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# Engaging Linda Hogan's People of the Whale (2009) and Brian Jungen's Cetology (2002) in an Eco-poetic Conversation: When Contemporary Indigenous Artists Voice New Totemic Hydrographies

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This talk aims to engage Linda Hogan's novel, *People of the Whale*, and Brian Jungen's monumental installation, *Cetology*, in an eco-poetic conversation to question the entanglement of our contradictory perceptions and expectations concerning our relationship with the ocean and our use of its wildlife. Both Hogan's fiction and Jungen's installation stage whales as their focus point, featuring them in their animality as well as in their mythical spirituality. Indeed, in both artworks, artists offer insights into the multifaceted aspects of the network or relationships entangling humans to this oceanic megafauna and draw the contours of subtly renewed Indigenous cosmopolitics. While delving into deep water with the enigmatic marine mammal, this talk proposes to address the flux of the numerous correspondences and resonances linking Hogan and Jungen's masterpieces. To do so, I will first explore their ingenious storytelling of a specific estranged environment, the oceanic biosphere, giving shape to actual hydrographies or the drawing gesture to give words to water. Then, I will examine the watery element as a storage place for all the memories of our human interactions with whales. Lastly, I intend to unveil the rich totemic subtext that endows both representations with profound metaphysical meaning.

### ***People of the Whale and Cetology***

Although created seven years apart and Linda Hogan having never alluded to being inspired by Jungen's installation, both art pieces demonstrate the same drive to probe the decentering of a Western perspective upon whales, drifting from a mere commodity to an acknowledged more-than-human ancestor. Interestingly enough, neither Hogan nor Jungen can claim direct lineage to the "People of the Whale," in other words, to a coastal native community that traditionally hunts and reveres the gigantic creature.

Linda Hogan is a Chickasaw writer from an Indigenous tribe located in Tennessee and traditionally living on corn and hunting. As Joni Adamson explains in "Whales as Cosmos": "Hogan's novel fictionalizes the controversy set off when Makah of Washington State hunted and killed a gray whale in 1999" (p.30). The small tribe actually tapped into ancestral rights and secular customs to appeal to US regulations in order to be allowed to resume whale hunting punctually. This endeavor triggered incomprehension and uneasiness as to their will

to kill an already endangered species. The novel fictionalizes these events and focuses on one specific Indigenous family torn apart by history, the Vietnam War, as well as this particular controversial whale hunting.

Likewise, Brian Jungen is a Canadian plastic artist enrolled in the Dunne-Za First Nation, also called the Beaver tribe, originally living around the Peace River in Alberta and British Columbia. His inspiration stems from the fulgurance of an encounter with a captive orca whale named Bjossa in Vancouver's aquarium. He spent considerable time visiting the animal, which led him to ponder the interplays between whales and humans and the consequences of the extensive whaling industry in the North West Pacific. Simultaneously, he engaged a flexion about the "process in which natural history museums take ownership, make precious and scientific, and fundamentally "sell" nature" to quote scholar Karen Kramer Russell.

*Cetology* is actually Jungen's second occurrence in his artistic series about whales, two years after *Shapeshifter* in 2000 and one year before *Vienna* in 2003, both very similar in appearance and method to *Cetology*. However, each installation is a world in itself, hence the different titles. We are not here dealing with mere copies but rather with a reproduction of art that leads to a multiplication of the experience. Each monumental installation consists of an assemblage of everyday-use white plastic chairs—some in their entirety, some in fragments—to form a suspended fifty-foot-long whale skeleton. By so doing, "Brian Jungen challenges the museum's traditional role as enforcer of ethnographic hierarchy by presenting a panoply of multiple histories and their dialectical relations," says art critic Margaret Rodgers. His technique cannot but remind us of other famous sculptures made of piled-up objects. Like Picasso before him with his bull head made with a bike saddle and handles, Jungen playfully prompts us to reimagine the oddly familiar and let our wandering mind be confused by seemingly obvious content. Similarly, Hogan's novel displays a number of transformational characters that are profoundly human and yet oddly linked to non-human beings, such as Thomas, born with webbed feet, or Ruth, born with gills. To that extent, *People of the Whale* and *Cetology's* storytelling are inseparable from the aquatic locale where they are set, a dynamic element endowed with the aptitude to assemble and fuse what should normally remain apart.

