

Terrestrial Intelligence:

Language, Man, and the Natural World in Linda Hogan's *Dwellings*

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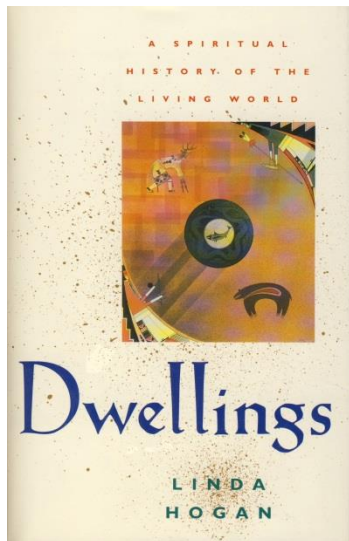
*Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes
With words that made them known.
The Tempest, Shakespeare*



The Yoruba people from Western Nigeria have several idioms that laud the power and might of the human language. One of them translates to: “The mouth of a man is sharper than a sword.” The mouth in this instance is a synecdoche which demonstrates the power of language. In this idiom, however, it can be observed that by representing language with the mouth, the human organ of speech, the emphasis of this idiom is reserved to the human language. In

Dwellings Linda Hogan pays sustained attention to language, as a communicative concept and as a cultural device. Her fervent advocacy for the spiritual reconnection between man and nature in this memoir is presented as possible non-verbal communication which can be accomplished through older traditional native cultures. Hogan argues that there is a primordial language, shared between man and nature which she refers to as “terrestrial intelligence” (11).

In the preface of *Dwellings*, Hogan refers twice to the natural world (animate and inanimate) as “alive and conscious” (12). Her concerns, as far as this work tries to relate its ideas to her poetics, is to emphasize two main ideas: first, that there is a misconception of humanity’s place in the natural world, and second, the cognitive functioning between humanity and the natural world. These two ideas however, are bridged by colonialism—to an extent. Although it should be advised that for the purpose of this work, colonialism is viewed in a sense of humanity’s exploitative dominance over man, nature and the earth’s resources and less in the ideology of the Western colonial establishments around the world (even if both are quite relevant). *Dwellings*



emphasizes the horizontal relationship between man and nature which is characteristic of traditional or Native American cultures. Hogan states that she writes “out of respect for the natural world, recognizing that humankind is not separate from nature” (12). The disenfranchisement of such cultural ideologies by a more pragmatic, ego- driven Western culture, thus renders the voice of nature in the human world incommunicado.

Hogan diagnoses and addresses the devastating effects human decisions have on nature by reevaluating the place of man within the presence of a sentient earth. Her place and the place of her culture, as a displaced and disenfranchised culture,

become equally reflected upon. In “Unwriting Manifest Borders” Mike Walter states that “for Hogan there is no difference between the genocide of Native American peoples and the ongoing destruction of nature” (9). An excerpt from the same article quotes Hogan saying “what happens to people and what happens to the land is the same thing” (as qtd. in Walter 9). Similarly, the loss of nature’s voice lamented in *Dwellings* echoes the loss of the Native American culture, and the restoration of this voice is in a more expansive sense the restoration of harmonious dwelling of the Native American culture, and for all of humanity. Old cultures such as Hogan’s Native American cultures are represented as one with the wilderness, or at least a custodian of the wild; therefore, the disturbance of these cultures becomes consequent to the alarming depletion of the wilderness which carries grave consequences to the survival of humankind on Earth.

