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COPING WITH TRAUMA: SELF-PORTRAYAL IN LINDA HOGAN'S MEMOIR

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Abstract: *This essay demonstrates that in Linda Hogan's The Woman Who Watches over the World (2001) the "I" confronts the trauma of the past and of the present in order to reconcile her self with her personal and communal histories in the aftermath of the riding accident that changed her life. Her strategies of coping with trauma are shown to include an emphasis on spirituality and self-awareness as well as the very writing of her memoir. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's insights from their introduction to Women, Autobiography, Theory are used for analyzing Hogan's autobiographical practices. The situatedness of the subject implies an examination both of gender issues and of tribal history. Invoking the history of destruction inflicted on American Indian communities, Hogan discusses the Chickasaw past as announcing her own pain-stricken life: "I am one of the children who lived inside my grandmother, and was carried, cell, gene, and spirit, within mourners along the Trail of Tears" (123). The "I" sees the relationship with her mother, based on silence, as the source of her alienation. The discovery of self-expression turns into a way towards salvation and delivers her from the pain of history. However, the legacy of violence lives on and surfaces in the descendants of those who experienced removal, loss and humiliation on the Trail of Tears. The volume American Indian Women Telling their Lives by Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands provides the specificity of the terms needed to address such topics which are further illuminated by references to Linda Hogan's novels and non-fiction.*

In her important study *Native American Life Writing*, Hertha D. Sweet Wong includes Linda Hogan's *The Woman Who Watches over the World* among the most representative written autobiographies for the contemporary period, thus establishing its rightful place in the context of the genre. Hogan's discourse is clear proof that native intellectuals today have a strong sense of who they are and achieve relevant self-portrayals even as their autobiographies are viewed by the critic as a "mode of grappling with vexed questions about the instability of identity" (139).

When one pursues the comparison between Hogan's work and other American Indian women's autobiographies, the first chapter in *American Indian Women, Telling Their Lives* by Gretchen M. Bataille and Kathleen Mullen Sands provides seminal information. The study focuses on the characteristics of a tradition with interesting specificities that are relevant here. One feature that distinguishes American Indian life writing, including Hogan's, from mainstream life writing is the situatedness of the writing subject. The point that Bataille and Sands make is that in most native tribes women are not oppressed or subjected, but central and powerful:

This power that women have traditionally exerted in Indian communities also has some impact on the narratives under study because it clarifies the importance of the role of the narrators in the well-being of their own families and tribes and undercuts the stereotypical notion that Indian women were simply drudges whose tasks and roles were merely supportive ones. (18-19)

Likewise, the present analysis sets out to demonstrate that Hogan's saga will eventually point to her as a sustaining force not only for her family, but also for all the communities she is part of. This conclusion is not emphasized by Hogan, but reached by the reader, the quality of modesty being another characteristic of native American Indian women in general, and of their life writing in particular.

As far as the thematic content is concerned, Bataille and Sands point again to an essential feature shared by American Indian women's narratives stating pertinently that "There is a sense in most Indian women's autobiographies of the connectedness of all things, of personal life flow" (8). This all-embracing worldview applies to Hogan's writing as well, and it reflects the circularity of space and time that many American Indian nations cherish.

Hogan's whole work is informed by a deep-rooted concern for the living world and for the best image to express the need for reconnecting broken links. *The Woman Who Watches over the World* dwells on the interplay between connectedness and fragmentation from its very title, which was inspired by a clay figure. Sold in a gift shop as "The Bruja Who Watches Over the Earth" (17), and so, an epitome of wholeness and protection, the clay woman actually becomes a metaphor for the present state of the world, that of destruction and defenselessness, the moment the object is literally broken while being sent in the mail: "the woman who watches over us is as broken as the land, as hurt as the flesh people" (18). Progress into Hogan's autobiographical account unveils further interpretations of this central image. The woman could actually stand for the speaking voice in the text that strives to achieve unity and render meaning for the sake of the reader.

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 communal 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.

