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TRAUMA, MADNESS AND COMING OF AGE IN LINDA HOGAN'S SOLAR STORMS

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Abstract: *Linda Hogan's poetry, fiction and non-fiction have increasingly been linked to eco-criticism, eco-feminism, and environmental justice especially with the publication of her second and third novels, *Solar Storms and Power*. Yet, it is in *Solar Storms* that the author explicitly links the theme of the deracination of a brutally abused mother who in turn abuses and projects her self-hatred on her daughter, with a ruthlessly exploited and depleted landscape that consumes and devours all forms of life which it is supposed to nourish.*

In this paper I will examine the complex narrative structure employed by Linda Hogan in her examination of interior and exterior landscapes as they bear directly upon the discourse of madness, trauma and healing in the female protagonist's physical, spiritual and political journey to selfhood. I will argue that Hogan's narrative strategy subverts western trauma theories which posit a linear construction of trauma where the latter is defined as belated temporality, accessible through evocation of repressed memory. Conversely, Linda Hogan's achronological narrative highlights sensations to which we have no access, because trauma disrupts the "I", and hence chronology. The approach the adolescent character uses to cure herself of self-loathing and self-hatred, passed down by her incurably insane mother, defies the bildungsroman requirement for self-isolation for the creation of an autonomous subject in favor of a self-in-relation model conceived in spatial rather than temporal terms, where Angel, the heroine is "no longer empty space."

Linda Hogan's poetry, fiction and non-fiction have increasingly been linked to eco-criticism, eco-feminism, and environmental justice especially with the publication of her second and third novels, *Solar Storms and Power*. Both works are coming of age stories and explore the dynamics and politics in a female centered community, defined by mother-daughter-grandmother relationships. Yet, it is in *Solar Storms* that the author explicitly links the fates of a brutally abused mother, who in turn abuses her daughter, to a ruthlessly exploited and depleted landscape. The setting is the frozen North Country of the Great Lakes region in the late 1960s. The land is being drilled and dynamited to make way for the new dam. The rivers diverted from their ancient beds flood settlements and fertile land killing game and driving people way. This violation of land and people is not only another episode in the long history of dispossession and removal of Native people, but is seen also as an act of madness and brutality that is internalized by human victims, and often finds immediate manifestation in acts of destructive, incurable insanity. In her works, especially in *Intimate Nature: the Bond between Women and Animals*, Hogan repeatedly demonstrates that there is a special communion between women, nature and the animal world. To explore this network of relations, in *Solar Storms* the author develops complex structures in her examination of interior and exterior landscapes as they bear directly upon the discourse of madness, trauma and healing in the female protagonist's physical, spiritual and political journey to selfhood in the liminal position of dramatic cultural cross-roads and clashes.

The novel is about Angel, a seventeen year old girl, who having spent most of her life with different foster parents in Oklahoma arrives at Fur Island, "... the home of her great-grandmother Agnes and other relatives"(36). In her conscious search for self and healing she has to confront historical trauma (collectively induced but personally experienced) as well as the rage of her own childhood, marked by the absence of her mother, Hannah, who has tortured and tried to kill her. I will argue that *Solar Storms* continues the tradition established by Paula Gunn Allen's *The Woman Who Owned the Shadows* of questioning the relevance of current

Western trauma paradigms to a Native American context.¹ In the works of such leading theorists as Cathy Caruth the connection between trauma, time and representation is crucial for the understanding and healing of trauma. They posit the construction of linear plots in the process of retrieval of hurtful events and a temporal narrative self. Ultimately, such a paradigm aims at ‘disciplining’ the subject, and making him/her capable of functioning “normally” in society again. I intend to discuss how trauma in *Solar Storms*, as a psychological and social-cultural phenomenon produces a “rupture” in the wounded psyche/body and marks, in Lacanian terms, what is missing, that is, the absence of the Real. I will argue that Linda Hogan expands the understanding of trauma and offers alternative ways of accessing repressed or lost memories by recreating traumatic experiences through testimony and mythologization.

