

HUNTING HISTORY AND MYTH IN LINDA HOGAN'S *POWER* AND WILLIAM FAULKNER'S «THE BEAR»

Laura Castor

As a Chickasaw poet, novelist, and essayist who began publishing in the early 1980s, Linda Hogan has developed her writing in an era in which the discourse of ecology and environmental advocacy has been familiar to many of her American readers. Awareness of a global ecological crisis has led many non-Indians to look to the narratives of contemporary indigenous peoples for answers to the problems created by the dominant Euramerican view of the land. But as we read Linda Hogan's works we discover something more complicated. In her 1998 novel, *Power*¹, Hogan suggests that there are many shades of meaning in the legacy of European conquest of the American landscape. Her environmental concerns are some of the same ones that have engaged mainstream writers since the nineteenth century, but the ways she deals with them are different. This novel has a number of striking parallels with William Faulkner's 1942 «The Bear»². As such, an examination of Hogan's *Power* together with Faulkner's story can enable us to consider issues raised by Faulkner in a new light, in particular the relationships between the degradation of the land, the survival of Native Americans, and the resilience of their world views.

Both «The Bear» and *Power* are tales of initiation into the adult world. In both stories, this process is symbolically linked to the hunt for an endangered animal in the southeastern United States. Protagonists in both stories are also influenced by an Indian mentor who lives alone, between Indian and white cultures. In Faulkner's story, Ike McCaslin takes part in a yearly hunting expedition for Old Ben, a bear believed to be the last of its kind in the Mississippi woods. The narrative is also about Ike's coming to know both the woods and himself through the help of an old Chickasaw who is symbolically named Sam Fathers. At the

end of the story, the bear has died, the woods have been leased to a lumber company, and the man whose knife has killed Old Ben goes insane. In Hogan's novel, the sixteen-year-old female narrator, Omishto belongs to the fictional Taiga tribe. In the beginning she lives with her Christian mother in town, goes to school and church like most of her white peers. But she also visits an older woman whom she calls Aunt Ama, in the woods. Everything changes for her when she witnesses Ama killing an endangered Florida panther. Ama is arrested and put on trial twice, first by whites in an American court, and then by the Taiga elders. Finally, she is convicted and banished by the tribe, and Omishto goes to live with the old people in the woods.

Both Faulkner and Hogan lament the encroachment of civilization on the natural world, but the sense of hope each writer has for the future is very different. In Faulkner's narrative, the death of Sam Fathers is symbolically linked to the death of the bear and the wilderness. In Hogan's story, the banishment of Ama Eaton plays a crucial role in the ability of the protagonist, Omishto, to act decisively and effectively. Paradoxically, it suggests hope for the survival of both the Taiga people and the Florida panther. In this paper I will explore two central issues: First, how does Faulkner's characterization of the bear and Sam Fathers compare with Hogan's portrayal of the panther and Ama Eaton? Specifically, how do these portrayals reflect different ways of understanding the interdependence between humans and the natural world? Second, in what ways did changing historical contexts in the first half of the twentieth century shape Faulkner's views of the environment, and how have these contexts changed for Hogan, and for us as readers of both texts after the 1990s?

In Faulkner's story, the yearly ritual of the hunt for Old Ben, the last surviving bear of his kind in Mississippi, has been widely discussed by critics as symbolic of Euramerican ambivalence toward the natural world. The bear is a creature to be feared, hunted, and conquered, but at the same time it is a source of almost mythical power for Ike McCaslin. It is «indomitable and invincible» (p.1366), and «ran in his knowledge before he ever saw it » (p. 1365). Sam Fathers has an intuitive understanding of this sense of power, and he teaches Ike to learn how to experience it when alone in the woods. For example, «He entered his

novitiate to the true wilderness with Sam beside him as he had begun his apprenticeship in miniature to manhood after the rabbits and such with Sam beside him» (p. 1367). Later, Ike's initiation is made complete only after he takes Sam's advice and symbolically chooses to leave behind the symbols of Euramerican historical progress: his gun, his watch and the compass. But at the same time, Old Ben's supposed «furious immortality» (p. 1366) is shown to be an illusion when he is finally killed and the ritual of the yearly hunt is broken: «It fell just once...It didn't collapse, crumble. It fell all of a piece, as a tree falls» (p. 1366). Faulkner sees the end of the bear as a devastatingly final one.

