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Protest, the Older Ways, and Environmental Justice in Linda Hogan's Solar Storms

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Protest, the Older Ways, and Environmental Justice in Linda Hogan's Solar Storms

By

Matthew Chelf

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

Of Lehigh University

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Matthew Chelf.

Date Approved

Thesis Director

(Name of Department Chair)

*I would like to thank
Mary Foltz for helping me discover beauty and power in stories of the earth,
And Daniel Kimmel for being my comrade-in-arms.*

Table of Contents

Abstract	vi
Introduction	1
Degradation and the Older Ways	7
The Middle Place and Protest	20
Conclusion	34
Vita	37

ABSTRACT

In her protest novel, *Solar Storms*, Linda Hogan explores how an environmental justice movement can emerge from dispossessed populations whose lands and culture has experienced centuries of colonialist violence and exploitation. Hogan's vision of environmental justice, this thesis project argues, responds to the challenge of history and present ruination through a turn to the indigenous lifeways of the past and a dedication to future-oriented political action. In my thesis I call this double movement imaginative futurity, looking to the cultural wellspring of the past to constructively respond to present ruination through imagining a different kind of future and working toward it. In this way, environmental justice in *Solar Storms* works to heal damaged lands and people by resuscitating the reciprocal, ethical relationship between humanity and the natural world that colonialism disrupted. Hogan uses this ideal to imagine a future beyond colonialist hegemony, which gives the environmental justice movement in the novel an ethos on which to resist BEEVCO, a massive hydroelectric project that threatens to flood the region.

In her protest novel, *Solar Storms*, Linda Hogan explores how an environmental justice movement can emerge from dispossessed populations, specifically populations indigenous to the North American continent, who have experienced centuries of systemic colonialist violence and exploitation. What Hogan finds and renders are the ways in which Native American peoples form community bonds through a shared story of the natural world and of the cultural past, how they forge a shared sense of futurity in the face of adversity, and how together they can work toward healing both damaged landscapes and bodies. Much like how intersectional politics look for alliances across borders, Hogan shows that the fight for justice in *Solar Storms* involves creating a praxis that draws together social and environmental injustice. The protagonist's, Angel Jensen's, journey at age seventeen to find her home initiates her into the knowledge of the social and environmental injustice inflicted upon her community and homeland by Western colonialism over the course of generations. *Solar Storms*, in important regards, is a historical novel in how it recognizes the voices of the dead and tells the story of history from the perspective of marginalized peoples, and it is also an environmentalist novel because it turns our gaze to the degraded landscape in which it is set. But Hogan's novel moves beyond both these forms for a similar reason: connecting the social and environmental plot foments a dedication to future-oriented political action that assuages present suffering, imagines a new future in which scarred bodies and landscapes receive healing through the instantiation of a an indigenous relationship between humanity and the natural world. I call this process imaginative futurity. It

refers to Hogan's emphasis and faith in the impulse to create a future outside the colonial hegemon through collective action and this distinguishes her novel from historical novels, which seeks to recover the past, and the despairing, apocalyptic rhetoric that characterizes much contemporary environmentalism. Imaginative futurity finds its power through recuperating the life ways of the "older world" (79), the culture Angel discovers in her indigenous community. These 'older' ways reconstruct Angel's broken identity as they extend the boundaries of the community to encompass the natural world and give it meaning and agency. It is way of living based upon the indigenous story of the equal and mutual relationship between humanity and the natural world. Reciprocity between humanity and nature enables Angel to imagine a different kind of ethical relation to nature, one that envisions the healing of damaged landscapes and bodies. *Solar Storms* treats the demand for environmental and social justice as an imaginative, creative act that posits a vision of the future, with an eye toward the past.

To help elucidate how imaginative futurity works in *Solar Storms*, I turn to Joni Adamson's work on environmental and social justice in recent American Indian literature, *The Middle Place*. Though Adamson does not explore *Solar Storms* in her own work, she provocatively lists it among the works of American Indian writers "since the 1980s" whose writing "redefine[s] environmental issues as social and economic justice issues and that address these concerns as basic human rights" (129). By combining environmental and social justice issues, *Solar Storms* makes several important moves along with other recent American Indian writing. First, Hogan does not separate nature from culture, and this refusal locates *Solar Storms* in

a turn away from the pristine wilderness as the ecological idea—as it is in the dominant trend in American environmental and ecocritical work. As Adamson argues in *The Middle Place*, canonical American environmental writing, such as the work of Edward Abbey, tends to idealize nature as pristine, wild space untrammelled by man, a higher reality far removed from society and culture. The consequences of this wilderness ideal, as Adamson demonstrates, is that pitting culture as the great nemesis of nature causes us to miss the real ethical, social, and imaginative question of how we, as beings who must use and manipulate nature in order to survive, are to live responsibly *with* nature. This brings us to a second, and consequent, important move: because *Solar Storms* connects nature and culture, we can see the degraded landscape, the lasting impacts of capitalism and colonialism on the natural world. Set in the scarred and degraded landscape of the Boundary Waters region between Minnesota and Canada, Hogan shows how its inhabitants form sustainable, reciprocal, and loving bonds with what, according to mainstream environmentalism, should be rejected and has been invisible. Recuperating the older ways instantiates a tradition that fights for the homeland. Finally, Hogan’s dissolution of the “conceptual split” between nature and culture and insistence upon the integrity of scarred people and landscapes offers an alternative ethos from which to engage in the work of imaginative futurity. The work of environmental and social justice in *Solar Storms* employs this ethos of the older ways to find integrity in the degraded landscape and to leverage this ethos against present social and ecological ruination through forms of protest that this essay will seek to explore.

The challenge facing this work of imagining and building a more just future is the difficulty of bringing disparate, often alienated and dispossessed, peoples together in collaboration. Adamson recognizes this challenge being worked out in contemporary American Indian literature through what she calls the “middle place,” a concept this essay will employ and attempt to develop. Hogan directly confronts issues of collaboration, I argue, through the “middle place” throughout *Solar Storms* generally and more specifically in the novel’s final chapters, when the community forms an environmental justice movement to resist BEEVCO, a hydroelectric project that threatens to flood the region. The middle place, simply put, is the “common ground” (xvii) on which people band together around issues of social and environmental justice and “work for transformative change.” Intent on replacing the social structures of oppression and extraction established by colonialism, marginalized peoples can meet in the middle place, a discursive and communal space, where they may gather their creative energies, exchanges cultural narratives, and transform an imagined vision of the future into possibility. Using the ‘middle place’ as a theoretical framework to approach *Solar Storms* will allow us to productively explore scenes of collaboration and story telling throughout the novel, and it provides us with a lens to explore the oft-neglected environmental justice movement at the climax of the novel.

