an understanding of corporeal enmeshments and solidarities both ecologically and socially. The material interplay of atmosphere under climate change with breathing bodies, offers a way of thinking the co-agencies at work in this moment, and their capacities for productive resistance.

Eric Garner’s dying words repeated “I can’t breathe,” on July 17, 2014, Staten Island, New York, become a prompt for Ashon T Crawley (2017, 1) writing in witness and resistance to the murders of African Americans. This is not simply a US-issue; in Australia, hundreds of Indigenous people have died in police custody since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, whose “final report, signed on 15 April 1991, made 339 recommendations, mainly concerned with procedures for persons in custody, liaison with Aboriginal groups, police education and improved accessibility to information” (“Deaths Inside” 2019; National Archives of Australia 2020). In November 2015, 26-year-old Dunghutti man, David Dungay, said “I can’t breathe” twelve times before he died restrained by five prison guards (Allam 2020). Dungay’s family has expressed solidarity with the family of George Floyd, whose death at the hands of police in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 sparked widespread protests (Allam 2020). Countering the constriction and taking of the breath in violent deaths authorised by racism, Crawley (2017) sees breath and its performance, especially in the “Blackpentecostal” tradition, a term he coins to emphasise Black agency, as a form of survival-resistance, what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor (1994, 4) terms “survivance”. Through shouting, howling, preaching and riffing, the act of breathing is an embodied performance of survival in the face of racism, an enunciation of a community’s freedom producing a critical disruption that expands to what he calls “otherwise possibilities” which alter “the normative worlds of juridical violence and violation” (Crawley 2017, 2, 85). This writing of breath as a performative of disruptive remembrances and possibilities, echoes for me in Paul Celan’s (2005, 162) description of the capacity of poetry to “turn the breath.” Can

our readings of biblical texts work poetically and performatively to turn the breath toward “otherwise possibilities”?

Breath as Intertext

Linking breath and atmosphere through the concept of aura, Tom Ford (2013, 76) describes a process of “auratic citation” that “provides language with the means to fracture the impermeable carapace of the present, opening it to a breath of other times and other forms of time.” Auratic citation has intersections in biblical literature with what we sometimes refer to as intertextuality. I understand intertextuality not only as a practice of citation and allusion, but building on Julia Kristeva, it is also the complex relation of textuality to the semiotic space of the maternal and the material (Kristeva 1984, 43–51, 57–71; Elvey 2011, 28–43). Through the breath of other times and places, the interplay with other bodies and other texts, a text is multiple; it carries traces of its relation to the material given, both through its materiality and its relation to the cross-temporal, more-than-local interconnectedness of air. A recollection of this intertextuality, which includes the “inter-con/textuality” of which Elaine Wainwright (2016, 24) writes, calls forth the repressed voices of Earth in the multiplicities of existence and agency across place, space and time. This recollection allows for the unsettling of the oppressions encoded in the text, when, as Catherine Keller (1996, 37) suggests, *πνεῦμα* “breezes through the tightest texts.”

In my performative reading below, I listen for the breath when 1) *πνεῦμα* is announced in the text itself; 2) breath is embodied in the character of the Lukan Jesus; 3) it arrives in the direct citation of other texts; 4) the matter of Earth’s air and the body’s breath are remarked where the text alludes to its own materiality; 5) breath enters in the repressed bodies of women; 6) it is interpolated in the contemporary strained breaths of racist violence and climate change; 7) *πνεῦμα* is unsettled by and unsettles violence, social and systemic, that would take the breath. These instances of a breath-filled text do not suggest inspiration in the tradition sense so much as an aspiration to interpret as an exercise of attending to the breath.

Some Matters of Biblical Breath

The Hebrew word *רוח* bears multiple, interrelated meanings, as “the air of both atmospheric winds and animal respiration” (Hiebert 2008, 13). Through its connotations as breath, spirit or divine breath, wind and air, *רוח* links the human breath of life, inhalation and exhalation, and spirit—the “sacred” breath of creatures—with Earth’s atmosphere marked in our time by global warming/heating or, more commonly now, climate change. Appearing in Gen 1:2, as primeval wind, breath, air and atmosphere, *רוח*, is for Theodore Hiebert (2008, 15) “the first sacred thing.” When *רוח* is poorly translated with an over-emphasis on spirit and read as immaterial, this can have problematic otherworldly, Earth-subordinating connotations (Hiebert 2000, 141–43; Elvey 2006, 69). In contrast, Luise Schottroff (1993, 24), with reference to Martin Buber, suggests that in Gen 1:2 *רוח* is characterised as “a giant mother-bird”; the wind or breath is the movement of her wings. In this verse, for Keller (2003, 238), an originary matter vibrates with sacred breath. Thomas Staubli and Silvia Schroer (2001, 214–15) comment that in the Hebrew Bible, *רוח* “almost always appears in connection with verbs of motion” where wind and storm and

the “life force” of animal respiration are associated with “divine power,” life and death. Recovering the material meanings of breath, wind, air, and atmosphere becomes significant for an Earth community under the sign of climate change, air pollution, and the strained breath of creatures suffering loss of habitat, the failing breath of oceans, and the excision of breathing forests such as the Amazon.