To Faulkner, the economic conquest of the southern landscape was inextricably linked, not only to the conquest of blacks and women through the legacy of slavery, but also to the conquest of Indian cultures as represented by Sam Fathers. Sam's fate as a vanishing Indian is symbolically connected to the identity of the bear in this story. Characterized as the son of a Negro slave and a Chickasaw chief (p. 1373), he is similar to Old Ben in that he is solitary, has no children, no people, none of his blood (p. 1379), and consequently has no blood kin who will inherit his cultural knowledge of the woods. Soon after Old Ben dies, Sam dies in what seems to be an inevitable extension of the bear's demise. His burial together with a box containing the bear's mutilated paw reinforces the clear separation Faulkner sees between the timeless forces of nature, tradition, and myth on the one hand, and the inevitably violent forces of history and white culture on the other. This reflects a belief that was common among Americans at the turn of the twentieth century, that Indian cultures would die, whereas individual Indians would either die or assimilate to white ways. The photographs of solitary, proud Indians taken by Edward Curtis stand as romanticized, yet psychologically powerful examples of the ambivalent attitude held by mainstream whites. They wanted to preserve what they perceived as powerful remnants of disappearing traditions, but were reluctant to see themselves as responsible for the loss of these cultures.

The narrator in «The Bear» didn't anticipate that in the later twentieth century, the wilderness habitats in Mississippi that he believed was inevitably «doomed» to historical extinction would begin to return. According to literary critic Wiley C. Prewitt, Faulkner's hunting stories

were written during a time of tremendous environmental upheaval in Mississippi and the South.³ Beginning in the 1880s, timber speculators had been clearing land for as little as a dollar an acre. As a result, the habitats of both large and small game had been steadily shrinking. When the narrator introduces Old Ben as «solitary, indomitable, alone,» and an «anachronism...and invincible out of an old dead time»(Faulkner p. 1366), he reflects an historical development that Aldo Leopold had documented in a 1928 study. Leopold, an important early advocate of environmental ethics and a pioneer of modern wildlife biology, had conducted a survey of game in Mississippi in which he found only a few thousand surviving deer and turkeys. The numbers of large game were so small that he didn't even bother to mention them in his study. This is ironic, considering that the state of Mississippi was the site of Theodore Roosevelt's famous bear exploits, the same adventures that inspired the creation of the teddy bear toy animal (Prewitt p. 203). However, the area of land that Faulkner's narrator characterizes as «that doomed wilderness whose edges were being constantly and punily gnawed at by men with plows and axes» (Faulkner p. 1365), was already being revitalized as early as the late 1940s, when the U.S. Forest Service planted over 600,000 acres of trees in the state (Prewitt p. 214). Faulkner's description of the landscape therefore must be understood not only a general critique of Euramerican attitudes, but also a reflection of a changing landscape at a moment in American history.

Nor could the narrator in «The Bear» have anticipated the comeback that most indigenous tribes would make from the 1970s on, and the ways in which their increased visibility in American society would challenge the image of the vanishing Indian. Beginning in 1934, the Indian Reorganization Act initiated by Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier had already marked a change in official United States Indian policy. The goal of the act was to restore power and land to Native peoples that had been lost after the 1887 Dawes Act. The goal of this act had been to make private landowners of Indians through a process of dividing communally held territory into separate 160-acre tracts. In the end, the results were disastrous for Indians, and by the early 1930s, they had lost 60 percent of all their lands held at the time the Act had been implemented in 1887.⁴ Although the 1930s reformers meant

well, the administrative changes they made led to a series of new problems. For example, the reformers defined the tribe as a political unit, but historically, political decisions had taken place at the level of the clan, the band, or the village, not the tribe. Tribal boundaries designated a broader similarity in language and cultural practices.⁵ One consequence was that a growing rift developed between the tribal councils which the U.S. government recognized as representing Indian interests, and the traditional political structures which continued to function in various ways, sometimes indirectly. Many tribal council leaders have assimilated to white cultural ways, and have adopted mainstream instrumental attitudes toward the environment. In practice, this means that political conflicts are sometimes defined in terms of the rights of Indians versus environmental advocates.

