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Feasting on Famine in Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms*

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In 1899 H. B. Cushman observed that when a Chickasaw died, tribal lamentations would last for several days and would conclude with a feast (410). Nearly one hundred years later in 1997, in the prologue to her novel *Solar Storms*, Chickasaw Linda Hogan recounts a "mourning feast."[1] But in her presentation, Hogan changes several mourning-feast customs, the most salient of which requires that the mourned be deceased. The alteration of the traditional mourning feast serves not merely as a signpost for changing Native American rituals. Rather, the transformed mourning feast in *Solar Storms* indicts white culture for causing Native American famine, both physical and emotional. But in blurring some demarcations of culpability and in providing a role model in the form of the character offering the feast, Hogan points to ways in which the Native American community might respond to the emotional, bodily, and cultural starvation inflicted through postcolonialism.[2] In this manner Hogan eschews what David L. Moore deems construction of reductionist binaries concerning colonization.[3]

Hogan's *Solar Storms* recounts the story of Angela (Angel) Wing, a beleaguered seventeen-year-old whose disfigured face bears the scars of an unremembered trauma. Angela's deranged mother Hannah Wing necessitated Angela's placement in foster homes, from which Angela has fled for years. In a court record Angela discovers the name of Agnes Iron, whom she contacts, believing her to be a relative. Agnes, Angela's great-grandmother, immediately sends money for Angela to join her in Adam's Rib, an economically

depressed town situated between Minnesota and Canada in the Boundary Waters area.[4] Through her gradual identification with the Adam's Rib community, Angel's psychic wounds heal, even as events bring Angel to a confrontation with her mother and the restoration of the memory of her repressed past.[5]

Before asserting the degree to which Hogan changes mourning feast norms, we first might consider what a "normal" mourning feast would entail. Determining such normalcy proves difficult, if not impossible, in part because different Indigenous nations at various times alter specific traditions. As Homi K. Bhabha notes, "The enunciation of cultural difference problematizes the division of past and present, tradition and modernity, at the level of cultural representation and its authoritative address" (207). Yet according to Ernest Stromberg, in the past, ignoring First Nations' cultural specificity "served to reduce hundreds of complex individual cultures into a single category" (98). As Craig S. Womack maintains, "Native literature, and the criticism that surrounds it, needs to see more attention devoted to tribally specific concerns" (*Red on Red* 1). Since both Bush, the character preparing the feast, and Hogan herself hail from the Chickasaw nation, some concordance between the feast in *Solar Storms* and Chickasaw mourning feasts seems likely. But perhaps more importantly, Bush even inverts the feast's would-be cross-tribal common denominators.

For some Westerners who associate feasts with joyous occasions such as births, weddings, liberation from oppression, and gloriously heroic feats, holding a feast in order to mourn might in itself appear an inversion. This might seem true even though the Irish, for example, provide ample food during wakes, and people frequently offer bereaved families prepared dishes as tokens of affection and support. In any case, within the definition of any "mourning feast," the most fundamental characteristic proves so obvious that we can easily overlook it: the person whom the community mourns should indeed first be dead. Another prominent feast attribute relates to food preparation: since participation in the feast involves virtually all group members, food preparation involves community cooperation. As with any feast, we might

expect the quantity of food to be great and the quality of it the best that could be provided. Furthermore, in Native cultures, mourners often share their food with the departed. W. M. Beauchamp notes that "It was a prevalent idea that the dead liked the good food of this world, and this was often placed on graves. If it disappeared . . . it was supposed to be eaten by the dead. . . . [It was] thought the soul lingered near the body until the Feast of the Dead" (109). Hogan's character Bush breaks these "rules" of the mourning feast and also adds some unprecedented procedures. And whether breaking an old rule or instituting a new one, each breach of feast protocol calls up an awareness of the causes of starvation and to supply methods of combating it.

