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Native Pain: a 'Confluence of Violences' in Linda Hogan's *The Woman who Watches over the World*

In *The Woman who Watches over the World: a Native Memoir,* Linda Hogan lays bare a powerful history of violence and pain, by interweaving her own personal story (one of neglect) with that of her adopted Sioux daughters (one of abuse and rape) and the Chickasaw tribal history, dating back to the Trail of Tears (sterilization of women, land dispossession, loss of identity). This autobiography emphasizes the intersections of race, class, gender and power relations that transformed the lives of thousands of Native Americans, and that devastated Hogan's life in many ways, particularly through the violence of her abused and traumatized adoptive daughters. Hogan's narrative could be qualified as a powerful "gynography in the first-person plural" (Sweet Wong, 1998, 168) since she manages to rewrite subjectivity and community into a single story, showing among other things how violent silence can be: in the erasing of a people's history, the forbidding of its language and religious beliefs, in motherhood, or in a child's road to adulthood. By depicting an intersectional violence that takes place inside the home, on the streets *and* in the minds, Hogan paints a painful but loving portrait of contemporary indigenous realities: "I sat down to write about pain and wrote, instead, about healing, history, and survival." (Hogan, 2001, 16).

INTRODUCTION

Linda Hogan is a Chickasaw poet, novelist, and writer who wrote screenplays as well as for the theater. Hogan's father belongs to the Chickasaw Nation and served as a sergeant in the army of the United States; her mother –of white descent– is said to have suffered an emotional blockade which resulted in severe neglect towards her children, according to Hogan. Due to her father's military service, Linda Hogan grew up often moving around the world to the different places her father was stationed in. Accordingly, the family resided in Germany for quite some time. In spite of this, Hogan says she considers Oklahoma as her "ancestral" home. Native culture and identity are an important

aspect of Hogan's writing which deals with topics specifically related to Native American experience and, more broadly, to the general relationship humans have with their environment. Her acclaimed first novel, *Mean Spirit*, focuses on violence in the Osage Indian community during the Oklahoma oil boom of the 1920s. *People of the Whale* is a work of fiction heavily inspired by the Makha whale hunt in which she recounts the disturbed tribal history of Thomas, his son and his father. In *Solar Storms*, she depicts a young Native woman in search of her tribal roots who ends up discovering the strong ties that bind her to the environment and to tribal history.

Linda Hogan has also published several volumes of poetry and essays, mainly dealing with feminist and environmentalist issues. Hogan has been very active in ecofeminist circles and has received grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, to name but a couple. Although Hogan has been very active in writing works of fiction and poetry, the work that we will turn to for the present study is inspired by her own life and presented under the subtitle "Native memoir", thus announcing the autobiographical quality of the text.

THE BRUJA WHO WATCHES OVER THE WORLD

The author begins her story by recalling how she encountered a clay woman figure in a museum gift shop she visited with a friend far from home: "a flying soothsayer who protected the lands beneath her" (Hogan, 2001, 16). The figure of the woman is represented as being physically connected to the earth: "Like nearly all first people, she was shaped from the planet to which she was connected" (2001, 18). Hogan pays to have the figure shipped to her home in Oklahoma but it arrives with broken legs before starting to "fall apart in other ways" (18) –losing its nose for example– and remains that way despite the author's efforts to try to fix the clay figure. At first Hogan feels disappointed, but soon she starts seeing a strong analogy between the broken figure, the world, and her own life, for example, when she declares: "the woman who watches over us is as broken as the land, as hurt as the flesh people. She is a true representation of the world she flies above. Something between us and the earth is broken" (18). As such, with the very first words of her memoir, Linda Hogan starts interweaving the different histories of land, of people and her own into a narrative that demonstrates how power

relations may be mutually reinforcing when it comes to violence. In doing so, she illustrates the importance of relationality as regards Native women's histories in the US and the power of autobiography within these histories:

> For many Native American women reclaiming their own histories and cultures is not a Romantic retreat to a lost past, but a political strategy for cultural (and national) survival and personal identity. A Native autobiographer, whether a speaking or writing subject, often implies, if not announces, the first-person plural –we– even when speaking in the first-person singular. (Sweet Wong, 1998, 171)

INTERSECTIONAL RELATIONSHIPS

In telling her life story, Hogan focuses on often hurting and hurtful relationships, demonstrating what Hertha Sweet Wong refers to as a "notion of self as communal or relational" as opposed to "identity as individual and autonomous" (1998, 169). The notions of individuality here referred to is thus "Michail Bakhtin's notion of the polyvocality of what only appears to be a singular voice" (1998, 169). The first relationship Hogan mentions in the book is the one she had with her mother. She deems this relationship depressing and neglectful because her mother could, apparently, not love in a normal way. Hogan manages to expose the violence with which she endured this silent relationship:

> I see that my life was shaped by a poverty of the heart, the lack of present love, which left me open to love from other places, because I was a child untouched by my mother's hands, a child so disturbed as to have almost no language. I say this now, looking back, knowing full well that my mother cooked for us and did all that was considered her duty, yet could not love. (Hogan, 2001, 43-44)

This passage is one of the first in the book to assert the violence of silence and to expose the fact that the traditional idea of violence as being only, or mainly, physical should be challenged so as to subsume other aspects of violence within society as well.

