BILDUNGSROMAN IN *SOLAR STORMS*: FORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF ECOLOGICAL DEVASTATION

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Linda Hogan's *Solar Storms* (1995) is a novel of displaced beginnings, as the protagonist Angel Jensen is taken away from her Native American family by social services. Angel's grandmother tells her, "Nobody knows where it began, your story". The Bildungsroman genre views beginnings as a process: the creation story of the individual. Helena Feder warns that Bildungsroman develops human subjectivity while propagating the 'humanist myth of its separation from and opposition to nature'. This beginning, conventionally, marks an imaginary rupture between the human and non-human. However, Hogan offers a Bildungsroman in which there are multiple possible beginnings, such that 'nobody knows' a specific starting point. For Hogan, the threads of human and natural history interweave with the process of Bildung. I will analyse the role these genealogical and ecological ties play in Angel's formation and, in particular, how Bildungsroman functions in the context of both cultural and environmental destruction.

At seventeen years old, Angel reunites with her family at Adam's Rib, a reservation on the borderlands between Minnesota and Canada. The recovery of these ties is akin to a rebirth: 'I was at the end of one life in America, and a secret part of me knew this end was also a beginning' (p. 26). As she leaves non-Indigenous America, she returns to the 'beginning', and the process of 'Bildung' starts over.³ Hogan presents an alternative Bildungsroman: the process of formation, of bringing pieces of the self together, occurs in tandem with the deformation of the land. A hydroelectric dam threatens the ancestral lands of the Beautiful People, a fictional Native American tribe. Angel and her grandmothers Agnes and Bush, and her great-grandmother Dora-Rouge, undertake a perilous journey to resist the dam's construction. Through their stories, Angel fills in the unknowns of her childhood, including the violent abuse of her mother Hannah. They arrive to find the project underway, and the land and people suffering from the ecological repercussions. The dam building echoes the real life Hydro-Quebec hydroelectric project at James Bay in 1971, when Hydro-Quebec and the Quebec government diverted the Eastmain, Opinaca and Caniapiscau rivers to reservoirs on La Grande Riviere, causing widespread flooding on Cree and Inuit lands and significant species loss.⁴

¹ Linda Hogan, *Solar Storms* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), p. 37. All further in body references will be to this edition.

² Helena Feder, *Ecocriticism and the Idea of Culture: Biology and the Bildungsroman* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2014), p. 18.

³ Cambridge German Dictionary Online, s.v. 'Bildung', https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/german-english/bildung, accessed 22.01.21.

⁴ James H. Marsh, 'James Bay Project', in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (2015), https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/james-bay-project, accessed 24.01.21.

Amidst destruction, Angel learns that the Beautiful People's history is interwoven with the history of the biosphere. Set in the wake of the Wounded Knee Occupation of 1973, the novel charts Angel's movement from alienation to collective action. Bildungsroman has long been associated with eras of instability. Franco Moretti argues that European Bildungsroman arose out of the tumultuous revolutionary period of the 18th century: as the younger generation overthrows tyrannical *ancien regimes*, Bildungsroman becomes the 'symbolic form' of modernity; a modernity that 'perceives the experience piled up in tradition as a useless dead weight'. ⁵ The eighteenth century protagonist releases himself from the shackles of previous generations, and makes his way into a new society. Bildungsroman presents the formation of the self within a shifting environment.

This political turbulence, argues Bernard Selinger, echoes the transitions experienced by Native Americans in the twentieth century: the collapse of traditional practices and the 'loss of continuity between generations', Selinger suggests, are 'all mapped by most contemporary Native American novels'. Bildungsroman is a relevant genre for the 'disquieted exploration of transitional spaces', as Native American protagonists move between dominant society and a 'supposedly outmoded' tribal society. The allusion to 'transitional spaces' indicates a rupture between generations which is also a loss of rootedness in place. Thus, many Native American writers employ Bildungsroman to explore the impact of social inequality on the preservation of traditional practices. *Solar Storms* identifies the quandary of how to continue cultural practices within an altered ecological landscape. However, generational exchange is crucial to the formation of an environmental consciousness that protects sovereign lands.

