Ecomedia: Songs of Healing and Texts of Iatrogenic Harm in Linda Hogan’s The Book of Medicines

Linda Hogan’s A Book of Medicine is concerned with a number of issues, such as the genocide of the Native Americans (as Emily Hegarty points out), the destructive results of men’s actions, women’s ability to create and maintain relationships, the environment, etc. It is also about the media of communication and the healing abilities or harm that can come from these media. In this collection of poems, there are essentially two modes of communication that are explored: song and text. Songs arise from within an entity, while words are spoken from a human-made language and often from a textual source.

Prior to the invention of the printing press or even before the creation of writing, song and voice had a monopoly on the media of communication. Meanings arose from the speaker and communication was created. Meanings and ideas floated into the air and dissipated into the environment. Meanings and ideas were shared even if they couldn’t be recovered after spoken for closer scrutiny or revision. Song and voice came from within the speaker and went out into the world to be shared. With the rise of writing and printing, language started to evolve rules of syntax, grammar, and words that had more specific definitions. In addition, information could be stored, and it didn’t dissipate outwards. Once written, it stayed on the page. In addition, this new language started to assert itself into the environment. It imposed its meanings and rules on living and non-living entities. It encouraged an us-them relationship.

According to David Gilcrest, “We have tended to view the European [language] tradition as hopelessly logocentric, in love with the Word (not the World), hostile to unmediated experience, in short, antithetical to the ecopoetic aesthetic” (22). Linda Hogan’s book, on one level, wants to address this European language tradition that is in love with the word and imposes itself onto nature and creates division and harm between humans and non-humans, whereas the ecopoetic aesthetic, in song in The Book of Medicines, creates a relationship between speaker and the speaker’s surrounding environment of living and non-living entities. Linda Hogan’s The Book of Medicines is a book about how to heal wounds by creating ecomedia relations through song and not by the use of logocentric division.

This paper will slowly evolve towards a definition of what is meant by ecomedia, but first, I would like to ground this paper by defining eco-poetry and eco-poetic aesthetic, as they will be used here. Even though, “[a] precise definition of eco-poetry has not yet been established” (Bryson, “Introduction” 3), a definition can be hinted at. According to Leonard M. Scigaj, eco-poetry is “poetry that persistently stresses human cooperation with nature conceived as dynamic” (5). In order to accomplish this human cooperation, Eco-poets “seem to know that the loss of relationship with the natural world is irrevocable, yet they continue to call for some sort of healing of that breach [. . .] and they certainly yearn for the relationship” (Bryson, “Preface” 3), and this loss of the natural world happened a long time ago. As a result, Eco-poetry, on one level, asserts our current relation with nature, ecology, and environment. In the ancient past, humans had relationships with nature and non-human entities (plants, animals, minerals, etc.), and their art reflected that relationship, as Hogan says:

us
who remember caves with red bison
painted in their own blood,
after their kind

(“The History of Red” 11-14).

Today, modern humans have a relation where nature serves humans, and humans use it for their own ends. Eco-poetry, then, asserts the current divide’s harmful effects while trying to revive ancient-like relationships with nature in order to heal. Eco-poets can do this in a number of ways. For instance, according to Scigaj, “human language is much more limited than the ecological process of nature.” Eco-poets “recognize the limits of language while referring us in epiphanic moment to our
Scigaj explains, ecopoets “want the poem to challenge and reconfigure the reader’s perceptions so to put the book down and live life more fully in all possible dimensions of the moment of firsthand experience within nature’s supportive second skin and to become more responsible about that necessary second skin.” (Bryson, “Preface” 3).

The ecopoet then writes to create experience and to encourage the reader to live more closely with their environment instead of through the dividing media of a book or textual source. The ecopoet also “looks to discover the means to ‘go back’ to a time and place of nonduality and relational significance” (4). This nonduality and relational significance exists most naturally in a pre-linguistic environment or time, especially before Descartes, which I’ll get to later. It is in “the work of these contemporary [eco]poets, we get a perspective on the human-nonhuman relationship” (Bryson, “Introduction” 5), and for Linda Hogan, the medicine of healing and relational significance, in part, comes from song, and the harm – the divisive force – comes from language, especially written language.

To begin examining the difference between song and language in The Book of Medicines, a good place to start is with “The Alchemists,” which is the poem that opens “The Book of Medicines” section. In this poem, there is a high-level evolution of the divisiveness that language creates. The poem opens:

By day
they bent over lead's
heavy spirit of illness,
asking it to be gold
(1-4)

The alchemists, traditionally, see lead as gold that is ill or gold that is not rising to its potential. There is also the myth of the alchemists who are trying to convert lead into gold using various incantations and ingredients, like sulphur and cinnabar. In this stanza, however, we seem to be at an early stage of alchemy. Here the alchemists are “asking” the lead to be gold. They are not trying to change its state through magical spells or concoctions, but they are asking it to become its full potential – gold. In the poem’s penultimate stanza, however, we encounter the actions of an evolved, or more modern, alchemist:

But he was only a man
talking to iron,
willing it to be gold.
(38-40)

In this stanza, the alchemist moves from “asking” with reverence and respect to “talking to” the metal. The important preposition here is “to.” The alchemist is not talking “with” the metal as if in an equal relationship. He is talking “to” the metal. This relationship has turned from sympathy to subservience, or at least there is more distancing between the two and less empathy. There is the subtle shift in dominance of man over matter. This shift becomes more pronounced in the next line with “willing,” which suggests that by the alchemist’s powers alone he can deliberately force the iron to become or transform into a new object. He can will it to be something it is not, which is not dissimilar to the naming of the animals in “Naming the Animals.”