As I have suggested, previous scholarship has tended to neglect the protest at the end of the novel, and I argue that this is a crucial oversight because the protest shows the potency of Angel’s conversion to the older ways and transforms Hogan’s critique of colonialism into an ethos of imaginative futurity. Broadly, scholarship has

focused on *how* Hogan reconstructs Angel's broken identity and *why* this healing process prepares Angel for the protest at the end. But they do not engage in analysis of the protest itself. For Jim Tarter, Angel's healing is the natural outgrowth of gaining a spiritual understanding of nature, and thus resisting BEEVCO becomes her "spiritual duty" (137). Bethany Fitzpatrick's ecofeminist account suggests how protest becomes an expression of how the restored pact empowers women to challenge the gender hierarchies that exploit women and nature alike. For Silvia Schultrmandl, the restoration of "the initial bond within pre-Columbian Native American societies" (80) gives Angel a backward looking ideal that enables her to resist Western exploitation in defense of "pristine" nature. In all of these accounts, restoring the broken "pact" (Hogan) between humanity and nature becomes a form of healing and personal development for Angel that transforms her "into an activist firmly woven into the community" (Jespersen 283). These critics powerfully provide accounts of how Hogan builds an eco-conscience subjectivity that compels Angel toward social and environmental justice, but they stop at the moment before entering the environmental justice movement and favor Angel's development over relations in the middle place. The protest against BEEVCO is used as a type of proof that confirms the successful conclusion of Angel's integration into the older ways rather than an expression of the older ways coming to life to imagine a new future through drawing the community together in the middle place. Indeed, Hogan's rendering of the protest shows how a community comes together to deliberate, resist exploitation, demand environmental and social justice, and, finally, to mutually enact imaginative futurity so as to have a future.

The recreation of the broken pact between humanity and nature carries important implications for imaginative futurity and collaboration, but an analysis that does not explore the environmental justice movement misses Hogan's point that people come together because they want to build a future without the trappings of colonialism. I want to build on these accounts by offering a fuller explanation of how people come together and on what basis. When Angel, Bush, and Dora-Rouge land at Two-Town they begin to navigate a new set of relations in the middle place—they form collaborative relationships with disparate peoples around the basis of social and environmental justice, they undergo personal transformations along with the community, and they share an imaginative vision of the future.

Following Adamson's call, I will explore how *Solar Storms* bridges the gap between environmental issues and social and economic justice and how, when conceptually combined, they can incite political action. First, I will argue that in order to contend with the presence and future of ecological problems we need to turn our attention away from pristine wilderness and to the ways historical colonialism and BEEVCO, the executors of modern colonialism, understand nature, how they utilize the natural world through systems of extraction and profit that create degraded landscapes and damaged communities, and how Hogan responds to these forces through the older ways. The older ways provide the cultural framework for Angel and her community to value what has been devalued by recalling the indigenous story of the land. From the older ways, I will move to apply and extend Adamson's concept of the middle place to *Solar Storms* in order to explore forms of community and collaboration and the mobilization of disparate peoples into a

community of activism against BEEVCO. *Solar Storms* demonstrates that the older ways reunites indigenous people in the middle place around the vision of environmental and social justice.

Degradation and the Older Ways

Hogan focuses on the ecological and human ruination caused by BEEVCO and the colonialist tradition it inhabits in order to demonstrate the lethality of Western culture's consumerist economy toward nature and native peoples. Immersed in the world of degraded landscapes and damaged peoples, Hogan's critique of Western colonialism seeks to understand the present ruination of indigenous communities by looking to the deep history of the wounded landscape for the stories written into the scars. Hogan's deep history situates the consumptive drive behind the degradation of landscapes and the systematic exploitation of indigenous populations within a colonialist continuum with European pioneers and BEEVCO officials at opposite ends, signaling an evolution across time. The movement from hunting, trapping, and logging to the cold calculus of hydroelectricity is a major paradigm shift replete with ideological and technological transformations. Just as Hogan's engagement with the history of colonialism revives the dead and calls attention to damaged nature, this attention to the degraded landscape offers strategies of resistance and community renewal. The degraded landscape serves a dynamic rhetorical function: it speaks to both the bankruptcy of colonialist ideology as well as the potency of indigenous culture finding positive meaning in the damaged landscape. Hogan uses the degraded landscape to collapse the Western distinction between nature and culture and to recuperate the older ways of

indigenous culture that can offer insight into ethical relations with nature. As the degraded landscape comes to signify both the legacy of colonial exploitation and ethical futurity, it becomes an alternative ethos for the indigenous community to mount an environmental justice movement BEEVCO. In this way, *Solar Storms* is, as Christine Jespersen has written, “an energizing myth of hope” (295), one that starts with the scars of people and the scars of the land in order to move from despair to community healing and environmental justice without hiding the fact of scars.

To understand the relationship of the community with degradation of the landscape, it will first help to understand the Western colonialist ideology that produces such environmental and social destruction for its own gain. First, we will look at Hogan’s representations of early colonialism and its forms of resource extraction so as to situate the degraded landscape within Western ideology. Then, we will explore how BEEVCO inherits and transforms colonialism in the present. Knowing our enemy, so to speak, will elucidate the importance of focusing on tarnished landscapes rather than pristine ones as well as help set the stakes for our later discussion of protest and the middle place. The degraded landscape, as we will see, is a discursive space that contains the possibility of generating counter narratives capable of contending with the stories of despair woven into the land by colonialism.