While Selinger and Moretti agree that Bildungsroman grapples with the rupture between generations, to Hogan, Bildungsroman enacts a repetition of generational experiences. *Solar Storms* inverts Moretti's view, in which cut ties from the older generation are the precursor for the formation of a 'final and stable identity'.⁸ Instead, Bildungsroman starts with an understanding of generational trauma. Agnes, Angel's grandmother, retells the family's grief after Angel is taken away as a baby. Angel is part of a chain of lost children, which initiates a collective mourning in Adam's Rib: 'Some of the people cried. Not only for her, but for all the children lost to us, taken away' (p. 17). The novel is set in the 1970s, when the boarding school system of cultural assimilation was in living memory. Richard H. Pratt, its founder, claimed in 1892 that the system aimed to "kill the Indian in him and save the man".⁹ Children were forbidden from learning traditional Indigenous practices and languages.

⁵ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), p. 5.

⁶ Bernard Selinger, 'House Made of Dawn: A Positively Ambivalent Bildungsroman', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 45.1 (1999), 38-68 (p. 3).

⁷ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸ Moretti, p. 8.

⁹ Richard R. Pratt, 'The Advantages of Mingling Indians with Whites', *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Corrections* (1892), p. 46, quoted by Clifford E. Trafzer, Jean A. Keller, and Lorene Sisquoc,

Rupture from previous generations is not the protagonists' attempt to differentiate themselves, as Moretti argues, but the result of a repressive policy. Later, the narrative adopts the perspective of Angel's great-grandmother Dora Rouge, who tells the story of her sister's attempt to escape from boarding school. She commits suicide by walking 'into the snow' (p. 167) and freezing to death. The children 'lost to us' are frozen in ice; they are barred from accessing traditional knowledge. Bildungsroman here locates personal experience within a wider historical experience.

Collective grief connects the people of Adam's Rib to a shared past. The others see Beth has 'gone to the old ways' as she mourns (p. 17). The 'old ways' are the practices and memories that comprise this shared past. History is embodied as an inner 'map' from which to guide oneself. Beth's mourning reminds the community to live from 'the map inside ourselves' (p. 17); the loss of Angel enacts a return to traditional forms of healing. While Moretti charts the detachment between one generation and the next, a shared history of displacement, from the Indian Removal Act of 1830 to boarding schools, are repeating threads that link generations. From the novel's opening, Angel belongs to the past of 'all the children lost to us'; she is one piece of a wider collective loss.

A history of displacement occurs in a series of repetitions, so that the process of formation is bound up with historical experiences. The creation of a coherent self is frequently viewed as characteristic of Bildungsroman. Feder suggests that Bildungsroman initiates a false 'separation' between the human and non-human; the creation of a self detached from its environment. Angel's removal from her family enacts this separation, uprooting her from ancestral lands. However, Hogan counteracts this by threading genealogical history into Angel's personal story, returning her to a connection with place. Selinger points to the version of coherence offered by feminist authors of Bildungsroman, which involves 'a coherent self - but not necessarily an autonomous one - that structures its identity relationally'. Rather than simply an interiority, these critics adopt the definition of coherence as 'logical connection or relation'. Prormation is not only self-invention, but the exploration of one's links to an already existing chain of experiences. As she counters displacement, Angel redraws her connections to people and place.

Angel defends ancestral lands and so rejects conventional Bildungsroman's separation between self and environment. However, Hogan highlights the complexity of finding connections to people and place following cultural erasure. In her memoir, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* (1991), Hogan likens self-discovery to travel through an unknown landscape. She opens with an

Boarding School Blues: Revisiting American Indian Educational Experiences (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), p. 18.

¹⁰ Feder, p. 18.

¹¹ Selinger, p. 2.

¹² OED Online, s.v. 'coherence', https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/35933?redirectedFrom=coherence#eid accessed 22.01.21.

awareness that readers of Native American memoirs seek alternative forms of knowledge: they seek to 'know the private landscape inside a human spirit, the map existing inside tribal thoughts and traditional knowledge'. ¹³ Geography provides the metaphor for the search for the 'coherent self' in Bildungsroman, or as Hogan describes it, our desire to find 'wholeness'. ¹⁴ However, the 'private landscape' of the self has lost its 'cairns and markers'; the demarcations have been 'taken away and broken' by generations of colonisation of Native American lands. ¹⁵ A history of displacement causes a dislocation of the self, in which the 'private landscape' becomes unnavigable. In *Solar Storms*, Angel returns to her family to retrace these 'markers'.