Cathy Caruth defines trauma as “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.”(11) Furthermore, such structures of “belated temporality” are thought to be accessible through evocations and analysis of repressed memory. Conversely, Linda Hogan’s combination of chronological and achronological narratives highlights sensations which are not available to the subject, because trauma disrupts the “I”, and hence chronology, or because the memory of it is lost, or is available only vicariously. For instance, Angel has no memory of her mother; only the scars on her body are a painful reminder of the missing parent. The lost memories, which create a gap in her psyche, are restored and made accessible to her by the testimonies and sacred stories, told by her grandmother Bush, by Agnes, and by Agnes’ mother, Dora-Rouge. The chronological narrative of Angel’s initiatory canoe journey to Canada to meet with her mother and to take part in the demonstration against the building of the dam is interrupted by the cyclic time of sacred narratives. Thus historical, mundane time merges with and is transformed by the timelessness of the mythological. Significantly, in this sacred setting, Angel feels:

As if time were nothing at all. I was traveling backward in time toward myself at the same time I journeyed forward, like the new star astronomers found that traveled in two different directions at once.... Already I believed in the power of water (64).

This is one of many examples that foreground the heroine’s double consciousness, merging western discourse of science, or Christian belief with that of traditional wisdom, as well as the process of breaking of boundaries. Significantly, the primary element of creation and means for renewal, water, and stories about water, play a major role in Angel’s transformation into an autonomous subject. As the stories talk to each other and interact with each other, they create a frame of reference in relation to which the traumatic experience acquires visibility and accessibility, and can be placed within the scope of communal experience, and eventually sublimated.

The discourse of trauma and mental illness in the novel creates a relational, spacious model for retrieval and healing rather than a linear traumatic narrative. It is the intercepting chains of such events for which the memory is lost, that fracture and fragment the protagonist’s experience of a coherent self. Angel craves continuity and connectedness when she says: “I wanted an unbroken line between me and the past. I want to be no fragments and pieces left behind by fur traders, soldiers, priests, and schools (77). In her multilayered narrative of building wholeness, personal and collective trauma mingle, veer off and make new connections with other events, linked not by time but by their similarity and effect on subjectivity. One example is the story about the woman who “became winter’s mistress,” that, as we shall see later, both mirrors Hannah’s past and

¹ The protagonist of the novel, Ephanie, gives up psychotherapy in favor of rituals of homecoming and healing. The structure of the novel suggests that since trauma fragments the self and creates a “cut” within the psyche, it is “unrepresentable in narrative terms” (Madsen 112).

functions as a code for “reading” Hannah. It is this symbolization of the connection between similar hurtful events that create continuity in the discursive construction of subjectivity. Significantly, *Solar Storms* uses the confessional form and the techniques of introspection and auto-translation through which the protagonist is able to process discursively and make sense of her life experience. Angel becomes fully aware of the healing power of words, and her narrative generates a new kind of “traumatic knowledge” which helps, to quote Geoffrey Hartman, “to read the wound with the aid of literature.” (544)²

“Sometimes I hear the voice of my great-grandmother, Agnes,” the seventeen year old narrator-protagonist, Angel, begins her story. After twelve years of separation from Bush, the wife of her grand father Harold, who raised her, she accidentally finds Agnes’ name, in a court record and writes to her. Agnes knows that Angel is desperately looking for love, for what has been denied her in her childhood. This is why, on the day of her arrival, Agnes introduces her into her past with a story of deep love, evoking the day on which Bush, “prepared a feast to mourn Angel’s being given back to her abusive mother” (11). Bush invents a sacred, give away ceremony, which is “an act of grief”, and like a priestess, officiates it, pretending that it is her tradition. “It was the holy sacrament of you we ate that day,” Agnes testifies and admonishes the girl, “so don’t think you were never loved” (16). On the other hand, Bush, who Angel sees as “neither Catholic nor Protestant, ... a person of the land,” who “kept statutes of saints and crosses alongside eagle feathers, tobacco, and photographs of loved ones” constructs a new ritual within the familiar traditional patterns in order to mend the broken chain of communal experience (71). Bush, the most fully developed, powerful and active character in the novel, has a highly hybrid identity with which she is perfectly comfortable. She uses extensively Native and Christian rituals of love and sacrifice to integrate modern, uncanny experience into timeless, sacred time. The ceremony she invents references both Christ’s ultimate sacrifice, and is an invariant of a traditional ritual. Thus she is able to bridge both cultures and to act as a mediator between them.³ Agnes’ use of the Christian concept of the ‘holy sacrament’ to transmit to the girl the intensity and endurance of personal and communal love is the first, most impressive feature bestowed on her newly emerging identity. It illustrates how Christian concepts and Native knowledge systems function as equally powerful codes for identity formation. In spite of Angel’s efforts to discredit Christian belief, rather than distorted practices of it, she resorts time and again to Christian troping in order to articulate a new sense of self. Significantly, her transformation and rebirth in water shortly before she meets her dying mother is rendered through the story of Jonah when she says:

I sensed already, that the land on Fur Island, the water, would pull a person in, steal from them, that is would split them up transformed, like *Jonah from the belly of the whale* [italics mine] (68).

