

Transcultural Crossings: Spirituality, War, and Selfhood in Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale*

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*You couldn't use standard methods to date the
doom; might as well say that Vietnam was where
the Trail of Tears was headed all along.*

Milton J. Bates

Linda Hogan has often been seen as our most provocative Native American writer, with “unparalleled gifts for truth and magic,” and *People of the Whale*, “as an extraordinary novel filled with the wisdom of ancestors and the hubris of man, with the loss and redemption of the self” (Gates). The conflicting and painful journey to selfhood and the important part spirituality and the natural world play in it is the author’s most pervasive theme in all her works. On another occasion, I have defined the novels, *Mean Spirit*, *Solar Storms and Power* as, to use John Barth’s term, “literature of replenishment,” since, although based on actual events, they make known what has been suppressed in the dominant discourse, and reveal deeper historical truths that the intricate procedures of the courts in each work are able to resolve. Hogan’s fourth and most recent novel, *People of the Whale*, introduces a new perspective by focusing on a male character’s struggle to make sense of his deeply disturbing Vietnam war experience in an effort to reclaim his repeatedly fragmented self. As such, the novel falls into the category of the homecoming and healing literature but should also be discussed within the impressive body of American interpretations of this unique conflict in which a small agrarian country was able to defeat a military and technological giant.

Thirty eight years after the end of hostilities, the Vietnam war continues to be a critical test for American values and attitudes. Recent US military involvements, for instance in Iraq, have often been interpreted through the prism of Vietnam. The difficulty of arriving at a reconciliation with the past is due to the unique character of the war. As early as 1972, Gloria Emerson in *Winners and Losers* and Frances Fitzgerald in *Fire in the Lake*, saw American defeat as a result of wrong assumptions about the nature of the war and of the attempt to destroy the culture of the people it pretended to save. Fitzgerald offers yet another important insight: the evocation of the frontier paradigm in the imaging and imagining of Vietnam. She says, "It put the Vietnam War into a definite mythological and historical perspective: the Americans were once again embarked upon a heroic . . . conquest of an inferior race" (368). This assertion is confirmed by the fact that no resort to frontier mythology can be found in the works of American writers about WWI or WWII where the enemy is not a racial other.

The most widely agreed conclusion found in personal accounts and fictional treatments of the war such as *Dispatches*, *A Rumor of War*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Short Timers*, *If I Die In the Combat Zone*, *Going After Cacciato*, *Meditations in Green*, to mention just a few, is that American involvement was possible because of the unquestionable loyalty to the Puritan missionary idealism of the past, resurrected in the 1960s by President Kennedy in his New Frontier Program. As Richard Slotkin notes, “Myth does not argue ideology, it exemplifies it” (*Regeneration* 19). In his study, *The Fatal Environment* he argues that “generations of Americans had made our recurrent Indian wars a historical fable of myth in which the confrontations of redskins and palefaces became the symbolic key to interpret the meaning of history”(8). The writer-protagonist’s response to a confusing reality, where often it was impossible to tell fact from fiction, was to experiment with different techniques as a means of discovering hidden meaning and to highlight the double function of language, both as a path to and obstruction of truth. As John Hellmann remarks, “The need to break through the media-created corporate fiction is one of the major motivation and themes of new-journalistic works” (6). The interest of the protagonist shifts to the word as a sign, and he becomes a kind of semiotician, a reader of signs and symbols. Only as such, can he decipher the ideological implications of the parallel between of the mythic wars with the Indians and the current reality. The ironic tension between noble, mythic goals and ignoble performance is illustrated by the two epigraphs in Ron Kovic’s 1976 novel, *Born on the Fourth of July*. The first is Kennedy’s famous patriotic plea: “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do to your country.” The second epigraph, a poem written by the paraplegic Kovic, sounds in stark, almost cynical contrast:

I am the living death
the memorial day on wheels.
I am you yankee doodle dandy,
your john wayne come home
your fourth of July firecracker
exploding in the grave (11)

Peter McInerney argues convincingly that “Kovic’s work is an extended attack upon the American society and the myths which compelled him to go to Vietnam and be permanently disabled. Kovic blames America for what happened to him and accuses his culture of fraud” (198). This discrepancy between the mass-media-created image of Vietnam and the real Vietnam emerges as a dominant motif in all American works about the conflict.