In commencing *Solar Storms* with a remembered mourning feast and in titling that remembrance "Prologue," Hogan disorients readers by dismantling conventional notions of structure, presaging the dismantling of mourning-feast conventions even while asserting the underlying value of ritual. Conventionally, a prologue serves in part to situate a play's action between past and future. But *Solar Storms*'s prologue provokes more questions than answers. Readers' "questioning" might relate to Craig S. Womack's notion of the reader/text dialogue. Womack suggests that we need to cultivate "a self-awareness of our own role as readers in shaping what we encounter and a resistance to reading where we talk back to texts, where we ask questions, rather than view the texts as the authoritative final word that has come down to us in some pure form" ("A Single Decade" 55). Hogan forces us to ask, for whom is the feast held and why? Locating the answers to these questions requires us to read the novel both progressively and retrospectively, invoking a method similar to the one Native Americans must employ to "recover . . . lost stories and cultural practices" (Womack, "A Single Decade" 19) while safeguarding their meaning for future generations. Observing Native American women's writing, Carolyn Dunn and Carol Comfort suggest that such literature often contains a "confounding of divisions—between sacred and secular, between animal and human" (xiii). Dunn and Comfort might have added that the "confounding of divisions" also concerns the temporal,

for allying ancestral experience with that of the living quickens a "dead" past, even as it weds the living moment to a revered ancestral past. Hogan's blending of the three conceptions of time—past, present, and future—into a unified comprehension ironically mimics the most efficient way to read *Solar Storms*: in simultaneous relation to time's three (perhaps illusory) divisions.[6] According to the narrator in the prologue, true tradition comes from "the map inside ourselves" (17). Only by the novel's end do the narrator's words fully unveil hidden connections between tradition and its significance to the present moment. The subtle nexuses of unified (cyclical) time and culture correspond to presenting and then subverting the classical prologue's function. The novel's beginning, then, marks the end of formal structure that mandates a straight line of narration. Hogan in effect bends the line of narration back on itself, much in the way Erich Neumann configures human consciousness as uroborus, or as a serpent swallowing its tail.[7] Pleading in "The Snake People" for an appreciation of the unjustly maligned serpent, Hogan alludes to a similar epistemological metaphor but extends the comparison to encompass all consciousness, rather than merely the human:

> [T]he image of snakes twined about a tree or one another looks surprisingly like the double, twisted helix of DNA, the spiral arrangements of molecules that we share with every other living thing on earth, plant and animal, down to the basic stuff of ourselves. Perhaps Snake dwells at the zero of ourselves, takes us full circle in a return to the oldest knowledge, which says that the earth is alive. Our bodies, if not our minds, know that zero, that core, the constellation of life at our human beginnings, the same shape of that galaxy. (235)

As Donelle N. Dreese maintains, Hogan's valuing the form of the snake challenges a linear construct of life:

> Due to the snake's ability to coil itself in the form of spiraling circles, it echoes the circular life philosophy of continuity, reciprocation, and holistic living (nurturing spiritual, men-

> tal, physical, and emotional needs) rather than the Western linear construct, which leaves a loose end dangling into oblivion. (8)

In framing the feast within a prologue that relates at first glance incomprehensibly, and in retrospect profoundly, to the novel's thematic concerns, Hogan contravenes the letter of structural law, even while upholding its spirit.

Hogan replicates the spiraling form of the snake in the structure of *Solar Storms*. Only by going back to the text's beginnings can we gain understanding. It seems to me, too, that Hogan's prologue relates more to song than it does to the confining conventions of a literary prologue. In its exquisite poetic expression and its fluid emotive power, the novel's beginning requires of the reader a receptivity akin to what Simon J. Ortiz suggests will allow a listener to "hear" a song. When he hears a song, Ortiz

> listen[s] carefully, but I listen for more than just the sound, listen for more than just the words and phrases, for more than the various parts of the song. I try to perceive the context, meaning, purpose—all these items not in their separate parts but as a whole. . . . A song, a poem, becomes real in that manner. You learn its completeness; you learn the various parts of it but not as separate elements. You learn a song in the way you are supposed to learn a language, as expression and as experience. (115)

