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STATES OF BEING IN THE DARK

REMOVAL AND SURVIVAL IN LINDA HOGAN'S MEAN SPIRIT

ERIC GARY ANDERSON

[F]iction is a vertical descent; it's a drop into an event or into history or into the depths of some kind of meaning in order to understand humans, and to somehow decipher what history speaks, the story beneath the story.¹

—Linda Hogan (1994)

In 1990, Chickasaw poet Linda Hogan published her first novel, *Mean Spirit*, a well-received and yet controversial account of the Osage oil boom of the 1920s and the subsequent rash of criminal conspiracies and murders that has come to be known as the “Osage Reign of Terror.”² The story she tells is often grim and violent; it returns again and again to “states of being in the dark” (44), which Hogan

depicts as a wide-ranging confusion and uncertainty that afflicts many of her characters and demonstrates the period’s turbulence to her readers. But the story is also resolutely and respectfully grounded in her home place, the southern plains. As Cherokee novelist and critic Betty Louise Bell explains, Hogan centers on

the land she knows and loves: the Red Earth of Oklahoma. From chickens to oil, the reader inhabits the land of removal: pick-up trucks and stomp dances, rodeos and powwows, family histories and cultural histories in a tight, neverending weave from one generation to the next.”³

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Removal and survival: Indian country in Hogan’s hands is a physical and historical process articulated metaphorically and characterized by a seemingly infinite continuity across

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generations, crosshatched by discrete yet dangerously contagious episodes of cultural disruption. Incarnated in stories, Indian country and its inhabitants sometimes achieve a highly valued and spirited connectedness to each other, a rootedness. Historian Terry Wilson points out that in common local parlance, "the Osage" refers both to the place (the county) and to the people.⁴ Moses Graycloud in *Mean Spirit* sees Stace Red Hawk as "a good man" in large part because Stace is a "man rooted in life" (367); likewise, a respected Hill Indian's "legs looked rooted to earth" (30). Conversely, the town of Watona (Pawhuska, Oklahoma)—"the quick and wobbly world of mixed-blood Indians, white loggers, cattle ranchers, and most recently, the oil barons" (5)—is less grounded and in some ways weaker, structurally. So when Hogan says that "fiction is a vertical descent," she has in mind an exploration of the power as well as the vulnerability of rootedness; she wants to move below and inside the spoken and written surfaces of history. Rather than perpetuating a notion of history as a more or less horizontal, more or less irreversible time line, she defines history as a process that functions as a sort of gateway, an opening to deeper vertical passages and complex, vital circulatory systems. In this sense the storyteller can be seen as analogous to (among others) the heroic Earth Diver who penetrates surfaces, negotiating a vertical passageway and axis that leads to solid yet shifting earth, the stuff that life and home place is made of: removal and survival.⁵

This "vertical descent" is of course particularly loaded in *Mean Spirit*, not least because the technological extraction of oil from north-eastern Oklahoma, like the genealogical extractions of Indians in Oklahoma, involves a penetration of the surface plains and a close examination of the roots and veins, the body of the place as it both connects to and violently detaches from the bodies of the people who live on and in the place. But this comparison between technology and genealogy must not be nudged too far, for the very violence of Euro-American land abuse sets in

motion a terrifying and confusing and wrenching disruption of Indian identity in Indian country. When "fiction as a vertical descent" crashes into a variety of man-made confusions and obstructions, including the obstructions invented and enforced by history itself, tribal identity does not always necessarily or consistently work—even though, as Hogan has remarked of the Osage oil boom stories, "In some way, when you hear something from your family it becomes a part of your cell structure."⁶

As various literary critics have noted, Hogan's version of the historical events is not entirely "faithful" to the known facts of either Osage culture or the illicit activities of terrorists working against it, most aggressively in the 1920s; she distorts or even falsifies Osage tribal identity. But these critics presuppose that fiction works less as a "vertical descent" than as a progressive, "horizontal," linear narrative, while my argument is that Hogan in effect dives into notions of history not widely recognized as mainstream, seeing these "alternative" historiographies as particularly suited to the resources and arguments of *Mean Spirit*. Some of the characters she draws, such as the oilman Hale and the Osage hermit John Stink, actually participated in the events, and some of the events actually happened, but many of the details and characters, however vividly drawn, are products of Hogan's politically charged literary imagination.⁷ In part because many of the crimes are still unsolved and unresolved, she freely combines "fact" and "fiction."⁸ She fills in some but by no means all of the narrative spaces, exploiting the tensions between a linear-historical imperative and her own resistance to the compulsory linearity and authority of western history; she strategically evokes an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and uncertainty. She also suggests that various Native characters—like various Native people who survived or did not survive the "Reign of Terror"—could not tell their stories about what was happening, for fear of reprisal, and so Osage perspectives on these events are guarded if available at all. In fact, the phrase

"Osage Reign of Terror" does not clearly illuminate who did what to whom—although it *does* raise the misleading possibility that the Osage held the political control and power necessary to reign and even terrorize, when in fact the Osage were more often than not the terrorized.

