

## “BOUNDARIES ARE ALL LIES”: THE FLUIDITY OF BOUNDARIES IN LINDA HOGAN’S THE BOOK OF MEDICINES

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### ABSTRACT

Linda Hogan’s *The Book of Medicines* contains poems which can heal our injured or broken relationships with the world around us. This article approaches these poems in the light of Hogan’s conception of boundaries as being fluid because they are artificial and cannot separate creatures from establishing direct communicative links with the world around them. It explores four interrelated issues that reflect the interconnectedness obtaining between everything and all creatures in the universe: Hogan’s view of maps and cartography, the barriers that buildings and walls create between human beings and the world, her notion of crossing boundaries and liquefying the obstructions that create misunderstanding and lack of communication between creatures, and her vision of ruptures as spaces which heal and unite.

**KEYWORDS:** Book of Medicines, Boundaries, Cartography, Confluence, Convergence, Cracks, Crossing, Healing, Interconnectedness, Linda Hogan, Naming, Regeneration, Ruptures

### INTRODUCTION

Linda Hogan (1947-) is a multi-talented Indian American author who writes poetry, short stories, and novels. Her Chickasaw indigenous origins inspire her poetic worldview and grant her poems an insight that sees through the barriers that western civilization establishes between the self, whether individual or collective, and the world. This article explores how Hogan’s poems in *The Book of Medicines* (1993) portray a fluid view of boundaries and celebrate gaps, ruptures, and cracks. It starts with discussing her perspective on the artificiality of cartography and of its naming and limiting practices. The second section tackles Hogan’s view of walls and the barriers they create. Next, the article discusses Hogan’s concept of crossing and how it embodies an act of bridging and a convergence of boundaries. The final main section of this article deals with Hogan’s treatment of locations of cracks and ruptures as spaces which represent the confluence and union of the elements of the world and heal the entities that occupy them.

#### **Naming, Cartography, and Artificiality**

Linda Hogan’s view of boundaries is different from those of scientists, geographers and cartographers. In “Map,” she criticizes “what I know from science” because the lines that set boundaries are arbitrary. These “lines” are delineated by humans in order to distinguish themselves as separate from the rest of creatures. Hogan uses the naming power as described in the Book of Genesis as a basis for exposing humans’ colonial domination of the earth: they contain flora, fauna, and aquatic life within the names that exclude them and confine them within “the map of the forsaken world,” “as if words would make it something/ they could hold in gloved hands” (*The Book of Medicines* 37). Here “names carry the power of language to objectify and identify, rendering everything natural as useful” (Stacks 132). The named entities are deprived of the agency and power which the name-givers appropriate. In contrast with such scientific cartography, Hogan presents an alternative view of maps: “This is what I know from blood:/ the first language is not our own./ There are names each thing has for itself,/ and beneath us the other order already moves./ It is burning/ It is dreaming/ It is waking up” (37-

38). This quotation shows how humans have colonized the language that is not a human property. They have silenced and occupied the “names each thing has for itself.” The title of the poem calls our attention to how Hogan “interrogate[s] mapmaking as a colonial enterprise, exposing the wholesale theft of land that began in the Americas in the fifteenth century and that continues today” (Johnson 106). Although colonial and postcolonial approaches lie in the background of this article, my main concern here is with how Hogan sees through the artificiality of mapmaking and consequently of boundaries in general.

In an interview with Summer Harrison, Hogan refers to the importance of maps as organizing elements, but she asserts that “maps are partly imaginary, and the lines are imaginary. We have lines drawn that are not real. We cross over this imaginary line and we’re in a new place. . . . Maps are not the territory at all” (Hogan, “Sea Level” 172-73). The problem with maps and boundaries in general is that they are superimposed upon reality and are taken to be real. That is why Hogan celebrates the notion of crossings in her poetry in general, and in *The Book of Medicines* in particular, in order to emphasize “that we are not a separate creation” (Gould 29). The “murky, discordant, subversive, and enduring” “open frontiers” that Hogan portrays (Blend 70) serve to expose the artificiality of human-centered cartographic knowledge. They break the barriers that set humans away from one another and separate human beings from other creatures. The closure of “Map”, cited above, has a prophetic dimension: it foretells the “waking up” of “the other order” that lies “beneath us”; this “other order” will reshape our own order with reference to the power of naming and mapping, restoring the linguistic and cartographic agency of the silenced other.