If we are attentive "listeners" to Hogan's opening "song," we hear how unusual the mourning feast actually is. We sense something is amiss, for Hogan only hints that the person honored at the feast might not be dead. It is true that the story is told in the first person and also true that the narrator addresses an absent second person: "The last thing Bush did to prepare her feast in honor of you was to open the jar of swamp tea, and when she did, I smelled it. It smelled like medicine to me" (14). Although the narrator of Bush's feast apparently addresses another, the tone and presentation of the story induce us to forget that the "you" addressed might be another living person—we suspect, falsely, that the narrator speaks to a

spirit. In confusion we turn once again to the prologue's beginning lines—the only two sentences of the prologue not printed in italics. Juxtaposed with the italicized words, those first two sentences baffle us: "Sometimes I now hear the voice of my great-grandmother, Agnes. It floats towards me like a soft breeze through an open window" (11). Is great-grandmother Agnes, then, someone dead addressing the living narrator who remembers the words? All we know for certain is that Hogan presents Bush's mourning feast oddly—as a prologue—and we cannot determine who lives and who, if anyone, has died. This confounding of the reader appears deliberate. When anthologized, the prologue was stripped of its first two sentences and a few other lines that evidence that both the narrator of the prologue proper and the narrator of the first two sentences are alive.[8] The removal of just a few lines frustrates the most careful reader's ability to determine whether anyone has actually died. In constructing her prologue to perplex, Hogan countermands classical literary protocol and invites readers to reconfigure notions regarding the living and the dead, both textually and physically. As Melani Bleck observes, "Hogan portrays writing as an act of liberation from spatial boundaries" (33). Bleck additionally asserts that not only do "Hogan's novels' characters, their perspectives, languages, writing, and their worldviews dissolve . . . stereotypes that bind Native Americans[,] [but] [s]he too takes issue with the structuralist assertion that . . . 'Literature and language remain . . . bounded entities'" (32). Bush's mourning feast, as prologue to *Solar Storms*, points to the played-out (starved) representation of the prologue, even as it replenishes (feeds) it with renewed vitality.

Probably as deliberate as it is ingenious, Hogan's tactic to ask readers to "listen" carefully proves effective not only because readers keep turning pages as they struggle to solve the mystery of the prologue but also because offering a mourning feast for one still living mirrors Bush's own feelings about the "dearly departed"—a little girl gone from Bush's life, but one not deceased. Only later in the novel do we learn the convoluted story of why Bush provides the feast for a living girl. Bush informally adopted Angela, the

granddaughter of Bush's philandering husband, because Angela's mother (Bush's husband's daughter-in-law, Hannah Wing) was clearly insane. Everybody in the community "knew . . . [that] Hannah Wing . . . stood at the bottomless passage to an underworld. She was wounded. She was dangerous. And there was no thawing for her heart" (13). Bush devotes herself to little Angela and adores her adopted granddaughter. But inexplicably the county takes Angela from Bush. The court's action proves worse than a death sentence for the child, for first the court grants custody to Angela's natural mother. Given Hannah Wing's nature, we suspect that she will torture the girl if she does not kill her immediately. Only gradually do we fathom the depth of Bush's sorrow at losing the child and fully appreciate how completely the county's action jeopardizes Angela's life. Bush understands that, in losing custody, she loses all contact with the child. The child is literally "lost" to her. Her anguish, coupled with her uncertainty concerning Angela's fate, legitimates Bush's holding of the mourning feast even though no one has literally died.

All this personal history may seem like fate, but the indirect cause of the unorthodox feast is literal and figurative starvation perpetrated by whites. Hannah Wing's insanity compels Bush to care for Angela in the first place, but Hannah's depravity results from the starvation of her people. Hannah Wing's mother, Loretta, came "from the Elk Islanders, the people who became so hungry they ate the poisoned carcasses of deer that the settlers left out for the wolves. The starving people ate the bait" (38). Loretta smells of cyanide, and she passes on her insanity and her distinctive odor of almonds to her daughter, Hannah Wing. Thus, behind Hannah's insanity lies white encroachment upon Indigenous people's resources, even to their food. Tracking the incipient cause of the Elk Islanders' starvation, Agnes Iron speculates that "It might have started when . . . the logging camps started and cities were built from our woods, or when they cut the rest of the trees to raise cattle" (40). Bereft of game and dispossessed of their own land, the Elk Islanders suffer extreme privation. Bush's nontraditional feast points back to the "original sin" of starvation caused by white settlement of Native lands.