In a similar way, and for similar reasons, "Mean Spirit" is not a clearly identified entity in the novel. It may be a cold-blooded, heartless, altogether unrepentant killer of Indians, or it may be a cranky and malevolent apparition, or it may be someone or something more stingy than angry—a miser or a spiritually bankrupt figure—or it may be some combination of these characteristics or something else altogether, something more nebulous and elusive even than a ghost or a soul, something perhaps most clearly described as a pervasive atmosphere or mood. Because it deceives and confuses, it is certainly implicated heavily in "states of being in the dark." As Alix Casteel explains in an insightful recent essay on Hogan's novel:

Mean spirit. These are important words. "Mean" can interchange with the following adjectives: paltry, contemptible, shabby, petty, stingy, selfish, grudging, mercenary, greedy, grasping, or rapacious. It also carries the connotation of being low: low-minded, lowborn, low-bred, low class. It conveys a sense both of worthlessness and unworthiness. A mean spirit is not only an inferior and deficient spirit, it is a small one in every way.⁹

Whatever we decide to call it, it is clearly not "objective" history. Instead, for a variety of reasons, Hogan works heroically and not altogether successfully to decenter the linear-historical logic of an ambiguous but undeniably plot-driven narrative. Working against the impervious form and style of government documents about the Osage tribe, working (to some extent) with tribal stories about these events, she sets into motion metaphors that are crafted to evoke the terror, confusion, and magnitude

of these catastrophes. Again, in this sense she takes up the actual uncertainty, the absence of specific factual knowledge, and transforms this absence and uncertainty into a politically loaded and often tense interpretation of what happened in Osage County. She does not go as far as various canonical Native American novelists—N. Scott Momaday in *House Made of Dawn* (1968), Leslie Marmon Silko in *Ceremony* (1977), and Louise Erdrich in *Tracks* (1988), for example—in affirming tentative survival and the possibility of personal and cultural recentering at story's end.

And in the process, some critics argue, she runs into trouble. In the eyes of Osage critic Robert Allen Warrior, Hogan's novel is careless and irresponsible rather than designedly ambiguous; Hogan, he writes,

in effect, de-Osaged the story, picking and choosing what she liked about the particulars of history and inventing new material for what she didn't. . . . In place of Osage spirituality, for instance, Hogan uses a sort of pan-tribal New Age-ism with Southern Plains and Southeastern (Hogan is Chickasaw) features, presumably making it easier for her inter-tribal cast of characters to interact but losing the specificity of Osages in the process.¹⁰

Warrior offers John Joseph Mathews's 1934 novel *Sundown* as an alternative to *Mean Spirit*, in part because "Mathews allows the Osages to be Osages and presents a picture of a community in spiritual, social, and psychic crisis" (52). Although Warrior in his book *Tribal Secrets* criticizes "American Indian and Native Americanist discourses [that] continue to be preoccupied with parochial questions of identity and authenticity" (xix), he also urges a Native American intellectual sovereignty that is grounded specifically in land and community:

land and community are necessary starting points for the process of coming to a deep perception of the conflicts and challenges

that face American Indian people and communities. They take into account the various groups of people, Native and non-Native, whose choices and actions influence a situation as well as the historical and biological backdrop-in-process that also has its influence. To fail to find a way of keeping these many factors in place, especially the ones internal to Native communities, is to fall easily into romantic excesses regarding Native traditions.¹¹

Thus, even though Hogan is Native American, and even though she grew up in Oklahoma, her novel runs into problems because she filters Osage cultural experiences through a Chickasaw and "pan-tribal" lens; she does not allow the Osages a grounded, sovereign position, and she romanticizes rather than inquiring skeptically and critically.¹² To use Warrior's own verb, she does not "cross-fertilize" Chickasaw and Osage in specific, complex, and productive ways. Neither does she present an accurate historical account of the *internal* complexities of Osage politics, the network of conflicts and tensions that are both distinct from and deeply implicated in the highly problematic relationships between Osages and Euro-Americans. As Terry Wilson has amply demonstrated, Osage versus Osage (sometimes full-blood versus mixed-blood) often was as sticky and painful and divisive as Indian versus white.¹³

On the other hand, Warrior perhaps demands too much allegiance to "the particulars of history." As Betty Bell writes,

Hogan has been criticized for her deviation from some historical facts in *Mean Spirit*. This assumes that there is a sole and accurate historical narrative to every event and that truth resides only in that narrative. In fact, to the advantage of all peoples once absent from History, the privileged voice of History has long been reduced to its narrative form and content. It is just another way of telling a story. As a Native American woman, Hogan knows the dangers of

complicity with History; as a writer, she insists on the primacy of the imagination.¹⁴

To Bell, as to Warrior, Hogan writes of Osage experience from a Chickasaw perspective; both would basically concur that, in Bell's words, Hogan "as a novelist . . . dared to rewrite history." Hogan herself says of *Mean Spirit*:

I realized that I had to do something stronger than history to reach the emotions of readers. It had to be more than just a record of the facts; it had to get larger. That's when it became a novel—when it stopped being history.¹⁵