In Job 12:10, life and breath are in parallel: “In his hand is the life (נפש) of every living thing and the breath (רוח) of every human being.” The divine relation to breathy life (which is more-than-human) is associated with discernment: “Does not the ear test words as the palate tastes food?” (Job 12:11). The interplay of divine breath and creaturely life underscores Job’s assurance or oath that he speaks truthfully (Job 27:3–4). This assurance echoes in the way prophetic speech is signed with the divine breath (e.g., Isa 61:1). Hiebert (2008, 18) comments: “The biblical concept of רוח, ‘air,’ indicates that the theologians of the Hebrew Scriptures entertained an understanding of the human in the world that is not dualistic but which, on the contrary, contained a deep appreciation for the interrelatedness of human life, other life, and the atmosphere upon which all life depends.” He argues, further, that the understanding embedded in the word רוח and its usages in Hebrew Scriptures affirms the “correspondence between the respiration of all living beings and the atmosphere they inhabit” (Hiebert 2008, 18). This affirmation, I suggest, functions intertextually when Second Testament writers, such as the Lukan composer, refer to πνεῦμα.

In biblical Greek, רוח is commonly rendered πνεῦμα, with a similar range of meanings, “blowing,” “breathing,” “breath,” “(life-)spirit,” and sometimes also “wind” (Bauer 1979, 674–75). Although western readers have inherited a problematic dematerialisation of πνεῦμα when rendered “spirit” or “Spirit,” Second Testament writings are more likely steeped in material understandings (Stowers 2009, 93–94). For example, Troels Engberg-Pedersen (2009, 179) argues that for Paul, πνεῦμα is “a material entity”; in Pauline cosmology earth and heavens are constituted by material realities (water and earth; fire and air), and the materiality of earth and heavens/skies/cosmos resonates in the materialities of spirit/breath and flesh/body. Stanley Stowers (2009) argues for the substantial material grounding of the concept of πνεῦμα. The question is not one of opposition but of hierarchy. Stowers (2009, 94) writes that “in Paul’s world *pneuma* (wind, air, breath, spirit) ... is a refined, qualitatively higher substance with its own power of movement and intelligence.” This understanding of πνεῦμα supports a Pauline understanding steeped in traditions of ancestry and concrete thinking about the interplay of divine πνεῦμα in the physical body (Engberg-Pedersen 2009, 187–89). Nonetheless, Stowers (2009, 99) notes Paul’s indebtedness to a tradition in which πνεῦμα is the active element in relation to “passive matter.” From an ecocritical perspective, both the hierarchy and the contrast of active-passive in relation to spirit/breath over flesh/matter remains a concern. But the exercise of πνεῦμα in σάρξ in Paul’s Christology represents a deepening of the materiality of the Christian’s corporeality and their bodily participation in/with Christ (Stowers 2009, 99–100).

In the Gospel of Luke, πνεῦμα appears, usually translated as spirit, often with a capital. But ecologically the ancient resonances may be better served by rendering τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον as “sacred breath” rather than “holy spirit.” In the Lukan narrative, while the promised child John will share the prophetic character denoted by the presence of רוח / πνεῦμα (1:15, 17), and a sacred breath (πνεῦμα ἅγιον) will arrive on Mary of Nazareth