On the way to revealing the past, the autobiographical subject first looks back upon her childhood. The adult consciousness discovers deep wounds that seem to explain her troubled self at the time since the individual trajectory is seen as the direct consequence of a collective destiny:

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)

The focus upon the need to remember before healing can be effective makes Hogan's writing become part of the larger context defined by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson in their theorizing of women's autobiography:

Since autobiography unfolds in the folds of memory, there are projects to be found in probing the limits of remembering, the politics of remembering, the communal effects of remembering, and the ways in which remembering confuses our expectations of linearity and spatiality, of poetics and thematics in narrative. (39)

Actually, Hogan uses the personal memory of her suicidal drive, to which she shockingly confesses with the political purpose of drawing the reader's attention to collective history. Her lines are an appeal addressed to the reader to understand the complexity of the American Indian contemporary situation, which bears the legacy of a tormented past starting from her own individual experience.

In an earlier autobiographical piece *The Two Lives*, Hogan traces the history of each branch of her ancestors in order to illustrate the conviction that the present dysfunctions at the heart of her family can be

explained by historical genocide. Discussing her mother's family of pioneers who advanced into Nebraska plains despite hardship, she notes: "It was a continuing time of great and common acts of cruelty and violence" (437). Thus she marks a direct correspondence between the cruelty and violence enacted by intruders in the territory and the cruelty and violence with which the land responded, sometimes turning into a major obstacle against the pioneers' thirst to thrive.

These fierce people perceived the American Indians as the enemy and Hogan cannot help but notice that representatives of both sides form her ancestry: "When I think of these parallel worlds, it's with the realization that I contain blood of both victim and victimizer" (119-120). This statement essential for her sense of identity could apparently point to a split and cause life-long tension, but the speaker is always in favor of a re-connective solution: "But I also hold that there are forces deeper than blood. It is to these that I look, to the roots of tradition and their growth from ages-old human integrity and knowledge of the world" (120). Her belief in the wholeness of the universe is reaffirmed here, redeeming the crisis.

When dealing with the ancestors on her father's side, Hogan considers that the history of the Chickasaws predicts her own pain-stricken life. As she is already a winner in the fight with her suicidal drives and her drinking problem, she is not finding excuses for the problems in her life, but she is making sense of the source of her illnesses, while reminding the others of it: "I am one of the children who lived inside my grandmother, and was carried, cell, gene, and spirit, within mourners along the Trail of Tears" (123). The reality of the Trail of Tears in the 1830s haunts many of her works as she attempts to address the sorrow of those times and write history from the perspective of the dispossessed people. In "The Two Lives" Hogan captures the moment in the history of the United States when several south-eastern tribes were forced away from their homelands to march to Oklahoma as follows:

That was the trail where soldiers killed children in order to make the journey quick, where women were brutalized, men murdered, where the bodies of living people were left to die as markers along a trail of history, pointing the direction back to our homeland (438).

The violent history lives on and surfaces in the descendants of those who experienced removal, loss and humiliation on the Trail of Tears.

The act of exposing the most unsettling paradoxes of the frightful journey reappears in *The Woman Who Watches over the World*: "My ancestors were followed by thieves and the military. They would later be charged by the United States \$720, 000 for their own removal from their homeland. The Chickasaws owed money for food and supplies that never arrived" (117). The exactness of the information is an open accusation that shows the government's injustice. Moreover, the terms used to describe the traumatic experience of the enforced exile are definitely meant to acknowledge, commemorate and eventually heal. Hogan believes in the reconciliation between various shreds of identity, which can be reached only through balancing the past of the ancestors and the future of one's unborn children. The idea that the individual can only exist in a web of love relationships compromising predecessors and descendants reflects Hogan's life creed expressed in one of her interviews: "We came here with work to do – balancing the forces – and with great capacities for love and joy to fulfill with/in our full selves" (Bruchac 131). The "here" in this quotation could be the universe all mankind is bound to live in.