Probably because of this lack of nurturing love ("left me open to love from other places"), 12-year-old Linda became involved with a man twice her age called Robert. Although Hogan explains that she was fully consenting to this affair, she also says that she felt that something was not right with it: "Away from school I was already a woman in many ways, cooking, ironing, not only with a woman's jobs and duties, but also in my union with a man" (2001, 37) and "I felt as if I was a child

responsible for the life of an adult man" (48). Luckily, when the family left Germany to go back to the United States, Hogan had to leave Robert behind. She then confesses to feeling a large –albeit temporary– feeling of relief, of energy and of limitlessness; this, however, will soon abate as she is confronted with living in a country she dislikes and in which she has trouble feeling at home. Very quickly at the beginning of the book, the intersectional qualities of Hogan's pain and suffering are put forward, especially when the autobiographical subject realizes that the deep wounds of her childhood's troubled self are probably related to a collective destiny more than to an individual trajectory:

> I was a child who had been suicidal for as far back as I could remember, praying each night for death, as if I'd inherited all the wounds of an American history along with a family which hadn't yet learned to love, touch, or care. (42)

These deep childhood wounds and troubled selves related to a collective destiny are echoed within the adoption of Hogan's two daughters and show what Hogan's writings assert on the whole, namely that the collective intersects within the individual: "[i]ndividualistic paradigms of the self ignore the role of collective and relational identities in the individuation process of women and minorities" (Stanford Friedman, 1998, 72). Both of Native descent, the girls have been heavily neglected and also seem to have inherited the dark side of an American history they know not much about. Hogan's adoption of Jeanette and Marie is a direct consequence of the *Indian Child Welfare Act* of 1978, which created the possibility for Native families to adopt Native children, although the act would prove inefficient with time, partly since it blatantly disregarded tribal affiliations and culture differences, representing indigeneity as a monolithic and reductive identity block. Conscious of the fact that "at the time, in our region alone, there were six hundred American Indian children in foster care homes, needing Indian families" (75), Hogan hopes that this adoption will mean healing for these two children. The youngest of the two girls, Jeanette

> was a tiny five-year-old girl with a stubborn streak, but a hint of sweetness. She was a wisp of a child with thick long black hair falling down her back, as if all her bodily energy had grown into hair instead of bone and flesh, for she was malnourished and weighed only twenty-four pounds, and was silent. Her teeth had all decayed and were capped with aluminum. Under her eyes were dark circles, a trait I later learned to recognize in many abused children, as if they never sleep, are always vigilant. (68-69)

Similarly, Marie, the oldest of the two, is described as being a

> ten-year-old girl filled with silent rage and horrible pain, one who looked through things and people, not at them. Later, when her story began to unfold, her entry into here, into this home, was insignificant for her; she was already broken and wounded beyond what could be repaired. She was already a child who'd lost her core. She had no conscience, no reference point outside herself, and was violent. (69)

In an almost gullible manner at first, Hogan remains under the impression that the power of love and care will be enough to overcome and heal these girls' painful history. Having at that time little knowledge of the way such an unconnected child functions, Hogan is unable to admit that human closeness, physical contact and intimacy may appear as a threat to the children. Subjected to the unreasonable violence of those who were supposed to love and protect her (her biological parents), Marie appears to be hurt well beyond repair and reasoning. Linda Hogan goes as far as declaring that the abuse and abandonment that Marie suffered from and which so long-lastingly changed her, had turned her into an utterly malevolent being: "Twenty years later I still wonder how such ice exists in a human. I still fear it. I wonder, also, how, in my wish for love, I came to stand beside it" (69). Sadly, Marie grew up to reproduce the severe abuse she had herself suffered from and, although she became a mother several times, her troubled temper led her to even deny her own children's existence. This leads her adoptive mother to declare that "when the unattached become mothers –even if you don't believe in it– all hell breaks loose" (89).

