Traditional Mothers and Contemporary Daughters in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*

I currently teach a graduate course, ENG 552, entitled "Contemporary Native American Literature" at West Chester University of PA (WCU). The class is comprised of 15 students, 10 women and 5 men, several of whom are in-service secondary teachers required to complete the MA degree for "advanced" teaching certification in the state of PA. Others in the class are full-time graduate students who seek the MA as an entrée to a Ph.D. program in literature elsewhere. (WCU is a regional comprehensive university, which does not confer the doctorate.) Still others are taking the course as continuing education. The class is a genial group of men and women who work diligently to learn about and interpret a body of literature that is, for the most part, unfamiliar to them. This essay provides a general overview of the course and the analysis of and response to a particular text, *Solar Storms,* because of its appeal to students and its important blend of historical relevance, environmental concerns, and its focus on the complicated relationship between mothers and daughters.

Typically, WCU requires that professors provide a brief overview of a graduate course so students have an idea of the topic, readings, and requirements as they choose among the graduate course offerings in any given semester. I submit the following statement:

> Contemporary Native American Literature—ENG 552—provides students with an introduction to Native American authors and texts from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While not a survey course, the class begins with Mourning Dove's *Cogewea* (1927) and ends with the postmodern fiction of Sherman Alexie. Students will have an opportunity to read contemporary Native poetry by Joy Harjo, Paula Gunn Allen, Sherman Alexie and others as well as short stories and novels by Native authors. The course will consider (among others) the following topics: the struggle of the Native American author to represent his/her own cultural experience, the resistance that the Native American author confronts, the

> question of telling one's own story, the imposed position of the Native American as a marginalized voice, and the themes of silence, healing, community, and mixedblood status that we witness in the texts. We will follow the evolution of the Native American novel informed by a selection of post-colonial essays on "new world" discoveries and its naming of the Indian. The required primary texts include: *Cogewea, The Surrounded, Wind from an Enemy Sky, House Made of Dawn, Ceremony, Fools Crow, The Indian Lawyer, The Beet Queen, The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse, Medicine River, Truth and Bright Water, The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* and *Faces in the Moon.* In addition to the primary texts, a reading packet of articles is also required. Assignments include two short papers, one long paper, and an oral presentation in addition to regular attendance and active participation.

As we proceed through the course, students, for the most part, embrace the texts and raise important questions about the non-linear narratives that dominate Native fiction. Students, even experienced graduate student readers, initially register some confusion with the blending of the past, present, and future in the texts. But careful study and open class discussion unravel reading methods and strategies that resolve students' preliminary confusion about the manner in which time sequences are presented. As the students read more Native fiction and become more familiar with its conventions, they embrace the fluidity of time in the texts as well as the other common themes that we study. One of the most important threads that we trace throughout the course is that the healing of an individual does not happen without community. Most of the characters we study experience a return home to family and friends after time away. (William Bevis termed this practice "homing in" in a 1987 seminal essay about American Indian novels.) Some protagonists return home from war; others return home from a coming-of-age journey in a world that is markedly different from the one in which they grew. Whatever the circumstances, and however painful or conflicted the return, the protagonists in the texts heal with the help of the people to whom they return. Linda Hogan's attention to Angela Jensen's healing process in *Solar Storms* seems to capture my students' attention more

than that of any of the other protagonists whom we red about this semester. The significance of the landscape coupled with the significance of the relationships among the women in the novel offer my students not only a compelling story of mothers and daughters but also a look back at environmental disputes of the recent past. Before providing my students' responses to the novel, I offer an overview of the text to inform the classroom conversation that has taken place during the semester.

Reading *Solar Storms*

Considered both an historical and an environmental writer, Linda Hogan addresses the impact of "the construction of the James Bay-Great Whale hydroelectric project in Quebec" (Cook 43) on the Cree and Anishinaabe people in her rich novel, *Solar Storms.* Set on the landscape of the Boundary Waters between Canada and Minnesota, Hogan shows the struggle of protagonist, Angela Jensen, and that of her community as they fight for their land and water rights against local surveyors and land developers. In her essay, "Hogan's Historical Narratives: Bringing to Visibility the Interrelationship of Humanity and the Natural World," Barbara J. Cook explains: "The project was launched in 1971 to provide electricity to New York City without prior notification to the people it would affect. Hogan carefully details the effect of the Quebec project on the region's population, focusing on the negative impact on the indigenous people"(43-44). While outlining the historical significance of this particular battle of the Cree and Anishinaabe to preserve their natural resources, Hogan also investigates themes of family and motherhood in a narrative that focuses on five generations of Native American women caught between traditional and contemporary ways.