For Hogan, starvation relates not simply to human privation—physical, cultural, and spiritual—but also to the land's and to other life forms' hunger.[9] Later in the novel Bush, Angela, Dora-Rouge, and Agnes embark on a journey, not only to locate Angela's mother and to escort Dora-Rouge to her ancestral homeland, but also to protest construction of a hydroelectric project. As Barbara J. Cook explains, "Hogan draws on the reality the indigenous inhabitants of James Bay [Quebec] faced and on their resistance to the project. The project was launched in 1971 to provide electricity for New York City without prior notification to the people it would affect" ("Hogan's Historical Narratives" 43–44). Donelle N. Dreese notes that "Hogan strives to break down the human/nature dichotomy and heal the alienation between humans and the natural world that has led to environmental degradation" (9). Starvation involves far more than humans. Along the way to protest the construction of the dam, Angela speculates that, in the past, "the people in the north found direction in their dreams. . . . They dreamed where food animals lived. These dreams they called hunger maps and when they followed those maps, they found their prey. It was the language animals and humans had in common" (170). Jim Tarter contends that *Solar Storms* posits "a common animality, a common plant nature, a common earthliness" (145). Just as the novel's structure unites times past, present, and future, so too it links human starvation and the natural world's privation.

Just as the initial cause of Hannah's insanity is the Elk Islanders' starvation, the cause of Bush's bereavement is the actions of the county. In this too we see a miscarriage of justice at the hands of whites. No tribal court awards Angela to her violently insane mother. The entire community of Adam's Rib realizes the danger of returning the child to her mother. Eventually the county court places Angela in foster homes, but it acts only after Hannah horribly disfigures Angela's face. Only near the end of the novel do we learn what Hannah has done to scar Angela so. The mother has eaten part of her daughter's face—a grotesque response to starvation and insanity. When at the age of seventeen Angela finds her way back to Adam's Rib, she begins to understand that her own

emotional starvation would have been avoided had she stayed with those who loved her. We know that Bush fought the courts to prevent Angela's return to Hannah, but Hogan does not reveal why Bush failed in her battle. Why did the court ignore her legitimate testimony? An easy answer might be that courts typically favor the natural mother, but we suspect that racism figures in the ruling (i.e., the testimony of a nonwhite who counters white "rules" must be suspect). In any case, rules made and administered by whites impel Bush to hold the mourning feast.

The court's ruling results in the emotional starvation of both Bush and Angela. In *Solar Storms* inner sorrow resonates in an outer abode and vice versa. When Angela returns to Adam's Rib, she has run away from numerous foster homes, knowing that "no one had ever wanted [her] for good" (26). Deprived of affection, Angela feels she dwells in two rooms: "One, the darkest, was a room of fear, fear of everything—silence, closeness, motionlessness and how it made me feel and think. . . . And there was the fire-red room of anger I inhabited permanently" (27). Significantly, Bush's small three-roomed house, like Angela's two "rooms," becomes a metaphor for Bush's sorrow at losing Angela. The prologue proper begins with Agnes saying to Bush as she prepares the mourning feast, "The house is crying," for "steam [runs] down the walls" (11). But Bush replies that "the house [can] withstand it" (11). Agnes, comprehending the depth of Bush's anguish, does not believe this. Even though the wallpaper in Bush's house peels and even though "now and then a tear would try to gather in [Bush's] eye" (17), both Bush and her house indeed withstand the sadness, but not without a wasting away of spirit. Twelve years after the feast, when Bush and Angela reunite, Angela mistakes Bush for a deer, "thin and brown" (67). Angela recounts that "From the first time I saw Bush, I knew that she, like myself, understood . . . loneliness. She, too, had only thin, transient bonds to other people, having grown up on the outskirts of their lives" (67). Hogan's repetition of "thin" in adjacent sentences underscores the ravages of emotional hunger precipitated by the county's ruling. Had child and adoptive grandmother been allowed to remain together, the bond between them, and their subsequent bonds to others, would have been fleshed out.