“Naming the Animals” begins:

After the words that called legs, hands,
the body
of man out of clay and sleep
(1-3)

Here, words evoke man or conjure him up from earth and dreams. What is interesting here, however, is that these words are unmediated. That is, there are just words with no speaker or delivery system of the words. These words also name or make categories, such as “legs, hands,” and “body.” This is the beginning of language, and the man risen from the clay, or Adam as we learn by the end of the poem, usurps this language for his own ends and he imposes it on other non-Adamic entities. He names:

wolf, bear, other
as if they had not been there
before his words [. . .]
or sung themselves into life
before him.
(7-9, 11-12)
The poem and time continue, and Adam's children name a group of creatures "pigs." We can't be sure what group of creatures they actually are because Adam's children have named them, but there is a voice that speaks for these creatures – the first person subject "I." The I, or speaker of the poem, lives in the "wilderness" away from the "law and order" of Adam's language, and she is old enough to remember a time, a pre-linguistic time ("before the speaking"), where there were "no edges to the names." These names are the songs the animals sing to create themselves. In addition, these songs have "no edges," unlike Adam's words which categorize with defining edges. If there are no edges, then things flow into one another. There is no clear demarcation between living entities or non-living entities. There is a relationship, and this relationship is in a timeless space with "no beginning, no end." However, after Adam stole language and started naming entities against their will, he also stole their powers to sing, which is not only a source of creation but a form of connection, as suggested by the closing lines: "my stolen powers / hold out their hands / and sing through me."

What can be noticed about the songs in this poem, and the songs throughout the book, is the songs have no words. Songs are like "breath in a flute" ("Nothing" 76). They are a breath mediated by the mouth, or a "breath made by the air" ("Nothing" 76). As a meaningful breath-noise, it instantly interacts and unifies with the air and environment. Despite the lack of words, the songs communicate, create, and form relationships, such as in "The Grandmother Songs." This poem directly follows "The Alchemists" in order to juxtapose the divisive non-healing language of the alchemists with the embracing and healing abilities of song.

In "The Grandmother Songs," songs "rose of out wet labor." They were part of the birthing process. The baby and their songs were as one and one creation. These songs also "made a shape around me / the speaker," or a grandmother's "embrace" (7-8). In addition, "Song was the pathway where people met / and animals crossed" (25-6). These songs, then, created life and made relationships. Songs also have the powers of "finding the lost" (12), to create rain (13), and to enable a woman to "fly" (18). Perhaps this is also the stolen power referred to in "Naming the Animals." Nonetheless, song creates and unifies.

Most important, perhaps, is that song is also a medicine that can heal when the body is recognized "as agent of experience" (Wegenstein 21). According the Wegenstein, there is a "tension between the body as object and as agent of experience" (21) and examples of this can be seen in "the art of healing across cultures" (22). Wegenstein continues:

Western culture since the sixteenth century has developed methods for opening the body and examining it for symptoms of disease or other conditions to be eradicated. [...] More recently, the ongoing development of medical imaging technologies has improved our access to the body's insides, put the body on display in deeper and more inclusive ways, and thus facilitated the exposition of factors contributing to disease. (22-3)

Looking back at "The Alchemists," we see two types of healing. One is healing the lead by respectfully asking it to change its form, as we see, in stanza one (treating the body as "agent of experience"), and the other is a doctor trying to heal patient (body "as object") in stanza four. Stanza four opens with the speaker's "father behind a curtain. He has been separated from others within the "sick ward" environment. This father also "heard a doctor / tell a man where the knife / would cut flesh," or separate skin. He also hears a man "reading from a magical book." This recalls stanzas five and six of "The History of Red," where we encounter the origins of Western medicine:

The doctors wanted to know
what invented disease
how wounds healed
from inside themselves

[...]

They divided the red shadows of leeches

In "The History of Red," the reader also encounters cutting "the wall of skin" and the doctors "reading the story of fire," which I take to be the "magical book," which is a book of words, and perhaps incantations. This brings us back to the closing of "The Alchemists." The words this doctor speaks are akin to those more modern alchemists with their incantations of trying to turn or force lead into gold. According to Hegarty, "[t]heorists are alchemists" (165), and if the surgeon's diagnostic speech had worked / we would kneel down before it and live forever" (165). Of course his speech and words do not work because the written language, even when spoken, does not recognize that the body harmonizes within itself and outside of itself. The doctor's "focus on the body as a visible object tends to obscure the bodily agency that is at work, for example, in fighting disease" (Wegenstein 23). Not only that, the doctor's language sets up a Cartesian tension between body and mind, where the passive body is "manipulated by the mind" (Wegenstein 23) of the doctor and the doctor's language and tools. As a result, there is a
The doctor provides that “third-person perspective” and Cartesian duality not only between body and mind but between patient’s body and doctor’s body, whereas the healing song comes from within the body and yokes together the mind, body, and environmental dynamic.

