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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The Poetics of Transformation
and Becoming in Linda Hogan's
Solar Storms

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of decolonizing English by Indigenous communities and writers. By adapting English not only grammatically, but semantically, they acknowledge their cultural realities while emphasizing the interdependence of humans and the land. In particular, this paper draws on Robin Wall Kimmerer's concept of "Grammar of Animacy" and applies it to Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*. In so doing, I argue that by recognising the land and water animacy and livingness, the protagonist of *Solar Storms*, Angel, is able to challenge the colonial uses that had been associated to the English language by the colonial system. Angel's contact with the land of her ancestors results in the transformation of her understanding of the land and, as a consequence, her understanding of the colonial system that perpetuates the inequalities and discrimination against Indigenous people. The land teaches her the grammar of animacy, helping her to transform the English language so that she can give thanks and acknowledge the connection she shares with the land, decolonizing English in the process.

Key Words: Indigenous Studies, Indigenous Languages, Indigenous People, Land, Water, Dreams, Animacy, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Solar Storms*, Linda Hogan, Colonization, English, Decolonization, Relations, Grandmothers, Aunties, Indigenous Resilience, Indigenous Resistance, Indigenous Transformation, Indigenous Poetics.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo se centra en el proceso de las comunidades y escritores Indígenas de descolonizar la lengua inglesa a través del reconocimiento de sus realidades culturales adaptando no solo el inglés gramaticalmente, sino semánticamente, para así mostrar la relación que los humanos deberían compartir con la tierra. En concreto, el ensayo muestra el concepto de “Grammar of Animacy,” que en español podría ser traducido como la “Gramática de lo Animado,” que Robin Wall Kimmerer nos enseña en su libro *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Esta gramática se aplica a la novela *Solar Storms* de Linda Hogan. Mantengo que al reconocer la vida y autonomía de la tierra y el agua, la protagonista de *Solar Storms*, Angel, es capaz de desestabilizar el uso colonial que la colonización de América asoció al lenguaje. Angel es capaz de cambiar la forma en la que ve el mundo gracias a su interacción con la tierra de sus ancestros, y por ende, es capaz de cambiar su entendimiento del sistema colonial que había perpetuado las desigualdades y la discriminación contra los Indígenas. La tierra le enseña la gramática de lo animado, ayudándole a cambiar la realidad de la lengua inglesa para que pueda agradecer y reconocer su relación con ella, descolonizando el inglés en el proceso.

Palabras clave: Estudios Indígenas, Lenguas Indígenas, Indígenas, Tierra, Agua, Sueños, Animacy, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Solar Storms*, Linda Hogan, Colonización, Inglés, Decolonización, Relaciones, Abuelas, Tías, Resiliencia Indígena, Resistencia Indígena, Transformación Indígena, Poesía Indígena.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Understanding the “Grammar of Animacy”.....	2
3. The Song of Animacy.....	4
4. Conclusion.....	8
5. Works Cited.....	10

Our biology is only a very small part of our humanity; the rest is a process of becoming.

— Daniel H. Justice, *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* 33

I. INTRODUCTION

Cherokee scholar Daniel Justice argues that the act of being human is a “process of becoming” (33) in itself, an act of learning. We learn how to be human through the teachings that our relations in the world share with us in the language they happen to do so. Through their teachings and stories we learn about our contexts and possibilities of becoming at the same time that we obtain our language. In her essay “Land Speaking,” Jeannette Armstrong writes, “[a]s I understand it from my Okanagan ancestors, language was given to us by the land we live within” (142). For her community, her Okanagan language is tied to the land where the community is based, the same as the process of learning how to be human is tied to the land where one lives. The land becomes, therefore, a language teacher. It is through language that we get to understand the relations that we share with our communities, our ancestors and our responsibilities. But what happens when a community is displaced abruptly from the land where they live? or when the land is commodified completely in order to make it valuable according to settler economic notions? Does the language adapt to those changes?