In addition to critically examining cultural assumptions that motivated them to take part in the war, Michael Herr, Phillip Caputo, Ron Kovic and Tim O’Brien, the best representatives of “new journalism,” strove to deconstruct the clichés and dominant patterns of discourse that represented the Vietnam war as a progressive step in conquering barbarity, in this case commun-ism. The process of sense-making and the critical examination of the system of meaning production are of paramount importance in these works for the rebuilding of the self and the writing of the text itself. On the other hand, works like Gustav Hasford’s *Short Timers*, reveal yet another aspect of the war: its

gender undertones implying that it was also a war on femininity and that the real issue for the young, very often teenage soldiers was anxiety about their masculine identity. This approach seems quite relevant in respect to *People of the Whale*, since the male characters' decision to enlist in the army is motivated by values associated with male-bonding and hero worship typical of the classic American hero of the Western. Susan Jeffords defined the myth of masculine bonding as the most salient feature of Vietnam representations" (53).

The insistence that there was hardly any motivation beyond physical survival because of the lack of knowledge of the enemy is another recurrent motif. The Viet Cong are ubiquitous, cunning, fearless, dangerous, but they never have a human face. The last decades have seen the appearance of literary works and documentaries that introduce a new perspective on Vietnam and broaden the interpretative horizon. In 1998 Barbara Sonnenborn released her *Regret to Inform* documentary which was made over ten years and features her pilgrimage to Vietnam where her husband was killed. The aim of the film was to create a sense of empathy with the silenced victims of war—the war widows on both sides, who are rarely a subject of war fiction. Not surprisingly, we encounter widows from all cultural backgrounds and races. For example, a Native American widow talks about the shock her husband experienced when he saw that the enemy looked like him. He had the disturbing feeling that he was waging war on his own people. How do you come to terms with a dilemma like this? Where do your loyalties lie? How do the women who are left behind cope with loss and betrayal? To my knowledge, Linda Hogan is the only novelist who tackles these difficult issues in *People of the Whale*.

Having been brought back home as a war hero against his will and having left behind his Vietnamese daughter Lin, the protagonist Thomas Witka Just has to confront his first wife Ruth and his son Marco, and reconcile his two lives by making sense of his troubling war memories, his betrayals, and his mixed cultural heritage. He has to find ways that allow tribal knowledge systems to persist in fighting the evil outside and within his native culture even as it changes. I will argue that this work is Hogan's most ambitious effort to transcend place and culture, margin and center, in order to resolve the discord between cross-cultural and tribal-centered discourses in fashioning a complex contemporary Native American identity. The work becomes a product of what Paul Gilroy has defined as "untidy elements in a story of hybridization and intermixture that inevitably disappoint the desire for cultural and therefore racial purity, whatever its source" (199). While in *Solar Storms*, for example, by creating empathy among people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds fighting for environmental justice, Hogan is a successful mediator between cultures, in *People of the Whale* she ultimately upholds the idea of separatism by having Thomas Witka return to the mythological space of the A'atsaka elders and turn his back on the contemporary issues and problems that divide his community. Though Thomas is finally healed and made whole, his son Marco, who is considered to be the future of the community, is killed by his father's war buddy Dwight. With his death, the dream of the people for a viable future is deferred in spite of the fact that Dwight's crimes are eventually exposed. The question still remains, as in Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, if a separate peace is possible in a world ridden with strife and violence.