Far from serving as any kind of authoritative final word or arbiter, history limits and diminishes, tells the wrong stories and doesn't tell them particularly well.¹⁶ But Warrior would criticize Hogan's ways of decentering history, while Bell identifies them as strategic and praises them wholeheartedly. Bell explicitly rejects the assumptions that "only an Osage can tell the story of the greedy destruction of the Osage, and a story, if founded on history, must rely completely on history as its muse."¹⁷ In a sense, the question is not so much whether Hogan is guilty as charged, but whether she, as an American Indian novelist, knows what she is doing. As Bell suggests, the question also has a lot to do with gender issues, particularly the relationship between a Native American woman writer and a prescriptive critical approach that in effect robs her of creative autonomy in the name of claiming critical and intellectual sovereignty. Bell also shrewdly observes that "It would be difficult to privilege any theoretical practice in a reading of Hogan's works. Often . . . such application is interrupted by Hogan swerving from the expected narrative,"¹⁸ perhaps veering away from expected historical trajectories in the process. Still, both Warrior's charges against Hogan and Bell's celebration of Hogan raise similar questions and issues about the nature and indeed the reliability of both history and literary criticism, considered as western systems of

thought and knowledge. These questions and issues are of course directly relevant to Native and non-Native readers, teachers, and scholars, as we reflect on past and present, cultural and personal, masculine and feminine “states of being in the dark.”

Catherine Rainwater provides one way of conducting these reflections without eradicating this crucial if sometimes troubling darkness.¹⁹ As she points out, there are really two overlapping and competing narratives in the novel, an “outer” narrative that develops across linear time as it tells the historical story of the Osage oil boom, and an “inner” narrative, “The Book of Horse,” in which water diviner and traditionalist Michael Horse writes down all that he sees and experiences, toward the subversive goal of rethinking the Bible and, more generally, keeping track of things from a non-linear, more traditional, and quite autonomous Native point of view. (He has autonomy because no Osage character presumes to interfere, and no outsider imagines that he might be literate.) Hogan not only provides this Native insider’s point of view; she also includes several Indian and non-Indian characters who gradually, over the long course of the novel, begin to learn how to understand this point of view. Throughout the book, *readers* are also, gradually, afforded an opportunity to begin learning how to read the inner narrative, how to recognize what Rainwater calls “Indian” cues and acquire something like insider knowledge that helps to illuminate if not eliminate states of being in the dark about the goings-on in Osage County. Still, as Rainwater explains, “inside” knowledge can take readers only so far; although the outsides of medicine bundles are sometimes visible and the omniscient narrator makes it possible for readers to join a group of Osage in rediscovering an ancient, sacred cavern, the interiors (of caves, of medicine bundles) are clearly marked as Osage spaces possessed by Osage characters. Each reader’s personal and cultural states of being in the dark are identified and dramatized, as they are differentiated from the holiness and power the Indians find in these

particular darknesses—in the cave, in the bat medicine bundles, in vertical descents to basements, and in each other.

No one felt safe, but there was nothing they could put a finger on, and that state of being in the dark made the situation even worse (44).

In this sentence, Hogan introduces the very slippery phrase that I have elected to use as a way of reflecting on the power and the perils of being in, or near, the novel’s broad variety of physical and metaphysical darknesses. In one sense, “that state of being in the dark” refers to Oklahoma, the physical location of the Osage oil boom; as Hogan puts it, “Oklahoma seemed a dark burial ground if there ever was one” (127). During the “Osage Reign of Terror,” dozens of Indians were systematically murdered by greedy white opportunists. Angie Debo writes that there were “twenty-four unsolved [murder] cases, including shooting, poisoning, and blowing up a house with nitroglycerine, in three years . . . and the Indians lived in terror of the next strike.”²⁰ And Robert Warrior adds that “Walking through an Osage cemetery and seeing the gravestones that show the inordinate numbers of young people who died in the period is chilling.”²¹ In the novel, the subterranean cavities and spaces also intensify “states of being in the dark,” as do the illicit extractions of dead bodies and their accompanying gifts (beads, medicines, etc.) from graves; grave robbing looms large as silent testimony to criminal greed, and Indians find that they cannot report these crimes for fear of inadvertently stimulating further grievous acts. “States of being in the dark” multiply contagiously; confusion and fear dominate.

But “being in the dark” also has to do with being in the money, because one of the other dark presences in the novel is oil. The “dark burial ground” of Oklahoma is at the same time the location of rich subterranean deposits, which through a complicated series of transactions and extractions simultaneously

bury the Osage and “reveal” them to America and Europe as celebrities. Terry Wilson even calls Osage County “the underground reservation” (in fact, this is the title of his study), perhaps as a way of getting at these darkly paradoxical power relations. This oil boom contributes to the economic strength of the Osages—as Oklahoma historian Kenny Franks points out, in the first half of the twentieth century, the Osage Nation received \$298,237,149 from its mineral rights—and to some extent helps them redefine a sovereign and powerful Indian identity.²² But it also accelerates the internal and external conflicts that had been plaguing the tribe for several generations prior to the discovery of oil in Osage land.²³

Yet throughout the novel, “that state of being in the dark” also refers quite directly to being dark-skinned, to being Indian. Hogan quite explicitly and frequently racializes Indianness; she is remarkably careful and specific in describing characters’ skin tones. She almost always says what color a character’s skin is. She calls attention to race; she makes an issue of it. In this way, *Mean Spirit* is part of the deeper political project Hogan has undertaken in much of her work. In her autobiographical piece, “The Two Lives,” for example, she argues that because she is “a light-skinned Indian person,”

Non-Indians are more comfortable with me than they are with my darker sisters and brothers, for they assume I am similar to them, or somehow not as real as other Indian people. . . . But I want to point out how exclusion works in a divided society and how color affects us all. To be darker means to experience more pain, more racism, less hope, less self-esteem, less advantage.²⁴

Compelling explicit awareness of skin colors throughout *Mean Spirit*, she tenaciously interrogates and disables racist valuations of lighter or darker pigmentation in favor of an insistent, repeated, proud inclusiveness. Admit-

tedly, darkness in *Mean Spirit* often conjures up danger—it is associated with terror and confusion, with evil, with crime, with the oil-saturated industrial wasteland—but “darkness” also refers racially to the continuing presence of Osage Indians in Oklahoma. Again, Hogan exposes and exploits these tensions as a way of representing and testifying to both the power and the peril of states of being in the dark.