### Hydrographies: Writing the ocean

Indeed, both Hogan and Jungen invest fully in the liquid milieu to operate a conceptual displacement of perspectives, thus offering a new locus of enunciation for storytelling our relationship to the natural sphere that has been thousands of years in the making. In their creations, the ocean acts first as a necessary “disorientation device” to disrupt our grounded understanding of the environment. By defamiliarizing our land-based knowledge, the American novelist and the Canadian artist proceed thus to a “re-story-ation,” to refer to the term coined by David Macauley, of our human and other-than-human reciprocal interactions. For instance, the many transcorporeal interconnections depicted in Hogan's *People of the Whale*, namely the diverse submersions of the characters into the ocean and the physical contact with the marine fauna, reveal the intricacy of the links woven between the human race who lifted itself out of the water to conquer the land and the whale, and its fictional combinatory variation, the octopus, who remained in the ocean but retained the ability to surface and interact with humankind. By drawing upon elemental philosophy, Hogan's narrative provides situated recognition of the close relationship we sustain with the sea and shifts our Western focus on the wet matter to an indigenous perspective. In *People of the Whale*, water has its own agency, outside of human control and human will. For instance, Witka's wife communicates with the ocean through her mind, receiving precise information regarding Witka. This episode, among others, enhances the fact that nature sees us and responds to our actions through an array of biosemiotic signals left to humans to read appropriately.

Because it embraces, at the same time, rich symbolic crossings between the human and the more-than-human realms and material connections among cultures and civilizations, oceanic water deploys the full extent of its “matterphoric” power and carries out “an invitation to lyrical drifts and continuous conjoining.” In Jungen's installation, water is subtly represented as the spectator is made to believe that the whale skeleton floats effortlessly, freed from all sense of gravity, thanks to the use of invisible cabling and the dark shades of the walls. However, in Jungen's artwork, as well as in Hogan's novel, the lurking threat of the shortage of water dooming our society casts an ominous shadow. On the one hand, we have the pretense of dry bones hanging in the empty room that asserts a dire deprivation; on the other

hand, when the whale is wrongfully killed by the Native community in Hogan's narrative, water recedes, and rain is suddenly scarce, nature sending a robust response to the human inability to use natural resources respectfully: "Mark my words. There's going to be a drought. A wrong thing was done. Maybe more than one wrong thing. There will be a drought," the old man warned Ruth" (p108). The ontological ambivalence of water, an element powerful enough to provoke devastating floods and ineluctable droughts, is internalized by both artworks to fan out the diverse layers of contained meanings. By this doing, Hogan and Jungen's creative moves give voice to "storied matter." I am referring here to Serpil Oppermann and Serenella Iovino's conceptual utterance of the "matter's narrative power of creating configurations of meanings and substances which enter with human lives into a field of co-emerging interactions [...] Matter itself becomes a text where dynamics of "diffuse" agency and non-linear causality are inscribed and produced." (p. 79-80)