Although the ultimate goals of the tribal council leaders and the traditionalists are not necessarily opposed -- both favor self-determination and cultural survival -- their methods are often at odds with each other. A good example of such a clash is the 1983 case that inspired Hogan to write the novel. In *Florida* versus *James Billy* an influential Seminole tribal council leader killed an endangered Florida panther. Killing a panther is a federal offence unless it occurs on Indian territory and can be justified for traditional religious reasons. But Billy, who had elsewhere gained national media attention for his role in bringing the first high-stakes bingo casino to an Indian reservation,⁶ did not kill the panther as part of a traditional ritual. In an interview Hogan says that he had been poaching with some friends the night of the incident. When he saw the panther's eyes shine, he shot it. Later he asked friends to take trophy photos of him and the panther, then cooked and ate it. During the trial that followed his arrest, the elders were called in to testify. Hogan notes that their questions and comments were evasive. Although they disagreed with his action, they were not willing to question him directly because as a leader of the tribal council, he had a power they did not wish to challenge in front of the white court.⁷ In effect, what may have appeared like a straightforward conflict between Indians and environmentalists in the court was actually more complex. Hogan explores these issues in *Power*, although in her fictional version of the court case, the issue is more clearly about religious freedom, and the

hunter is a woman rather than a man. These changes allow her to examine in more depth the cultural misunderstandings in the original case and some of the historical developments that led to it. «Indianness» cannot be automatically equated with respect for the natural world. But it is equally problematic to define the rights of Indian peoples as opposed to the responsibilities of environmentalists.

Just as the bear has meaning both in myth and history in Faulkner's story, so the panther has various meanings in *Power*. In the Seminole mythology in which Hogan bases her story, the panther is a sacred animal. Symbolically, she sets the number of surviving members of the tribe she invents, the Taiga, at about thirty. This is exactly the same as the number of panthers believed to be left. In Hogan's version, the myth of panther woman reinforces this relationship between the survival of the panthers and humans. Omishto narrates this story:

...long after the beginning of the Taiga people... and the people had broken the harmony and balance of this world we now live in. One day a storm blew with so much strength that it left an opening between the worlds. Panther Woman saw the opening, and followed the panther into that other world. She went through that opening and entered it, and no one enters willingly. What she saw there was rivers on fire, animals dying of sickness, and foreign vines. The world, she saw, was dying. The unfortunate thing was that the door blew closed behind her and she had to find a way to open it again.

«You have to kill one of us,» the panther, who was dying, told her, «It should be me. I'm not the oldest or the weakest, but I'm the one you know best.»

A sacrifice was called for and if it was done well, all the animals and the panther would come back again and they'd be whole. The people in those days believed that all the hunted, if hunted correctly, would return again. In Taiga, the word for sacrifice mean «to send away,» and the animal returns to the spirit world. (p. 111)

The story of Ama is a reenactment of this myth, a myth whose purpose is, in this larger sense, to help restore ecological balance to the world. It includes a hurricane at the beginning of the novel, the hunt which Omishto witnesses, Ama's killing of the panther, that is, significantly, sick and dying, and two trials which follow her arrest. In the end, she takes on the role of the sacrificed panther when she is banished from the tribe by the Taiga elders. Omishto leaves both school and her Christian mother's house and goes to live with the old people in the woods.

The close connection between Ama and the panther suggests some important parallels with Faulkner's portrayal of Sam Fathers and Old Ben. Like Sam, Ama has no spouse and no children. She lives alone in the woods, apart from both white culture and from the old people of the Taiga tribe. But she is also different from Sam in important ways. Sam is shaped by the legacy of slavery and the Civil War, and he cannot effectively challenge this past. His passivity is expressed, for example, in the clothes he wears: «the battered and faded overalls and the frayed five-cent straw hat which had been the badge of the negro's slavery was now the regalia of his freedom.» (p. 1374) Ama, in contrast, makes her own choices at the same time that she fulfills a larger destiny. Whereas Sam's solitary status is symbolic of a disappearing tribal past, Ama's position signifies a necessary link to the future. Omishto tells the reader that «Ama said the old ways are not enough to get us through this time and she was called to something else. To living halfway between the modern world and the ancient one» (p. 23). Her choice also has implications for the way she dies. Whereas Sam's death seems like a logical extension of the death of Old Ben, the process leading to Ama's banishment is by no means a logical one. In describing the process which results in the final guilty verdict, Hogan addresses some of the many layers of historical meaning. This makes her perspective on indigenous cultures quite different from Faulkner's.

