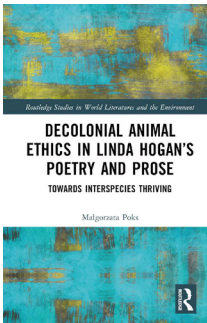




DECOLONIAL ANIMAL ETHICS IN LINDA HOGAN'S POETRY AND PROSE. TOWARDS INTERSPECIES THRIVING BY MAŁGORZATA POKS

(Book Review)



This book starts with a preface and an introduction in which Poks sketches the relationship between the modern, hierarchical, anthropocentric view of non-human animals, and the traditional, relational view in Indigenous ontologies. In dialogue with, for example, human–animal studies, decolonial studies, ethno-science and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the study provides an in-depth engagement with the authorship of Chickasaw poet and novelist

Linda Hogan. The point of departure for the study is the assertion that the perception of non-human animals has a significant political and ethical dimension, and its overarching purpose is the sympathetic one of responding to Robin Wall Kimmerer's imperative to dance for the renewal of the world (vii).

The book is divided into two parts, with the first investigating Hogan's poetry, and the second dealing with her prose. The chapters follow a decade-wise chronology throughout which Poks asks questions about the significance of Indigenous knowledges for the Anthropocene, how they connect to the extinction of species and environmental grief, and what insights Indigenous ethics can offer to activists and decision makers. Hogan is a highly relevant author to focus on in this context, given her long-standing engagement with discussions on the subject through the medium of fiction and essays, as well as argumentative and scholarly texts. Despite the scope of Hogan's production, Poks notes, there is not much written about her literary production, and even less so of the representations of the human–animal relationship in it. Thus, before an adequate evaluation of her work can be undertaken,

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there is a need for a deeper inquiry into its premises. Moreover, there is a tendency among critics and scholars to charge fiction written by women of color with historical inaccuracy, and to define them as containing magical realist elements (30). This tendency points to a reductive understanding of history as a coherent and singular entity.

These are the main motivations for Poks' study, which aims to perform a decolonial reading of the human-animal relationship in Hogan's authorship. In order to do so, she states the aim to place it within the work of "re-minding," a decolonizing method that Hogan proposed in her book of essays *The Radiant Lives of Animals* (2020). It takes as its point of departure the ongoing sixth mass extinction and human cruelty to animals, in face of which we need to be "re-minded" of the ontological primacy of relationships and recover the attitude of respect and gratitude. This is a process of re-learning, which is based in knowledges generated while walking the land, watching the animals, and listening to the landscape (13). Another important point of departure for Poks' study is "re-story-ation," a term that was coined by Robin Wall Kimmerer to signify a category of "healing stories" that allows for the imagination of a non-abusive relationship to the non-human world (17). In keeping with Indigenous storytelling traditions, re-minding allows the use of imagination to access the deeper truths which mere facts can never reveal (30). Hogan believes in the power of stories in creating change and her writings are "healing stories," Poks claims (17).

The introduction provides the reader with a clear and rich overview of the field in which Poks' project is situated, as well as the main theoretical and methodological concepts she works with. However, this is also the part of the book which raises concerns on my part. Poks starts out with a sketch of the ways in which the modern, Western view of non-human animals as the Other facilitates a large-scale capitalist meat industry, which in practice means the killing and torturing of immeasurable numbers of non-human individuals. This is a description that I fully agree with, but I think that the idealizing ways in which this view is contrasted against Indigenous conceptualizations of non-human animals as teachers and kin are problematic, as can be exemplified by the following fragment: "In the beginning, when everything was in a state of transformation, there was no clear distinction between human and other-than-human beings: animals could become humans and humans animals; everyone lived in peace and spoke one language, bound by ties of kinship and ceremonial treaties. Traditional societies still honor these treaties, respecting the ties of kinship with all life. But modern societies have broken the ancient pacts, betrayed the trust, and transformed the common lifeworld into a deathworld." (10)

As Poks states, the intersection between decoloniality and animal studies is a very recent one (8–13). I have been active in literary human–animal studies for more than 15 years, and I am convinced that Indigenous ontologies have much to offer in this field, and, in extension, to modern Western philosophy in general. I also believe that the marginalization and neglect of these beliefs and worldviews have been, and continue to be, motivated by racist values and capitalist concerns. In Sweden, we see very similar tendencies and processes in the relationship between the Northern-European nation-states and the indigenous Sami-people to those which Poks describes in an American context. There is no doubt that the usage of non-human animals in modern capitalism is highly destructive for basically everything: the environment, human health and morals, equality, justice and, of course, the creatures who are forced into or produced by the meat- and dairy industry. Consequently, there is a pressing necessity to acknowledge alternative modes of thought and living, as well as a necessity for a reinvigoration of narratives, truths and ontologies – and I do think that Poks proves that Hogan’s authorship provides a kind of re-storying and re-minding that is much needed in this process. Still, it appears as counterproductive to sentimentally look towards another worldview as a “paradise lost,” which seems to be the case in the quote above.

One of the pit-falls with this kind of thinking becomes apparent when Poks writes: “Traditional peoples (...) embrace cyclical notions of time, which enables them to remain hopeful, believe in renewal, and work toward survivability” (22). Another example is this: “The Indigenous people of North America believe that the animals that once roamed the continent did not simply become extinct” (60). Here, it seems that Poks has abandoned the discussion about different ontologies, and even about cosmology and mythology, in lieu of presumptions regarding what a certain ontology makes people believe and embrace, and how it effects their emotional life and political struggles. Of course, there is no such clear relationship between cause and effect in this case, and this is a gross simplification. Nevertheless, as Poks progresses in her analysis, it becomes evident that she holds a high regard for Indigenous cultures (nothing wrong with that). However, the discussions largely refrain from an idealization of these cultures and from hasty conclusions regarding the potential effects they may have. Instead, we get a detailed, in-depth, theoretically sophisticated analysis of the collected literary works of Hogan as regards the relationship between human and non-human animals.