(1:35), it is Luke's Elizabeth who, the narrator tells, is first "filled" with a sacred breath (πνεύματος ἁγίου; 1:41). Mary, too, in her encounter with Elizabeth is engaged with this breathing life (1:46–47) as she sings out in the Magnificat (1:46–55). As Barbara Reid (1996, 76–77) explains in relation to Luke 1:46–55, πνεῦμα and ψυχή are not opposed to either σῶμα (body) or σὰρξ (flesh). Rather these terms work together to describe the fleshy material subjectivity of the whole person. This breathy sacred engages, too, with the male characters, Zechariah, John and Simeon (1:67, 80; 2:25–27). As the narrative turns to the Lukan Jesus as an adult, the focus of the sacred breath shifts to him (3:16, 22; 4:1, 14), arriving in bodily form as a dove (3:22) recalling the hovering birdy כּוֹרֵב of Gen 1:2 (cf. Dixon 2009). Thus, when the Lukan Jesus comes into the synagogue of Nazareth (4:16) the reader knows already that Luke's Jesus is enmeshed with the breathing life of Earth. Nonetheless, just as the Lukan narrative retreats from an affirmation of the maternal (11:27–28; Elvey 2005, 141–42), the corporeal, airy, material resonances of the Hebrew כּוֹרֵב could be said to be forgotten when in 24:39—where the NRSV translates πνεῦμα as "ghost"—πνεῦμα is contrasted with the corporeal, the tactile, the material. Πνεῦμα becomes a breath that has no body.² But the materiality of this sacred breath returns in the first chapter of Acts (1:2, 5, 8, 16), with the arrival of πνεῦμα at Pentecost signalled by a violent wind (2:2, 4), an Earthy breath. With these multiple associations in mind, I turn to a performative reading of Luke 4:16–30.

Luke 4:16–30³

And he came into Nazareth, where he had been nourished, and went, according to his custom on the Sabbath, into the synagogue.

Should we assume this to be a male-only space? Perhaps not. But if it were, the recollection of nourishment in οὗ ἦν τεθραμμένος is a reminder of the material givenness of the maternal body and Earth, including its atmosphere, which sustains life, and of his mother Mary of Nazareth whose dynamic connection with a sacred breath precedes and enables his own.

He stood up to read.

HE TAKES A BREATH.

The increase in air pollutants makes the effects of increased allergens associated with climate change even worse. People with existing pollen allergies may have increased risk for acute respiratory effects. (American Public Health Association)

The Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (TSANZ) declares climate

² To what extent was the Lukan narrative also echoing Plato's or Aristotle's distinctions between spirit and matter and the relation of the body to the cosmos? On the influence of Greek philosophy on Luke's understanding of the body, see Trainor (2012, 121–23), who frames the question from an ecological perspective.

³ This reading references the following: American Public Health Association (2020); The Breathe Project (2020); Brooten (1982); Crawley (2017); Elvey (2011, 44–67); Elvey (2020b); Ginsberg (1956, 5); Harrison (1992, 51–52); Lamar (2020); Levine and Witherington III (2018, 113); Poppick (2019); Ringe (1995, 183); The Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (2019); Wainwright (2008).

change a medical emergency. (10 December 2019)

The scroll

Βιβλίον—a material thing, made of papyrus or parchment, plant or animal skin
 Hear the wind through the papyrus reeds, the warm breath in the nostrils of a sheep.
of the prophet Isaiah was given to him and he unrolled the scroll

He touches the matter of the text.
and found the place

Is it several places?
where it is written

inscribed, matter to matter, ink on papyrus or parchment, a place that is several places

HE TAKES A BREATH

Air carries the sound of the voice from his mouth to the ears of those in the synagogue.

Tripled, the breath of Isaiah (42:7; 58:6; 61:1–2) breathes in the text

AURATIC CITATION

the breath of ha shem is on me

breath speaks like wind against hair and skin, a voice that moves through
 air brushing an ear, yes metaphor, for material relation with the divine
 an echo too of a woman

my whole bodied self (ψυχή) makes great

my breath (πνεῦμα) rejoices (1:46–47)

on account of who anointed me

oil to skin, yes metaphor again, but grounded in matter to matter, plant oil,
 the animal skin of a human

to bring the good news to the poor

material situations of want, welcome news of needs met

hear his mother sing of an overturning and the hungry sated while
 the rich go hungry (1:54)

who has sent me to announce / proclaim freedom (ἄφεσις) to captives

a material situation of confinement, that might mean slavery as a result of
 war or debt

and the otherwise possibility of ἄφεσις

and to the blind recovery of sight

the return of a lost sense

but what of the senses of the blind, senses as modes of fleshy engagement
 with matter, matter to sense

to send the oppressed / broken down / violated in freedom (ἄφεσις)

material situations of trauma

and the otherwise possibility of ἄφεσις

a co-agency with Earth recalled

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,

and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,

so Adonai Yhwh will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations (Isa 61:11).

to announce/proclaim the year of ha shem acceptable (δεκτόν)

a period of material undoing

a period of renewal

an otherwise possibility of material relation that is Jubilee, imagined or real

an acceptable day is a day of critique

of the oppression of workers

and the enslavement of other creatures

a day of imagining yokes broken (Isa 58:3-6)

Hear in the background: Rome and empire, the felling of breathing forests, a colonial cultural invasion effected through destroying the forested bounds that enabled story and rite to grow in their own unique habitats, a totalising force to be resisted.

a co-agency with Earth recalled

you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water,

whose waters never fail. (Isa 58:11)

AURATIC CITATION

A co-agency with Earth in a Sabbath observance predicated on more-than-human engagement in alleviating oppressions of hunger, disease, debt and imprisonment.