After the emotionally painful adoption of the two daughters, Hogan learns that she suffers from a disease called fibromyalgia. It is an illness that takes away most of a person's muscular strength, replacing it with never-ending pain and it is often accompanied by a sleep disorder and a state of never-ending vigilance. Consequently, it deprived Hogan from her capacity to sleep and dream and thus, according to her Chickasaw tradition, from her ability to mend herself. After a year-long and fruitless search for medical treatment, she declares that "The physical healing never came. Finally, there were medicines that helped, but I did not ever return to what I had been before illness, nor have I ever been out of pain in all this time" (134). The violence of this disease is something that Hogan describes as being difficult to share with others, especially because the illness is invisible to them. Since there are no outward signs of it, the outside world has no real proof of the sickness

and their misunderstanding is experienced by the author as another form of violence. Indeed, intersectionality pertains to gender, class and ethnicity but also to physical ability as the works of Kimberlé Crenshaw and Temple Grandin have shown.

INTERSPECIES INTERSECTIONALITY

Among the many powerful relationships she describes in the book, perhaps some of the author's most powerful ones are with horses, such as when she recounts the affinity she felt for Mystery, the wild mustang: "When we walked together it was at the same pace and rhythm, as if we were the same animal" (153). The connection between Mystery and Linda Hogan is made evident from the beginning since the author explains how, ironically, both the mare and herself have suffered a pelvic fracture, Mystery's broken in a roundup of wild horses, Hogan's in a fall from a horse. The writer recalls how, Mystery being pregnant, when birthing time came near, she began rolling with pain, and the author understood that something was not as it should have been. The pain proved so overwhelming that the mare tried to drown herself in a trough of water. When the vet finally arrived, the unborn foal had already died from a broken neck but the mare survived this trauma:

> And now she stands, a beautiful survivor, as if she is a sister to me in some kind of time before. I looked at her and wondered if someone I came from knew her ancestors. Because with Mystery, it was not just her sturdiness or wildness, not the loss of a foal, that brought us together. We had these other things in common, a shared history, a world we once knew, the ache of being rounded up, being branded, owned, and battered. (158-159)

Physical pain and suffering thus create a link between the author and the horse which serves to strengthen the relationality already present in the book and in Hogan's thoughts according to which the author sees herself as "connected to an entire network of kinship relations with family, clan, community, earth, plant and animal life, and cosmos" (Sweet Wong 1998: 169). This is what this section's title, *Interspecies Intersectionality*, refers to, since the intersectionality of violence not only serves as a crossover between categories in Hogan's writing, but also as a crossover between human and animal. Mystery is not the only horse that has played an important part in Hogan's life. Her relationship with the "Big Red Horse", a roan Tennessee walker the author has been hoping to buy, would change her life forever, as she herself declares. Even before

the transaction was over, Hogan went to the horse's stable and fed and groomed it, giving it apples and carrots to make the horse feel at ease with her. The owner saddled the horse for Hogan to ride it but according to her, nothing felt as it should have. The author decides to ride nevertheless and wakes up in the hospital almost three weeks later. There she is informed by relatives and doctors that she suffered a severe brain injury, collapsed lung, broken pelvis, broken tail-bone, ankle, elbow and numerous other injuries. For two years she continues to suffer short-term memory loss and will feel disconnected from the rest of the world:

> In an injury like this, meaning escapes language and description. I didn't remember that I'd try to say a word but another word would come out, that I didn't recognize my daughter, that she had to feed me pureed food by spoon, that there was a possibility I was going to be permanently damaged. (Hogan, 2001, 166)

SILENCE AS INTERSECTIONAL VIOLENCE

This accident plunges Hogan into a world of painful silence. This gives way to a reflection about the various types of other silences, other pains and other beings which she considers permanently damaged in a sense, like herself. This is how Native history appears, woven into Hogan's memoir. She reminds us that history's violence is ever-present although often unspoken: "We are never not Indians. We have never forgotten this history" (59). The way the narrative interweaves tribal and personal stories seems to be a way of helping the reader to understand the connection between the past and the present and draws a clear analogy between the way Hogan's personal history of physical pain intersects with her clan's tribal history of suffering:

> History is our illness. Those of us who walked out of genocide by some cast of fortune still struggle with the brokenness of our bodies and hearts. Terror, even now, for many of us, is remembered inside us, history present in our cells that came from our ancestor's cells, from bodies hated, removed, starved, and killed. (59)

By creating a physical, cellular link from one generation to another and pretending that terror has continued growing inside today's generations of Native Americans, Hogan challenges what will ultimately appear as the most violent of all reactions: silence. She shows how historic and emotional pain are passed down through generations while revealing her own struggles with physical pain as she blends personal history with stories of important Indian figures of the past such as Lozen, the woman

who was the military strategist for Geronimo, and Ohiyesha, the Santee Sioux medical doctor who witnessed the massacre at Wounded Knee. Throughout the memoir, the "I" confronts the wounds of the past and of the present in order to reconcile her self with her individual and tribal history in the aftermath of the riding accident that changed her life. The strategies of coping with trauma are shown to include an emphasis on self-awareness and dedication to all forms of life as well as the very writing of her autobiography, which has the ultimate power to convert the curse of wounding into a gift, by literally breaking the silence surrounding all the different forms of violence that form the "confluence of violences" referred to in the title of this article.