The title of the novel does not raise expectations about the unraveling of war events, but about communal mythic identity. It is about Thomas Witka Just's masculine identity, about his first wife Ruth, as well as about the identity of their small, former whaling community on the northern West Coast of the Pacific Ocean. Yet, Hogan reaches out beyond the familiar landscape of cultural clashes to embrace a new kind of Otherness—that of a former enemy turned family. As the novel opens, we find ourselves immersed in mythological, sacred time: the birth of Thomas is accompanied by an octopus emerging from the sea, something nobody has ever heard of, and literally walking on land, “the eye of it looking at them, as if each one were known in all their past, all their future” (15). This event—implausible as it is miraculous—suggests that Thomas is fated to be a visionary and whaler like his larger-than-life grandfather Witka. The octopus departs with the gifts the people give him—a pearl, gems, a gold ring—and reminds them of the sacred songs and rituals of old, and of their biological connection with the mysterious creatures of the ocean. Witka, for instance, “lived between the elements ... was a medical oddity, a human curiosity, a visionary, a hunter and carver, and a medicine man who could cure rheumatism and dizzy spells. His knowledge of the ocean was so great that scientists came to question him” (19). Ruth was born with gill slits, Marco, Ruth and Thomas' son, with webbed feet. As in *Mean Spirit*, the novel employs a predominantly realistic mode, but it too strains significantly the bounds of realism, by resorting to postmodern strategies, such as the mixture of genres, frame tales, and a specific use of tribal lore, in order to exploit a sense of history and identity as a poetic and imaginative construct.

The first chapter, entitled the Octopus, introduces the main characters and the major events that are gradually dramatized fully throughout the novel. Witka's death signals the loss of tradition and of the sacred as the narrative switches to the present. Eleven years after the end of the war, Thomas, “the man who had been missing in war ... now lived in Witka's gray hut on the craggy rocks,” depressed and lost, even though he “had won the Purple Heart and nearly the last Medal of Honor and other shining tokens of actions that should have made him feel esteemed” (23). Not only is Thomas a divided and fragmented person, the community itself is divided into fractions and ridden with strife. Oppositions are everywhere: the sacred versus the profane, Native versus American, spirituality versus materialism, honesty versus dishonesty, loyalty versus betrayal, all on a dynamic landscape of a mixed and hybrid nature. Greed and jealousy that lead to crimes rather than respect and appreciation are the motivation for the actions of Dmitri and Dwight, Thomas' war buddies, now turned businessmen. As the narrative unfolds, it becomes apparent that the male characters' inability to mediate between mainstream and traditional values without compromising their integrity and sense of belonging eventually causes evil to enter not only their personal lives but that of the small community as well.

The hybrid nature of the modern native community is most conspicuous in the abandonment of traditional dress codes, in the food they eat and the utilities they use. “Who would have thought the day would come when they would ask for Starbucks?” some of them wonder in disbelief. Another character shouts in the bar, “Custer died in an Arrow shirt. That was their joke. (Thomas had such a shirt on when his mother pulled

him out of the water) (23).” Some of the Indians like Thomas’ mother converted to Catholicism. When Thomas asks his mother, “Why do you keep that Catholic stuff? she answers, “You never know.” She, daughter-in-law of Witka, was going to cover all her bases. She even kept a small Buddha in the corner” (75). Syncretism, and not cultural or religious purity is the defining feature of this modern community, whereas the elders who live in a small community of their own strive to keep intact their ancient tribal beliefs and practices.

The reconstruction of chronology begins with Thomas and Ruth’s traditional marriage ceremony in this diverse and unstable landscape, where “Not far from them was the Shaker church many belonged to, but not Thomas and Ruth, who belonged to the age of Aquarius, as they laughingly put it when making love.” The new coinage, “aquarius” refers to Thomas and Ruth’s aquatic whale-octopus ancestry but also implies their familiarity both with the beliefs of the Christianized Indian Shaker Church and with popular culture’s vision of the Age of Aquarius which is linked to the rise of the New Age spiritual movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Thomas Witka’s promising future as the grandson of the A’atsika people’s visionary ends unexpectedly when in an untypically native fashion he succumbs to peer pressure and enlists in the army during a drunken party, thus betraying both the values of his people and his young pregnant wife. He admits that he did not know why he enlisted. “We just all did it ... They believed in America. They did. They were patriotic ... I am not just an Indian. I’m an American, too,” he declares to Ruth defensively (30).