The same attitude is adopted in “Naming the Animals” where “the fierce edge of the forest” serves as a frontier that occupies a midway between the forest and the “savage country/ of law and order” (*The Book of Medicines* 40). Criticizing “the Biblical Adam’s presumptuous naming of the animals” (Blaeser 564), the speaker tackles man’s colonial policy of naming the “wolf, bear, other/ as if they had not been there/ before his words, had not/ had other tongues and powers/ or sung themselves into life/ before him” (*The Book of Medicines* 40). The human other is animalized or bestialized and exiled into the domain of the other. However, the speaker turns this othering into a positive and creative power by aligning herself with the animals. She adopts the perspective of the pig in order to show how “law and order” create a savage country that cannot be lived in. Living on the edge represents a form of resistance and a wish for returning to a precolonial time and place where this speaker can unite with a native worldview that does not exclude anyone or anything. This attitude provides her with a regenerative vision where “my stolen powers/ hold out their hands/ and sing me through” (*The Book of Medicines* 41).

### **Buildings as Barriers**

Linda Hogan has a negative view of the barriers that human beings establish in order to enclose and imprison themselves behind them. In “Shelter,” she regards walls as something which obstructs the promising vastness of the world: “Tonight the walls are only thin, dead trees/ of a felled world that stands again/ between this body and the stars” (*The Book of Medicines* 35). Associating these walls with the “dead trees,” which expose those human beings or powers that debilitate the environment and degrade the world, implies that mural constructions limit the possibilities of life. Also, the rising of the “felled world” does not suggest rebirth or renewal; rather, it stands for the obstacles that disturb the communication channels between the body of the speaker and the stars.

In an interview with Bo Schöler, Hogan says that she wants “to live out in the middle of nowhere, and just take care of whatever needs to be taken care of, to live and sit around and stare at the hills, and explore the land and the stars” (Hogan, “A Heart Made out of Crickets” 116). This quotation corroborates our argument here with reference to Hogan’s

preference for being “nowhere” or living in-between to living within walls and buildings. Also, the stars are part of the sky which is the abode of “the Great Wolf” that represents, in Native American astronomy, “the mother of all women” (*The Book of Medicines* 42). In “Chambered Nautilus”, the earth itself is “a turtle/ swimming between stars” (61), with the turtle symbolizing “generative power” (Montgomery 95) and “the Chickasaw people who have carried their homes with them, each body a shelter, a shell, a home” (Wilson 430). In “Great Measures,” stars have “magnetic longings” that quicken the hatching of eggs and urge birds to become “wilder” so that they can “go to any lengths” and “follow” the stars (*The Book of Medicines* 81). All these symbols make us view Hogan’s desire for building direct links between her body, in the poem “Shelter,” and the sky and stars as a quest for direct communication with nature, Native American worldview, and woman as a creative and regenerative symbol because “the feminine body is intimately interconnected with the natural world” (Cagle 101). That is why she regards the house where the speaker lives with her daughter, in the third stanza of “Shelter,” as unsafe.

In “Gate,” Hogan exposes the attitude of the townspeople who stick themselves off the vast world of nature behind a gate. They even project their self-imposed solitary and secluded existence upon their mental image of God: “They believe the gods live far/ beyond a latched gate of night/... They think heaven is so far away,/ beyond the farthest towns,/ not beneath the mortal sky,/... and not where children are born,/ through body’s gate of mystery,/ red and crying” (*The Book of Medicines* 77-78). There are two kinds of gates here: the gate which imprisons those who live behind it and blocks mystery, spirituality and human potentials, and the one which embodies mystery and represents a bridge between two worlds or rather, two phases of existence. The former is both physical and mental, with those townspeople being “trapped within their limited worldviews” (Riggs 190). The speaker’s fascination with the second gate drives Hogan to close the poem with a stanza that substantiates a convergence of the two components of our planet: “And farther out,/ there’s a vast blue sea/ with great turning fish/ and holy rains/ dissolving, coming together with land” (78). This poetic closure highlights one of Hogan’s main concerns in *The Book of Medicines*, i.e., her fascination with dissolving and convergence: the act of creation and renewal represented in the human body or the “gate of mystery” is strengthened by the dissolution and the reunion of the “vast blue sea,” which represents the opposite of the gate of the townspeople, and the “land.”