Ultimately, it seems as though the silence is even worse than the physical and psychological violence imposed on the protagonists of the book. Shrouded in silence, the violence that has been forced upon them stems both from the fact that they are Native Americans *and* women living in a patriarchal Western society. As Hogan diligently reminds her readers: "Native languages, larger and more encompassing than English, were forbidden and changed, spiritual traditions banned" (Hogan, 2001, 60). In short, whole cultures were literally reduced to silence. In parallel, the words she chooses to describe her oldest daughter Marie echo the violent role of silence and of history in one sole human being: "She had grown up in the silence of […] words and letters and memos of other people's making" and "She is yet, […] a tangle of threads and war-torn American Indian history that other Americans like to forget" (2001, 77). Both her daughters grew up and proved to be prone to violence because of the silent abuse they'd been subjected to as young Native girls. Similarly, the narrative moment in which the author expresses the most anguish and fear is made up of the silences of her own mind when she suffers from amnesia after her fall from "the big red horse". Being unable to voice her past, her feelings *and* her pain is described by Hogan as an experience that is far more violent than just *going through* the accident and the pain.

Silence, again, sums up the relationship Hogan had with her own mother, relationship from which she confesses to having so badly suffered (to the point it drove her to adolescent alcoholism). Binding all these forms of violence together, silence also permits us to talk about the conditions of animals and environmentalism, given that, in Hogan's eyes, silence also characterizes the violence done to the natural world.

ECOFEMINISM AS A TOOL FOR ANALYSIS

One tool which can help us to better analyze this "confluence of violences" as being truly intersectional –and as pertaining also to environmental degradation– can be found in feminist and ecofeminist thinking. As Greta Gaard explained in her 2001 article "Women, Water, Energy":

> More than a theory about feminism and environmentalism, or women and nature, as the name might imply, ecofeminism approaches the problems of environmental degradation and social injustice from the premise that how we treat nature and how we treat each other are inseparably linked. (Gaard, 2001, 158)

Val Plumwood, in her 1993 *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, defined dualism as being at the heart of intersectional violence and as stemming from "a certain kind of denied dependency on a subordinated other" (Plumwood, 1993, 41):

> Examining the various forms of oppression, particularly the intersections of race, gender, and colonialism, Plumwood showed how "by means of dualism, the colonized are appropriated, incorporated, into the selfhood and culture of the master, which forms their identity." (Plumwood, 1993, 41-42) […] Exemplifying these dualisms are the following sets of contrasting pairs, whereby the privileged self of Western culture is constructed in opposition to the devalued other of nature:
>
> self / other
> culture / nature
> reason / nature
> male / female
> mind / body
> master / slave
> rationality / animality
> civilized / primitive
> public / private
> White / non-White
> subject / object […]
> (Gaard, 2001, 158)

It is easy to see, according to this "logic of domination" how intersectional violence is dealt with here. On many levels, what Hogan expresses through her memoir is her belonging to the category of "devalued other of nature" in the Western conceptual mind. The accumulation or "plurality of violences" she and her relatives suffered from are, it

appears, different forms of the same violence, this is why we use the term "confluence" to describe them.

CONCLUSION

Talking about all these very different but interrelated forms of silence, and thus of violence, allows the author to draw links between the species, as well as between people; such as when she recounts a nest of kittens at the orphanage from which her daughters came:

> the silent kittens at the orphanage had inherited their mother's muteness. Whether it was a physical condition or whether they'd learned soundlessness, I don't know. I only know that silence, muteness, was not entirely foreign to me. Like the kittens, like my younger daughter, I first grew into my remembered life in a house without words, and as a child, I became wordless outside of home. (Hogan, 2001, 92)

Within these personal life stories' silences dwell and appear fragments of the silent tribal history these peoples have had to endure such as the forced sterilization of many Native women, the alcohol which has literally been used to silence the mind and to cope with the violence of History, according to the author. Through the narrative, silence thus becomes what could be analyzed as one of the worst forms of violence, as well as the commonality and the intersectional space in which this confluence of violences continues to exist.

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