At the end of the novel, she is “resurrected” and “transformed” and comes back to her community.

In Angel’s discursive processing of personal and collective trauma we can identify what Lacan calls “a missed encounter with the Real” where the “Real” is not reality, but, according to one of Lacan’s interpreters, “The Real would represent precisely what is excluded from our reality, the margin of what is without meaning, and which we fail to situate and explore” (Leader 61)⁴. The dismembered colonial past which repeats itself in a new act of dispossession is another hurtful experience which defies understanding and hence seems “unreal” in the normal course of Native lives. On the other hand, since the experience of a psychologically distressing event

² It’s worth noting that according to Hartman this literary way of knowing combines “the literal and the figurative, insight and blindness, play and earnest, and linking inspiration to sound as well as to sense”. Obviously, there is similarity between Hartman’s definition of the literary way of knowing trauma and Hogan’s concept of the healing power of sacred stories and the “vocabulary of senses” in *Dwellings*.

³ Laura Castor sees *Power* as “bridging the gaps between Native and Western understandings of place”.

⁴ I am fully aware of the current debates about whether the modalities and terminology of western cultural theory are adequate for the interpretation of American Indian texts. My belief is, that since the American Indian writers use narrative structures that are clearly recognizable not only in western, but in many other cultures as well as all kinds of symbiosis of symbols, images and linguistic strategies, the recourse to such terminology is justified.

does not fit into usual human experience it resurfaces in the form of “intrusive phenomena” such as fear, terror and rage. Angel re-lives the pain of physical abuse, repeatedly inflicted by her mother in the form of intense suffering, of cutting herself, or of bursting into uncontrollable rage. When, during the party in her honor, Frenchie asks what happened to her face, referring to the scars, Angel remembers her reaction in this way:

I heard a voice yelling, “Damn it!” and it was me, my own voice, raging and hurt. There was anger in it, a deep pain, and the smell of hospitals of the past, the grafts that left my thigh gouges, the skin stolen from there to put my face together (52).

In this explosion we can identify the symptomatology of breaks and repetitions. Whenever the “missing event” is reconstructed through broken structures of memory, it also effects a break in the experience of a coherent self, thus causing excessive outbursts of uncontrollable anger. The incomprehensibility of the event causes pain and alienation which desperately need healing. “My ugliness, as I called it, had ruled my life”, the girl speculates. “My need for love was so great, I would offer myself to any boy or man who would take me. There was really no love in it but I believed any kind of touch was a kind of love (54). Thus the initial trauma is compounded by loveless acts of pseudo healing, which may seem to alleviate the symptoms, but do not heal the sickness.

At the moment at which the protagonist realizes that she is entering a world which will provide the knowledge she needs to face the demons of the past, she admits that: “...deep down I dreaded knowing what had happened to me and the dread was equal to my urgent desire to learn the truth” (55). This fear of the unknown is an avoidance symptom, an effort to suppress thoughts, feelings or activities associated with the traumatic Real. The three “mighty women” (28) jointly conduct the sessions of healing through caring and by “translating” the uncanny for the girl either in the intimate space of home, or in the soothing embrace of open spaces and waterways that a psychiatrist in the western tradition would perform by himself in the rational, confining solitude of his study. The creation of emotional comfort and the ability to “decipher” the traumatic are basic strategies in Bush’s therapy. Angel’s resistance to stay at the new place is broken by her disarming love and acceptance: “Bush would create a room full of intimacy. I unpacked,” the girl acknowledges. Intimacy then becomes the prime value, the welding element in the relationship between the three women and their charge, and between them and nature during their journey to Hannah’s house. Significantly, as Angel begins to feel more and more at *home* in nature, as she becomes an insider to its secrets, she can locate intimacy in landscape too. Looking at the island of the Fat Eaters, Dora Rouge’s ancestors, the protagonist remarks: “Even from a distance, the island had a feeling of intimacy” (167). Ultimately intimacy extends to her experience of the Sublime:

Something lived there..., I would call it God., and this is how I came later to understand that God was everything beneath my feet, everything surrounded by water, it was in the air, and there was no such thing as empty space” (170).

By extending the concept of home to include the whole world, the heroine participates in what Langdon Elsbree calls, “the archetypal act of establishing, consecrating a home” (32).