In connecting external and internal famished spaces, however, Hogan also posts exit signs that illuminate escape routes from such starvation. One exit leads to rituals performed simultaneously. In pairing inner and outer landscapes, Hogan asserts the primacy of forging new associations with place. For although a common ancestral birthplace invites cultural homogeneity, relocation of First Nations forced inhabitants to reassess their relationship to their land. The attendees of Bush's feast all represent dislocated peoples. The feast reflects this dislocation, but in an unexpected way. Ironically, during the feast in *Solar Storms*, the "landscape" of cultural interaction shrinks to a house. In staging that seemingly limited interaction, Bush's house hosts not only a feast but also a transforming sweat-lodge ritual. Situated on a small island completely surrounded by ice, Bush's house initially appears as the emblem of her sorrow-frozen heart. Watching the approaching guests "arriving that cold Sunday," Agnes observes that

> Across ice they looked like mere shadows against a darkening winter evening. Wind had blown snow from the surface of the lake, so in places the ice was shining like something old and polished by hands. Maybe it was the hands of wind, but the ice shone beneath their feet. I scraped the window with my fingernails and peered out. (14)

Indeed, Agnes knows that outside lies "a bone-chilling, hurting cold, the worst of winters" (15). Yet "The room was hot" (15), Agnes remembers, so hot that when the guests try to depart, they discover that "the door froze shut" (17). With its "small, now-stripped [appearance] and its . . . wood and wallpaper [that] were stained where rain had seeped through" (15), the house recalls a sweat lodge. Like a sweat-lodge fire, Bush's "cooking stove heated the house" (11). The small house replicates a sweat lodge with its circle of diners (who enter ceremoniously, taking care to remove their boots) and with its "smell . . . of cedar" (14). In "All My Relations," Hogan reveals that during "a sweat lodge ceremony, the entire world is brought inside the enclosure. The soft odor of smoking cedar accompanies this arrival" (39). Hogan additionally notices

that within the sweat lodge, "willow branches move overhead" (Chandler 25). Similarly, when Bush holds her feast, "branches of trees scraped against the windows like they were trying to get in" her house (*Solar Storms* 11). Further likening Bush's feast to the sweat-lodge ceremony, Hogan writes that the house seems to chant when its "teakettle [begins] to sing as if it remembered old songs some [of the diners] had long since forgotten" (14). While the Native American diaspora sundered people from places and concomitantly from cultural identities, Bush's smoky house/hogan invites guests to participate in ritual, the glue of culture. Perhaps Hogan folds one ritual (the mourning feast) into another (the sweat-lodge ceremony) because diaspora and genocide resulted in doubly severe wounds, far too deep for a single ceremony to heal.

The diners accept Bush's invitation to participate in a kind of sweat-lodge ritual. Summarizing Hogan's ideas on the function of the sweat-lodge ceremony, Chandler notes that "The ceremony's purpose includes restoring, renewing, and restructuring the human mind by remembering 'that all things are connected'" (25). Certainly the guests ultimately connect to one another during the feast. When they first enter Bush's house, they are "uncomfortable," but as the feast progresses, the house "[grows] smaller. It settled" (*Solar Storms* 16). The people also "settle"; one diner later "took some tobacco out of the tin and pinched it into his cheek and smiled all around the room" (16). By the end of the feast, the guests, "white-haired people, black-haired people, and the mixed-bloods," are "talking and some even laughing, and there was just something in the air" (16). That "something" undoubtedly relates in part to the healing power of the sweat lodge to fortify the bonds of community.

In breaking tradition by preparing the food for the feast by herself, Bush additionally instructs the people of Adam's Rib about the true worth of both community and tradition. Only Agnes keeps Bush company as she prepares the food for the feast. Bush works "day and night" for the numerous people who will attend (12). Since Bush "is a quiet woman, little given to words," and since she "never takes kindly to being told what to do," Agnes "let[s] her be"

while Bush "prepare[s] the feast" (13). But this unsociability may reflect more than just Bush's solitary nature. She might not have convinced others to help her, since the community knows that she is preparing an unorthodox mourning feast. Agnes remembers that

> To get them to her banquet, [Bush had] told them this was her tradition, that it was the only thing that could help her get over her grief from losing [Angela]. There wasn't one among us who didn't suspect that she'd invented this ceremony, at least in part, but mourning was our common ground and that's why they came, not just for her, but out of loyalty for the act of grief. (15)