Self-discovery requires the excavation of natural space. The 'map' rests on an anthropological perspective alone, and other 'markers' are required. Bush depends on seventeenth century maps drawn by Euro-American settlers, but they prove irrelevant in a shifting landscape. As Hogan notes in her memoir, the map of the 'private landscape' is incomplete, and entry points are 'not always mapped or charted'. ¹⁶ Self-knowledge surpasses human memory: 'Our stories began not just with our grandmothers, our ancestors, but maybe four million years ago in dark matter'. ¹⁷ Human history comprises just one piece of the tapestry of 'our stories', and formational stories reach further into natural history than can be 'charted'. Hogan is conscious that writing the self is also writing place, recognising our embeddedness within the natural world. Bildungsroman here does not create a 'coherent self' that distinguishes itself from previous generations, but an individual that coheres the unmapped connections between human and natural history.

In *Solar Storms*, Angel and her family resist the diversion of rivers, by which the land is physically displaced from its chosen trajectory. Beth's defence of ancestral lands is based on the determination that "the river cannot be moved" (p. 120). Angel's displacement hinders her development, just as the river's artificial diversion reroutes it from its intended course. Angel's return to family counteracts displacement. She likens this to water returning to a lake: 'I was water falling into a lake and these women were that lake [...] travelling backwards in time' (p. 55). Angel describes the experience of returning in terms of the geological cycle of rain falling in a lake and evaporating. Re-routing the river hinders its linear travel, but resistance is possible through its cyclical processes. Bildungsroman here is not about changing course, the rupture that Moretti conveys, but rather a process of reincorporation into landscape and community.

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¹³ Linda Hogan, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), p. 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Moretti's version of Bildungsroman emphasises linear development: the movement from the childhood home to the challenges of urban life and the 'stable identity' it brings. 18 Here, Angel is 'travelling backwards in time' as she hears her grandmothers' stories (p. 55). Formation is an ongoing process that reaches into historical time. As Angel informs us, 'Beginnings were important to my people' (p. 37). The plural 'beginnings' is important to note. Angel's grandmother Agnes tries to tie up Angel's origin story: "Nobody knows where it began, your story" (p. 37). She considers various starting points, including the destruction of natural spaces: "It began around the killing of the wolves. When people were starving" (p. 37). The dual suffering of the starving people and the slaughtered wolves highlights the interwoven stories of people and land. Natural history provides the 'cairns and markers' of human history: it occurs 'around the killing of the wolves'. Agnes remains uncertain; she 'searched for words' (p. 37). An origin story is not easily pieced together. Hogan conveys the idea that beginnings are crucial: 'As in Genesis, the first word shaped what would follow' (p. 37). Angel requires a creation myth, but the entanglement of natural and human history complicates the ability to find 'the first word'. Hogan challenges the primacy of human history: rather than a distinct developmental stage with a beginning and an end, formation occurs at the intersection of multiple beginnings beyond the self.

Angel's development occurs from many 'beginnings' that arise from both human and non-human sources. Anna Tsing and her co-editors argue that 'monsters and ghosts' are necessary for writing the Anthropocene: they write that 'against the conceit of the Individual, monsters highlight symbiosis, the enfolding of bodies within bodies' during evolution and ecological chains. ¹⁹ If 'monsters' are species that result from human entanglement with the biosphere, then 'ghosts' signify memory, both ecological and human. Our entanglement undermines 'the conceit of the Individual', and has repercussions for Bildungsroman, the genre that serves to present the Individual's formation. ²⁰ Angel's formation requires her to deconstruct imaginary barriers that enclose the self. At first, Angel separates her feelings of 'fear' and 'anger' into 'rooms I inhabited' (p. 26). 'Rooms' create an illusory separation between human life and the environment. The illusion of the coherent self creates false barriers between internal and external worlds.

Hogan affirms the idea that our recognition of entanglement may at first be monstrous. Angel breaks a mirror, as she hits the reflection of her scarred face: 'I saw myself in the mirror [...] hit the face of myself' (p. 52). She breaks the coherent self of her mirror-image into 'cut, broken reflections of my face' (p. 53). The breaking of barriers reveals the self is comprised of disparate elements, 'broken' pieces brought together. The illusion of the Individual is shattered; the 'rooms' fail to cohere

¹⁸ Moretti, p. 8.