With her stories of witnessing, Agnes takes Angel back on a journey toward her mother and tells her that what happened to her, “...started long ago. It happened at the time of the killing of the wolves,” (37) in 1938, when Loretta, Hannah’s mother, arrives at Adam’s Rib:

smelling of cyanide because in order to survive, she ate the corpses of poisoned animals and with no love left in her for when she was still a girl, she had been taken and used by men who fed her and beat her and forced her. That was how one day she became the one who hurts others. It was passed down (39).

It seems that a person, especially a mother, who has never experienced love, but seen only destruction and suffered inhuman pain, is not only incapable of love, but has become another instrument of destruction of

lives. In giving birth to another life, she sees it only as an extension of her own brutalized, hateful body: hence the irresistible urge to destroy her own child.

Like her mother, Hannah is the living embodiment of the “incomprehensibility” of the traumatic Real of historical experience. Agnes sees her in a dream and is afraid of her, because, “what was wrong with her we could not name and we distrusted such things as had no name...” (12). Bush tells the girl how Hannah walked out of the cold water, “white with shock...it looked like she was born of storm”. People fear her inhumanity and destructive power and define her sickness as “soul loss...a heart of ice.” (76) Neither the Christian priest, who calls her “a miracle in reverse” (100) nor the Indian medicine man, who is versed in “terrestrial knowledge,” can exorcise the demons within Hannah. Significantly, Bush identifies Hannah with the island where she lived, with “the frozen waters... the light and dust of solar storms that love our cold, eerie pole.” (78) Hannah is as deadly as a solar storm that could fry power grids, knock satellites back to Earth, and among other things, cause deadly solar radiation. Bush, the only one, who driven by her love for Hannah manages “to sing herself into her, to go partially inside her” sees her as

... the meeting place... her life going backward to where time and history and genocide gather and move like a cloud above the spilled oceans of blood. No one still alive was strong enough to sing the song that would cure her” (101)

The phrase “no one still alive” is significant here, for it intimates the existence of a realm of spiritual powers beyond human perceptions, both good and evil, the realm of angels and spirits, both heavenly and fallen.

The pairing of the Christian priest with the Indian medicine man supports Catherine Rainwater’s thesis about the existence of “balanced pair of narratives and characters,” and “intertextual network of references” in *Solar Storms* (95). The pair also symbolizes the seemingly competing discourses of Christian knowledge versus traditional native knowledge. The phrase “miracle in reverse” evokes at least one of the miracles that Christ performs “a man who has been possessed for a long time, wears no clothes, has no home but lives in the graveyard” (Luke 8: 27). As Luke tells us, Jesus

...had commanded the unclean spirits to come out of the man. For oftentimes he had caught him; and he was kept bound with chains and in fetters; and he broke the bands, and was driven of the devil into the wilderness (8:28-30).

Like Hannah the man is a “meeting place” of thousands of demons from different dimensions, for when Jesus asks him, “What is your name,” the demon responds, “Legion”. Like Hannah, the possessed man is a “miracle in reverse”, that is, the Devil’s dark work until he is exorcised by the “Son of God most high.” Like Hannah, he is, as Bush puts it, “a skin that others wore... a storm looking for a place to rage” (77) Since Christ promises to any of his disciples to have the power to cast demons in his name, we may wonder if the priest even attempted to heal Hannah in teaching her the gospel of love and compassion. Most probably not, because like the Bishop who ordered to dynamite the healing mineral waters “to spite the superstitious natives,” in spite of the many instances in the New Testament of healing waters, stirred by angels, he does not remember that God’s grace extends equally on believers and non-believers. On the other hand, the heroine cannot yet make the distinction between practices that distort the religious belief and the true message of the teaching of Christ.

In an effort to understand what Hannah is, Agnes recalls “Old stories about the frozen heart of evil that was hunger, envy, and greed, how it had tricked people into death or illness or made them go insane” (13).

It is these coded stories, both referencing the traumatic event as a “failed experience” and turning it into an invariant of a myth, thus making it less threatening, rather than the reconstruction of the event as memory that gradually provide understanding and the possibility for the fashioning of a meaningful discursive subjectivity. For instance, there is the 1939 story of a starving woman who buried under the snow ate the frozen

bodies of the family who had already died. Two hunters found her and cooked her some hot soup. Yet, “she loved only human flesh” and tried to kill the young hunter. After the two men killed her “they poured boiling-hot water into her open mouth and her wounds to melt her frozen heart,” since they believe that the spirits do not die with the body and it takes a special ritual to exorcise them. Although the men plead guilty and are sentenced by the white jury, as Bell testifies, they were satisfied, “knowing they had returned the world to a kind of balance” (248). Only by ritual action can people perceive the meaning of the messages from the spirit world and translate them for other humans. In his discussion of the functions of myth and ritual, David Rasmussen reminds us that myth is concerned “. . . not with presenting an objective vision of the world, but with presenting man's true understanding of himself in the world in which he lives” (10). It is this power of myth that is used masterfully and extensively by Bush, Agnes and Dora Rouge as a means of healing Angel of her trauma, by restoring her into a position of connectedness to other human beings and by giving back her own humanity and sense of dignity. Thus they exorcise the demon of self loathing and self hurting.