There is nothing wrong with having a mixed or multiracial identity, the problem is submitting blindly to establishment values without any clarity as to causes and consequences. It is worth noting that it is at the end of the war, when “he heard on the boat that city after city had fallen to the communists,” that “For the first time he wondered what a communist really was” (41). Thomas’ main justification for enlisting is that “the Army promised us the buddy system” (30), which points not only to the fact that he has concerns about his masculinity, but that he has internalized one of American culture’s most dangerous cults—that of male bonding created by the American mythmaker James Fenimore Cooper and embraced enthusiastically by the Western, the most American genre. Vietnam, the new West, offers the possibility for the re-enactment of the Western formula of idealized, heroic bachelor existence. As David B. Davis suggests, male bonding is typical of “the pre-adolescent, either chronologically or mentally. It is the stage of revolt against femininity and feminine standards. It is also the age of hero worship.” (115). Leslie Fiedler goes even further by claiming that “The West is a place where boys refuse to grow up” (128). Male bonding insists on a singular intimacy and closeness between men and ascribes to their friendship a higher value than a committed relationship between a man and a woman. This is a concept that Ruth, “a woman who could stand alone in the world, would never understand” (31). Thomas’ impulsive act attests to his already fractured self and his emotional immaturity even before he goes to Vietnam, as well as to the lack of a firm set of moral values characteristic of his tribal culture and also of human wholeness.

Linda Hogan uses multiple points of view by filtering events through her characters' minds in order to explore their internal landscape which allows the reader to identify with and feel empathy for them. Yet, too often the author resorts to commentaries addressed to the reader which undermine the reliability of the narrator and raise a red flag about a possible bias. For instance, in the first chapter we learn that after building a family life in a Vietnamese village, Thomas was found by the army and brought back home, and "Now he is missing from himself" (24). Immediately the reader is admonished that "If you knew him, you would want to go talk to him and tell him it's not his fault and you'd tell him to live" (24). The assertion that "it is not his fault" is problematic because it invalidates the need for personal responsibility: the wholeness of being which the main character strives to achieve starts with self knowledge which cannot be acquired without taking responsibility for one's actions. The promise of "male bonding" is a very poor excuse for going to war and that has to be acknowledged by Thomas if he is to get an understanding of what he has allowed to happen to him and what he has done to others.

The novel consists of three intercepting narratives that converge in the turbulent present of the whale hunt: Thomas' fragmented story about his two lives, Ruth's story line and Lin's, Thomas' Vietnamese daughter's story. The narrative starts in the present and uses flashbacks and alternating points of view to access the past. As the narrator explains, "During the daylight hours he [Thomas] travels, without wanting to the inside passages of his own self, a human labyrinth of memory ... is in trouble, not with the law, not with other people ... It is the inner world, one of disasters and whirlwinds, unknown islands, and he must journey them alone. (24) The character's painful journey through his "labyrinth of memory" begins with the admission that "few of our people had ever heard of that small country before ... they knew little of the war (26). Ignorance of the history of the enemy, of the landscape of Vietnam, and of the true causes for the war is typical of all men who went to Vietnam because they all had been seduced by popular culture icons such as John Wayne: they all wanted to be heroes like his simulated image and live in the glory of masculine prowess. The process of awakening is even more painful for the Native American soldier. It is best illustrated in John Kerry's account of his Indian friend's predicament in Vietnam: "As a boy on an Indian reservation he had watched television and used to cheer the cowboys when they came in and shot the Indians, and then suddenly one day he stopped in Vietnam and he said, 'my God, I am doing to these people the very same thing that was done to my people,' and he stopped."

As Thomas's story gradually unfolds, we learn that he refused to kill Vietnamese women and children, prevented the rape of a Vietnamese girl, killed an American who targeted civilians, and saved the life of a fellow soldier. Looking back at those days, Thomas realizes that he lost track of what was real and of truth. In the few letters they exchange, Ruth asks him to tell her what it was like there. As he admits later, "this was the beginning of many lies; how could he tell her the truth of his life there" (33). Ruth and Thomas's relationship begins to suffer from half truths, unsaid truths, and lies. In order to spare him further pain, Ruth does not "write Thomas about how his own father had attacked her at the corner of the schoolhouse one night. They didn't come to help her, even though she knew they heard. They walked away. Worse, they laughed. With her

strong arms she had to break his hold herself and leave him bruised, drunk and angry enough to tell everyone he “got some” from his daughter-in-law” (78). Debasement of women, misogyny, and rape is not something you come across in Native American cultures. This incident clearly demonstrates that the tribal community has also been fractured along gendered constructions of femininity and masculinity replacing the sacredness of sexual otherness. The final breach of trust between husband and wife comes when Thomas’ envious war buddy Dwight lies to him that Marco is not his son, and Thomas doubts Ruth without even asking her if it is true.