### **Water has Memory**

In Jungen's masterpiece, as well as in Hogan's novel, water infuses and contains, it pervades and encloses: it stands both as an elemental substance and a geographical site that retains the memory of past encounters. Water is a storage place for our wildest dreams and our wildest fears. Moreover, it remains the only environment potent enough to shelter the whale, a megafauna so extraordinary that no human-made aquarium can welcome it, the biggest mammal on Earth and under the sea. It is worth saying that the gigantic proportions of the animal have always triggered the human mind to fantasize about its intentions, and its formidable potentialities have soon prompted greed. Historian Michel Pastoureau thoroughly explored the paradoxical Western stance regarding the exceptional creature, as the whale represents a means of survival but also the vessel of our imagination; in other words, as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss theorized, an animal that is good-to-eat as much as it is good-to-think. In Western traditions, whales have first instigated dark fear: early on, they are told to be blood-thirsty, devilish beasts, devouring humans (the Bible is an example among others that illustrate this belief); then they later transformed into a seemingly inexhaustible source of revenue, providing oil, meat, amber, bones for corsets, to quote but a few. Reversely, they nowadays embody the symbol of environmental battles as they are the most represented

animals in ecological campaigns. As Michel Pastoureau astutely remarks: "Whales do not devour anybody any longer; they are being devoured" by the current consumer society. And, remarkably, *Cetology* materializes this "dévoration," devouring, which leaves only bones for the sorry eye, only bones, and the presence/absence of water.

Lastly, and quite interestingly, Pastoureau notes regular occurrences of whales confused with or imagined as "islands," literally carrying new worlds and potential Edens on their back, which clearly echoes many Native cosmogonies and Hogan's designation of the whale as a planet: "it was a planet" p267. Clearly, Jungen and Hogan's construed whales respond to each other, and both act as visual reminders of a Native direct connection to the sea giant and a deeply embedded responsibility for it. Each represents a "mnemonic for the entanglement of humans with whales and thus a kind of short-handed "comparative ethnology," to quote Joni Adamson p35. Each aggregates the different layers of time—cyclical time, human time, mythical time—to make evolutionary time visible: "[Hogan]calls upon readers to become more aware of the evolutionary worlds that exist outside the "measured time of a single human life," says Adamson p40. Conversely, "Jungen's whale-skeleton sculptures usher us into the "deep time" of the past, when whales predated humans, and the "deep time" of the future when plastics will very likely postdate human life on earth" as critic Andrea Nightingale suggests. She further insists on the profound dilemma aroused by this human-made fossil that should undeniably outlast both whales and humans in the forms of plastic particulates: "Certainly, the shape of the skeleton itself signals the death of the whale. At the same time, the sculpture celebrates the majesty of the whale and offers a stunning piece of art" p116. Here, ambivalence, and maybe even a touch of uneasiness, inhabits the imaginative representation.

The irony of this artistic situation is not lost either on critic Margaret Rodgers, who remarks that "whale oil was an earlier carbon fuel source than the petroleum that has been used to create plastic chairs" p36. At this point, Some sort of unnerving vertigo seizes the spectator, who starts to apprehend the vicious industrial circle storied by the whale. In that regard, Jungen's *Cetology* and Hogan's *People of the Whale* offer paramount counter-narratives to the dominant position on the conquest of the oceans as they delve into a renewed cyclical time where layers of meaning intersect, contradict, and intend to adjust.

They contribute to drawing the map of a “cosmos of relations,” which Joni Adamson defines as acknowledging the world as “a dynamic space that includes humans and the whole community of beings that exist” p39.

### **Renewed Totemism**

While Brian Jungen plays on a hybridity of forms between disposable plastic chairs and monumental scientific representations, Hogan intermingles secular mythical beliefs and Western literary genres. Therefore, they both synthesize old ways with current methods of mass production. Meanwhile, they also actualize traditional totemism and rebuild the common totemic ancestor. Indeed, North American totemism practices dwell first and foremost on a mystical kinship between humans and an other-than-human entity. The title of Linda Hogan's novel itself implements the core of the totemic lineage: the people descend from the whale and accordingly belong to its clan. Later on, key characters reactivate the ancestral covenant sealed with a sea creature by offering treasured belongings. These interactions inform the reader of the inherent tie ensuring each party's survival thanks to a network of reciprocity. Likewise, the many metamorphoses and becoming-animal narratives enforce a contextual fluidity of ontologies. Consequently, when they elect to represent whales the way they do, Hogan and Jungen “teach [their audience] lessons about the relationship between humans and animals because these depictions reveal the animality of humans and the humanity of animals” Adamson.