Hogan holds a contrast, in “The Bricks,” between “clay” and “mud” on the one hand and “walls of bricks” on the other. Mud and clay stand for the beginning of life and the interconnectedness that allies and joins things and creatures together in Native American philosophy and mythology: “In those days/ we were marvelous children of clay/ rocking in the mud mother’s lap” (*The Book of Medicines* 67). At these times, the Natives included within the plural pronoun “we” did not know the walls that besiege and contain: “We did not yet/ live inside walls of bricks,/ we did not know destruction would bloom” (68). While “clay” is a symbol of generation and creation, “walls” symbolize degeneration and devastation because humans deplete, and force life out of, this clay by turning it into bricks in order to build the walls that seal them off the world.

### Crossing the Boundaries

In “The History of Red,” Linda Hogan has a dynamic conception of space whose fire is “stolen/ from root, hoof, fallen fruit” (*The Book of Medicines* 11). The stanza immediately following these lines builds bridges between “the human house” and “the cave of skin/ that remembers bison” (*The Book of Medicines* 11). In Hogan’s poetry, “caves are places of great spiritual significance” (Dreese 11), and skin is “a liminal zone” (Alaimo 61). Through the act of “swimming inside” this cave, with “the human house” serving as a temporary destination or residence at night, Hogan creates a private space that uses some sort of a Promethean fire stolen, not from Olympian gods, but from other species, namely fauna and flora, to widen her human environment and bring about a “simultaneity of different worlds” (McAdams, “We” 13), thus

condemning “the rupture between humankind and the rest of creation” (McAdams, “Ways” 228). The remembrance of the “bison” strengthens the rooty, hoofed, and fruity dimensions of the fire that runs through the blood of the speaker and creates an aquatic metaphor that merges opposite poles and evokes “a connection between the Self and the world” (Mittlefehldt 138), expressing a nostalgia for “a time when humans had not assumed dominion over the earth” (Dreese 13).

The history of human domination on the earth acts, in “Mountain Lion,” as a barrier that separates the speaker from the mountain lion. This domination is represented in “the road/ ghosts travel/when they cannot rest/ in the land of the terrible other” and in the “Red spirits of hunters” (*The Book of Medicines* 27). Through moving “back and forth between the human and animal perspectives” (Smith 130), the speaker manages to explore the culture of fear and how man’s “power lived/ in a dream of my leaving” (*The Book of Medicines* 27). However, this leaving cannot be taken as a desire on the part of the mountain lion for living away from the “other;” rather, it is a condemnation of this other’s dominion, because Hogan concludes the poem with the speaker’s similar attitude that sheds light on the thematic objective of the poem: “It was the same way/ I have looked so many times at others/ in clear light/ before lowering my eyes/ and turning away/ from what lives inside those/ who have found/ two worlds cannot live/ inside a single vision” (27). Both the speaker and the mountain lion believe in the possibility of “two worlds” living and converging “inside a single vision.” This possibility shows Hogan’s view of the artificiality of boundaries and the narrowing scope of human worldview.

The convergence of boundaries is developed in “Crossings” “where one ocean dissolves inside the other/ in a black and holy love” and “sand falls down the hourglass/ into another time” (*The Book of Medicines* 28). The boundaries of both time and place are not fixed, as they are interconnected through the concept of crossings that negates any binary opposition and brings the whole being on earth into a unified whole. Again, Hogan reflects on the artificial borders that humans create in order to set themselves in a distinguished position on earth. She “creates a vision of the world in which there is a fabric, a dependent relation between things” (Averbach 71). Playing on theories of evolution, she expresses a “longing” for “the terrain of crossed beginnings/ when whales lived on land/ and we stepped out of water/ to enter our lives in air” (*The Book of Medicines* 28). However, whales are already there on land before the appearance of man on land. Also, the “fetal whale” which has “a human face” does not “want to live/ in air” and turns its “fingers . . . into fin” because it is “a member of the clan of crossings” (28). This “demonstrates the transformative quality of American Indian cultures” which call people to adapt “to their surroundings in order to survive” (Dreese 13). The whale once lived on land and now develops fins in order to live in water and enjoy belonging to “the clan of crossings,” and man once lived in water which is an “image for physical and psychological healing” (Dreese 7) in Hogan’s poetry and now lives on land. Through this image of water and the whale’s going back to the ocean, Hogan supports the breaking of boundaries and reveals her wish to cross her human terrain in order to get healed through water.