Once in Vietnam, the protagonist is surprised to find out that “the enemy—they didn’t need gear, they didn’t need anything but what they could glean from the dead and fallen, the trees, the strips of bamboo, even a tossed away can. With those things they ... had won every war with almost nothing but cunning and the knowledge of their own land” (170). It does not take long before Thomas begins to think like the enemy in order to survive. The young American Indian gradually realizes that his patriotism is an illusion and begins to identify with and feel respect for the Vietnamese, not only because he looks like them, but because their bravery, determination and reverence for the earth strikes a very deep chord in him.

It’s worth noting, though, that identification with the enemy is not something unique that happens only to Native American soldiers. Many critics recorded the surprising transformation in alienated Vietnam veterans which is illustrated by photographs before and after the war. As David Espey remarks, “Before: the recruit in crisp uniform and crew cut, about to embark for Southeast Asia. After: Vietnam veteran with long hair, headband, beads and fringe. The cowboy has become an Indian. The similarities between many Vietnam war veterans and Indians were not merely cosmetic; both felt betrayed, misunderstood, and ignored by American society.” This perspective, which unfortunately we do not find in *People of the Whale*, shows that Vietnam, more than any other war, provided common ground for all Vietnam veterans, helping them create a strong anti-war movement and find a new identity in which the personal and the political are not at odds. It created friendships between white and American Indian soldiers as well, as demonstrated by Philip Caputo’s most recent Vietnam narrative *Indian Country*. The lack of such cross-racial and cross-cultural friendship in Hogan’s novel is surprising, since in her earlier works, especially in *Mean Spirit*, she was able to depict the Oklahoma oil frontier as a troubled place of fluid and changing identities, both white and native, a place of active exchange between cultures, a place of promise.

Indicatively, in the process of switching loyalties, Thomas begins to think about what went wrong. Although in retrospect he admits that, “To be a hero you always have to betray something or someone” (179), in the heat of the jungle he attributes all evil to the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition by “updating” the biblical creation story: “And God created good and evil ... And god created the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese, the Americans, and eventually he would create the Khmer Rouge, and the capacity of men to torture others and laugh about it” (175). It’s worth remembering that Christ gives the privilege of free choice to people in regard to actions as well as to their

beliefs by saying that “whoever believes and is baptized will have eternal life.”¹ Heaven is not to be taken by force. It is too simplistic to blame everything on God, which even those Christians who do not know well their own God are prone to do. Yet, such jarring and disappointing passages abound in the novel and they detract from its value, for we seem to hear Hogan’s voice rather than the protagonist’s.

Blaming God for human-inflicted sufferings and poor decisions absolves one of responsibility and accountability. On the other hand, anger against God blinds people to the reality of evil in themselves, blocks the way to cleansing and redemption, and often leads to self-hatred. During the war Thomas “had been watching keenly the split of the human heart, including his own ... God created it and what kind of a creature was this god, and he was afraid at first, then he hated, and then he was no longer Thomas. Monster. That’s what he was with brother M16 and AK and grenades” (81). Surely, God did not create the M16, and did not ask young men to enlist in the army. Their government did. On the other hand, many draftees challenged their government by avoiding the draft both on religious and moral grounds. They may have very well listened, as the Amish and the Mennonites did among many others, to God’s admonitions against doing evil and injustice which run like a red thread in both the Old and the New Testament, as in this example from Isaiah:

Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings,
from before my eyes;
cease to do evil, learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan, plead for the widow (1:10-18)

God did not split Thomas’ heart: his desire to be with his buddies and to be an American patriot did. Unfortunately, he makes the choice typical of men from marginalized racial and ethnic groups during a major American war: they took part in it because they needed acceptance, and they needed to have their share in the American Dream on the grounds that they fought for their country. Christ has nothing to do with such a choice: he is not interested in an earthly citizenship; his followers are citizens of his heavenly kingdom.