For Euro-American pioneers pressing into the Americas, the raw, untamed “wilderness” of the north (Hogan 86) presented a vast, untapped potential simply waiting for human labor to distill its value. The utilitarian framework of the Western mind, as Hogan illustrates, removes forests and animals from their facticity and

deems nothing more than economic opportunities. The “history” of the waterways that Angel recounts as she approaches Adam’s Rib by the ferry shows the effects of utilitarian ideology:

[The waterways] had been crossed many times before me . . . there were the French trappers and traders who emptied the land of beaver and fox. Their boats carried precious tons of fur to the trading post at LeDoux . . . The British passed through this north, as did the Norwegians and Swedes, and there had been logjams, some of them so high and thick they’d stanced the flow of water out from the lake and down the Otter River as it grew too thin for its fish to survive. (21)

Here, Angel signals her engagement with the deep history of the degraded landscape by consciously entering the stream of time that Europeans have colonized with stories of exploitation. From the “French trappers and traders” to the “logjams,” Hogan characterizes the utilitarian ideology behind trapping and logging as governed by both abstraction and immediacy. Trappers, for instance, can only value “beaver and fox” within the capitalist economy that “enframes” (Gerrard) them as a natural resource. Conceptualizing animals as a natural resource ascribes them, to borrow Christine Jespersen’s term, “taxidermic value.” Meaning, animal life becomes “precious” through skinning, the transformation of life into “tons of fur,” inanimate, quantifiable, and profitable commodities of exchange in the colonial economy. The image of furs riding on “boats” to the “trading post at LeDoux” demonstrates how French trappers and traders supply demand for fur through a centralized hub, and the presence of “British . . . Norwegians and Swedes” suggests that these national characters conduct similar levels of hunting and trapping, possess their own national trading posts and economies. The presence of these various European

nations in the North Country suggests that their rivalry creates a massive, ruthless scale of extraction and places immense pressure on the landscape. Though the European identity is split four ways, Hogan unifies European colonialism around a shared identity of killing and turning the rivers into an infrastructure of export and exchange.

In the above history, Hogan also calls attention to logging as a particular form of extraction within the larger complex of colonialism. The magnitude of logging in the region results in “logjams” that highlights the ability of humanity to radically damage the environment. Instrumentalizing the waterways for its ability to transport logs shows the premium placed on convenience and cost effectiveness over the well being of “the water” (Hogan). The logjams also showcase the disregard for animal life, as they disrupt the flow of traffic between the lake and “Otter River,” thinning the water level to a point where “the fish” cannot “survive.” Achieving maximum profit from cutting down trees supersedes any consideration of the spawning routes of fish, the animal and human communities that depend upon fish for sustenance, or the capacity of rivers and lakes to sustain heavy traffic. The disruptive effects of the fur trade and logging shows colonialist extraction obeys a utilitarian ethic that enframes nonhuman nature within an economy that deprives it of any cultural significance beyond capital or of any ethical obligation.

The utilitarian ethic undergirding extraction is accompanied by Hogan’s depiction of Christian mythology, a Christian narrative of progress that cares less about economic profit and more about the erasure of life threatening beings through spiritual colonization. Whereas trappers and loggers view nonhuman nature as an

inert resource, an infinite wellspring of untapped potential waiting to be harvested, Christianity in *Solar Storms* channels the fear of the wilderness into a mission of transcendence. Angel tells us, “The immigrants had believed the wilderness was full of demons . . . they feared the voices of animals singing at night” (86). Christianity acts as a spiritual, moral force that in exorcising “evil” and bringing civilization to the wilderness consequently decimates the cultural web of reciprocity that indigenous people have with nature. Fearing “animals singing at night” and exorcising “demons” instills forms of hate into the structures of civilization that only know how to understand difference through isolation and destruction. The “logging camps” that built “cities . . . from our woods” and deforest “the rest of the trees to raise cattle” (400) link the building of Western culture with the decimation of nonhuman nature and indigenous culture. These logging camps show the Christian narrative of transcendence using the utilitarian ethic to tame “the dense, dark forest” (27) by using it to build civilization.

Part of Hogan’s critique of this narrative of Christianity is that the ruins of Christian architecture lingering in Adam’s Rib continue to trouble indigenous spiritual values. Agnes’s dilapidated house provides an example of how Christian-style homes leave people with a spiritual form of degradation: “like the other squat places . . . it was designed and built by Christian-minded, sky-worshiping people who did not want to look out windows at the threatening miles of frozen lake on one side of them and, on the other, at the dense, dark forest with its wolves” (27). Agnes’s “boxlike house,” and its many duplicates, figures the Western, Christian mind as a heavenward orientation that places an antagonism between

transcendence and earth. Christian settlers fear and oppose the wilderness, yet they find fulfillment of their religious destiny through transcending nature through logging forests and building homes such as the one Agnes now inhabits.

Hogan's critique of Christianity converges with her critique of the fur trade on the issue of the degradation of women and land. The Christian obligation to master and transcend nature by destroying evil and building civilization entails a utilitarian use of the land that logging and hunting accomplish. The consequence of degradation, as Hogan shows in the story of the Abandoned Ones, is the abandonment of the land and the invisibility of the people, particularly women, and environment left behind. The French trappers, for example, who take indigenous wives and first settle Adam's Rib abandon their families in order to move "on to what hadn't yet been destroyed" (29) after they deplete the beaver population through over trapping. Bethany FitzPartick rightly recognizes that these "Abandoned Ones" are not simply victims whose bodies the forces of history degrade and abandon; they constitute, as she argues, a community of independent women who powerfully reclaim their cultural values and establish the social organization that Angel and her relatives come to inhabit. The "worn out" (Hogan 29) landscape left behind by pioneers signifies the fulfillment of the purpose that compelled the pioneers to colonize the land. That is, to use up the land. The depleted landscape signals the opportune moment to venture forth and domesticate plentiful locales that lie just beyond the horizon. Scarred and degraded landscape signifies the actualization of the Western destiny to master the land.

For Hogan, the depletion of the landscape by European colonialism is the early stages of a vaster history of Western exploitation that establish the theoretical framework for corporate entities like BEEVCO to inherit and use in new and effective ways. The move from trapping and logging to hydroelectricity constitutes a paradigm shift in how the Western world views and utilizes the landscape, which is now seen as a wasteland. Damming, this technological advancement in the means of colonialist exploitation, is, as Desiree Hellegers argues, the fruition of “intergenerational trauma” (2) whose roots exist in the deep history of the fur trade that Hogan presents. Building upon Hellegers’s insight that “the hope for the future in *Solar Storms* is contingent on a deeper understanding of the historical roots” of the violence and exploitation wrought on indigenous people and lands by capitalism and colonialism (22), I argue that BEEVCO’s willingness to flood the landscape concludes the colonialist logic to extract the most possible use out of the land. Now that logging and the fur trade has “emptied” the land of economic viability, the degraded landscape best serves the aims of Western colonialist by being submerged underwater.