Seventeen year old Angela Jensen arrives at Adam's Rib to live with her great - grandmother Agnes, and her great-great grandmother Dora-Rouge. Bush, Angela's step-grandmother, resides in nearby Fur Island, where Angela also spends some time. Here, among her foremothers, Angela reconciles her modern teenage world of Wal Mart, Big Macs, and Mick Jagger with her traditional one of song, story, and ceremony. In the spring, the women travel a treacherous journey to Dora-Rouge's homeland in the north so that she can die among her people, the Fat Eaters, and Angela can reconnect with her mother, Hannah, to resolve the past. That is, two worlds, the old and the new will collide when the women reach their destination in the north. The physical journey to her ancestors' native land is especially important for Angela; it parallels her emotional journey toward self-awareness and self-reliance.

While educating readers about the dire circumstances Natives endured as a result of the hydroelectric project, Hogan shows Angela Jensen's life come full circle. Angela restores her low self-image, her fractured relationship with her family, especially with her mother at whose hand she suffered significant abuse, and establishes her place within the larger community of the fictional setting Adam's Rib. The reference to the story of Genesis is not insignificant. Literary critic, Ellen L. Arnold, claims:

> Hogan reinstates the power of women within Christianity by blending its stories not only with the indigenous ones but also with earlier versions of Christianity's own narratives. . . . [Hogan] comes closer to the first creation story that appears in Genesis, which tells of the equal creation of man and woman . . .. (296-297)

The use of Adam's Rib as the setting of Angela's departure and return simultaneously suggests triumph over a difficult past and hope for a promising future. Angela's maturation process is an act of recovery. In *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel,* the late scholar and literary critic, Louis Owens, locates Native

recovery in three sites: the personal, the tribal, and the historical. We see evidence of recovery in each of these sites as Angela comes to terms with her difficult childhood, develops stronger ties with her extended family, and fights to preserve the natural landscape of the Fat Eaters.

Violence plays an interesting role in the novel; we witness both the traditional ways in which Angela's foremothers attempt to combat it as well as the contemporary struggle of Angela's relatives to keep their land and water rights. Bush, Angela's step-grandmother, educates readers about Native traditions when she attempts to shield Angela from her mother's abuse. Convinced that Hannah Wing, Angela's mother, is a troubled woman with many demons, and fearful that Angela is vulnerable and unsafe in her custody, Bush prepares a mourning feast to protect Angela from Hannah's torment. But Bush's traditional methods do not spare Angela from her childhood with Hannah. Half of Angela's face is bitten off by her mother—a wound that takes on multiple meanings as Angela finds out more about the circumstances that led to such violence. Agnes recalls the event to Angela:

> Bush, the wife of your grandpa, had struggles with your mother's cold world. She tried to keep you with her, to protect you from the the violence that was your mother. There was a time she heard you crying in the house when you were not there. I heard it, too, your voice, crying for help, or I would not have believed her. It was a chilling sound, your soul crying out, and Bush turned desperate as a caged animal. She fought for you. In that battle with what amounted to human evil, Bush didn't win, but she didn't lose either. It was a tie, a fragile balance that could tip at any time. That was the reason she cooked the mourning feast. (Hogan 13)

Bush attempts to neutralize the power of evil that Hannah asserts against Angela. In *Other Destinies*, Louis Owens suggests: "evil cannot be destroyed; to attempt to do so is to err seriously and dangerously" (104). Rather, Owens explains: "good and evil must co-

exist in a delicate balance" (179). Hannah continues to enact violence on Angela, suggesting that evil prevails. But we will see Angela come into her own later in the novel verifying the delicate balance in which good and evil co-exist. Angela is empowered by the trip north with her grandmothers; she begins to heal in the company of her elders.

Hannah's violent behavior toward her daughter sharply contrasts the traditional world of Angela's foremothers, who not only celebrate their children and their children's children but also acknowledge the social and natural worlds as entities which are inextricably linked to each other in harmony. Hannah stands out among the mothers in the novel as a troubled figure who not only rejects motherhood but also abandons the history of her family. That is, Hannah denounces the nonviolent traditions and nurturing ways of her people that, in the end, help Angela to become whole again. In fact, nonviolence is so important to the novel that Hogan insists the indigenous people who fight for their land and water rights do so through nonviolent means. While the storyline about the hydroelectric project has potential for violence, the Fat Eaters resist such extremes. Barbara J. Cook explains:

> Although Hogan acknowledges the possibility of violence by the tribe, she depicts a community that returns to wholeness through its nonviolent fight in a struggle that enables its members to respect themselves again. In the process they recover the spirituality of their ancestors as they remember the old stories and songs. Angel[a], who during the novel heals from the psychic and physical scars inflicted by her mother, is an individual representative of the healing of the tribal community as it attempts to heal from the scars inflicted by the developers on the land and the river. Angel[a]'s healing is brought about through the strength of the community and the spiritual link to ancestors, stories, animals, and healing plants. (49)

Clearly, Angela's resolve and the victory of the Natives over the white land developers suggest the simultaneous recovery of the personal, the tribal, and the historical. The process of healing, which is a communal rather than an individual process, works for

Angela, her people, and the natural world in which the Fat Eaters live and on which they depend for livelihood and subsistence. Never is this more apparent than at the completion of the women's journey when they arrive at Dora-Rouge's birthplace.