In Hogan's narrative, the white court acquits Ama, whereas the Taiga elders are the ones who find her guilty and condemn her to walk for four years. This paradox makes it worth taking a closer look at the two trials, in particular the terms used to decide Ama's guilt or innocence. In the white court, it is assumed that individuals are responsible for either saving or killing the panthers. This is the same

mode of thinking that underlies Ike's reasoning in Section IV of «The Bear» where he believes he can repudiate his inheritance of the farm as a way of compensating for the crimes of his slave-holding forefathers. In both Hogan's novel and in the actual American legal system it describes, Indian rights are often defined in opposition to environmental protection laws. If the defense can prove that Ama is exempt from these laws, then she can be found innocent. The prosecution wants to know whether or not she is a full-blooded Taiga, and whether or not she was on Indian territory when she shot the panther. They want to know about her religious beliefs, assuming mistakenly that she thinks she will gain power for herself by killing the panther. What all of their questions imply is that if Ama's act can be explained in terms of her "otherness" as an Indian, then she will be granted the privilege of acquittal by the court. As part of the defense, the tribal chairman is brought in to testify on her behalf.⁸ He is a man who, according to Omishto, «brought us cigarettes and Bingo, has written a letter, and now he comes in to speak in defense of Ama. I know him and I think this is good of him» (p. 131). Just as in the historical case the elders kept their questions and comments vague, likewise in this scene the tribal chairman, who doesn't believe in the panther mythology himself, makes evasive remarks. He reflects a mainstream American idea about freedom of religion when he tells the prosecution, «Anyone can believe anything». Yet Omishto notes that he does not say «that the claws were once used for scratching the bodies of people in ceremonies.» (p. 132). When confronted with the white legal system, the chairman perceives that both he and the traditional Taiga have common interests. However, in the end it is neither his letter nor his testimony that frees Ama. Even after she confesses to the crime, she is acquitted because of lack of sufficient evidence. Ironically, what becomes likely only later in the novel, is that the evidence -- namely the body of the panther and the gun -- had been removed by Janie Soto, the oldest and one of the most traditional members of the clan. Hogan therefore suggests the power of indigenous survival includes an element of traditionalism that may remain hidden from the view of whites. It is one of patterns that has always characterized white-Indian political relationships, and in increasingly sophisticated ways since the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act.

The central issue at the first trial is that the white people are not able to acknowledge that Ama has been made the scapegoat for their own cultural attitudes and actions that have threatened the existence of the panthers. Clearing the land for cattle and sugarcane and building is what has destroyed the panther's habitat and endangered its existence (p. 27), not Taiga religious sacrifices. Yet in specific cases where whites killed panthers, Omishto notes that they had not been arrested. «A dozen of the cats have been killed since the highway went in (p. 123). One died when it outgrew the collar biologists used to track its movement, while another died by drowning after a drug was released into its neck» (p. 119). For Hogan, the real conflict is not between the environmentalists and the Indians, but between the forces of «civilization» and those who are designated as «others». These others include both Ama as a Taiga woman and the panthers.

Hogan's indictment of Euramerican progress in the first trial is similar to the ideological tone of Faulkner's «The Bear». But in the second trial, she blurs the moral boundaries. While it is not surprising that the elders are more respectful of Ama than the lawyers at the first trial were, aspects about it are nonetheless troubling. In the end, their guilty verdict might be interpreted in several ways : (1) Ama did not perform the sacrifice correctly. After she killed the panther, according to tradition she should have brought the body to the oldest member of the tribe, Janie Soto. (2) Janie Soto and the other old people perhaps resent Ama. They cannot accept that she has chosen to live by herself in the woods rather than in the community with them. If we accept either of these reasons, we understand Hogan to be criticizing those who try to hold onto tradition for its own sake. In other words, tradition needs to change to reflect historical needs.

However, a third perspective could be that the guilty verdict was a sign of ultimate respect for Ama and for the myth. In banishing her, they enabled her to enact the story even more completely, first as the woman who sacrifices the panther, and then as the instrument of sacrifice on behalf of the tribe. She, unlike the weak, sick panther, was both strong and healthy. Perhaps this difference would have made her sacrifice more appropriate and a more powerful force in restoring balance to the world. Was the act of banishing her therefore the fulfillment of the panther

woman myth, or was it a human mistake? Not all of the old people are certain that the verdict was justified. As one of the important women elders reflects, «I am thinking we threw her away. She was strong. She was important. We threw her away» (p.226). Whatever their motives, Hogan suggests that the Taiga old people didn't fully trust their verdict. At the end of the novel, and also at the end of Faulkner's tale, readers are left with several disturbing questions: Is it possible for a damaged or weakened landscape to recover its original vitality? If so, what difference do individuals make a difference in the process of renewal?