Through this paper, I want to explore how the commodification of the land and displacement of Indigenous communities not only affect those communities physically and structurally but also linguistically, for the language is a manifestation of the relation with the land. When the land is damaged, the language of the community is also affected. In order to do so, I will examine the novel *Solar Storms* written by Linda Hogan. Through my exploration, I argue that *Solar Storms* challenges the colonial system that the English language maintains by its separation of people from non-human persons and beings. First, I will introduce the concept of “Grammar of Animacy” following Robin Wall Kimmerer’s discussion of the term in her

book *Braiding Sweetgrass*. Then I will think about the concept of animacy in Hogan's novel. My aim is to show that Indigenous people, and especially Indigenous women, are living examples of Indigenous resilience and transformation in motion. The argument I try to pursue is that even though Indigenous languages were affected by colonialism and racism, and many Indigenous peoples in Canada are only fluent in English now, their resilience is still manifested through their language and narratives. In her story "Goodbye, Snauq," Lee Maracle writes: "Raven shaped us; we are built for transformation. Our stories prepare us for it. Find freedom in the context you inherit" (111). In this sense, the context many Indigenous communities have been forced to inherit is the English language, but they have adapted it in order to hold their stories and develop a relationship with the land they inhabit.

II. UNDERSTANDING THE GRAMMAR OF ANIMACY

One of the principal differences between English as a colonial language and some Indigenous languages such as Okanagan, Cree, Anishinabek or *hə́nqəmínəm*, is that these Indigenous languages recognise the agency and livingness of the world and the land where we live. Botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer calls this quality of language the "Grammar of Animacy" (49). In her chapter "Learning the Grammar of Animacy", she writes that "[t]he language is the heart of our culture; it holds our thoughts, our way of seeing the world" (50). While she explains how she came to start learning the traditional language of the Potawatomi nation, she teaches us that "Potawatomi does not have gender divisions, but animate and unanimated ones" (53). She reflects on how this alters the experience of learning her language drastically, because at the same time she progresses in her learning process, she is also changing the way she conceives the external world. She writes that "[a] bay is a noun only if water is *dead* . . . But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to be bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live" (55). Therefore, talking Potawatomi is not simply speaking, but a way of locating yourself in the

world, recognising the relationships that sustain you and the nourishment you receive from other beings. There is not a simple way to take agency from water, land and animals in Potawatomi, therefore recognising their agency on our lives when we speak it: “Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms” (55). When counterposed to English, the differences set sparks into the night air with the friction of both languages: “The arrogance of English is that the only way to be animate, to be worthy of respect and moral concern, is to be human” (57). Even though Kimmerer uses the “grammar of animacy” only with Potawatomi, I believe many Indigenous languages share this characteristic. Not only does Kimmerer defend the animacy of the world, but through her argumentation, she also shows how language, culture and land are completely interrelated as one. Jeannette Armstrong similarly writes, “I have heard elders explain that the language changed as we moved and spread over the land through time. My own father told me that it was the land that changed the language because there is special knowledge in each different place” (142). The movements of the community were manifested in their language and their connection to the new land they inhabited. But what happens when the only language your ancestors have been able or permitted to give you is English, a language used in the same colonial processes that displaced Indigenous communities and aimed to erase their languages, cultures and traditions? The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada wrote in their final report that “[c]ultural genocide is the destruction of those structures and practices that allow the group to continue as a group” (1). What happens then when the same language used for cultural genocide is the only language available to you? Following Daniel Justice, in some sense the only thing left is a “process of becoming,” a process of learning to decolonize English in order to honor our relations with the land and other non-human beings, a process of acknowledging the agency of land through the “Grammar of Animacy”.

III. THE SONG OF ANIMACY

Linda Hogan presents us with a world of singing memory in her *Solar Storms*. In her book, we follow Angel on her journey back home. Even though she was still a teenager, she had been in the foster system almost all her life. The narration starts when she is able to contact her grandmother, who lives up north in a place called Adam's Rib, and she invites Angel to go and visit her. From the moment she arrives there, she tries to connect with her stolen past. Angel listens to the stories and the silence her grandmothers share with her. Eventually, her great-grandmother decides it is time for her to go up north, to the land of the Fat Eaters, in order to die where she was born, and Angel embarks on a perilous canoe journey with her grandmother Agnes, her great-grandmother Dora Rouge, and her adoptive grandmother Bush, who was the original organizer of the journey in her willingness to stop the dam construction up North that would surely destroy the land where they lived. Through her journey, Angel is faced with both a beautiful and dangerous world while she reconnects with her past and the memory of her mother. With the help of her grandmothers, she is able to start recollecting the truth about her mother's past and how this past affected the trauma she caused Angel when she was still a baby by harming her.