With his decision to build a life in Vietnam and leave his dog tag behind, so he would be counted dead, Thomas says farewell to arms and to Ruth as well. His love for her ends. He finds himself lost in Muong country, and “had no idea how he’d come across the women drying rice on the road ... an old woman looked and smiled ... he saw compassion in her” (43). Not knowing the language, Thomas pretends to be deaf, so that the Vietnamese will not realize he is an American soldier. He becomes a fisherman, husband and father and builds a new life in the Vietnamese village. His only fear “had been of the Americans” (50). Accidentally, he is found and brought back “home” against

¹ As Richard Mize says, “the fundamental dichotomy of worshipping Christ and following Jesus in nothing new under the Son.” Yet Hogan focuses only on the first member of the dichotomy, “the providential and bellicose,” impulse, totally ignoring “that of Las Casas’ – evangelical and peaceful” approach which preaches against sins of omission: the failure to help the poor and the oppressed.

his will. On the day of his departure, he sees his wife Ma being killed after stepping on a land mine. The last image he has is that of his little daughter, Lin, running after the helicopter.

Ruth and their son, Marco, are at the airport to meet Thomas, but he never gets off the airplane. Torn by grief and loss, ashamed of his treatment of Ruth, Tom is not ready to face those who he left behind and who now consider him a war hero. Going back means having to face his betrayals and lies: “He himself was an island surrounded by water, mystery and being returned to a country he no longer knew or wanted (50)” .Thomas arrives in San Francisco and spends several years of soul searching before he decides to go back to his community after learning from the newspaper that his people are organizing a whale hunt. “We are going to be a people again,” he reasons. “He was suddenly full of need and pride ... He tried not to think of Ruth and the child he’d been told by Dwight was not his own” (70). The protagonist is looking for anything that can give him a sense of belonging, even if it is an empty ritual or a mockery of a sacred rite, as if stepping into a new identity can absolve him of responsibility and delete his wrongdoings. Ironically, the whale hunt becomes his ultimate harrowing of hell, for on an impulse he shoots the young whale in front of Marco’s stunned eyes who says it is the wrong whale to kill. And it is Dwight who knocks off and then drowns Marco, the chosen one, the one who is considered to be the future of the people.

The true protagonist of the novel is actually Ruth. Eventually, Thomas admits that “she is the real hero.” The chapter entitled “The Wife of Marco Polo” is dedicated to her and begins with the words: “No one wrote about the wife of Marco Polo, the first journeyer. As far as anyone knew, no one wrote about the women who were left at home when their husbands were at war or searching for other worlds or traveling out of pure longing” (52). The Marco Polo story seems to serve as a frame tale to this postmodern story, and the reader is invited to see Ruth as a modern Donata Polo. Yet, Marco Polo married her in 1300 after 17 year service in the Khan’s court and after his release from prison. He never traveled again until his death. He never had a son. The wife that was left behind was Marco Polo’s mother. Upon arriving in Venice, in 1269, Nicolo Polo discovered that his wife had died, leaving the care of his seven-year-old son Marco, whom he had never seen before. Hogan’s choice of frame tales and prototypes is both surprising and indicative, for she employs western cultural codes for reading and creating modern female identities.

Ruth names both her boat and her son, Marco Polo. She earns her living by fishing and basket weaving and spends most of her life on the boat: “Ruth was a tide pool, full of life that awaited the return of its element” (51). She uses water and western cultural images when thinking about her lot: “Perhaps explorer Marco Polo’s wife was also a creature in a pool, she thought, awaiting the return of her beloved. She did not know that the women gods on all the island Odysseus visited awaited any traveling sailors around the Mediterranean to keep them from returning home” (52). Hogan references implicitly Penelope’s story as well, the classical icon of wifely loyalty, yet the actual reference is to the tempting female gods Odysseus had to resist in order to come home to his loving wife. These examples of intertextuality point to Ruth’s recognition of her life in a world of intersecting destinies and cultures. In a typically postmodern

fashion, she uses code switching in order to make sense of her life and women's stories is general.