The very flexibility of just one of Hogan’s metaphors accents the difficulties of reading, writing, and interpreting the people, the events, the issues, the crimes; because it is so powerfully and at the same time so sneakily complicit in so many different (and often competing) positions, this metaphor at times slips out of control. It has an element of danger—it both confers and confuses identities. And that is a big part of Hogan’s point. “The world had gone crazy” (39), and consequently people and things get dislodged, circumstances are liable to change very suddenly, and many of the Indian characters in the novel lose track of the answers to the questions “Who am I?” and “How do I know who I am?” In this sense, Hogan does not answer Robert Warrior’s call for a sovereign Native intellectual tradition because there is no such sovereign tradition to be found, for her, in this Oklahoma story. Instead, she demonstrates the causes and the aftermaths of various, often premeditated strategies for confusing, dismantling, and splintering anything like a sovereign or autonomous Osage identity. Her complex metaphors provide readers with a powerful if not always clear sense of a very uneasy and unsettling experience; “states of being in the dark” resonates with pride and community as well as with confusion and fragmentation, and the metaphor resists any fumbling attempt to organize things into neat binary categories. As Betty Bell points out, “Linda Hogan’s poetry and prose concerns itself with the detritus of loss and the need to take and create life from the remnants of personal and cultural histories.”²⁵ In this way, the metaphors can be dramatically, rhetorically, and didactically persuasive, but they do not necessarily describe or guarantee

a harmonious, balanced algebra of losses and recoveries. Her words teach readers things that are not necessarily codified or authenticated by history, things that are nonetheless highly instructive to a clearer understanding of a murky, complicated situation.

The phrase “that state of being in the dark” billows outward so far and so often that it takes on a frightening figurative pluralism, referring at various times and places to economic states, psychological states, spiritual states, states of connectedness, states of confusion, and so on. It encapsulates a sometimes reluctant, mixed condition in which the Osages seem to be both present and absent, enrolled and erased, powerful and powerless, insiders and outsiders. They are difficult to read and always at risk of being neither here nor there: “there was nothing they could put a finger on,” and yet the danger and fear seem almost palpable. Hogan deliberately works the metaphor as a way of representing Osage experience in Oklahoma in the early twentieth century, a time and place that remains very confusing and fragmentary and full of unanswered as well as unasked questions.

In some ways, the Osages have been “neither here nor there” for a fairly long time. As Terry Wilson points out, “By 1700 and throughout the eighteenth century, both Indians and whites recognized that the Osages had military control of Missouri, Arkansas, and eastern Oklahoma and Kansas.”²⁶ But because of this geographical range, the tribe was easy to divide, and the French went ahead and did so, in ways that served French interests and compromised Osage sovereignty. Ironically, the very flexibility of Osage government made it more vulnerable to outside influences, expanding the mixed-blood population and consequently increasing the level of full-blood ambivalence about the ways things were going, culturally. For, as Wilson observes, “mixed-bloods, the offspring of Indian-white liaisons . . . took advantage of their bicultural

heritage to use the conflict between the races for their own economic advantage.”²⁷ The Osages were relocated to northeastern Oklahoma from southern Kansas around 1871. Compared to the Trail of Tears, for example, it was a relatively short migration in miles, but it was a migration nonetheless, and an unhappy one. By 1874 the move from Kansas was mostly complete, and things were not going well for the people. Assimilation had many discontents for them; in Wilson’s view, “[c]o-optation of the Osages to the Anglo-American political system so that the tribe could contribute to its own demise seemed eminently logical and consistent with acculturation policy.”²⁸ Indeed, as he bitingly points out, before the oil boom “the resource most readily accessible for exploitation was the Osages themselves,”²⁹ and they were exploited in various ways by farmers, ranchers, builders, traders, mixed-bloods, and government agents. Throughout these three decades (1870-1900), federal officials typically regarded themselves as agents of assimilation and American progress; in their view, the government was doing just fine and the Osages were the clueless ones: “The entire bureaucratic apparatus of the federal government was unable or unwilling to protect what it viewed as a doomed Osage culture in the face of continuous white pressure for the annihilation of the tribal life.”³⁰

And then, in 1897, oil was discovered on the Osage reservation. I will not dwell at length on the detailed technological, economic, legal, and criminal complexities that grew out of this discovery, except as they play out in *Mean Spirit*. First, the Osages insisted on, and were granted, tribal ownership of the oil, and of any other subsurface minerals. As Wilson writes, “Like other Indians, they suffered the trauma of rapid change brought about by the intrusions of white culture during the reservation and postreservation periods. Because of the presence of petroleum, however, the intruders were especially numerous and included many who ruthlessly sought to separate the tribe from its wealth by any means available.”³¹