When boundaries have clear-cut demarcations, as in the fishermen’s view of themselves as being detached from the natural world in “Harvesters of Night and Water,” the result is a world full of violence, misunderstanding, and lack of communication. The voice in the poem wants to tell these fishermen “that this life collects coins/ like they do/ and builds walls on the floor of the sea” (*The Book of Medicines* 23). The word “walls” is used here in a positive sense, perhaps because of its association with water and the sea which have constructive, healing, and regenerative attributes in Hogan’s poetry, in order to emphasize that sea creatures lead a life parallel to our own. This view is strengthened later on in the poem through another comparison of the octopus with a human being: “And while water breathes up and back/ it finds its way/ into the ink black skin of water,/ crossing other currents, floating/ like a man’s dream of falling/ into world he will never know” (23). The image of “the skin of water” or “water’s skin” recurs in this poem (23, 24) and in other poems in *The Book of Medicines* such as “Travelers” (46), “Drum” (69), and “Two” (75). This sort of skin and skin in general in *The*

*Book of Medicines* and elsewhere in Hogan’s poetry is portrayed as a border zone that facilitates movement and communication between creatures and things. Describing this skin as black refers us back to “The History of Red” where “black earth” actualizes the “dreams of darkest creation” (*The Book of Medicines* 9) and forward to “Crossings” where the “black and holy love” (28) achieves an intimate confluence of oceans, and “Other, Sister, Twin” where the dancer who “wrapped night’s dark skin around her shoulders” is metamorphosed into “the hand of the river” (83). In these contexts, darkness, water, and skin symbolize healing, regeneration and creativity.

### Cracks and Ruptures as Confluence

The images of breaking and cracks convey creative, regenerative, and adaptive survival mechanisms in Hogan’s poetry. In “Travelers,” for instance, the breaking of ice symbolizes the salvation and liberation of the frozen geese the speaker tries to save. After these geese restore their life, “sky took them in/ beyond the curved edge of horizon/ where one beautiful world/ moved above another/ skimming the flat white lake,/ the wounded ice/ left behind to heal itself” (*The Book of Medicines* 47). In this context, being on or beyond the edge, as in “Naming the Animals” which is discussed elsewhere in this article, represents freedom from the restricting containment within boundaries. Also, the ice which breaks or is broken in order to allow the liberation of the geese has its own agency that enables it “to heal itself.” Breaking implies the possibility of healing and creating natural order out of debilitation.

In “Glass,” the fragmentation which is experienced by the speaker through her reflections in “mirrors” in the first stanza and which can be seen as a loss or at least a refraction of identity is supported by the colonial displacement of the speaker’s indigenous religion and replacing it with that of the colonizer. This speaker’s initial response views this forced conversion as acquiring “the color of holes/ in danger of breaking” (*The Book of Medicines* 65). This response goes in harmony with the mirror fragmentation of her many images. However, she comes to see the mirror as “a circle/ of revelations” that makes her realize her own identity like the raven who “saw himself/ black and shining” (65) after seeing his own image in water. That is why she looks anew at this fragmentation in the last stanza of the poem. Through water, Hogan creates a form of collective identity that does not see any demarcations that separate the self from the world: “This life,/ it’s like living in water,/ in the cracks between thawing ice/ that has begun to live again” (65-66). These cracks merge two boundaries and ‘breaking’ turns out to be a “simple power” (66).

In “Breaking,” it is water which grows in the gap that has come to divide the once single land. “Water grew between two lands/ that once were one./ That was the first breaking,/ and the stories in each grain of sand,/ older than we are,/ come apart” (*The Book of Medicines* 30). When water occupies this gap which appears to be created by the acts of naming and of colonial demarcations referred to in the first section of this article, it turns the gap into a rupture that unites rather than fractures. Water uses the dismemberment represented in the cut legs, fingers and jawbones to revoke the effects of the naming practice that is established in the first stanza of “Naming the Animals” (40) as a power that leads to man’s dominion over the earth. This revocation creates a form of being that is devoid of the debilitation which this naming has brought about: “How does water do it,/ strip a world to its bones,/ how does it dance that way/ without feet,/ sing without a voice,/ caress with no hands/ and follow the moon/ without a single eye?” (30). The symbolic stripping of the “world to its bones” rids it of what has been culturally and cartographically superimposed upon it. This recalls the speaker who finds “no way back to the forest” that can fill the gap separating her from the forest, in “Tracking,” except by turning herself into “a spring of clear water,/ to fill myself/ and make a new way/ through the world” (*The Book of Medicines* 49). It also reminds us of “the fierce edge of forest,” in “Naming the Animals,” where the speaker who unites with the pig lives in order to be away from the “savage country/ of law and order” (*The Book of Medicines* 40).