Deeply suffering Thomas' loss, Ruth dotes on their son Marco and wishes for him to travel the world, like his namesake. Yet, she knows that she will have to give her son up too. Although he does not want to live with the old people, Marco knows that he is the one who is to pass on traditional wisdom. Marco and Ruth become deeply involved in the political battle over the issue of the whale hunt which acquires international significance. Thomas' war buddy, Dwight, has organized a whale hunt and secretly signed a contract with a Japanese firm to sell the meat, defying traditional spiritual practices for whale hunting. The elders of the tribe denounce the hunt on the grounds that Dwight and his fellow hunters "haven't praised the whales since they were children, if then. They haven't cleansed themselves. Some of them have been to war and not yet purified themselves ... Nothing good will come of this" (78). Ironically, this time, the evil does not come from the vilified Christian God, but from a non-Christian culture, for the gospel of profit is not the prerogative of any one religion. It is a sickness to which all humanity is susceptible.

Ruth is among the very few who opposes the hunt and asks a reporter from *San Francisco Times* to come and cover the tribal debate. Most of the people think Ruth "was right but if they stood up with her, they would lose. Health benefits. Housing. And she was an outcast in some circles, a puzzle in others, a hero among a few. She was a rare woman who was not afraid to use words" (97). The financial security the white world offers has a stronger hold on people than their traditional beliefs and practices. Ruth knows that human needs and human greed are insatiable, that "at the end of it they would still have wants and needs never fulfilled. Ruth understood that humans could be such empty vessels" (98). Like every visionary and revolutionary, Ruth does not give up, knowing very well that she will have to pay for her activism and for fighting for the truth.

As prophesied by the elders, the hunt turns into a tragedy, leading to personal and environmental catastrophe: Marco is drowned, they kill the wrong whale, a vicious drought sets in, and all environmentalists in the nation and the world are against them. Ironically, they cannot sell the whale meat because during the storm after the hunt, it gets washed away and is reclaimed by the ocean. Frustrated and enraged, Dwight and his cronies, decide to take their revenge on Ruth: they kill her dog, break into her boat and devise a scheme to have her thrown in jail for setting up a forest fire. A rain priest is summoned who finally restores the balance in the community.

After the rain, Thomas builds a fence around his house and begins the difficult process of self-knowledge and self-purification. He remembers that even as he shoots the whale he is wondering like Marco, why he had fired, why he had been brutal to the whale, "why the weapon in his hands had the life it had" (93). Gradually he realizes that the war for him has not ended, "he had fired against his own will. It was not by design but by habit, fear, adrenaline"(94). Suddenly it dawns on him that he and his cronies "were like men at war ... Thomas was ashamed of them ... his love for them had led him to crimes, including this one. (91) He understands now that not God, but he himself is responsible for the choices he has made. If he is to reclaim his humanity, "A sacrifice is

in order ... Truth-telling is part of the price, if he can do it. He had to care again.” Thomas resolves to visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, return his medals, tell the truth to the army, and then go to Ho Chi Minh City and find his daughter. It is after the rain that he starts practicing diving and can see again “the beauty of the water, the thickness of life”(160). Yet still overwhelmed by self-pity and numb with shame, he continues to live in seclusion which ends abruptly with his daughter’s arrival.

Linda Hogan is very good at evoking the atmosphere and the way of life in the Vietnamese village, as well as Lin’s childhood and adolescence as an orphan with vague memories of her American father. Like Ruth, she is strong, intelligent, compassionate, resource-ful and loving. Surprisingly, in this section there is no trace of the author’s insistent spirituality which strains the limits of one’s belief in mysticism. We never learn what the religion or the beliefs of the Vietnamese people are, or Lin’s, or her adoptive parents’. She is born in the communist North, and communists are supposedly atheists, while her husband is raised in the Catholic South, yet the issue of beliefs is never even mentioned. On the other hand, there seems to be a mystical connection between Ruth and Lin, for Ruth has dreams about a little girl, sitting on Thomas’s lap. When Lin arrives in the reservation, it is Ruth who takes care of her and works as a mediator between father and daughter, helping them build a working relationship. As Luan Gaines points out, “It is these women who give depth to Thomas’ story, their undiminished love that sustains even though he remains a wanderer for a long time.” Here, as in her other novels, Hogan seems to suggest that women are capable of unconditional love because of their deep bond with the natural world. It is this bond that is the source both of their endurance and joy, in spite of pain and loss.