In part because Bush comes from Oklahoma and in part because of her reticence, the other people at Adam's Rib never fully accept her; indeed, they virtually ostracize her. Yet Bush battles for a child not related to her by blood. Furthermore, Bush alone has the courage to deal with Hannah Wing's insanity. We later learn that Bush also raised Hannah and even attempted to heal her and to scrub the odor of cyanide from her. Only Bush ventures to defy tradition by changing feast rules. By altering customs, Bush renders the "tainted" feast a communion. In telling Angela about Bush's mourning feast, Agnes muses, "I don't know how to measure love. Not by cup or bowl, not in distance, either, but that's what rose from the iron pot as steam, that was the food taken into our bodies. It was the holy sacrament of you we ate that day, so don't think you were never loved" (16). The feast attendees, then, not only mourn the "loss" of a loved one but also celebrate union. The communion with the "dead" joins Angela to each person partaking of the food and also expands the community, by "taking in" another valuable outcast. Agnes explains that the community "came to love [Bush] that night. She'd gone to the old ways, the way we used to live. From the map inside ourselves. Maybe it reminded us that we too had made our own ways here and were ourselves outcasts and runaways from other lands and tribes to start with" (17). Although the outcast Bush breaks with tradition by cooking the food her-

self, her solitary labors compel the community to remember the origin and reason for traditions. Traditions encourage community solidarity, especially in the time of grief. Pointing to Hogan's mixed-blood Chickasaw/Anglo heritage, Benay Blend remarks that "As a participant in two cultural traditions, Hogan draws from each to create new patterns of individual and communal identity" (67). By insisting that the community draw "outsiders" into its circle, Hogan draws a "map that resists the falsely rigid bounds of outwardly imposed culture . . . [and] integrates all fragments of her being into what she depicts as whole" (68). As Christopher B. Teuton asserts, "The act of returning with new knowledge and fresh interpretations creates new terrain upon which the community may continue to grow. Knowledge is sought and valued in relation to the collective harmony and survival of the community as a whole" (197). Outsider though Bush is, her knowledge of the need for the feast ensures the emotional and cultural survival of the community of the diners.

For Hogan, the disruption of community and its traditions goes beyond the tribal. Catherine Rainwater observes that in both *Mean Spirit* and *Solar Storms*,

> Hogan emphasizes not only the mistreatment of Indians, but also the paradoxically self-destructive actions of white society as it damages the earth where white people and Indians alike must live. As Dora-Rouge says in *Solar Storms*, the Europeans have "trapped themselves inside of their own destruction" of the world. (98)

Although unequivocally incriminating whites for Indian starvation, Hogan shows that whites too risk suffering the poisonous effects of the ecological damage they incur.

Besides widening the community's parameters, Bush's initiating a unique practice ensures the community's distribution of grief. After her guests have eaten, Bush, "in front of everyone, . . . cut[s] her long hair. The way we used to do long ago to show we had grief or had lost someone dear" (16). Nor is this the only custom she revives: "When the dishes were piled up, [Bush] went to

the middle of the room where she had placed her earthly goods, then in a giveaway, she gave each diner present some part of her world" (16–17). Bush gives away virtually everything she owns, including her food—she even gives away the clothes she wears to the feast, keeping only her white sleeping gown, a seemingly foolhardy gesture, since the feast takes place during the coldest time of the North's winter. Yet Bush's innovative ritual does more than show her individual willingness to attune with Angela's suffering under Hannah's starvation-induced coldness and insanity. The dispersal of Bush's possessions activates a primary function of a mourning feast: to distribute the grief among an entire community. After cataloging the items the diners take from Bush, Agnes concludes, "But the most important thing they carried [away] was Bush's sorrow. It was small now, and child-sized, and it slid its hand inside theirs and walked away with them. . . . After that [Angela's] absence sat at every table, occupied every room, walked through the doors of every house" (16–17). Beyond invoking Christ as the unseen guest at every table, Bush's dispersal of material things helps her achieve an important goal of a funeral: to help the bereaved overcome sorrow. While other types of feasts might serve to distribute the community's abundance, in Bush's mourning feast, the distribution of goods signals the equal distribution of sorrow. Bush performs no act of selfishness here, for the entire community should have mourned the loss of the child in the first place. In addition, the community previously excluded Bush from itself and consequently slighted her suffering. Only as she gives away her possessions do "Some of the people [cry]. Not just for [Angela], but for all the children lost to us, taken away" (17). By incorporating the new ritual of giving away all she owns, Bush reminds the community of its obligation to "take away" a portion of individual sorrow.