¹⁹ Anna Tsing and others, *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), p. M3. ²⁰ Ibid., p. 3.

the fragments that comprise the self. Hogan posits entanglement as a way to comprehend the 'broken reflections': Angel 'began to feel that if we had no separate words for inside and out and there were no boundaries between them, no walls, no skin, you would see me' (p. 54). Language creates a separation between the individual and the world it inhabits, the 'separate words' that obscure interwoven ecologies. In the absence of linguistic barriers, Angel considers the self in elemental terms: 'Some days you would see fire; other days water' (p. 54). The self fluctuates with natural processes, from 'fire' to 'water'. Hogan reworks Bildungsroman by collapsing the barriers between the formation of interior and exterior ecologies.

The journey Angel and her grandmothers take to the land of the Beautiful People collapses time. Bush keeps track of the land: "We've just passed God Island and the ribs of that boat. We must be at..."; she breaks off, unable to locate herself (p. 173). As she attempts to find the 'lay of the land', her 'map came apart' in her hands (p. 173). Maps invite us to read the landscape through an anthropocentric lens, one that views the 'lay of the land' as unchangeable. Hogan undercuts this encoded knowledge, instead placing the women in 'the hands of nature' (p. 172). Geoffrey Stacks argues that the novel conveys a 'historically rooted' cartography that can 'resist rather than assist colonization'.²¹ This cartography involves non-human agencies: Angel becomes 'equal to the other animals, hearing as they heard, moving as they moved, seeing as they saw' (p. 172). A non-human sensorial awareness is necessary to exist within the landscape. Without the map, the women are lost, but Dora Rouge notes, "I believe we've always been lost" (p. 177). In her memoir, Hogan writes, 'it is not that we have lost the old ways and intelligences, but that we are lost from them'.²² There are 'no maps or directions' on the journey to rediscover traditional practices.²³ As they lose control over space, the women resist the norms of a society that externalises the self from its environment.

The journey of writing the self is a return to the lost 'old ways'. Jonathan Lear observes the writings of Frank B. Linderman on Plenty Coups, the chief of the Crow nation in the nineteenth century, to explore subjectivity as a way of life ends: Plenty Coups asserts that "when the buffalo went away the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened". Lear argues that Plenty Coups' assertion that "after this nothing happened" reveals an 'ontological vulnerability' caused by the loss of cultural identity. Not only do practices become irrelevant after this cultural collapse, but forging one's own subjectivity is jeopardised: 'the concepts with which I would otherwise have understood myself [...] have gone out of existence'. End was a return to the lost 'old ways'. Jonathan Lear observes the writings of Frank B. Linderman on Plenty Coups, the chief of the Crow nation in the nineteenth century, to explore the property of the concepts of

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²¹ Geoffrey Stacks, 'A Defiant Cartography: Linda Hogan's Solar Storms', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 43.1 (2010), 161-176 (p. 165).

²² The Woman Who Watches Over the World: A Native Memoir, p. 14.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 2.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 50.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

Bildungsroman is the formation of subjectivity, this process is undermined by cultural and environmental collapse.

What Lear points to is not only 'ontological vulnerability', but also ontological dependence, by which a being depends upon other entities for its 'existence or for its identity'.²⁷ This interdependence reflects wider ecologies, in which living organisms are intricately dependent on one another for survival. While Lear indicates that written history provides a means for the 'creation of new forms of Crow subjectivity', for Hogan, it is the defence of natural space that connects one generation to the next.²⁸ The mosquitoes that cluster by the women's tent in *Solar Storms* witness the oppression of Indigenous people: 'The mosquitoes remembered all the letting of blood. They remembered the animals sinking down into the earth' (p. 175). Drawn affectionately to the humans' 'warm breath' (p. 174), they connect the women inescapably to a symbiotic chain. The parasitic relationship between mosquito and human embeds human memory into another species. Human history cannot be extracted from animal histories, embodied by 'the animals sinking down into the earth'. For Hogan, the 'ontological vulnerability' Lear explores is also an ecological vulnerability. The process of formation is entangled with and dependent upon the natural environment.

Angel embodies this entanglement as she develops the ability to dream the location of plants. Just as her ancestors created songs 'of land speaking through its keepers' (p. 176), the land expresses itself through Angel's dreams. An environmental consciousness suspends human agency, as the growth of her abilities happens in sleep: 'A tendril reached through darkness, a first sharp leaf came up from the rich ground of my sleeping' (p. 170). Natural growth is evoked here; the 'first sharp leaf' implies that the land enacts a new beginning. The growth of her ability occurs not through 'a cultivated growing, but a wild one, one that had been there all along, waiting' (p. 170). Development is stalled, 'waiting' for her return. Here, the 'old ways and intelligences' (p. 17) Hogan alludes to are the agents of Bildungsroman. They exist in an earth memory only accessible through the journey's process of re-entanglement with nature.