According to NASA, the polar ice cap has melted at nine percent faster in the last four decades, forcing the Arctic ice thickness to decrease in about 40 percent since the 1960s (www.nrdc.org). *The Journal of Climate* on the February 15, 2016 released an article which stated that “recent Arctic sea ice changes have important societal and economic impacts and may lead to adverse effects on the Arctic and ecosystem, weather, and climate” (Wang et al. 1529). The arctic melting may boost transatlantic sailing and economic increase through open sea fishing, but in exchange, ecological balance and sustenance of earth’s climate remains in jeopardy (1530). The remote human disturbance and loss of this magnificent glacial wilderness is conceivably the most profound way which the earth has spoken to humankind of her discontent with human activities within her sacred self. In *Dwellings*, Hogan writes that “in a time of such destruction, our lives depend on this listening. It may be that the earth speaks its symptoms to us” (52).

To Hogan the gradual destruction of the earth is directly linked to the decadence of man's spiritual consciousness. She quotes C.A. Meier who states that "the whole of western society ... is approaching a physical and mental breaking point." Hogan then adds: "the result is a spiritual fragmentation that has accompanied our ecological destruction" (52). The reference to "western society" reinforces the elements of colonialism contained in Hogan's *Dwellings* and most of her works. There is a suggestion of western/traditional cultural dichotomy, which claims the former's responsibility for the decline of spiritual connection and communication with the natural world. Hogan repeatedly refers to western/modern civilized age as that of pragmatic reasoning which relies on scientific facts. This ideology of seeing the world disenfranchises cultures which formed its world view on spiritual depths.

Hogan does not shy away from spirituality and mysticism; in fact, it is the recommended solution to restoring humankind's hearing of how nature speaks. She states that "in recent times, the term "myth" has come to signify falsehood, but when we examine myths, we find that they are high form of truth. They are the deepest, innermost cultural stories of our human journeys toward spiritual and psychological growth" (Hogan 51). By reducing the ways of old traditions to myths, Western civilization assumes the power to unfairly dominate (colonize) and exploit nature's resources, including land, mankind, minerals and animals. The implication here is that the wild, which becomes the polar opposite of civilization, becomes a dispensable object of civilization; thus creating a perverse relationship between man-and-man, and man-and-nature.

Hogan's reservations about the Western philosophical relationship with nature are shared by most nature writers. For instance, Henry David Thoreau in *Walden* stated that "our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end [...] We are in great haste to construct a magnetic

telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate” (Thoreau 67). Both Thoreau and Hogan are concerned about the pervasiveness of technology or western ideology of civilization. Such perversion becomes a concrete argument in Hogan’s works, solidly constructed upon the ideals and spiritual consciousness of her native culture. Hogan implies that there is an alternative “history of thinking” in horizontal Native American culture, which communed with land, earth and animals in a mutual understanding, as opposed to the vertical culture of modern civilization, which prioritizes human economic wealth (Hogan 12).

It is a carefully intended coincidence that Thoreau’s commentary on the perversion of civilization is connected with communication. Thoreau’s reference to the telegraph, though, is clearly concerned with humankind’s growing dependency on technology and with the wrong kind of communication. Without disregarding the immense importance of human communication, the absolute reliance on speech can be observed as a hindrance to the spiritual consciousness which should be receptive to nature’s voice. Hogan states that “without language, we humans have no way of knowing what lies beneath the surface of one another. And yet there are communications that take place on a level that goes deeper than our somewhat limited human spoken languages” (57). Because human language is a component of human culture, Western civilization for Hogan becomes tantamount to general human language—the political strengths and universality of Western languages may be considered as viable reason for this—and the disenfranchised languages of old tradition is hardly discussed as just a means of human communication, but rather as a spiritual medium of communicating with nature and the values of the cultures that have been lost to western civilization.

Human language, or Western culture, is therefore seen as a tool too shallow to comprehend the loud whisperings of nature. Hogan states:

As one of our Indian elders has said, there are laws beyond our human laws, and ways above ours. We have no words for this in our language, or even for our experience of being there. Ours is a language of commerce and trade, of laws that can be bent in order that treaties might be broken, land wounded beyond healing. It is a language that is limited, emotionally and spiritually, as if it can't accommodate such magical strength and power (45).