Most sensational was the "Osage Reign of Terror" in the 1920s. This period in Oklahoma history is sometimes misidentified as an example of the Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, with Osage flappers and philosophers driving brand new roadsters and partying till dawn; in fact, as Robert Warrior argues, "there was no unitary Osage experience in the early part of this century."³² Terry Wilson agrees with Warrior but points out that the Osages did share the experience of Anglo-American mistreatment; the "sensational murders and elaborate confidence schemes," and the international media attention given them, were really "not a temporary and forgivable break in a normally peaceful coexistence between Native and Anglo Americans [but rather,] part of a long history of the majority culture's exploitation of the Osage tribe."³³ It is a more spectacular, and more famous, exaggeration of what had been going on between whites and Osages for years and years: a confused and confusing culture war in which states of being in the dark predominated. Throughout the 1920s, things just escalated. The Osages were granted American citizenship in 1921 and at the same time subjected to concerted and deadly attacks by representative Americans who sought to compromise if not destroy Osage tribal culture and sovereignty.

In *Mean Spirit*, a very strange scene takes place one night as the "highest priced oil sale in history" (150) winds down and the celebrations get underway in Watona, Oklahoma. Hogan introduces this place as "that limbo between the worlds, that town named Watona" (6), although the very name of the town is being contested: the Indians call it Watona, the whites call it Talbert, and the town limit sign keeps getting vandalized as the name gets tossed back and forth. On the night of the big oil sale, "The white members of the Rotary Club were dressed up as Indians," and

A hypnotist had entranced a handful of very serious Indian people to believe they were chickens and they goose-stepped and clucked at each other without so much as a

smile on their faces. They believed they had beaks. They believed they had claws. They believed they had feathers. They believed they were safe (150-51).

In this carnivalesque night scene, poised somewhere between delusory entertainment and surreal terror, racialized identities artificially shift. White Rotarians play "Indians" simply by changing their clothes, while the Indians are acted upon, transformed—not into "white people" but into domesticated barnyard birds. But they also resist transformation; they preserve their seriousness even while clucking like chickens (and, for Hogan, even at the risk of stereotyping them as stoic, wooden Indians). The whites "make-believe"; the Indians believe. Who is in the dark?

Throughout *Mean Spirit*, Hogan represents racialized identity as a complicated give-and-take, an economy of actions and reactions, preconceptions and reconstructions. With race as with various other issues, she illuminates, critiques, and celebrates states of being in the dark. Hogan often calls attention to the physical, material nature of racialized identity by specifying not only skin colors but also the color of a character's hair and the style of his or her clothing. Cross-racing becomes fashionable: Creek girls at the Indian school grow fascinated with "white heaven," dye their hair yellow, and begin to wear white gowns. Meanwhile, one of the school's white matrons "began dying her hair black, and asked if she could attend the peyote church" (171). Similarly, in "real" history, when Federal Bureau of Investigation agents began looking into the "Osage Reign of Terror," they found disguises necessary; as Kenny Franks notes, federal agents dressed up as "cowboys, insurance salesmen, and Indian traders" when in Oklahoma.³⁴ In the novel, Reverend Joe Billy, an Indian by blood and a Christian by trade, moves away from that church and back toward the sacred (and probably fictional³⁵) bat medicine and traditional ways of his people as the novel develops; first he "wore braids and moccasins to deliver his sermons and he finally wrote the

main church offices that he was resigning from the ministry" (170). And Joe Billy's white wife, Martha, gradually grows closer to Osage ways, to the extent that *she* has a key dream about bats; along the way, "Martha had begun to look, in some peculiar way, like an Indian" (175). Michael Horse, the character who is probably the most perceptive observer of his own people, even remarks that "She looks darker every day. You'd swear she was Indian" (272). Indeed, Hogan writes, "It seemed as though, toward the end of that year, people became the opposite of what they had previously been, as if the earth's polar axis had shifted" (171). Assimilation is presented as a process *not* absolutely dependent on white Euro-American culture, a crossing of permeable boundaries, sometimes unsettling and sometimes rejuvenating and sometimes both, with intertwining and often competing personal, familial, tribal, and cultural ramifications. It is capable of polarizing, though, as I have been arguing, Hogan does not typically polarize simplistically. Assimilationists engineer both removal and survival: Euro-American assimilationists set out to remove Indianness by removing Indians from tribe to reservation and from tribal sovereignty to cultural dependency or some version of self-determination. But sometimes Indians strategically move and remove themselves, often for purposes of surviving, and sometimes Euro-Americans assimilate into Indian cultures. Various characters in *Mean Spirit* resist compulsory, government-directed assimilation while openly assimilating when it seems the appropriate thing to do.

Parodying self-determination and critiquing polarized thinking about both Indian and white cultures, Hogan suggests that these physical and material changes are inextricable from the less tangible qualities of racialized identity. In transforming their appearances, these and other characters must also adapt or suppress or perpetuate their preconceptions about "white" or "Indian" identity. They must do more than merely apply "redface" or "white-face." Yes, in a sense Hogan is simply having a

little fun with the idea that Indians become trendy to some whites and whites become trendy to some Indians. Actually, she has a *lot* of fun with the effects of the Bijou Theater and its silent movies on local residents: "Valentino and Fairbanks at the Bijou had changed the love lives of people around Watona" (143). After white suitor Will Forrest drives Osage suitee Nola Blanket "out to the country, he put a new fur coat around her shoulders and held her in the latest position Rudolph Valentino had used for seducing starlets on the screen at the Bijou. He was irresistible and he knew it. And she was like a soft animal" (163). But even this role-playing, engendered in the dark space of a movie theater, mixes parody and bemusement with confusing questions about identity formation and gender and even species: why does Hogan describe Nola as "like a soft animal"? Who sees Nola that way? The phrase resonates with both Indian traditions and racist assumptions; Hogan plays this scene for assimilationist comedy but does not suppress troubling "fictional" depths.