Academic Chadwick Allen also analyses this process and asserts that it gives shape to a form an autoethnographic artwork, which he defines as the action to “negotiate a single narrative out of the worldviews, memories, and aspirations of disparate indigenous cultures while also constructing a dialogue between indigenous and non-indigenous understanding of indigenous experience” p209.

This inherent hybridity dwells on a traditional shapeshifting that animates totemic beliefs: through rituals, humankind can reopen the door to mythical times when human beings and other-than-human beings could exchange part of their essence and fuse characteristics. Totem poles, dance shawls, and traditional carved canoes attest to this

malleability, just as Hogan's character, Marco, is supposed to be able to take the shapes of a human or a whale, or the octopus to come back as the rain man: "They say when a real whaler dies at sea he will become a great whale. Maybe Marco will travel on. Maybe he will return one day and feed his people" (p106); "That afternoon a stranger comes to town. He rents a room at the Midtown Motel, where the yellowed ceiling had already started to leak even before he arrived [...] 'Damn. It's supernatural.'" (p141). Indigenous artwork upsets cartesian logic to remind the Western mind of a long-forgotten truth: all beings share common biological ground, cellular water, and thus remain codependent.

The metaphorical transcoding at work relies on the liminal potential of oceanic water, an environment erasing gravity, blurring time references, and disorienting notions of up and down to merge ontologies, epistemologies, and conceptual frameworks. Meanwhile, Hogan and Jungen's creations debunk our fake romance with nature and refute simplistic views about the future of endangered species and the permanence of human-made pollution. Similarly, they question the stereotype of the "ecological Indian," a term coined by anthropologist Sheperd Krech to designate a supposedly nature-loving Indigenous trait being deeply ingrained in every Native individual, subsequently evoking a kind of reductive candor. As such, Hogan develops the character of Dwight to point out "indigenous complicity in environmental destruction" and eschew "any suggestion that the local people necessarily have exclusive access to nature," as Jonathan Steinwand theorizes.

Jungen, as for him, uses humor to tackle the issue of shared accountability or, to be more precise, "survival humor" that Anishinaabe writer Louise Erdrich deems as "essential to Native Americans' response to their overwhelming experience of cultural [and I would add "ecological"] catastrophe (in Stookey, 1999, 20). Totemic shapeshifting allows Brian Jungen to reverse our initial expectations about Native art and the representation of nature. As Comanche curator and art critic Paul Chaat Smith mentions: "Lots of people think that Jungen's whales are actually dinosaurs. Maybe even most. Not surprising: how many of us have ever seen a whale skeleton? The whales we know are fully clothed: brooding in the deep, triumphantly rising into the sky, or taking aim at Captain Ahab. This confusion is interesting. We are told that whales may soon be extinct; some varieties already are." Like traditional Native craftsmen, Brian Jungen carved the body of a renewed totemic ancestor, both fragile

and enduring, timeless while violently contemporary, sacred and profane, that ground its clan, the People of the Whale, into uncertain times and prompts them into action.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude my talk by convoking Gaston Bachelard: his inspiring acknowledgment of the human need to interact with wet matter and the phenomenal possibilities that thinking with water creates. "Water is really a transitory element. It is the essential ontological metamorphosis between fire and earth. The being destined for water is in constant vertigo. He dies every minute, for always some of its substance flows by."

Linda Hogan and Brian Jungen's imagined whales bring us to experiment with this liminal substance where nothing remains static. Entangling layers of histories in the defamiliarizing watery milieu, they voice new hydrographies to help us rethink the borders between humans and nature. By so doing, they guide us on the threshold of an "intimate immensity," to quote Bachelard again, an intimate immensity that encompasses both the experience of our interior focus on the images of whales inhabiting us and the outward experience of a newly discovered congruence into the aquasphere.