Dora-Rouge's homeland is different from her memory of it, which brings the conflict between the old and new to the fore—and the two storylines together. The white developers' attempt to harness power from the water for electricity has depleted the area's natural resources—leaving little for Dora-Rouge's people to rely on. Much hostility takes place between the Fat Eaters and the whites, who reroute the rivers, desecrate the landscape, and destroy animal migration patterns. Jennifer Brice explains in her essay, "Earth as Mother, Earth as Other in Novels by Silko and Hogan," that "whites are taught . . . to see the land as separate from themselves, whereas Native Americans believe the land is the same as themselves" (127). Although the long, complicated, and hard-fought battle about the hydroelectric project ends in victory for Angela and her people, Angela's trip is fraught with emotion. Having endured Agnes' death en-route and preparing for Dora-Rouge's passing, Angela finds Hannah, whose life also wastes away:

> There were no herbs or poultices for her, no salves or unguents, no laying on of any hands that would save her, not even a ceremony. I could see this by the set of her eyes. The presence of death was outside the door. Perhaps it had walked along the same trail I had. But I wasn't afraid of death, I decided. I went over and opened the door for it. I wasn't afraid of Hannah, either, and for this I was glad. (Hogan 244)

In the natural cycle of life and death, Angela's mothers leave her. But they prepared her for a life of responsibility and service. When Angela lived in Bush's house on Fur Island, Bush had told her "mirrors had cost us our lives" (Hogan 69). Of course, we recognize Angela's anxiety about her scarred face—and its impact on her self-image, which is one

reason she would use pieces of a broken mirror to look at only parts of her face. But Ann Fisher-Wirth explains a deeper significance of Bush's statement:

> Mirrors reflect one's small, imperfect sameness to oneself; they foster one's narcissistic obsession with image and with the inability ever to close the gap between self and self-and-other. Consequently, they create a closed circle of self-concern. Although bereft of her mother, at Adam's Rib Angel[a] learns to see from the center of her being—without mirrors—and discovers that she is firmly at home. . . . As the novel progresses she is increasingly conjured by a different kind of mirroring, a phenomenological knowing of oneself through others' responses. . .. (64)

As Fisher-Wirth makes clear, Angela's arrival at Adam's Rib to live with her grandmothers begins her healing process, which is completed in the north with her extended family and her mother during Hannah's final days. The reflection that Angela used to see in the mirror, "from below the eye to the jawline, [which] looked something like a cratered moon" (Hogan 33), does not hold the same power over her now. The scars no longer take on the significance they once did, causing Angela to hit her own reflection in the face, shattering glass onto the floor. Angela recalls Bush's soothing words: "'Some people see scars and it is wounding they remember. To me they are proof of the fact that there is healing'" Interestingly, Hannah's death also enlightens Angela: "It was death, finally, that allowed me to know my mother, her body, the house of lament and sacrifice that it was. I was no longer a girl. I was a woman, full and alive. After that I made up my mind to love in whatever ways I could" (Hogan 251). Angela's mothers, Dora-Rouge, Agnes, Bush, and Hannah instilled a sense of self-confidence and self-reliance in Angela so that she can not only accept the events of her childhood but also move beyond them (Hogan 125). Now, having been instrumental in the victory over the land developers, Angela takes on a new challenge in the role of mother to her infant half-sister Aurora, named after the aurora borealis, which, "sometimes . . . moves across night, strands of

light that remind [Angela] of a spider's web or a fishnet cast out across the starry skies to pull life in toward it" (Hogan 349).

Teaching *Solar Storms*

Solar Storms draws my students in like no other novel which we study this semester. We enjoy a stimulating discussion about the hydroelectric project and the civic responsibility the characters demonstrate to fight for land and water rights of the indigenous people. My female students, in particular, are moved by Angela's ability to come to terms with her childhood demons and the pivotal role her foremothers play in Angela's healing process. Further, my students, both male and female, are sympathetic to Hannah. One student suggests that Hannah's scarred body bears the burden of colonial oppression. "I looked for the first time at my mother's body, her arms so like mine, her bones familiar. She was covered with scars" (Hogan 252). How could Hannah know anything other than violence based on the abuse she endured? That is, my student cannot dismiss Hannah's pain regardless of the intolerable abuse she enacts on her daughter. My students are also comforted by the fact that the characters, especially Angela, demonstrate strength and are able to heal. The idea of "homing in" shows new readers of Native literature the tremendous significance of returning to one's community and of its impact on identity formation.

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