The topos that Hogan most often mentions as central to her need for home, balance, love and interconnectedness is Oklahoma. Many statements go back to the formative place she celebrates in all her writing since, as she declares: "my identity with family is there, with Chickasaw people and land, and maybe my idea of what a home is, is *there*, in south-central Oklahoma. I think also, this is where I was *loved*" (Smith 145). Thus the episode that narrates a visit to her paternal grandmother's house in *The Woman Who Watches over the World* offers the perfect occasion for insisting on the indestructible link

between humans and land: “‘Oklahoma’, as a word, means red earth, red people. It is a term of connection. I always feel a certain love coming from the land itself, and that day I did; my grandmother’s world remembered us” (124). The powerful memory of the land that influences the course of both history and contemporary life is a recurrent theme with Hogan, especially when she takes up the damage the modernized world has done to the land. The land representing the traumatized seems to take its revenge on the modern man representing the traumatizer by determining various abnormal states that cause the latter a lot of pain.

Besides the trauma inherited in one’s blood, early life is also marked by detrimental external factors, part of a polluted environment, whose harmful effect is realized only in retrospect as the adult speaker analyzes her former exposures:

We lived in a world where DDT was sprayed on us to keep flies away... DDT was sprayed freely on the table, or any other place insects ventured. Mercury was also considered harmless at the time. Merthiolate and Mercurochrome, it was painted on our throats to keep us from tonsillitis and strep infections. We played inside rusted cars by the nearby dump that was later revealed to be a chemical waste site. (109)

Supposedly standing for scientific progress and improvement in twentieth century people’s lives, the substances mentioned and the unprotected waste site represent the source of sickness and nightmares that seemed unexplainable to the speaker and her family at the time. Moreover, they represent clear signs that humans are completely alienated from nature in this age of heavy industrialization and medical experiment, and so vulnerable to uncontrollable forces and prone to various psychological conditions. In addressing these issues, the autobiographer echoes major concerns that have been taken up by eco-psychology. “Original trauma”, for example, is considered to be a generalized state that Chellis Glendinning discusses as follows:

The trauma endured by technological people like ourselves is the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the natural world: from the tendrils of the earthly textures, from the rhythms of sun and moon, from the spirits of the bears and trees, from the life force itself. This is also the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the kinds of social and cultural experiences our ancestors assumed when they lived in rhythm with the natural world. (quoted in Lundquist 121-122)

Another consequence of such inescapable trauma would be the communication breakdown experienced at all levels, but most painfully, within the family. The speaker in *The Woman Who Watches over the World* is confronted with the strangeness of a mother who could not offer any comfort to her child in need of attention and re-assurance and that the latter only now comprehends in view of her own adult experience: “There was a great silence around her, of what I think to be her own history, perhaps of abuse or injury, contained in her skin. Whatever it was, she was wounded” (95). The lack of communication early on does appear to be a *curse* for which the writer does not blame anybody, not even her mother. However, she does feel the need to diagnose the type and origin of the wound as much as she needs to find a cure.

All those years of silence, which were just the outward reflection of a deeper alienation between mother and daughter, are compensated through the discovery of articulation in the exquisite form of writing: “Words came, anchored to the earth, to matter, to the wholeness of nature” (57). Self-expression turns into salvation, a gift that also delivers the daughter from the pain of the cruel American history that had marked her self. Hogan’s in-depth study of the functions of language spells out the phenomenon:

For those who understand the potential of words as accumulation of energy, as visualization of the

physical, there is balance and wholeness. Words used properly and in context, whether in the oral form of prayer and incantation, or as prose, return us to ourselves and to our place in the world. They unify the inner and outer. ("Who Puts Together" 137)

This understanding of language as a performative force belongs to the writer herself and it is also reflected by alter-ego characters in her fictional projects. One of the most fascinating characters in her novel *Mean Spirit* is a master of words, Michael Horse. When explaining the purpose of his act of writing, the narrator voices Hogan's most intimate conviction that the act of writing is "part of divination and prophecy, an act of deliverance" (*Mean Spirit* 337). A detailed analysis of the novel prompted Melani Bleck to conclude: "Horse's perspective of writing alludes to the function that the oral tradition holds within Native American culture, and his description indelibly links the past, the present, and the future to the act of writing, and links writing to a process of healing" (33). The statement characterizes Hogan's endeavor in her autobiographical pieces and demonstrates the consistency of her vision. Reconstructing one's life through building webs of words proves to be more healing and rewarding than the previous method of "treatment", drinking.