Neither does she restrict her investigation to "white" and "Indian" identity-swapping by way of costumes, hair color, impersonations, or class pretensions. All sorts of transformations occur throughout the novel, and all sorts of characters experience all sorts of in-betweenness. Sometimes characters position themselves in between light and darkness by submerging themselves in caves, basements, or moonlit rooms. Sometimes Hogan explores the uncanny in-betweenness of apparitions: ghosts unexpectedly and visibly emerge as a presence to be reckoned with, ephemeral and yet embodied. John Stink, for example, dies and is buried, but that is nowhere near the end of his story:

[F]rom inside the grave, John Stink felt the rock thump earth. He began to work his arms out of the ropes that held him. If Houdini could do it, the old man thought to himself, so could the soul of old Ho-Tah-Moie. . . . The dogs were the only witnesses

to the miraculous return of John Stink. They were overjoyed that their master rose up from the grave, and when the old man's pockmarked face emerged, they yapped and licked him, and with their aid, Stink managed to pull himself up out of the coffin. . . . Resurrected, he examined himself. His hands were raw, the thick nails broken. He was dressed like a ghost, all right, in a winding sheet. His joints ached. But for a man who had just been in death's handhold, he was in fairly decent shape. (106-7)

Although he is a ghost, and is understood to be such by everyone who spots him after his reemergence, John Stink is very definitely also a spirit with a body.³⁶ He is extraordinarily physical; he still desires cigars and food and drink, and in fact he gets involved with a living, breathing white woman named China. Late in the book, he is able to write but not speak the words "I am dead" and "I am a ghost," and he is able to ask, again on paper, very interesting questions: "Is that why my body is missing? I am wearing it?" (316). But he cannot reassimilate. For him, identity seems to be irreversible. And he knows it.

For the powerful matriarch Belle Graycloud, one of the elders of the novel's central family, darkness also entails a complicated network of removals and survivals. "We act like it's any day," she says to Michael Horse early in the story, shortly after they learn that Grace Blanket has been killed, "like our daily chores are planted in us with long roots, like a devil's claw in a field of wheat" (33). But Belle nearly always knows exactly who she is and what she is about, so much so that the numbing accumulation of extraordinary removals, lies, and criminal schemes often (though not always) galvanizes her into action rather than lulling her into the false perception that everything is normal or frustrating her into submission. Granted, after some of the most devastating setbacks, she retreats to her dark cellar, to the "darkness" of her "holy cave" (118), from which she sings "a slow song in a deep voice. They [her daughters] felt her misery rise, up

the stairs, up through the wood and ceiling, clear up, they hoped, to sky's heaven" (118), on a vertical ascent, grieving and recovering, removing herself and surviving. But when she sees that white hunters have killed 317 sacred eagles—"They looked like a tribe of small, gone people, murdered and taken away in the back of a truck" (110)—she fights back:

She screamed, "You naholies! What have you gone and done this time?" She began removing the dead eagles from the truck. She placed one on a plot of grass. She was crying and talking in a language they didn't understand. They tried to stop her, but even three men couldn't hold her back. She was ruining the eagles they planned to sell, undamaged, as souvenirs.

"They're just birds," one of them said, trying to reason with the hysterical old woman, but at his words, she became even more agitated. (110)

When she tells her husband, Moses, and their friend Horse about this massacre, "they looked foreign and strange, like visitors from another world, a world that eats itself and uses up the earth" (114). Alien acts of unimaginable wrongheadedness and cruelty threaten to transform these three Osage elders into aliens and their world into an alienated and alienating and altogether contaminated manifestation of home.

Similarly, in a later scene, Belle defends sacred bats from white poachers, standing in the mouth of Sorrow Cave to stop the men from shooting and killing the animals. Rooted, "[s]he looked like a mountain. A raven flew in front of her and cawed" (279). Gradually, Indians and various sympathetic mixed-bloods and cross-racing whites join her, and together they put up a strong, united front. Then, upon entering deeper into the cave, they find ancient red clay pots and kernels of corn and paintings and a medicine bundle. "It was a sacred world they entered and everyone became silent and heard a distant dripping of water in the caveways, the echoing sounds, the breathing

of earth" (284). Still, they realize that they themselves are intruders, "[i]nvading an older world, the silent places of the ancient ones" (284).