Thomas’ pilgrimage to the Vietnam Veterans’ memorial which he undertakes with Dwight and Dmitri after Lin leaves, opens the door to healing and self-forgiveness. As attested by Vietnam veterans, the visit to the memorial has become a powerful ritual of confession, of uttering unspeakable truths, of making the first step to redemption and self-forgiveness. For Thomas the wall is a “time, a place, a whole world” (123). He sees his name engraved in the wall, and then a “cross with a circle at the edge of it, which means, he is resurrected.” The protagonist experiences a ritualistic death, which opens the way to rebirth and restoration. According to anthropologist Mircea Eliade, “ritualistic death provides the clean state on which will be written the successive revelations whose end is the formation of a new person” (278). Thomas touches the wall and “it feels as if you touch a human being.” The wall becomes the Golgotha of the Vietnam Veterans where they can pin their sins and where revelation leads to repentance and to freedom.

Back at the hotel, Thomas is already transformed: he has the courage not only to tell the truth but to fight for it. He has the courage to confront Dwight about his lies, about Marco’s murder and the fact that he killed for money. Thomas realizes that the most important thing for him is “not to be remembered as the American who killed children and women” (198). He returns his medals and tells the whole story of what happened in Vietnam to the officer at the army headquarters. He is told, he is free to go, for apparently such stories have become the norm rather than the exception.

Back in Dark River, the protagonist is ready to make his confession to Ruth and continue the long process of healing among the old people. He fasts and prays and assures them that “We are going to be better people. That is our job now ... The ocean says we are not going to kill the whales until some year when it will be right” (283). Tranquility comes to him on the day he can hear the ocean and understand its language. He feels whole again. He does not know yet, that Dwight has made another plan to go whaling. Yet, when Dwight comes back and joins Thomas’ people, Thomas thinks that Dwight is looking for the same path too. As Thomas paddles and sings, he has no time even to be surprised as the bullet hits him. He sees Dwight with the pistol and falls backwards in the water.

Miraculously, Thomas is washed out on the shore near the old people’s dwellings. Significantly, Linda Hogan resorts once again to a Biblical image when she writes: “Like Jonah, ... he washed up out of the belly of the Great Mysterious that held him ... the place where the whale gave birth to the human and it was written into stone, like a commandment”(180). Like Jonah, Tom is spiritually and physically reborn and ready to follow the commandments of the whale god. On the other hand, he is literally experiencing a Christian ritual death by being immersed into water and washed of his sins, and a ritualistic Christian baptism when he emerges from water purified and ready to follow the commandments of the spirit world. Thomas is like a new born, for “he is emptied of all his stories, even his deeds” (290). His re-initiation into the sacred is effected through a ritual as it is for all people who live in sacred, not profane time. Indicatively, the ceremony is defined as “judgment day for those who are questioned by a God in the sky or an angel who does the accounts” (290).

In spite of the tensions and oppositions between Christian and Native concepts of the sacred, such examples of overlapping of the two systems of spiritual wisdom for identity formation and self-articulation defy any separatist ethos, for both sacred codes converge linguistically and conceptually in the characters’ language and consciousness. As has been repeatedly pointed out, the gospel of profit and self-interest has nothing to do with following Jesus or with the essence of the sacred in any religion. It is Ruth who seems to know this truth and manages to navigate between cultural and religious differences and keep her integrity intact in the face of incredible odds. She looks for allies across cultures and nations who share her belief in the sacredness of the natural world and the need to fight for its preservation. The opposition now has shifted from white against tribal, Christian against Native American to materialism against spirituality. Ruth is yet another example of Hogan’s strong and compelling female protagonists who demonstrate not only that there is a special communion between women, nature and the animal world, but that such women are able to survive all odds and move forward into a future that requires the forming of coalitions across time and space to fight global corporate capitalism – the true enemy of the planet. Thomas and Ruth are finally reunited in the common cause of upholding the sanctity of creation in the face of modern and transnational corporate demand for depleting natural resources for profit. In spite of recurrent examples of devaluing of Christianity, the logic of Hogan’s narrative implies the need to explore transcultural and transatlantic connections by tracing affinities

between people beyond culture, ethnicity and nationality and by recognizing that the sacred is the absolute value in all human cultures.

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