Confronting the addiction takes a lot of courage given the prejudices linked to it that still exist in society. Yet, Hogan evinces a certain faith in the reader's capacity to understand and sympathize with the speaking subject: "I look back now on the history of a life; mine was one of a drunken young woman who once went so far as to drink a bottle of peroxide and a bottle of cough syrup together" (127). This abuse on oneself seems to be just another extension of the troubled individuality at odds with the world that Hogan does not refrain from documenting. A false and momentary antidote against pain, drinking is rejected as a viable method of coping with reality in the case of this American Indian life, even if it does remain the road to self-annihilation in the case of many others. By pointing to the ultimate source of the disease, she tries to make sense of it and, if possible, exorcise it: "It is the darkness that makes us want to drink, the story of war and its tidal wave of violence, the falling of countries and civilizations" (60). This is why she constantly emphasizes the need for dissipating the darkness through awareness of one's potential for reconstruction and healing.

Hogan's heartfelt conviction is that the worst approach would be to blame those who suffer. Her writing actually strives to provide alternatives to the common societal method in dealing with any disadvantaged group, which consists in accusation and dismissal. When talking about her trajectory in terms of belonging to a certain class, she remarked:

... one of the problems of coming out of a poverty situation in this country – and this is true for a lot of non-Indian people as well – is that we live under a dominant culture that blames victims. The real truth is that to come from that kind of a background means you have no self-esteem, and you think it's your own fault that you're living hungry and in poverty. (Smith 147)

These very words represent a double indirect urge: on the one hand, people from the lower classes are invited to confront the guilt instilled in them by others and to try to gain pride and confidence in themselves, and on the other hand, society at large is invited to revise its problematic attitude towards the underprivileged. In *The Woman Who Watches over the World* Hogan shows that she has found the power to surpass the sense of guilt and does refer to the harshness added to her life because of the class division ridden with prejudice still prevalent in the world she has known: "Now sometimes my life seems so far away. An Indian writer, a teacher, a person unlike the family I came from. Because of this, it was made harder" (108).

In her attempt to right the wrong the dominant culture inflicted upon native people, Hogan acts in the most direct way possible and does not limit her actions to the scope of her tribal nation. Awareness of communal problems shared by American Indians during her lifetime is not just noted, but is turned into

the stimulus for decisions that influenced her life irrevocably. The release of The Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, which allowed American Indian families to adopt children of the same tribe or another tribe and the awareness that “at the time, in our region alone, there were six hundred American Indian children in foster care homes, needing Indian families” (75) represent the decisive factors for her adoption of two girls for whom the reconnection to a native environment and the sustainable care Linda Hogan and her husband were ready to provide should have been sources of healing and revival. The motivation for this complex gesture is expressed in revealing language:

Adoption, like fire, was a life-changing event. It was not as easy as being a grafted tree. My father had learned to create trees that bore two kinds of fruit and would heal two together into one, and this was what I believed adoption would be, old trees bound with newly grafted limbs, bearing blossoms and fruits. With humans, it isn't as easy as trees. (125-126)

The image of grafting new lives onto the family tree is used to explain her perception of the bondage expected after the adoption of the two daughters. Besides its rich meanings, this same image is consistent with Hogan's lifetime interest in and effort of protecting everything in nature.

Hogan places great emphasis on her conscious attempt to contribute to the restoration of the People at this time in the history of the American continent. She confesses to having regarded the adoption as “the strengthening of tribes” (126). The adoptive parent felt confidence that her home could offer a sense of identity for the Lakota girls she adopted, but reality contradicted her expectations.

The initial hope for a new happy family shatters the very day the daughters arrive and no communication can be established. Silence also brings in tremendous suffering for the parents whose power to heal and desire to love is surpassed by the two girls' distorted behavior: “Our house, which had seemed to us so happy to be having children, was now a leaking container of pain, silence, and sleeplessness” (74). As the speaker explains, no access to the children's full history and so, no understanding of the full dimension of the damage, had been possible: “We didn't know how much they'd already been traumatized” (73). However, the parents persevere in their attempt to assuage the pain and find a cure. The shock that love could not heal the adopted children of their illness is great:

I look back to the rainy day they arrived, and I see them, as if they were here. The storm that day announced that my illusions about love, family, and children were about to be washed away. I had always believed in the power of love to heal... Instead there was devastation and changes never foreseen. The day the girls moved in, the red earth road along which we lived was almost washed away, as if to signify that we were beginning something that had no trail into it, and no road out. It was an irrevocable act, adoption, a thing of potential, for both heartbreak and love. (75-76)

The analysis shows the subject's present lucidity, wisdom, and resignation as it testifies to past patience, strength and potential for forgiveness, all of which are necessary in a twofold process: in order to cope with the trauma of the early abuse the two children had suffered in former foster homes; and in order to survive the trauma that the two children unwillingly inflicted upon the new adoptive parents. Hogan lists the daughters' unimaginable experiences and continues to present their ensuing result, i.e., the determined search for alternative cures and professional psychiatric help, which was in itself problematic given the incompetence of certain institutional employees who could not fathom the extent to which the children had been broken.

In the fragment quoted above, Hogan's description has elemental force since it uses the image of the primordial flood. And even if a tone of disappointment and loss appears to be overwhelming at this point, by the end of the autobiography, her luminous vision along with her own faith in love re-emerges in reference to the presence of a new generation in the family: “...as I cleaned my granddaughter's face,

my mother looked at me and said, ‘You love them all, don’t you?’ And I said, ‘Yes, every last life.’ Every last thing. Every creature” (127). Again the lesson of interconnectedness seems to be the key to the healing and thriving reserved to both the individual and the community.

The note of life celebration that emerges from all of Linda Hogan’s writings surfaces in *The Woman Who Watches over the World* even when confronting the pain she undergoes as a result of the recent riding accident for which there seems to be no reason. The power to finally un-blind herself and look beyond her wounded body and spirit and into the wounding is redemptive:

I was fearful and desperately wounded, and I seemed permeable, as if in that first house there was no wall between me and others, me and history, me and earth, so that even as I grew, the pain of others would hurt me. And yet, whatever wounds also sometimes heals. This was the step toward compassion, empathy, my gift, my curse. (110)

This statement points to a vision of the individual and the communal, the present and the past, of the human and the terrestrial, coming all together as the way towards surpassing the pain. The wound is welcomed as a gift rather than shunned as a curse. Her latest trauma and ways of coping with it become a process through which the subject manages to reach a higher degree of humanism and a stronger voice that will express further self-awareness and dedication to all forms of life.

The incident is explored and reinterpreted continuously. The riding of a beautiful horse with faith in his gentleness brings about great injury and the impossibility of seeing how that actually happened. The loss of memory that the consciousness deals with seems to be equal to losing oneself: “The inner story slipped away from me, my self was dismantled, unbuilt” (132). In describing this loss, personality seems to split and the reader encounters two persons confronting each other over the precipice of suffering: “who would have thought that ... months later I would be a different person, haunted by the memory of who I had been, thinking of her as another person on the other side of wounding” (159). The metaphor of “the other side” can be embraced by readers as standing for the aftermath of any type of life-threatening crisis that makes one divided within. With generosity, the writer herself opens her experience as a text for interpretation and borrowing: “Perhaps the loss of self and identity is always a feature of disease and suffering” (132). She shows empathy to all those who have gone through similar events and who might be reading her book.

The mere coming out of one’s pain and into sharing the tragedy through writing seems curative, as she is exploring the depths of her new suffering:

I am grateful to have seen this underworld, to have been a stranded creature without water. For out of unwholeness something began to grow, generate. There were layers and depths of consciousness still not compromised ... I developed, out of necessity, an empathy and a kind of spiritual growth. (134)

Here she is actually restoring her self of selves and turning to that essence that can never be lost: in her case, the power to survive through self-awareness, dedication and writing as well as the power to convert the curse of a wounding into a gift.

Despite trauma, Hogan does not leave the reader with a sense of pain and loss at the end of her autobiography. The ways of healing that she has found are valid not only for herself in her myriad roles as powerful and sustaining part of the family and of the community, but they are also valuable lessons for the others. The last words in *The Woman Who Watches over the World* are fashioned to be the ancestors’ call to the autobiographer, but their rendering in the second person transforms them in a direct address or ceremonial urge to the readers: “Watch and listen. You are the result of the love of thousands” (159), making them want to find their own redeeming ritual of healing.

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