Like in *Genesis*, we start our journey through the lands of Angel's ancestors in Adam's Rib: "The elders said it was where land and water had joined together in an ancient pact, now broken" (21). Angel starts the narration by telling us: "I was full of words inside myself; there were even questions in me I hadn't yet thought to form, things not yet come to words" (25). At the beginning of the narration, Angel is trying to reconnect with her family and her traditions by coming back to the place where she had tracked her grandmother. At this point, she still did not recognize the grammar of animacy because she had been dislocated from the land all her life. The first glimpses we see of the land where she arrives seem to be brokenness and

disconnection. By listening to her grandmothers and Husk, she starts to reconnect with her tradition. Husk tells her, “[t]here had once been a covenant between animals and men . . . They would care for one another. It was an agreement much like the one between land and water. This pact, too, had been broken, forced by need and hunger” (35). Even though the covenant was broken, “[Husk’s] main desire in life was to prove that the world was alive and that animals felt pain, as if he could make up for being part of the broken contract with animals” (35). At the time Angel is presented with the reality of living with Bush in Fur Island, we start seeing how she acknowledges the agency of the land and water: “Already I believed in the power of water. I believed water might leap up, open my palm, and take Dora-Rouge’s gift from me” (64). She also says that: “I sensed already that the land on Fur Island, the water, would pull a person in, steal from them, change them, that it would spit them up transformed, like Jonah from the belly of the whale” (68). In a sense, the water at Adam’s Rib seems to be a powerful and moody relation, maybe altered by the commodification of the land that the Hydroelectric company had been developing up North in its endeavour to advance the progress of civilization that permitted the conditions for colonialism. After some time living in Adam’s Rib, Angel tells us, “I had truly entered a different world, a tree-shaded place where unaccountable things occurred, . . . where water’s voice said things only the oldest of people understood” (73). Only the old people are able to remember and hear the voice of water because they are the ones who had been living inside the grammar of animacy that their communities offered them when they were still children. Even though the processes of colonialism were already in progress stealing Indigenous children from their families through the Residential School system, many of those children maintained their connection to the land. The elders of Adam’s Rib are able to migrate the grammar of animacy from their languages to English in a kind of transforming analogy. However, as modern development pushes forward, it pushes away the ability of people to recognise the livingness of the land. Angel tells us that “[t]he people at Adam’s Rib believed

everything was alive, that we were surrounded by the faces and lovings of gods. The world, as described by Dora-Rouge, was a dense soup of love, creation all around us, full and intelligent” (81). In contradistinction to this view, English as a colonial tool had been imposed through the school system in order to take those connections. But, as Angel learned from Bush, “[t]he division between humans and animals was a false one. There were times, even recent times, when they both spoke the same language, when Dora-Rouge’s song was taken into account” (82).

As Angel moves to live with Bush, her life becomes silent. In her silence, she is able to start acknowledging the land as a living relation: “As seasons changed, I thought I heard voices in the wind, the wind which returned there each night, the wind that lived on the island and sometimes talked to us through the organ pipes” (93). Silence in *Solar Storms* is the way to understand the connections to the land, because when you are quiet you are able to listen to others and acknowledge the voice of the land teaching you. I see here a connection with the Island of Ammah at the land of the Beautiful Ones, as they preferred to be called. Angel encounters this island in the stories people at the land of the Fat Eaters or Beautiful Ones tell. Angel says that “I was told Ammah was a silent god and rarely spoke. The reason for this was that all things—birdsongs, the moon, even my own life—grow from rich and splendid silence” (265). This silence enables her to reconnect with her ancestors, their land and its animacy, and it is the same kind of silence that enables her to share her life with Bush: “Together we went outside and as the wind inhaled there was a moment of silence in which we heard the sound of the northern lights. “Listen,” Bush said, and I heard the shimmering of ice crystals, charged by solar storms” (119). In silence, even the Northern Lights—the solar storms—are recognised as living relations that sing and dance.