BEEVCO’s project, rooted in the history of colonialism, is the attempt to extract value from a region that is seen as valueless:

In the first flooding . . . they’d killed many thousands of caribou and flooded land the people lived on and revered. Agents of the government insisted the people had no legal right to the land. No agreement had ever been signed.

[They] had lived there forever, for more than ten thousand years, and had been sustained by these lands that were now being called empty and useless. (57-8)

Like in the era of fur trade, “many thousands of caribou” and other plant and animals species continue to die for the luxury of Western society and impersonal “agents of the government” continue to use legalism to dispossess native peoples of the land and refuse to acknowledge their deep history of living on the land in sustainable ways. BEEVCO transforms the logjams of the early colonialists into a mighty dam that utilizes the power of the waterways to generate maximum profit through electricity rather than lumber. Technological advancement leverages its power to reconstitute the generative and spiritual quality of water in the indigenous framework into “flooding,” the destruction of life so that life cannot return. Here, water massively disrupts the deep time of the earth by submerging the “revered” land where people have “lived . . . forever,” making ancestral homes uninhabitable. Damming redefines the meaning of water into a destructive force that transforms the “empty and useless” land into a profitable commodity that devastates the native and biotic community and converts “ten thousand years” of history into electricity.

The ideological complex that wore out the landscape over generations of colonialism for its promise of inexhaustible financial gain is now replaced by the idea that the degraded landscape is “empty and useless,” and without purpose. That BEEVCO sees the landscape as “empty and useless” suggests how modern corporations have inherited an ideological tradition that perceives value only within the capitalist economy. Their regard of degraded land as empty and useless belies a their idea that nature possesses an ontological determination to be used to create the greatest good for man. Damming, in a sense, recycles the degraded land, giving it a new meaning and purpose in the modern context. The utilitarian pragmatism at

play in the colonialist tradition finally turns the destructive force of flooding into a matter of natural fact, or destiny, rather than human consequence, the work of historical forces in motion. The utilitarian drive to master the land proceeds from a conceptual void that ensures the blindness of the colonizer and the invisibility of the dispossessed. Thus, BEEVCO, like colonialist predecessors, use legalism to turn the desecration of “revered” land into the fault of the disenfranchised people who they subsequently deny the “right” to live by refusing to acknowledge their cultural embeddedness in the landscapes they destroy.

That BEEVCO empties and renders useless the cultural value of “revered” land echoes one of Angel’s realizations and helps concretize the spiritual stakes in the degraded landscape. “Empty and useless” refers to the spiritual evacuation of land and matter as well as the depletion of natural resources that ruin the landscape indigenous communities inhabit. In Angel’s own words, the degradation of the “legacy” of colonialism is “the removal of spirit from everything, from animals, trees, fishhooks, and hammers, all things the Indians had as allies,” leaving her community with “inarticulate souls, silent spirits, and despairing hearts” (180). The systemic web of extraction, such as the one we saw with the waterways trafficking fur and lumber, entwines “everything” in the colonialist economy. With the imposition of this infrastructure, the former “allies” of “the Indians” are drained of “spirit,” the will to act independently. Instead, they are decontextualized and transformed into tools and resources for further extraction. Indian laborers (“hammers”) now use their own “trees” as the lumber to build homes for Christian missionaries and towns for settlers. Traditional practices of fishing that posit obligations and respect between

human and “animals” vanish as their “fishhooks” are made to produce food for the market rather than ceremony or sustenance. The colonialist worldview that commoditizes “everything” in its gaze kills “spirit” by enframing the will of nature and the will of people within the capitalist economy.

Hogan’s response to the history of colonialism and the exigencies posed by BEEVCO is to recuperate the ways of “this older world” (79) at Adam’s Rib. Turning to the values of the community recovers an indigenous understanding of (degraded) landscape and ultimately positions an indigenous understanding of the land, the older ways, against BEEVCO. The older ways counteract BEEVCO by seeing an excess value in the world. This excess value beyond any economic rendering emerges from how everything—water, stone, plant—is a sentient, moral agent.

The 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. Even the shadows light threw down had meaning, had stories and depth. They fell across the land, and they were filled with whatever had walked there, animal or man, and with the birds that flew above. (81)

These older ways of the people at Adam’s Rib counters Western empiricism and rationality, which totalizes “everything” as inert mass and believes in only what the senses can apprehend. Here, we have an alternative framework that believes “everything” is “alive” and possesses spirit. These “faces and lovings of gods” immerse the older ways in a world of spirit beyond the senses and exceeds the ability of rationality to comprehend. Creation possesses value beyond market value. Dora-Rouge’s characterization of “the world” as a “dense soup of love” mixes

humanity and the natural world together through the “lovings” of the gods. Instead of a chaotic, orderless universe in need of rational structuration, the older ways sees cohesion and texture; fullness in the intimate, reciprocal relationship between all things, down to the way light throws shadows. The older ways see the subtle connections between events and attempt to spin those nuances together in their “depth” through narrative, “stories.” Stories, like the shadow, emerge from “the land” and contain “whatever” events have transpired there over time. The land is a type of text that records the history of “everything” and degraded landscapes, for the people at Adam’s Rib, tell both the story of scars and the story of a different future. But the older ways do not reject the scars in favor of futurity—the story of the land must be taken in its fullness and taken as a mixture in which “gods” prevail. The stories of the land told by the people at Adam’s Rib attempt to describe “the faces and lovings of gods” so as to ground themselves in the baseline of love and cohesion, rather than chaos, that constitutes the world.

By believing in this excess value and the living quality of the world, the older ways recognize the interconnection between humans and the biosphere. Recalling this interconnection through communal story telling summons the dignity of the world before colonialism. Fur Island is in equal parts defined by its beauty and its degradation, and the “history” (64) of the island told through a composite of stories that combine indigenous folk tales with colonialist exploitation shows the creative capacity in the degraded landscape. “Fur Island,” as its name suggests, refers to the colonialist reorganization of the island when it became a thriving, and sometimes contentious, hub in the fur trade because of its “immense beauty,” plentitude of

animals, and central location in the lake system. The stories Husk, Dora-Rouge, Bush, and Angel tell about Fur Island acknowledge this ruination but also counter the history of degradation by recuperating the older ways through the story of the island's deep past.