The moon which the water filling the gap between the two lands follows in “Breaking” is described in “Partings” as being earth in her early beginnings and as having been subjected to a forced separation from land: “Torn from her far beginnings,/ the moon was once earth,/ a daughter whose leaving broke land to pieces” (*The Book of Medicines* 71). Repeating the act of breaking in the form of the verb “broke,” in “Partings,” also refers us back to the two lands which were once one. In addition, following the moon on the part of water conveys a desire for healing the gaps in the land, as in “Breaking,” or earth, as in “Partings,” through establishing communion with the “daughter.” Hogan views the outcome of tearing the moon from earth as “the scar of rupture” (71). However, ruptures, cracks, and gaps in Hogan’s poetry have positive and healing characteristics, as we have seen in our discussion of “The History of Red,” “Breaking,” and “Glass” earlier in this article. This “scar of rupture” gives birth to, or is represented in, “this ocean of ancient rain/ that still rises/ and falls with the moon’s turning dance/ around her mother” (71). Moreover, the earth asks the moon, later on in “Partings,” to “return all lies to their broken source” and to “trust in the strange science of healing” because “emptiness is the full/ dance between us/ and let it grow” (71). This “emptiness,” which is the equivalent, in Hogan’s poems, to ruptures, cracks, gaps, and holes, achieves some sort of rhythmic harmony in the universe. Then the speaker in “Partings” cites some examples that prove how ruptures and emptiness stand for creation and renewal. She devotes a stanza to the Biblical history of Moses in order to show that the road through which Moses divided the waters of the sea was “a road of deliverance” (71). Also, the cutting that the knife of the midwife makes in the body of the birthing mother “made two lives/ where there was only one” because this midwife “had mastered the way/ of beautiful partings” (71). Hence, the “partings” of the title do not indicate separation, departure, or destruction; rather, they embody new life, creativity, and union through “the full and endless dance of space” (72).

In “Tear,” Hogan uses tearing or dislocating her ancestors away from their lands on the Trail of Tears as a tribal reunion, with the speaker acting as “the tear between” her ancestors and her children: “They walk inside me. This blood/ is a map of the road between us./ I am why they survived./ The world behind them did not close./ The world before them is still open./ All around me are my ancestors,/ my unborn children./ I am the tear between them/ and both sides live” (*The Book of Medicines* 60). Through the image of blood, which is as creative and healing as that of water in her poetry, Hogan uses the body as a meeting place where both ancestors and grandchildren live, and where ancestors are reunited with their stolen lands. Also, “the road between us” joins the past that “did not close” and the future that “is still open.” Thus, the tear of the title, whether it represents torn clothes, the dislocation and expatriation of Native Americans, or the tears they shed on the Trail of Tears, comes to be seen, through rupture, blood, and water imagery, as a tool of resistance and rehabilitation because it is a tear that lies between the speaker and her ancestors, and what lies between two separated entities unites them, as we have seen in our discussion of the poem “Breaking” earlier in this article.

## CONCLUSIONS

Linda Hogan has a distinctive philosophy of space and the relations that exist between those who occupy spaces. This philosophy relies on restoring the “other order” that the present hegemonic order of the universe hides. She thinks that boundaries are naturally fluid. Their imposed demarcations cannot stand for real borders because of their artificial nature that runs counter to the interconnectedness of all elements representing life in the world. She does not acknowledge the legitimacy of cartography because the lines it draws suggest the speciesism, colonialism, and arbitrary containment of the vastness of the world that the act of naming implicit in mapmaking suggests. In line with this view of maps, Hogan regards buildings and walls as barriers that separate creatures, especially human beings, from the rest of the universe: from water, green life, fauna, stars, the moon, etc. Also, gates can be used by some people as a self-imposed prison which limits their worldview and prevents them from recognizing their own spirituality and that of others, whether these others are human or

nonhuman. Hogan sees the bricks with which walls are built as killers of the spirit of clay from which human beings are created. Instead of the secluding enclosures of houses and walls, she adopts the concept and process of crossing as a strategy that bridges the gaps among humans, other creatures, and the universe at large. She believes in the possibility of a multiplicity of worlds inhabiting the same space, and there is no need for isolation, hierarchization, or categorization because establishing boundaries leads to lack of communication, violence, and humans’ deprivation of many possibilities that can enrich their life and create harmony between them and the world. Also, ruptures which are represented in cracks, gaps, holes, breakages, holes, and emptiness, act as creative, regenerative, healing, and resistant spaces that unite divergent poles and merge boundaries. These spaces are mostly occupied by liquids such as water and blood that dissolve and heal broken ties between those who lie on their borders

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