In the debut collection of poetry *Calling Myself Home* (1978), Hogan recollects her Oklahoma childhood with its animals and trees, her family and ancestors, and everyday work. Poks acknowledges the ways in which she discusses frogs, fish and turtles in this context, and comes to the conclusion that *Calling Myself Home* as a whole functions as a correlate of the painful story of Indigenous America in the intense political debates of the 1970's. The 1980's poetry collections *Eclipse* (1983), *Seeing through the Sun* (1985) and *Savings* (1988) were, Poks claims, inspired by the author's residence in Colorado. They engage portrayals of crayfish, coyote, elks, horses and crows in an ecofeminist context, thus acknowledging the potential in what comes across as a fundamental, entangled relationship between animality and femininity.

In 1990, Hogan made her debut as a novelist with *Mean Spirit*, which was nominated to the Pulitzer prize, and, as Poks states, it imaginatively engages the traumas of human and non-human people Indigenous to North America. During this decade, she also wrote the novels *Solar Storms* (1993), which investigates the concept of wildness and the un-tamed, and *Power* (1998), in which sacrifice and the shared world of human- and non-human animals are portrayed. As Poks notes, there was one collection of poetry published in this period of time, *The Book of Medicines* (1993), which contributed to making Hogan's authorship publicly known, and in which, apart from writing about buffaloes, bears and crows, her interest in aquatic elements and the notion of wildness manifests itself. After the turn of the 21st century, Hogan published her last novel, *People of the Whale* (2008), in which she continues to explore the topic of marine biology and sketches an Indigenous people-whale continuum, which Poks productively discusses with Mary Louise Pratt's concept "contact zone." The interest in the whale is developed in Hogan's 2008 collection of poetry *Rounding the Human Corners*, in which the merging of humans and whales is thematized along with a celebration of life. In the ensuing collections of poetry, *Dark. Sweet* (2014) and *A History of Kindness* (2020), Poks notes that Hogan foregrounds mercy and compassion in relation to insects, birds, horses, whales and marine organisms, but also mourns the nonhuman victims of human-induced environmental disasters and human cruelty.

It is fascinating to follow Poks' narration of the aesthetic development of Hogan's rich authorship through the decades. Poks' choice to present prose and poetry decade-wise yet apart proves to be a constructive one, since it allows for an in-depth analysis that takes into account the specificities of both these genres. In particular, it is interesting

to see the ways in which the engagement with Hogan's literary *oeuvre* provides a detailed overview of the potential and quality of the flat and relational ontology in Indigenous cultures as it comes to human-animal relations. Also, the variety of ways in which the human-animal relationship is entangled with the role of women in the Indigenous traditions is striking. According to Poks, Hogan's personal experiences and life are impossible to detract from her philosophy and politics, therefore she includes discussions about the author's life in the analysis of the texts. Although the author's biography is painted with broad strokes, and it is uncertain how effective this perspective is in the literary analysis, it nevertheless gives an impression of the indispensable connection between life, literature, politics and knowledge, which characterizes Indigenous literature. Through Hogan's own experiences in life, places such as Oklahoma and Colorado gain both material and metaphorical qualities in her literary works. This is also the case with the landscapes and the non-human animals who inhabit them and who become agents in their own right in a constant yet shifting and transformative relationship to the human, who is thus decentered in effective ways.

On an overall level, Poks' study is well-written, well-argued, detailed, respectful and coherent. The project that Poks carries out is much needed, as it apparently fills a gap in the previous research regarding representations of non-human animals in Indigenous literature in general, and in Hogan's authorship in particular. It also contributes to a justful canonization of Hogan as a writer of fiction. Moreover, the study displays the normativity of history writing, and proves that the past can be constructed in many different ways. Finally, *Decolonial Animal Ethics in Linda Hogan's Poetry and Prose. Towards Interspecies Thriving* demonstrates the great potential for indigenous studies and human-animal studies to engage in a fruitful dialogue that benefits both fields.

Abstract: Małgorzata Poks' *Decolonial Animal Ethics in Linda Hogan's Poetry and Prose: Towards Interspecies Thriving* (2023) focuses on the relationship between the modern, hierarchical, anthropocentric view of non-human animals, and the traditional, relational view in Indigenous ontologies. In dialogue with human-animal studies, decolonial studies, and Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), the study provides an in-depth engagement with the literary authorship of Chickasaw poet and novelist Linda Hogan. The questions that Poks asks are: What is the significance of Indigenous knowledges for the Anthropocene? How do these knowledges relate to the extinction of species and environmental grief? What insights are offered by Indigenous ethics to activists and decision makers in this regard? Despite the scope of Hogan's production there is not much written about her literary production, Poks claims,

even less so about the representation of the human-animal relationship in it. This is a lack which Poks makes up for in a thorough investigation of Hogan's prose and poetry from the 1970s until today. In Hogan's works, themes like mercy, compassion, wildness, grief, and the connection between femininity and animality are in constant dialogue with the painful story of Indigenous America. Through Hogan's own experiences in life, her description of places such as Oklahoma and Colorado gains both material and metaphorical qualities. This is also the case with the landscapes and the non-human animals who inhabit them and who become agents in their own right in a constant yet shifting and transformative relationship to the human, who is thus decentered in effective ways.

Keywords: literature, indigenous studies, human–animal relations

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