However, this harmonious interdependence morphs into the 'ontological vulnerability' Lear describes. When they arrive at the land of the Beautiful People, the dam project has devastated the landscape. Two rivers are combined, making the area unnavigable. Nature is no longer peacefully entangled with humans; as Angel notes, 'I'd catch the current and then the canoe would shift, would seem to enter air, turn, then drop' (p. 194). The rerouted river creates a defamiliarized landscape that 'shifts' chaotically. It no longer provides a space for the safe formation of the self. Just as Lear presents the breakdown in meanings as a culture faces erasure, human life is entangled in its ecology

²⁷ Tuomas E. Tahko and E. Jonathan Lowe, 'Ontological Dependence', in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta (2020), https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/dependence-ontological/, accessed 22.01.21.

²⁸ Lear, p. 52.

and dependent on its stability. Ecological devastation causes a breakdown in the way of life of the Beautiful People: 'The destruction and ruin that had fallen over the land fell over the people, too' (p. 226). Angel calls this a 'murder of the soul' (p. 226): the actions of the hydroelectric company in its destruction of natural space cannot be separated from its human inhabitants. To Angel, it is a violence as direct as 'murder', as the 'soul' is intertwined with this ecology and derives its meanings from place.

The younger generation are most vulnerable to this crisis. The dam building creates social problems such as child parenthood: 'Some of the children had children of their own, infants who were left untouched, untended by their child-parents' (p. 226). The link between one generation and the next is interrupted. As they lose a physical connection with the previous generations, the infants 'left untouched, untended' are displaced; they lose a rootedness in place. Dora-Rouge, Angel's great-grandmother, witnesses this displacement and asks, "How do conquered people get back their lives?" (p. 226). A 'conquered people' are represented by the child parents uprooted from Indigenous lands. Their resettlement interrupts the transmission of knowledge between generations, and disrupts the Bildung process.

However, Dora-Rouge's question points to the possibility for the people to 'get back their lives'. Bildung is the reversal of displacement. The Beautiful People's activism prevents the dam project's completion, but only after the land suffers significant species loss and river diversion. Angel hopes for the land's recovery: 'We had to believe, true or not, that our belated victory was the end of something. That one fracture was healed, one crack mended, one piece back in place' (p. 344). The fragmented landscape is healed by putting its pieces 'back in place', by honouring the web of interdependence engrained in its ecology. Their activism creates the chance for a rebirth like Lear describes: 'We'd thrown an anchor into the future and followed the rope to the end of it, to where we would dream new dreams, new medicines, and one day, once again, remember the sacredness of every living thing' (p. 344). Hogan presents the process of formation in the context of deformation. Traditional practices can be made anew, so that 'new dreams' and 'new medicines' can be found. However, across generations, the self is linked to 'every living thing'.

Bildungsroman occurs during a transition: the destruction of ancestral lands. Selinger argues that the social realities of twentieth century Native American life reduce the relevance of traditional practices in Bildungsroman. However, Hogan presents that Indigenous memory is crucial to the restoration of natural spaces. By portraying Angel's intricate entanglement with the surrounding ecology, Hogan reaffirms the relevance of Native American experiences of land loss and forced removal. In doing so, she challenges Feder's view that Bildungsroman reasserts the separation between the human and non-human. Human development is entangled with landscape and ecology. The question Hogan raises is how formation can happen in the context of deformation, when the environment in which Angel develops is being destroyed.

Lear's idea of 'ontological vulnerability' helps us consider this question. Like Selinger, Lear questions how a way of life is reformed following cultural collapse. In *Solar Storms*, if the process of formation is to counter neo-colonialist incursions onto Indigenous land and cultures, it must affirm a rootedness in place. Traditional practices are reformed to face the challenges of the younger generation. More crucial, however, is the understanding that destruction of Indigenous lands, such as the dam project, are part of a cyclical history of displacement. *Solar Storms* revives generational links; it threads together human and natural histories. The end of Bildungsroman is a consciousness which recognises entanglement with the environment.

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