The older ways create a space for people to tell reimagine the stories of human interconnectivity to the biosphere. Before colonialism, Fur Island was known by indigenous people as "The Navel of the World," suggesting how the older ways understood the center of all creation as a cosmopolitan enclave of animals living in dense harmony. The island's fertility and diverse landscape sustains "a large concentration" of "marten, otter, and beaver . . . in so small a place" (65). The island also provides an alternative to the traditional family unit of Western society. Home for "two wolf children" who were abandoned by their human parents and adopted by a pack of wolves, Hogan shows how kinship networks can expand beyond the human-centered familial unit. That the wolves actively teach the human children "how to evade explorers and priests" and "how to cross ice in winter" show how wolves form caring parental relations with the human children that instruct the children how to enter the flow of animal life on the ice as well as avoid the enemies of animals. When hunters kill the wolves and the wolf children die of despair over "their lost kin" in society, Hogan points to the intimacy of reciprocal bonds possible between humans and animals when humans cease desiring wolves for their pelts and instead join them as family. The "milkstone, flowing with healing mineral waters" that cures "small pox" (66) highlights how indigenous culture believes in the sacred and curative power of the earth. The milkstone also shows the land's

vulnerability to colonial institutions, such as Christianity, that do not respect the spiritual power of the natural world and destroy sacred indigenous landmarks because they deem them evil and “superstitious” (66). Collectively, the story of Fur Island creates a narrative structure that weaves indigenous beliefs together with the colonial forces that degraded them and explains how capitalism transformed The Navel of the World into Fur Island. These stories point us toward how Hogan recuperates the older ways.

Husk’s story of the “frogs” of Fur Island demonstrates solidarity between humans and animals and further illustrates how Hogan uses the history of the island as a pedagogical narrative for envisioning the older ways. According to Angel,

Husk told me about the frogs on Fur Island, how thick they were, how people had once heard them from miles away. He said at times they sounded like drums, and that they were conceived by rain. They slept through years of drought, buried in the ground, until the time was right for their emergence, and then, on that island, gleaming in mud, frogs would come out of the darkness, bronze-eyed, golden, and eating their own skins. On rainy nights they appeared and were plentiful. They were sacred beings. One year they would again rise from the mud of the island. (64-5)

Husk’s story shows the cultural understanding of the older ways in how he accepts the living agency of the frogs without skepticism. Husk, a self-described man of science, understands that the ceremonies and rituals of frogs is a life process that does not need his senses to prove, validate, or categorize. He accepts how the frogs live in a complex community with its own culture that syncs their intelligence to the rhythm of rain and drought seasons. He respects the frogs and enters equitable relations with them. The collective power of the frogs issues from the island in the sound of “drums,” evoking the older ways of indigenous ceremonies, rites, and

interconnection with the land. “Rain,” the free flowing of water down from the heavens that replenishes the earth with spirit, draws forth the immanence of the earth that is the frogs and their drums celebrate the natural cycle of life. “Drought,” this lack of water that forces the frogs into hibernation, is also the draining of spirit from water in the colonialist context. Sleeping through the “drought” of colonial degradation, Husk insists that these “sacred beings” will one day “rise from the mud of the island” when a powerful rain storm comes “one year” in the future and beckons their “emergence.” Husk’s story of the frogs is a story of solidarity with animals and the degraded landscape and imagines the powerful bonds between human and nonhuman nature.

The Middle Place and Protest

My reading of *Solar Storms* turns to forms of protest to explore the ways the indigenous community comes together in the middle place to enact an imaginative vision of the future rooted in the older ways and the degraded landscape. As I have suggested, protest has been understudied in the scholarship on *Solar Storms* for a few reasons. One of which is how critics tend to understand both BEEVCO and the protest as reflections of the historical record. James Tarter, for instance, dedicates the final section of his influential essay, “Dreams of Earth,” to arguing that the novel’s political work lies in Hogan’s faithful representation of the historical events of the James Bay Project. He says that “the new political unity forged among the tribes” whose cultures and environments were devastated by Hydro-Quebec “is central to my argument that Hogan’s novel, like the actual history, shows alliances formed between different people on an environment basis” (139). Similarly, Desiree

Hellegers situates BEEVCO within Hydro-Quebec and its deep history in the Hudson Bay Corporation to argue that “mapping [of] capital” (4) functions as the novel’s dominant strategy for bringing communities together. Both of these accounts turn from the novel to the historical James Bay experience in order to discuss the meaning of community and protest in *Solar Storms*. They celebrate the novel’s ability to reflect what “actually” happened rather than explore Hogan’s representation of the protest within the novel.

I am by no means against the historical contextualization of the novel—it has done great work to spread knowledge about the James Bay Project and produced illuminating scholarship—but I want to build on these accounts by closely examining Hogan’s imaginative vision of the future described in her representation of collectivity, protest, and the middle place. Additionally, this essay attempts to build upon Christine Jespersen’s argument that Hogan rewrites the narratological meaning of the wilderness, shifting the form away from its historically colonialist and rugged individualist ideology to a counter-narrative of activism and transformation. This counter-narrative, I argue, not only rewrites a whole mode of discursive representation, but also indicates how Hogan figures the protest as an imaginative response to Joni Adamson’s call: “Where we need to go is not ‘back to nature’ or a romanticized time before Columbus, but forward to a place we still have need of imagining” (30). Protest, I contend, demonstrates disparate people coming together in the middle place to form “alliances” based upon a shared concern for the degraded landscape and the resistance to contemporary enterprises that perpetuate colonialist violence to lands and people. What unites these people is the knowledge

of the colonialist past and its web of capital, but reducing the protest to the response to capital, or as a reflection of the historical record, overlooks present ruination and how Hogan imagines the futurity of the movement. Protesters come together to produce a counter-narrative to colonialism that imagines a new kind of future through activism.