And he closed/rolled up the scroll

touching the matter of the text

gave it back to the assistant/attendant/servant and sat down.

And the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him.

from hearing to sight

HE TAKES A BREATH

Air carries the sound of his voice from his mouth to the ears of those in the synagogue

from sight to hearing

But (δέ)

Is this a turning of the breath?

he began to say to them that today this writing is fulfilled/has been fulfilled in your ears

the body, the senses, the matter of a text from the air to the body's ear

And all were witnessing to him and were admiring the words of grace coming out of his mouth and said is this not Joseph's son?

Do you hear the body language?

The Ocean Is Running Out of Breath Scientists Warn. (*Scientific American* 2019)

It appears he does not want to be admired for the grace of his words—the howl, the shout, the breath exhaled in protest, these are not gracious words, but words of resistance, of otherwise possibility; so, he provokes them ...

And he said to them "By all means, you will tell me this parable, 'Physician, cure yourself, as much as we have heard you did in Capernaum do also here

in your homeland/hometown” (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι σου).

And he said, “Amen I say to you that no prophet is acceptable (δεκτός)
hear the echo of 4:19

in his/their homeland/hometown” (ἐν τῇ πατρίδι αὐτοῦ).

The place οὗ ἦν τεθραμμένος (where he was nourished) is now πατρίς from πατήρ (father) and presumed inhospitable.

He has the conversation with himself, from himself: Listen, beneath what seems like grace to the otherwise possibility: “I am howling.”

Written between 1955 and 1956, in the 49th and 50th stanzas/units of the first part of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” breathing and lung disease bump up against theology amid flames that suggest apocalypse.

But according to the truth I say to you many widows were in the days of Elijah in Israel when the sky was shut up for three years and six months and there was famine over all the land/earth

A material situation of want, and need met; a recognition of a group of women vulnerable to privation in patriarchal economies

And to none of them was sent Elijah except to Sarepta in Sidon to a woman widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Elisha, and none of them were cleansed except Naaman, the Syrian.

Are you holding your breath at the injustice of the divine choice? Is this what the hometown crowd, the πατρίς, are doing?

And all were filled with anger (sorrow, soul, spirit, mind) in the synagogue when they heard this.

A soul deep sorrowful rage they will not bear ...

instead seek to quell their distress through annihilation ...

And rising up, they threw him out

expelled him, exorcised him

from the town and led him to the brow

scorn, pride

of the hill on which their town

It is no longer *his* hometown. Is it still the place of nurturance—repressed?

was built, in order to throw him over the cliff

TO TAKE HIS BREATH.

William Lamar describes intersections of racism and the impacts of COVID-19 in poor communities as “the American empire in viral form” which is supported by “bad theology”. He closes with an allusion to Luke 4:18–30 and describes the response of the Lukan Jesus to the lethal violence threatening him as one of inclusivity.

But he passed through their midst and kept going on.

HE TAKES A BREATH,

goes on to Capernaum ... as the story goes ...

In Pennsylvania: “The Breathe Collaborative is a coalition of citizens, environmental advocates, public health professionals and academics working to improve air quality, eliminate climate pollution and make our region a healthy and

prosperous place to live. The Collaborative powers the Breathe Project through science-based work and a community outreach platform.”

Conclusion

Beyond breath shared across millennia of atmospheric unfoldings, there are no easy conjunctions between ancient text and contemporary context, between the otherwise possibilities of ἄφρασις breathed into and out of a text and its meaning amid our contemporary howls. While it might be satisfying to decide that a text is either unambiguously useful to our time or irredeemably toxic, neither is true of Luke 4:16–30. Read with an ear to its breathy engagements—and I have not considered its oral properties fully—intertextual voices and situations speak into and out of the text both through citation and in the materialities on which the text depends and to which it alludes. The breathy energies of the drama of the text, its intersections with the atmospheric energies of Earth, its situation in relation to empire, and its approach toward and temporary escape from the final breath of its protagonist taken violently, allow the text to be read in parallel with contemporary systemic situations of strained breath, as part of breathy voicings of what Crawley (2017, 2) calls “otherwise possibilities.”

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