While other feasts might feature food reflecting the community's bounty, many of the foods Bush serves at her feast call attention to white actions that have caused emotional and physical starvation. The first food she prepares, oxtails, calls to Agnes's mind the encroachment of white settlements:

> I thought of the old days when the oxen arrived in black train cars from the dark, flat fields of Kansas, diseased beasts that had been yoked together in burden. All the land, even our lost land, was shaped by them and by the hated thing that held them together as rain and sunlight and snow fell on their toiling backs. (11–12)

Bush is left not even with the "diseased beast," but merely the discarded tail of an animal that, like Indigenous people, suffered greatly under white rule. Instead of rejecting the oxtails as repulsive reminders of whites' stealing of tribal lands, Bush, who is capable of distinguishing the victim (the oxen) from the victimizer (whites), uses the symbol of white oppression to nourish her guests.

She also cooks rabbits, "poor, thin, winter rabbits" (12). Agnes's ruminations about the oxen remind us that land appropriation by whites has eliminated the plentiful game that once sustained Indigenous people. The starvation of Hannah Wing and the people of Elk Island represents those most brutally victimized by white settlement. Bush also prepares corn, an inexpensive and indigenous food staple of the Chickasaws (Pritzker 372). But according to Agnes, the most significant food Bush offers her guests is the wild rice (also indigenous) harvested two years before. As Agnes explains to Angela, "the rice was the most important thing because you had gone with us that fall day. You were all wrapped in cotton, with netting over your face so that the little bugs and dust wouldn't bother you as we drifted through the plants, clicking the sticks that knocked rice into the boat" (13). Agnes's story of the wild rice reveals Bush's love for and devotion to Angela and reminds us of the county's outrageous decision to separate Bush and Angela, emotionally starving them both.

While the foods Bush serves underscore her reasons for holding the mourning feast, her actions in relation to those foods suggest ways in which members of the community might counter physical and emotional starvation imposed by white actions. Both Agnes and Bush realize that the oxen, dislocated from lands to which they

had adapted, share with Indians the burden of a yoke that inhibits natural existence. Although the rabbits Bush serves are "poor and thin," Bush herself has hunted them. Bush supplies her guests with more than lean game here—her actions suggest that self-reliance has its place, even though white practices tremendously inhibit the exercise of that self-sufficiency. Bush also suggests the value of self-reliance in her own growing of the "inexpensive" corn she provides—Bush gathers or grows practically all her own food. But perhaps more significantly, Bush does not just serve the corn she grew; she transforms it. She "soaked the corn in lye and ashes until it became the sweetest hominy, and who would have believed such a caustic thing could sweeten and fatten the corn?" (13).

Bush uses what she has, transforms it, and uses it to "serve" the community. Holding the feast in itself witnesses Bush's power to transform "a caustic thing." Bush herself has harvested the wild rice, but its significance extends beyond a nod toward self-reliance. Since the rice connects Angela to Bush in memory, we realize the value that Bush places on memory of Angela to help call her back.

Bush will wait twelve years for Angela's return, and she will never give up hope. But before Bush demonstrates such unwavering fortitude, she first fights the county for Angela's custody. Political action, then, precedes patience. In an interview with Barbara J. Cook, Hogan proclaims that "For Native peoples there is no difference [between the spiritual and the political]" (Cook, "Interview" 11). Bush's fight with the courts and her protesting the Quebec damming project helps to "negate . . . the stereotype of Native women as passive victims of oppression" (Blend 69).

To sustain her vigil for Angela's return, Bush relies not only on memory, community, and political activism but also on divinity. Agnes remembers that "Bush put a piece of each of the different foods in her blue bowl for the spirits, wiped her hands on her apron, and took the bowl outside. I could see through the doorway how heat rose from the bowl like a prayer carried to the sky, begging any and all gods in the low clouds to listen" (15). Bush alters the custom of leaving food outside for the departed spirit, for Angela is not dead. But Bush, after losing her battle with the

county, continues to press her case with higher courts. Her preparation and management of the food speaks eloquently about her self-reliance, intelligence, power of transformation, memory, political activism, reliance on divinity, and perseverance. All of these qualities can be taken up to minimize the ravages of cultural and physical starvation.