In a variety of ways in both of these important scenes of Indian resistance and female power, most if not all of the characters involved are "in the dark" in at least one significant way. And in both scenes, Hogan does not illuminate or bridge the huge gulf that separates Belle Graycloud (and her allies) from the white authorities. The two opposing forces do not come to understand each other; neither do the twentieth-century Indians presume to infiltrate the spaces of the ancient Indians in any physically permanent way, although their experience of the deep cavern teaches intangible spiritual lessons. The claims Hogan makes through her portrayal of Belle Graycloud are risky as well as powerful, in part because the darkneses in and of *Mean Spirit*, the darkneses Belle takes on, represent the unresolved and often unsatisfactory truth of the story they both tell. The Osage oil boom and "Reign of Terror" remain so ambiguous, so confusing, and so uninterpretable that anything other than a "state of being in the dark" would be a violation of the events and of the people who participated in them. Although she is one of the most solidly grounded characters in the novel, Belle Graycloud also takes on some of the qualities of a gray cloud: sometimes legible, sometimes indecipherable, sometimes invisible, sometimes dominant, sometimes tremendously inspiring and powerful, and often in motion. For all the removals, though, there is finally, though provisionally, survival; Belle Graycloud's first words in the novel are "Go on" (3), and her last words in the novel are "What about us?" (375).

So who is in the dark? Least of all, Linda Hogan herself. Certainly, shadows, invisibility, and silences haunt the book and its writer, as does this unsettling state of being in-between and uncertain. Hogan's metaphorical playing in and out of light and darkness and

absence and presence reflects, for better and/or for worse, her political as well as her literary understanding of Indian-white relations in 1920s Oklahoma and in general. Along with Betty Bell and Robert Warrior, she exposes various unsettling apparitions, inversions, and transformations as politically motivated. She tries as well to challenge and lessen the authoritative explanatory force of western history, and all the power relations it represents and reproduces, seeking instead to "drop into an event or into history or into the depths of some kind of meaning in order to understand humans, and to somehow decipher what history speaks, the story beneath the story."³⁷ By so critiquing and diminishing the centrality of received historical explanations, by constructing interwoven patterns of racialized identity, and by speaking so powerfully to the physical and metaphysical complexities of all the stories and spirits, both mean and generous, both buried and unburied, Hogan partially illuminates, and takes at least partial control of, these states of being in the dark. In a 1994 interview, she strongly states:

It's like Angie Debo saying, 'I violated history to tell the truth.' It's the story that's been repressed. In the case of *Mean Spirit*, a lot of the story will always be repressed because the FBI reports themselves are so thoroughly blacked out in order to protect national secrets. Some of it's just not there. But the content of the story is truth, fictionalized. Reimagined, I've created many characters that don't, in fact, exist. But the events are real.³⁸

And survival in the face of removal—in the face of extractions that again and again disrupt extraction—is real, so much so that in the end there is also a beginning; there is, finally, a measure of power in the darkness: "They traveled past houses that were like caves of light in the black world," she writes at the very end of the novel. "The night was on fire with their pasts and they were alive" (375).

NOTES

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1. From "An Interview with Linda Hogan," *Missouri Review* 17: no. 2 (1994): 124-25.

2. Linda Hogan, *Mean Spirit* (New York: Ivy Books, 1990). Further citations to *Mean Spirit* are given in parentheses in the text.

3. Betty Louise Bell, Introduction: Linda Hogan's Lessons in Making Do," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 6, no. 3 (fall 1994): 3.

4. Terry Wilson, *The Underground Reservation: Osage Oil*, Lincoln (University of Nebraska Press, 1985), p. 9: "Osage County—'the Osage,' as cattlemen, oilmen, journalists, and many resident Indians call it—is situated in northeastern Oklahoma."

5. Sam D. Gill writes that "All over the Americas tribes told about the creation of the world in stories that said that in the beginning there was nothing but an expanse of water. The first beings were perched on the back of a water turtle. Among these beings were animals who took turns diving into the water to try to swim to the bottom, where they might get a bit of soil to use in creating the earth. Animal after animal attempted the task. Each was gone longer and longer. Each returned exhausted, almost dead, and without any soil. One animal was finally able to bring up just a tiny bit of soil beneath its claw. The earth maker took this bit of dirt and made the earth out of it. But the whole earth still rested on the back of the turtle." See Gill's essay "Religious Forms and Themes" in *America in 1492: The World of the Indian Peoples Before the Arrival of Columbus*, ed. Alvin M. Josephy Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), pp. 281-82. Arrell M. Gibson explains that, for the Chickasaws, Earth Diver was the crawfish; see *The Chickasaws* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p. 9. The Osages, however, believe that they were descended from the sky. As John Joseph Mathews explains in *The Osages: Children of the Middle Waters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), no reason was given for this descent, and those who came down to earth found one group of indigenous people, the Isolated Earth People, already here (see especially pp. 3-19).

6. "Interview with Linda Hogan" (note 1 above), p. 116.

7. The best source for understanding Hogan's politically charged literary imagination is Hogan herself. See especially "The Two Lives," printed in Arnold Krupat and Brian Swann, eds., *I Tell You Now: Autobiographical Essays by Native American Writers* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), and reprinted in Krupat, ed., *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994). Also useful is *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 6, no. 3 (fall 1994), a special issue titled "Linda Hogan: Calling Us Home," and guest edited by Betty Louise Bell. And interviews with Hogan often cover her political convictions and actions; see the *Missouri Review* interview (note 1 above) and Laura Coltelli's interview with Hogan in *Winged Words: American Indian Writers Speak* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990) for two good examples.