At the latter stage of this quote, her petitions have exceeded the spiritual inadequacies of human language; the term becomes one with culture, expressing its potential as a destructive device. Also, she points out that humankind's betrayal of its accord with nature has been lost to the language of economic gain—the language of commerce and trade. In Marc Reisner's *Cadillac Desert*, the economic greed which birthed the exploration of the Americas and the consequent colonization and near extinction of Hogan's people and culture is mocked. He refers sarcastically at the ridiculousness of the conquistadores' obsession with the Seven Cities of Cibola, a *legend* that claimed "houses and streets were venerated with gold and silver" (Reisner 15). This commercial language which Hogan refers, has contributed to the broken treaty between man and nature.

A 2011 newspaper article by Brian McCombie titled "Crying Wolf" explores sport hunting of wolves for economic gain as it is deceptively justified by denigrating wolves as menace to the wilderness and threat to elk and deer population (11). The irony remained that men hunted the animals it claimed to protect, and almost all of human hunting was done for sport. For Hogan, the vilification of the predatory animal which she believes are "so equal to us that it reflects back what we see in ourselves" (Hogan 71), hinges upon humankind's ego, drive and envy. The treaty of mutual respect and the mutual dependency between man and animal is compromised again by humankind's response by the language of his own understanding.

Hogan's works focus on renegotiating this treaty between man and nature. Her idea of unconventional style language—which is a genuine belief and practice embedded in traditional cultures—as a mediating device, and human/modern language as a culturally oppressive device is often represented in her work. In her poem, “The Sandhills,” she says that “[t]he language of cranes / we once were told / is the wind” (Poetry Foundation). Similarly, in *Dwellings*, she says that “bats hear their way through the world. They hear the sounds that exist at the edges of our lives. Leaping through blue twilight they cry out a thin language, then listen for its echo to return” (25). These fascinating ways of knowing are the forms of languages humankind does not comprehend, or appreciate, because we revel in the assumed superiority of our own language. This idea of animating nature is sustained through the pages of *Dwellings*, but so is humanity's aggressive exploitation of natural world. The link between these two ideas is that if humankind recognized nature as a living, breathing entity, we may show more compassion towards her.

However, we may wonder if life or speech guarantees human compassion. To be in accord with nature, Hogan proposes that recognizing speech may not be enough to create harmony between man and the natural world. In an earlier stated quote from *Dwellings*, she states that human language is “limited, emotionally and spiritually” (46). The alternative “terrestrial intelligence” thus responds to these two concepts, barring human speech as an effective mediator. For instance, the haunting scenery of blackened rivers with miles of dead fish afloat after oil spills from crude exploration speaks directly at our conscience and emotions, without any words, so does the streaked lifelessness of lands after fracking.

Hogan speaks about Eugene Linden's *Silent Partners*, a book which she says reports on a series of language experiments on primates, and another by Harry Harlowe which she partly described as “torturous experiments” (Hogan 54). Hogan restates a peculiar report from the

language learning program. Quoting Linden from *Silent Partners*, she states that “it is a little unsettling to be confronted with an animal who does not automatically acknowledge your paramountcy in the natural hierarchy” (as qtd. in Hogan 54). Her conclusions on these experiments she says show that “the questions raised throughout this project were primarily questions about ourselves, our own morality, our way of being in the world, and our responsibility for caretaking of the earth” (54). Humankind, in its deep yearnings to know nature, to seek answers of itself from nature has once again been compromised by its language of dominance.