In this reading, Hogan's representation of protest in *Solar Storms* signals not only the recovery of Angel's fragmented identity through the integration into her community, but also how that fragmented community comes together in the middle place to regain their indigenous identity as the "Beautiful People" through imagining a new future. That the older ways posits the connection between all things makes Joni Adamson's conception of the middle place, "the search to find ways to understand . . . cultural and historical differences and similarities sufficiently well that we might come together" (xvii), a critical tool for exploring how the degraded landscape offers an alternative ethos for marginalized peoples to form a community of resistance and reconstitute themselves through forms of protest. Thinking about protest through the middle place, a common ground structured by the older ways, situates our analysis from a position "where culture emerges from nature" (53) and transforms the indigenous narrative of the land and conversations into acts of protest that culminate in direct action. Protest, these direct and indirect forms of resistance, emerges from the middle place as the expression of the older ways, forging a counter-narrative to the official narrative that "we were people who had no history, who lived surrounded by what they saw as nothingness" (Hogan 280). In response to the story of "nothingness," protest in *Solar Storms* is the embodied and

spiritual imagining of a new kind of future beyond the history of the social and ecological exploitation under Western colonialism.

For Hogan, the use of the indigenous story of the (degraded) landscape is a form of protest because it helps create a middle place between people where, together, the stories of the older world can point them toward a new future. Stories, like the nomadic hunters who leave the wilderness to join the resistance against BEEVCO, are an immense form of power. “There were stories for everything,” one hunter says. “But not for this. We needed a story for what was happening to us now, as if a story would guide us” (302). Stories provide recourse to the older ways of the past, which contextualize and inform the present moment. Shared stories between members of a community, or sharing a story with an outsider, create a middle place for deliberating over the future. Not having a “story,” the hunter tells us, is like moving blindly, without agency, into a future that has been predetermined by history. Husks’ story of the frogs that will “again rise” offers such a story of guidance, because its political allegory of rebirth and solidarity can help formulate the “story” of “now.” In telling the story of the frogs to Angel, he enters into the middle place with Angel where they imagine the native warriors of the past returning to fight against present ruination. The frogs offer an ideal, or a creative understanding, of what it would look like for indigenous people to rise up from degradation and reclaim the sanctity of The Navel of the World. They eat the old skin of the past to transform into “golden” and “bronze-eyed” warriors emerging from the darkness of degradation to create the future. Recognizing the deep story of the land beyond degradation because of how “everything” is alive and has a living,

creative history that always wants to reemerge gives Husk a way of imagining a new future alongside Angel. Hogan's employment of the older ways through the deep, indigenous story of the land opens up the middle place to indigenous people, who may together engage with and recover the degraded landscape, and ultimately imagine a new future from the scarred past.

The narrative of the degraded landscape, empowered through the transformative lens of the older ways, also expands the middle place to include nonhuman nature as collaborative agent. When Angel arrives at the Two-Town area and observes the effects of BEEVCO's construction and last minute initiatives to "strip the land's resources" (218), her "sympathy with this ragtag world of seemingly desolate outlying places and villages" (224) signals her solidarity with degraded lands and people. This sympathy brings her into the middle place, where she imagines nature and people working together to fight BEEVCO.

In time it would be angry land. It would try to put an end to the plans for dams and drowned rivers. An ice jam at the Riel River would break loose and rage over the ground, tearing out dams and bridges . . . Then would come a flood of unplanned proportions that would suddenly rise up as high as the steering wheels of their machines. The Indian people would be happy with the damage, with the fact that water would do what it wanted and in its own way. What water didn't accomplish, they would. (224)

Angel's vision of the "angry land" is a legendary moment that imagines the river, fully enlivened with expressive and political qualities, as a kind of leader in the future insurrection against injustice. Hogan's subjunctive construction of the river's potential power—"in time it would be angry land"—puts us in the mode of

imaginative futurity by reminding us that a time will come when “water” and “Indian people” unite. The “ice jam” signifies the solidified and concentrated will of the river in rebellion against the “dams and bridges” that contain and utilize its life force, and the resultant “flood of unplanned proportions” unleashes the rage accumulated by the “angry land” over the history of degradation. Angel’s vision of the ice jam reveals the fragility of colonialist structures to the very force of nature that it attempts to harness to a measurable, predictable model of utility. Exploitation of the land creates the conditions that transform nature into a hostile agent, “angry land,” whose accumulated rage will break the capitalist and scientific enframing of nature as resource value. But nature, though powerful, is not so independent so as to completely achieve its own liberation, it leaves work for others to “accomplish”—and that requires the help of the “Indian people.” Angel’s vision of the angry land imagines the liberation of lands and people from colonialist structures as a reciprocal, collaborative movement within the middle place, for neither flood nor human action alone is sufficient.

The narrative of the land serves as a form of protest also for how it imagines the very origin of the world and humanity’s responsibility to creation. Tulik’s telling of the creation story, of Beaver, to Angel sets up another middle place of imaginative futurity. Tulik’s story of Beaver counters the message of so much American environmental writing—that humanity’s intervention into nature inevitably produces ruination—by emphasizing the creative intervention into nature and the building of the world through the use of natural materials.

Beaver took down trees from the sky; they brought up pebbles and clay from somewhere beneath the vast waters. They broke the ice that had shaped itself over the water. They swam through it and they made some land. With pebbles and clay . . . When Beaver shaped the humans . . . they made a pact with them. They gave their word. They would help each other, they said. Beaver offered fish and waterfowl and animals. The people, in turn, would take care of the world and speak with the gods and all creation.

Beaver, the only creature in this world, acts as a singularity and a plurality—“they were the ones,” Tulik says. This composite form speaks to the multitude of beavers whose actions give shape to this almost formless world of water and where the “roots” of trees hang from the sky “looking for a place to take hold” (238). Beaver’s radical interventions into the world—taking down trees from the sky, excavating “pebbles and clay” from the deep, and breaking “the ice” so they may navigate the world—rebuff the idea of a perfect, ideal nature that is the product of a geological miracle that just happens. The story of Beaver replaces this latter logic, which plays into the narrative of empty wilderness, with an ethical relationship with the natural world. Beaver constructed the land by piecing together the materials that were available, thus creating the livable terrain in which humans, plants, and animals inhabit. Tulik denaturalizes the earth by reminding Angel that the land is not a given and that the maintenance of life requires respect to the “pact” of reciprocity between Beaver and “humans.”