Hannah's fate mirrors the fate of the woman, “who slept with winter” and her story makes sense only through myth. According to Laura Castor the story “reenacts the Cree and Ojibwe windigo” tales, where “. . . a windigo emerges when a human being indulges self-interest to the point where his or her cravings for food or sex develop into a physical disorder. John Bierhost claims that “the only way to exorcise a windigo's power was by pouring hot tallow down its throat to melt the frozen heart” (219). Hannah can be accessed only through bits of reconstructed memories of the past events witnessed by the three women. These stories about actual events are “read” through the prism of a paradigmatic story that processes new experience in a ritualistic way. This strategy makes the event less “unspeakable” and “unreal,” and prepares Angel for the encounter with her mother, which is very brief, for significantly; Hannah repeats the fate of the ice woman and desires to die at the hand of the man she is living with.

On the other hand, the heroine's intimate experience of the pains and violations of the native land help her see the circumstances that turned her mother into “a cannibal, a cold thing that hated life” (247). It is significant that during the journeys, while the three women barely survive the torrent of diverted water, Angel not only overcomes her fear of water, but begins to find a long forgotten bond between her soul and the natural world. In Angel's mind and heart, the land, her mother, and she herself become one. She laments the land, that “was being drilled to see what else could be taken, looted, and mined before the waters covered this little length of earth” (221) and is filled with deep compassion. Respectively, at the first encounter with Hannah, she sees her as:

a body under siege, a battleground. But she herself never emerged. The others, with their many voices and ways, were larger than she was.. between all the layers of clothes, her skin was a garment of scars (99).

The daughter is moved from hatred and rage to understanding and grief and lovingly washes her mother's body, “the house of lament and sacrifice that it was” (251). It is this perception of the mother as a scapegoat, and the ability to feel compassion for her, that saves Angel from repeating her mother's fate, cures her of depression and allows her to grow up. “I was no longer a girl,” Angel states with confidence. “I was a woman, full and alive. After that, I made up mind to love in whatever ways I could. I would find it in myself to love the woman who had given life to me” (251).

The protagonist's full maturity comes only after she resolves the conflict with the mother. She makes a conscious decision to accept the unacceptable and to love the unlovable and realizes that she “had survived in the best of ways for [she] was filled with grief and compassion” (251) The ability to be compassionate and to love is a gift acquired in the process of the physical and spiritual journey during which the three women become mentors for the girl and function both as role models and visionaries with the power to heal by turning a traumatic, profane experience into a communal sacred story of a martyred mother. On the other hand, by completing successfully her rite of passage, Angel re-writes the old windigo story and creates its modern counterpart. Significantly her initiation into selfhood and maturity is marked also by her participation in tribal

political activism. On a personal level, the success of the demonstrators, aided by Angel's speech on the radio, can be seen both as an act of reclaiming the disfigured land, and as a sanctification of her dead mother.

In constructing Angel's restoration to health and wholeness, Linda Hogan rejects the paradigm of "belated temporality" in the representation of trauma in favor of the paradigm of reading and home. Reading here is perceived as the act of semiotic interpretation in a heightened state of awareness. According to Shoshana Felman it is "an access route to discovery" where "the struggle to become aware can never reach a term" (14). While the traumatic symptoms of depression and insanity in *Solar Storms* are similar to those described in western trauma theories, the strategies for accessing the hurtful event and the therapy Hogan suggests, are of a different nature. She introduces into the western discourse on madness and trauma a hybrid identity, inhabiting liminal, hybrid cultural location. The fragmented self is made whole and complete by drawing from different landscapes, language codes and sacred knowledge systems, as well as through a new experience of connectedness, love and caring. Thus the afflicted protagonist is initiated into the code of reciprocity which extends to the human and the natural world, and to eternity itself. On the other hand, the process of "writing the self" is seen as a powerful strategy for the "repossession" of one's life and for moving beyond trauma and loss, where, as Bush puts it, "scars are proofs of healing", not of hurting (125).

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