8. By combining fact and fiction so freely, she takes the same sort of reconstructive license that Truman Capote takes in a "true crime" documentary/novel set on and in the southwestern plains of Kansas, *In Cold Blood* (1965; New York: Vintage, 1993). Like Capote, Hogan powerfully evokes an atmosphere of terror, suspicion, and uncertainty and suggests that such an atmosphere overwhelmed a particular place during a particular time. In a sense, though, Hogan's office differs from Capote's. Indian-white affairs differ in cultural status from popular crimes that break certain boundaries (such as social class) and speak to contemporary issues (such as capital punishment), but also, unlike the murders committed and explained by Perry Smith and Dick Hickock and the Kansas Bureau of Investigation and Truman Capote, many of the Oklahoma crimes are still unsolved and unresolved and unnamed, some seventy years after their commission. Lacking the neat closure of Capote's narrative, Hogan invests heavily in the long-standing mysteriousness of the Oklahoma conspiracies, murders, and investigations.

9. Alix Casteel, "Dark Wealth in Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit*," *Studies in American Indian Literatures* 6, no. 3 (fall 1994): 56.

10. Robert Allen Warrior, "Review Essay of *The Deaths of Sybil Bolton*," *Wicazo Sa Review* 11:1 (spring 1995): 52. Warrior's important critique of *Mean Spirit* appears in this review essay, which also sharply interrogates another controversial book associated with the Osage, Dennis McAuliffe's *The Deaths of Sybil Bolton: An American History* (New York: Times Books, 1994). While the relationships between Hogan's novel and McAuliffe's personal narrative are really a topic for another essay, I would point out here that Warrior lambasts McAuliffe for factual errors and sentimentality, among other things, and so the critical distinctions he makes

between McAuliffe's failings and Hogan's are significant.

11. Robert Allen Warrior, *Tribal Secrets: Recovering American Indian Intellectual Traditions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 85.

12. Louis Owens seems to agree with Warrior about Hogan. Although *Mean Spirit* came out too late to be discussed at length in his critical study *Other Destinies: Understanding the American Indian Novel* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), Owens is nonetheless able to make a brief comparison between Hogan's novel and John Joseph Mathews's 1934 novel of the Osage oil boom and related matters, *Sundown*. He writes that "Hogan's novel pays more attention to the tribal community than does Mathews's and is considerably more romantic in its methods and conclusions" (p. 261 n.1).

13. In *The Underground Reservation* (note 4 above), Terry Wilson gives a detailed account of these frequent disruptions among the Osages in the early twentieth century (see chap. 4 especially).

14. Bell, "Linda Hogan's Lessons" (note 3 above), p. 5.

15. "Interview with Linda Hogan" (note 1 above), p. 116.

16. Among others, Calvin Luther Martin argues passionately that western linear history tells the wrong stories and needs to be radically rethought. See *In the Spirit of the Earth: Rethinking History and Time* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), especially chap. 5.

17. Bell, "Linda Hogan's Lessons" (note 3 above), p. 5.

18. *Ibid.*

19. For the material in this paragraph, I am indebted to Catherine Rainwater's unpublished paper, "Re-signing Boundaries: Silko, Walters, and Hogan" (presented to the South Central Modern Language Association, San Antonio, November 1996). See also Rainwater's *Dreams of Fiery Stars: The Transformations of Native American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), which develops her arguments about Hogan but was published too recently to be consulted in detail here.

20. Angie Debo, *A History of the Indians of the United States* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 285.

21. Allen, "Review Essay" (note 10 above), p. 52.

22. Kenny A. Franks, *The Osage Oil Boom* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1989), p. 111.

23. Wilson in *The Underground Reservation* (note 4 above) provides an excellent discussion of these pre-oil boom conflicts (see especially chaps. 1-3).

24. Linda Hogan, "The Two Lives," in *Native American Autobiography: An Anthology*, ed. Arnold Krupat (Madison: University of Madison Press, 1994), pp. 435-49.

25. Bell, "Linda Hogan's Lessons" (note 3 above), p. 3.

26. Wilson, *The Underground Reservation* (note 4 above), p. 2.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 25.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 72-73.

31. *Ibid.*, pp. ix.

32. Warrior, "Review Essay" (note 10 above), p. 53.

33. Wilson, *The Underground Reservation* (note 4 above), p. xii.

34. Franks, *The Osage Oil Boom* (note 22 above), p. 118.

35. An Osage student in my Native American Literature class in spring 1997 visited with elders in Pawhuska and interviewed them about the bat medicine; none of the elders recognized bat medicine as Osage. Likewise, none of the written sources I've consulted discusses bat medicine among the Osages. Interested readers might turn to Hogan's chapter on "The Bats" in her nonfiction book *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), pp. 21-28. Hogan writes that "bats have been a key element in the medicine bundles of some southern tribes" (26), but does not specifically link bats with the Osages here.

36. It is not quite clear *why* this ghost returns; neither is it clear whether Hogan is honoring or dishonoring or flat-out appropriating the actual John Stink, who died in 1938 after years of famous indifference to his own personal oil headright and wealth. According to Terry Wilson, "Reporters from a variety of newspapers filed stories about John Stink, the Osage shunned by his tribe, whose members stubbornly believed he was a ghost, ignoring the obvious explanation that he had recovered from a deathlike coma" (*The Underground Reservation* [note 4 above], p. 169). Unusually (for him), Wilson does not explore *why* the people ignore the official explanation and regard this liminal figure as a ghost, a shadow person.

37. "Interview with Linda Hogan" (note 1 above), pp. 124-25.

38. "Interview with Linda Hogan" (note 1 above), p. 123.