The older ways and the corpus of stories create a cultural tradition replete with powerful narratives about the relationship between humanity and nature that open up to disparate peoples conversation. Communication, from interpersonal

conversation to meetings, transforms these stories and older ways into resistance and protest. For instance, Hogan carefully establishes the meeting where Angel and the community at Adam's Rib learn about the destruction of flooding from the "two young men" as give-and-take in the middle place. At this meeting where various figures within the community gather and discuss BEEVCO's flooding of the land, Angel says she is "uncomfortable" in the presence of the "two men" and "the elders," outsiders and leaders. Her anxiety points to her position as new to the community, her life of alienation, and that being incorporated into the fold of this communal exchange, recognition, and negotiation troubles the boundaries of her identity. Here, Hogan shows us how the older ways open up a middle place for conversation to unfold. Their "quiet and humble" way of speaking conveys their adherence to the older ways of respect and reciprocity between people, rendering the "urgency" of the environmental issues legible to Angel, who Hogan points out twice that she "listens carefully." This careful listening and humble but decisive speaking facilitates the exchange of ideas in the middle place that lead to the transformative effect of Angel entering the middle place.

Conversation about the degraded landscape helps Angel see this interconnection between disparate peoples that allows her to make an imaginative leap into a community beyond her immediate environment. For Angel, listening to the couriers discuss the degraded landscape helps her bridge the gap between "these men's people" and "my own people." Her attunement to the dire cultural relevance of BEEVCO's destruction of faraway lands enables her to see that the people whose lands are being flooded, people she has never met, are "my people"

(58). Conversation brings her into this middle place where she gains a greater understanding of herself through entering relationships with suffering lands and people. The young men's call for "help" recognizes that fighting for the health of the biosphere calls for community action, "for people to show up to stop the machines" and for the elderly to lend their cultural and spiritual wisdom through "ceremony" (58). "Help," or protest, imagines a future where the indigenous community comes together through the embodied presence of resistance and ceremonies that enact the spiritual resistance of the older ways. These indigenous couriers of the middle place who move through the network of waterways disseminating news to native peoples so as to mobilize as "many communities, villages, and towns" as possible show the power of the older ways bring about alliances through a joint desire to defend the degraded landscape that is their home.

The older ways turn conversation, this exchange of careful listening and humble speaking, into a mode of interpersonal reciprocity that "balance" (233), to borrow Tulik's term, differences and similarities into relationships of resistance. Balance, in Tulik's sense of the word, describes a relational understanding and organization of qualities, feelings, and aspirations that strikes at a productive, energetic friction between people. Auntie and Bush's friendship is perhaps the paradigmatic example of the power of balanced conversation to produce a relationship of resistance, but we see this kind of exchange between Angel and Jo (261), Miss Nett and Dora-Rouge, Bush and Luce. Angel observes Auntie and Bush's friendship, "They were change-minded in the same fierce ways, but they had different ideas about how it should come about and they argued incessantly until

their voices were little more than background noise” (234). The relationship between Bush and Auntie emerges from a sort of moral and ethical constitution that is passionately, and uniquely, “change-minded” and the dedication to not only resist environmental and social “injustice” (234) but to bring justice to degradation. The debates between them—the middle place in motion—arise from their commitment to visions of futurity and their willingness to work together through their differences. Hogan’s figuration describing Bush and Auntie’s relationship as “like day and night, summer and winter, two parts of the same thing” (234) does not prescribe an essential dualism to Hogan’s resuscitation of the older ways, but describes the kind of powerful, imaginative relationship that collaboration in the middle place creates between people willing to converse about their differences.

We see the political efficacy of balance at a community meeting when Auntie and Bush confront “the BEEVCO bosses” (282) through different, but interlinked, modes of spoken resistance. Hogan shows that the balance governing the differences between Auntie and Bush is necessary for navigating the charged environment of protest and the discursive threat of hegemonic interpolation. That is, “reversal,” the turning of just language against itself. Auntie, who “yelled at them,” employs an ethos of justice that relies on righteous anger, what Bush admires as “Auntie’s fire,” but Bush also recognizes the tenuous position of the movement (283). Bush understands that the BEEVCO bosses, the hegemon, may turn “Auntie’s fire” as a weapon against them through “reversing the truth” and labeling them “terrorists.” Bush’s subtle pull on Auntie’s belt loop and gentle admonishment moderates Auntie’s rage before her resistance crosses an uncertain threshold that

neither side understands. Bush balances “Auntie’s fire” and becomes inspired to voice a humble, but no less scathing, indictment of BEEVCO’s project: “Why are only white laws followed? This will kill the world. What is the law if not the earth’s?” Bush’s appeal to the older ways, the law of the earth, breaks with her former status as a “silent” “outsider” and transforms her into a dedicated activist, writer, journalist, and photographer. Balance, as Auntie and Bush’s relationship shows, is not a metaphor for equilibrium or stasis, but the creativity and dynamism that emerges when people bring together their cultural, historical, and experiential particularity to the middle place.

For Hogan, protesting through direct action, the embodied resistance to oppression, signifies the achievement of the indigenous story of the land and the discursive, reciprocal exchange between people and land in the middle place, and should be, as Hogan does, celebrated in its tensions. Angel recognizes direct action as well within the tradition of native peoples and at the heart of the older ways: “For my people, the problem has always been this: that the only possibility of survival has been resistance. Not to strike back has meant certain loss and death. To strike back has also meant loss and death, only with a fighting chance. To fight has meant that we can respect ourselves, we Beautiful People” (325). For Jespersen, Hogan frames Angel’s view on direct action as a response to the “historical context of manifest destiny and imperial conquest” (291). Direct action in *Solar Storms* is certainly a response to the technological and historical forces of colonialism that BEEVCO manifests, but I suggest that this ethos of direct action is endemic to the indigenous narrative of the land and reciprocal relationships between land and

people. Stories such as the frogs of Fur Island and visions of the angry land consistently convey this message of striking back to gain a “fighting chance” and this insistence of reciprocity, beauty, and integrity.

Reading protest as the mobilization of the older ways through the middle place, direct action embodies the futurist aspirations of the story of the land and conversation. Dora-Rouge’s epiphany that leads to the need for direct action is a response to the “reality” (225) of degradation, the total encompassing of a biotic community in ruin: the land’s lack of animals, clans, landmarks, clean water, and, most of all, the culpability of colonialist agents for the “large mounds of sawdust,” the suicidal and despairing survivors, and other detritus of resource extraction.

It was murder of the soul taking place there.