When Angel and her grandmothers start their journey North, her conception about the land shifts completely, propelled by the stories shared on the canoes, the dreams that the land

offered her during the nights, and the beauty she was able to recognise in the petroglyphs, water and animals they encountered. “I know now that the name [“God”] does not refer to any deity, but means simply to call out and pray, to summon. To use words and sing, to speak” (169). She uses this praying to recognise the animacy of the land they are travelling through. “Something lived there, something I didn’t understand, but would always remember by feel, and when I felt it, I would call it God and that was 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). Her realization breaks the concept of “terra nullius”, a legal term meaning “nobody’s land”, used to justify the colonization of Indigenous people by Christians and their descendants claiming that Indigenous people did not use their land adequately. Her realization, therefore, gives her strength and resilience for the challenges ahead in her journey, such as the death of her grandmother Agnes, her mother and the struggle to stop the construction of the dams. She is also able to start making links between the commodification and engineering of the land she is being confronted with, and the consequences that Indigenous People have to face. This not only refers to dislocations and dispossessions, but also to the enterprise of the colonizers to erase the grammar of animacy from Indigenous people’s conceptions by distancing them from their languages, because if the covenant between animals and humans was broken, and Indigenous people felt disconnected and alone, they would be easier to dispose of and colonize. During their journey, Dora Rouge and Angel talks about the Europeans colonizers, and Angels thinks: “[The Europeans’] legacy, I began to understand, had been the removal of spirit from everything, from animals, trees, fishhooks, and hammers, all things the Indians had as allies. They’d forgotten how to live. Before, everything lived together well—lynx and women, trappers and beaver. Now most of us had inarticulate souls, silent spirits, and despairing hearts” (180, 181). I find the mention of most Indigenous people Angel knew having an inarticulate soul related to the colonial process, because as I said before,

when people stop acknowledging the animacy of the world, they might stop acknowledging and recognizing their own animacy and agency within the land.

Angel's journey with her grandmothers is so relevant to her transformation because it challenges the same colonial narrative imposed by the English language. She is able to start seeing that everything is alive, and recognise this with the English language, changing the language and its grammar. She is the one able to "find freedom in the context [she] inherit[ed]" (Maracle). She is able to recognise her transformation possibilities and let the land heal her trauma and alienation she had experienced all her life. "Sometimes on this journey I thought I heard the voices of the world, of what was all around us—the stones, the waters flowing toward their ends, the osprey with its claws in fish, even the minnows and spawn. I heard the trees with their roots holding ground" (181). Her journey through the waters and land of her ancestors helped her to become a real human being. Tulik once told her: "You know, Angel, here a person is only strong when they feel the land. Until then a person is not a human being" (235). Later on, Miss Nett, an old woman who had lived on and with the land all her life, after hearing Angel talking on the radio program Indian Time about the confrontation with the dams' men, comes to Tulik's house and tells him: "Tulik, she's a girl who turned into a human" (295). From that moment, "They began to call [her] Maniki" (296). Maniki is a truly human being, and therefore, in the act of calling Angel that way, they recognise her journey and transformation, her process of learning to be human, as Daniel Justice would say.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, after thinking and reflecting on *Solar Storms*, I see how Maniki's process of learning to be human is completely dependent on her ability to recognise the agency and animacy of land and water, of solar storms. Land shows her the beauty of the world, and therefore the beauty inside her and other beings. She follows the guiding of Dora-Rouge in her

last words: “The rain cloud. How Beautiful” (348), and the last we hear from Maniki in the novel is: “Something beautiful lives inside us. You will see. Just believe it. You will see” (351).

In her article “Bubbling like a Beating Heart”, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes:

I am pulled into my Michi Saagiik Nishnaabeg lands and the beating-heart river that runs through it. My consciousness as a Michi Saagiik Nishnaabeg women, my poetics as a storyteller and a writer, come from the land because I am the land. Nishnaabemowin seamlessly joins my body to the body of my first mother; it links my beating heart to the beating river that flows through my city. (108)

In the same way, Maniki’s grandmothers’ stories and her ability to recognise the animacy of the world finally link her life and experience with the land and water of her ancestors. Her journey shows that by transforming one-self, it is possible to transform the English language. Similarly, Linda Hogan shows this transformation possibility in the process of writing her *Solar Storms* by showing us the grammar of animacy. Her narration teaches us of a song too powerful and important to sing in isolation. Hogan’s novel, as Kimmerer would say, “reminds us about the capacity of others as our teachers, as holders of knowledge, as guides” (58). The stories of Maniki and her grandmothers “are stories worth following home. Our bodies, like compasses, still know the way” (Miranda qtd. in Justice ix).

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