The fractured relationship between man and nature proposes a list of paradoxes necessary to reunite humankind’s place within the intended balance of natural world. Humankind is required to *observe* more than it *sees*, *listen* without *hearing*, and most importantly *communicate* without *speaking*. Such ideals are related tenets of spirituality rather than pragmatic science, but also, spirituality is inherent to humankind, and not separate. Hogan regards this unspoken communication as the purest kind of communication. More honest and comprehensible than the words we utter, “we read one another via gesture, stance, facial expression, scent” (57). According to Hogan, this purer, honest mode of communication is how we illustrate difficult feelings. Hogan says that “we have feelings that can’t be spoken. The very speechlessness results in poems that try to articulate what can’t be said directly, in paintings that bypass the intellectual boundaries of our daily vision, and in music that goes straight to the body. And there is even more deep language in us” (57). It is in this same manner nature communicates, by spiritual depth of emotions interpreted in respect and fairness.

The failings of human language, or western culture, as it is synonymous in Hogan’s arguments, to mediate a respectable and peaceful relationship between humans can be observed

in the post-colonial reading of William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Post-Colonial theorists have often argued the role of language in constructing the power pyramid; that is, the vertical relationship between races, and how the illusion of a higher race is constructed. Hogan herself mentions that "language usage, in fact, often determines social class order in our societal systems" (Hogan 57). Caliban, in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, described as one who "gabbled in the most brutish way," (29) comes to mind. The inability of Caliban to communicate in a European tongue relegates his life value—to become a lesser human that may be exploited or assaulted. The same, or at least similar is the relationship between man and nature. The animosity which builds between the settlers and the native Caliban because the linguistic discord is reminiscent of the historical pattern of both human-to-human and human-to-nature relationships. Slavery can be viewed as an effect of the former, and climate change as an effect of the latter.

Do we therefore assume that the emergent discord between man and nature—which has been dangerously widened by modern civilization—can be related to humankind's insistence to communicate with nature in its own language of convenience--to speak with without listening, or observing, or feeling? In the earlier mentioned primate experiments from Eugene Lindel's *Silent Partners*, after forcibly and painfully teaching the primates a form of human language, the observers are appalled by how little the primates think of humankind. Perhaps this is so because the primates had engaged with us in the language of order, boundaries, fairness, sanctity and empathy, but humankind spurned this language.

It seems as though the way to find nature's voice is to mute our own voice, our own language, in all the varied forms of authority and superiority which human language takes. The most human expedient human connection with nature has been accessed in the wilderness. Most

human religions have their followers receive their most important revelations in the wilderness. Moses, Mohammed, and Jesus all engaged in an isolated experience where voice of humanity becomes shut out. We may also look to Humboldt's or Thoreau's journeys into the wilderness, where human speech is of no use, but only in this aspect: as a channel to tune our voice down; to humble ourselves before nature. Hogan says that "the wilderness is seen as having value only as it enhances and serves our human lives, our human world. While most of us agree that the wilderness is necessary to our spiritual and psychological well-being, it is a container of far more" (45).

Although the wilderness may provide an enhanced platform for spiritual consciousness, humankind can only commune with it by becoming one with it. Therefore, the wilderness is not necessarily a place of isolation waiting to be entered by humankind. Rather, humankind is an extension of wilderness that has become lost. Hogan illustrates a spiritual communing with the natural world by her native tribe in a ceremony. She says that,

"The man who will help us is drumming and singing in front of us. His wife drives and chats. *He doesn't speak. (italics mine)* He is moving between the worlds, beginning already to step over the boundaries of what we think, in daily and ordinary terms, is real and present. He is already *feeling, hearing, (italics are mine)* knowing what else is there, that which is around us daily but too often unacknowledged, a larger life than our own" (38).

The man described above connects spiritually by *not speaking*, but rather, *feeling and hearing*. The wilderness lies within him, like it is within us, within stories told in these languages of the "old native cultures," within the struggles seen in the journeys shared between man, his neighbors and their host, the earth. In conclusion, terrestrial intelligence is a linguistic process. It is a primordial mode of communication which relies on spiritual consciousness and emotive responses, instead of the mechanical process of communication by speech. Hogan's

shows that the sophistication and uniqueness of human speech/language can isolate humankind from the balance of the natural world; it is upon its power that humankind assumes its superior role in the natural world.

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