The devastation and ruin that had fallen over the land fell over the people, too. Most were too broken to fight the building of the dams, the moving of the waters, and that perhaps had the intention all along. But I could see Dora-Rouge thinking, wondering: how do conquered people get back their lives? She and others knew the protest against the dams and river diversions was their only hope. Those who protested were the ones who could still believe they might survive as a people. (226)

This moment marks a shift in our thinking of protest as stories and talk to direct action. Here, in the face of ecological and social annihilation, Dora-Rouge’s call to protest evokes the communal aspiration to “survive as a people.” That is, for the “people” to share their stories of the land, deliberate over the future, and to take direct action. The shared “devastation” between “land” and “people” points to “contested terrain” (Adamson) where people can rally together and work for transformation. Gathering around a fissure, the violation of the vibrant life bond that

animates the community and biosphere, rather than an ideal of beauty allows them to communally resist this “anguish disease” (Hogan 271) that infects the people with a sickness of the body and the soul that renders them “too broken to fight” against degradation. Despair signifies the vulnerable stasis of land and people that facilitates BEEVCO’s “desire” to “guide the waters, narrow them down into the thin black electrical wires” so as to profit from its “ancient life . . . its power” (268). Recognizing despair, “the murder of the soul,” as the “intention all along” of the colonialist system situates their “protest” as resistance to a power structure where BEEVCO’s flooding the “empty” land is the necessary conclusion to the over-trapping of the fur trade. Dora-Rouge’s epiphany configures protest as ceremony of resuscitating the soul by bringing the “people” together in the middle place. Together, rising out of isolation, “conquered people” can conceive of “their lives” beyond colonialist structures through an imaginative push into the future. Direct action disrupts the colonialist narrative that determines the total discontinuity of their culture with the story of survival and dignity.

Because of Hogan’s concern for the colonialist disruption of temporality, scenes of direct action target pathways like roads and train tracks because they structurally enable the continuation of BEEVCO. Such pathways forge connections beyond the epicenter of conflict that replenish and sustain the damming project as well as create the infrastructure of exploitation. For example, “the road . . . being built across the spawning grounds of whitefish” (275) acts as a miniature dam that, in sustaining BEEVCO, severs the waterway that sustains the population of the whitefish and other aquatic species. The activists who take direct action by digging

up this road “shovelful by shovelful” reclaim the liberatory power of collective action and the tools that colonialism has instrumentalized for capitalist profit through the work of freeing “the fish” so they may “journey toward the future” (281). This act of resistance works against the anguish disease, what Angel has described as the “removal of spirit” from the “tools” Indian people had as “allies.” The resuscitation of the older ways allows these activists to use abject tools to liberate the water and fish, enlivening the spiritual reciprocity between human and nonhuman nature. Uprooting the road in this way signifies that overturning historical structures of exploitation requires digging deep with those tools that colonialism tries to co-opt.

Direct action translates the cultural framework of the older ways to an embodied language of presence and immediacy, a convergence of bodies and ideas that articulates a collective vision of the future based in tradition and the experience of degradation. Luce’s idea to block the train tracks emerges from her engagement with the older ways and her involvement in the middle place, which manifests itself in the collective “decision to block the railroad tracks” (304). The easiness of the decision and the spontaneity of action should not be mistaken for romanticism, but is the expression of the older ways percolating in the middle place, the power of participatory democracy, and the diligent commitment to futurity. In blockading the train tracks, the protestors borrow from the indigenous creation story of Beaver, who emerges from “places the rest of us have never seen,” these ignored and unacknowledged spaces of raw creation (239). Inspired by Beaver, the protestors resist the importing-exporting power of the train through acting like beavers

amassing materials in a blockade and figuratively act alongside the angry land. The detritus that constitutes their blockade—rusty cars, “old oil barrels . . . filled with sand and dirt,” pipe, and large stones—re-presents and reclaims refuse and degradation as the tools used to disrupt the flow between use and disposal. Maintaining the blockade, this new “front line” (305), becomes both a dedication to the protesters, and a central strategy of direct action in *Solar Storms* that achieves greater effect in blockading the road at Two-Town.

As Angel says of their direct action, “we’d thrown an anchor into the future and followed the rope to the end of it, to where we would dream new dreams” and “remember the sacredness of every living thing” (344). Protest serves a temporal function that moves beyond, but includes, presence and immediacy and brings political action into the realm of futurity, where, in laying claim to an alternative future rooted in the remembrance of sacredness, protest disrupts colonialist temporality—the linear and dialectical march of time that destines the perfection of Western society through consuming nature. Protest, seen in this way, emphasizes the embodied presence of a collective refusal to accept present degradation, and also shifts the temporality of conflict away from just the present, where the “soldier police” (259) have the clear advantage of being supported militarily by the government, to the future, to the space of imaginative futurity.

Conclusion

Hogan recuperates the older ways in order to revitalize the deep history of indigenous people’s relationship with the natural world and to call for present resistance to BEEVCO’s hegemonic appropriation of nature and marginalized

peoples. Successful resistance, Hogan shows us, involves attachment both to tradition and focus on the future. The older ways mediate this tension through the indigenous story of the land, which employs narrative to bring people together in the present through imagining an ethics of solidarity between human and nonhuman nature in the future. Beginning with a worldview that sees the material world as “alive,” as possessing subjectivity, will, and spirit, rather than as an inert mass allows us to conduct this kind of reimagining of the world around us. Degradation thus works on two levels—the history of colonialism and the resisting of this history through loving the land by virtue of the older ways.

Connecting nature and culture in this deep way directs us to Joni Adamson’s concept of the middle place. Humans and nature coming together to deliberate over a shared future places us in a very different ethical paradigm than the hegemonic ethical *topos* of BEEVCO. This reciprocity in human relationships and relationships to nature create dynamic alliances, both literal and figurative, that creates a vision of the future that enables the active resistance to degradation. Imaginative futurity in *Solar Storms* employs the older ways in the middle place to reinvent the world beyond Western hegemonic ideals.

Though it takes a prolonged court case to achieve the ends the protest did not achieve, we should celebrate how the environmental justice movement in *Solar Storms* faces adversity, such as internal fragmentation, fierce resistance from authority, and the material reality of having access to sustenance. The success of protest is the continued resistance to colonialist degradation and the hope for a new future. Hogan finds hope in the material and spiritual basis of the earth itself. *Solar*

Storms starts and concludes on this material-spiritual image of the earth's power to carry the presence of Angel's departed ancestors to her through the wind. Agnes's voice and Dora-Rouge's touch moving through the wind testify to Angel's dedication to the older ways, her commitment to resistance and to imagining a new future.

Vita

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