Each of the qualities that Bush employs to counter hunger belies its own definition. Bush's "self-reliance," for example, carries neither Horatio Algerian nor isolationist sentiments. Ultimately, self-reliant strength functions for communal good. Paradoxically, part of that strength rests in her willingness to relinquish all she possesses, including her self-reliance. Because she has given away her worldly possessions, Bush runs the risk of freezing to death. After the feast, the ghost of her self-reliance forbids Bush to come to Agnes's house on the mainland. But Bush finally accepts Agnes's offer of shelter. Worried about Bush, Agnes says,

> I laced up my boots and went back over the frozen water [to Bush's house]. She was thinner, but she looked happy, and she didn't argue when I opened this bear coat I've always worn and wrapped it around the two of us and walked her back to the mainland. . . . We were two people inside the fur of this bear. (18–19)

Reconfiguring the holy trinity, the "community" of Agnes and Bush is contained by the animal world. Blend concludes that, ultimately, Hogan "create[s] new patterns of individual and communal identity" (67). That Hogan represents those patterns with such indefinable precision testifies to her artistry.

In amending traditions of the mourning feast, Hogan indicts white culture for causing Native Americans' need to alter their own customs. But ironically, the alteration of traditions spotlights the enduring value of the very traditions Bush modifies. The unusual mourning feast points to the resilience of Indigenous people and reveals their valor in dealing with hardships perpetrated by white culture. We often forget that the celebration of our own national feast, Thanksgiving, commenced with whites' showing gratitude

to the Indigenous people. Native American generosity toward settlers ensured the newcomers' survival. It is bitter food for thought that the development of white abundance precipitated the starvation of such gracious hosts.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Hogan quotations are from *Solar Storm*.

2. Although Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin's groundbreaking *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post Colonial Literatures* conceives of postcolonial literatures as "writing by those peoples formerly colonized by Britain" (1), which includes African, Caribbean, Australian, Canadian, New Zealander, and (eastern) Indian writings, the work does not discuss American literatures, since the United States won independence from Britain before the beginning of the nineteenth century. Yet Deborah L. Madsen finds the exclusion of U.S. writing "untenable. Writers of colour, publishing in America, face precisely the problems of marginalization and cultural erasure that confront post-colonial writers of Africa and the Caribbean, and indigenous post-colonial writers of Canada and Australia and New Zealand" (5). Regardless of the parameters established by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, Madsen and others argue persuasively for extending the boundaries of postcolonial discourse.

3. David L. Moore contends that too often analysis of Native American literatures has been framed by "dialectical binaries, such as civilization v. wilderness, Euro-American v. Indian, or Euro-American v. African American, [which] [miss] the blurring of those boundaries that drives the pragmatic unfolding of American identities and differences" (10).

4. For a discussion of the biblical references in *Solar Storms*, including the town name of "Adam's Rib," see Norienne Courtney Fauth, "Excavating the Past: (Re)Writing Continuity in Postcolonial Native American and Jamaican Literature."

5. Beyond the story of Angela's healing, according to Ellen Lester Arnold, *Solar Storms* creates "'a third space' in the general sense that Trinh T. Minh-ha uses it . . . to refer to that undefined and indefinable space between binary opposites, a 'non-binarist space of reflection'" (7).

6. In his brilliant essay "Standing Naked Before the Storm: Linda Hogan's *Power* and Critique of Apocalyptic Narrative," Michael Hardin hints at the connection of the Christian "linear, apocalyptic" vision and

Gerald Vizenor's transformation of this vision into "a return, a cyclic event" in *Heirs of Columbus* (143).

7. Drawing on classical Greek mythology and Jungian psychology, Neumann delves into the evolution of consciousness.

8. See Linda Hogan, "Bush's Mourning Feast."

9. In discussing Hogan's *Mean Spirit* and Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony*, Jennifer Brice shows how "dispossession [in the two novels] leads to spiritual anorexia" (128).

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