Faulkner's larger view is perhaps expressed in one of the final scenes in the story where Ike returns to Sam's grave and soon afterwards encounters a rattlesnake. Although a number of critics have understood the image as a Christian symbol of evil, there is evidence to suggest that it also relates to Faulkner's belief in the Native American idea of a natural cycle of renewal.⁹ Ike has a mystical sense that Sam is still present in the woods, and he is able to find the grave by remembering the practical methods Sam taught him. He pays attention to the bearings on trees until he comes upon «the round tin box now containing Old Ben's mutilated paw» (Faulkner p. 1451). Ike senses that Sam, and the tobacco and handkerchief that had been buried alongside him were «not vanished but merely translated into myriad life which printed the dark mold of these secret and sunlit places with delicate fairy tracks» (Faulkner p. 1451). The snake which appears almost immediately after this can be understood in the context of Ike's intuitive knowledge that there is no final death, in spite of the forces of history that he sees as inevitable and destructive. It can therefore signify a potent form of survival power rather than pure evil. (Prewitt p. 211): «At last it moved. Not the head. The elevation of the head did not change as it began to glide away from him...an entity walking on two feet and free of all laws of mass and balance» (p. 1452). What I find significant in this passage is that the movement, although it can be explained in terms of anatomy and physiology, has the appearance of occurring apart from conscious action. The snake's movement is slightly uncanny and apparently not the result of guidance from its head. But whether we interpret this scene in the context of Christian or indigenous traditions, it seems that intentional individual action is not part of the picture. Although in Section 4 of «The

Bear,» Ike makes a strong individual statement when he repudiates his inheritance of the farm as a way of protesting the legacy of his white southern heritage, Faulkner's conclusion is that it is not the acts of individuals which restores balance to the natural world. Rather, Faulkner's hope lies in the assumption that all living things share a universal consciousness. This is not a view that acknowledges the effectiveness of intentional, individual acts.¹⁰

In contrast, in Hogan's narrative, human actions do make a difference, and they are part of the larger universal process even if they are flawed. In the final pages of her novel, Omishto decides to go to live with the old people in the woods. She dances, and hears in the trees that someone «sings a song that says the world will go on living.» (p. 235). For Hogan, what ultimately matters is that individuals and human communities exist who maintain a reverence for the living world, and who take that world seriously when they make choices. It matters less that these people may be outnumbered, or that they make mistakes.

Finally, in neither Faulkner nor Hogan is it possible for humans to return to a state of original innocence. This is an important insight for non-Indian readers of Hogan who find that we cannot simply appropriate Indian philosophies and apply them to solve the environmental problems that Euramerican culture has created. But the alternative is not individual despair either.

Notes:

¹ Linda Hogan, *Power*, (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1998).

² William Faulkner, «The Bear,» in Scully Bradley et al., *The American Tradition in Literature*, Third Edition, Volume 2, (New York: Norton, 1967), 1364-1453.

³ Wiley C. Prewitt Jr., «Return of the Big Woods: Hunting and Habitat in Yoknapatawpha,» in Donald M. Kartiganer and Ann J. Abadie, eds., *Faulkner and the Natural World*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), pp. 198-221.

⁴ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, (Boston, Toronto, London: Little, Brown and Co., 1993), pp. 235-238.

⁵ Patricia Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West*, (New York, London: Norton, 1987), p. 206.

⁶ http://www.seminoletribe.com/history/seminoles_today.shtml/ «Seminole Tribe of Florida,» accessed April 2001.

⁷ <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/feature/>, «Endangered Wisdom,» interview by Amazon.com with Linda Hogan accessed February 2001.

⁸ The tribal chairman is modeled after James Billy, the man charged with killing the panther in the 1983 case.

⁹ In this connection, Wiley Prewitt discusses the significance of the snake, the deer and the bear in the Faulkner's story.

¹⁰ Ike saves nobody, not even himself. Authur F. Kinney has argued that in «Delta Autumn» the meaning of Ike's choices and his ability to suffer as an individual, is developed more fully. See Kinney, «Faulkner and the Possibilities for Heroism,» in *Bear, Man, and God: Eight Approaches to William Faulkner's «The Bear»*, Second Edition, (New York: Random House, 1971), pp. 236-237.