The healing song recognizes that body “is an expression of its environment on all scales, from the microscopic to the cosmic” (23). Further, in some non-Western medicines, “[r]ather than inspect the individual body piecemeal for specific causes” (23), as the doctors in “The Alchemist” and in “The History of Red” do, a non-Western medicine “looks at the balance or harmony within and without the body, and seeks to intervene in order to alter this relation in beneficial ways” (23). So, when the grandmother is under “the false death of surgery” (26) in “The Grandmother Songs,” she is forced to sing “for help” (27), which is similar to the out reached hands singing at the end of “Naming the Animals.” The song reaches out for help and not only physical help but temporal help, as well. It reaches out to an “older history” (37), a time “before the time of science / before we fell from history” (“Flood: The Sheltering Tree” 26-7). In “Flood: The Sheltering Tree,” “Land takes back the forgotten name of rain” and enables people to hear rain’s “wet song” (29) and smell its “smell of healing” (30). This ancient song-healing medicine, which can come from the song of a wolf as well, as it does in “The Fallen,” is a song the modern alchemists and doctors “did not learn healing / from” (25-6).

The doctors and alchemists in The Book of Medicines, in a sense, are like Ferdinand de Saussure who points out that language or signs do not have a direct link or causal link to the actual, physical thing it represents or express. Claude Lévi-Strauss would add that words, or written language, are a “secondary system of representation, figures deferment, absence, difference, and inauthenticity” (Liu 319) as opposed to speech which suggests “immediacy, presence, identity, and authenticity” (319). Stated differently, words label and distance, and as a result the language of modern western medicine cannot heal effectively, as Hegarty pointed out. The language creates an iatrogenic relationship, and according to Hegarty, wounds or diseases are “iatrogenic caused by the diagnosis, manner, or treatment of physical diseases” (165). “It is a language,” according to Hogan, “that is limited emotionally and spiritually, as if it can’t accommodate such magical power and strength” (Dwellings 45-6). Song, however, does have a direct link with the thing it represents. It comes from the voice of the object singing itself into existence, causing relationships, and the medicine of healing. This is the ecomedia that was mentioned before.

Ecomedia is not objective or textual. It is sound with meaning that connects with others and bonds with the environment. It does not harm or divide. It is available to all humans and non-humans or any entity that can sing for itself.

As a result of ecomedia, especially song, Linda Hogan can endure and heal from the sickness that is presented in “Sickness”:

If we are all one, then in my hand
is the mortal enemy,
the one that tells the forest,
struck the fire,
the doctors of torture
living at the edge of sanity
that, like broken glass,
does not call itself sharp.

This destruction even enters “inside” (16) herself, and “It went to work. / It tried to take my tongue” (25-6), which recalls the end of “Naming the Animals”: “my stolen powers / hold out their hands / and sing through me” (36-8). Her stolen powers are an ecomedium. And it’s from the reaching-out power of the ecomedium song, the reaching out for help and embrace, the “singing for help” (“The Grandmother Songs” 27) during the “false death of surgery” (26) that Hogan is able to survive and take back the forgotten name of rain and enables people to hear rain’s “wet song” (29) and smell its “smell of healing” (30). This ancient song-healing medicine, which can come from the song of a wolf as well, as it does in “The Fallen,” is a song the modern alchemists and doctors “did not learn healing / from” (25-6).

Works Cited


from break the line we have to go cause there’s no way back
you a place where we can be and everyone is dreaming of you should go ahead so fast you should go ahead so fast you should go ahead so fast break the line we have to go cause there’s no way back.

where we are comming

performing in a room plus with some elements of split screen. It was the last single by the Guano Apes before their four-year hiatus to break the thin line nothing’s gonna stop the way of life be sure that you are safe i’I’ll show new songs recorded for the album, however it was the only one that made it to the album, the two outtakes from the album “Stay” and “Underwear” instead became B-sides for the single. The music video shows the band a savage race, That hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me. “Break the Line” is a 2004 song by the Guano Apes from their greatest hits album Planet of the Apes, released on October 24, 2004. It was the one of the three line, “I” being a person has an absolute meaning. These line breaks are determining the visual shape of this text. Example #2: Ulysses (By Alfred Lord Tennyson). “Match’d with an aged wife, I mete and dole Unequal laws unto

There are two line break examples in the given passage. One line break cuts the line, “I have ta’en his head from him” in the middle, placing the line break at the end of the second line. Another line break is used in the fourth to find out more, including how to control cookies, see here: Cookie Policy
We take you now to the latest Trump administration official to act like the White House is located in Russia, this time... 5 days ago

New Listing: @EmptyMirror #litmag publishes new work every Friday & accepts previously unpublished short #poetry y... 5 days ago

Mine sparks despair and humor for me and my birth mom #BabyScoopEra 1 week ago

Follow @thelinebreak