

## The Vietnam War, the Whale Hunt and the Wall in Linda Hogan's *People of the Whale*

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Native Americans participated in the Vietnam War in a disproportionately large number in relation to their actual population in the United States. Nevertheless, few American Indian novelists have dealt with the war and its legacy. This article explores the significance of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Pacific Northwest Coast to the protagonist's war trauma in Linda Hogan's novel *People of the Whale* (2008). Drawing upon Michelle Balaev's pluralistic model of literary trauma theory, my reading of the novel investigates the importance of place and contextual factors vis-à-vis the protagonist's process of remembrance of the traumatic event. It also looks at the narrative strategies employed in the novel and uses ecological approaches when exploring the meaning of the two sites. Ultimately, the novel not only raises serious moral and political issues concerning the Vietnam War, but it also shows that the places of healing are symbolically linked to one another.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall, also known simply as the Wall, stands on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. Together with the Wall, the Northwest Coast and the Pacific Ocean are important places in Linda Hogan's novel *People of the Whale* (2008), which deals with the Vietnam War and its aftermath in the United States. Hogan (b. 1947) has mixed Chickasaw-Anglo ancestry and is a member of the Chickasaw Nation. As a prolific internationally-recognised writer, political activist and environmentalist, she draws on Native traditions in her work. *People of the Whale* focuses on a small Native American community called Dark River on the Pacific Northwest Coast. The inhabitants of the novel's coastal village belong to the fictional A'atsika people, who were traditionally whalers. The protagonist, a young A'atsika man who volunteers to serve in the Vietnam War, is called Thomas Witka Just. His participation in a supposedly ceremonial whale hunt, which is thematically related to the Vietnam War, and his visit to the Wall bring together the narrative and symbolic threads of *People of the Whale*. My main aim in this article is to explore the significance of these two places to the protagonist's war trauma.

Hogan's novel was published thirty-three years after the end of the Vietnam War. Initially, only the war veterans' experience was regarded as relevant, because they were considered to be able to tell the truth about the war. The first writers whose fiction and nonfiction about the Vietnam War was published in the 1970s were white American soldiers. Many of their works are still regarded

as classics about the war. However, a national attempt to forget the controversial war caused a sense of societal amnesia, which lasted until the end of the 1970s. The first white American women writers with a literary reputation, who focused on the war, emerged in the mid-1980s (Hofmann 1996, 21). A growing outpouring of interest in the war began in the late 1980s, and since the mid-1990s, in particular, “more and more previously non-writing” veterans have published their autobiographical texts on the war (Raphael-Hernandez 2002, 131). According to Heike Raphael-Hernandez, this can be connected to a new fascination with Vietnam War movies and literature on the part of those who were not actively involved in the war. She further suggests that the existing literature on the war may have been able to awaken people’s sense of their collective guilt and their awareness of injustice in the war (Raphael-Hernandez 2002, 131). Like Black Americans and People of Colour, Native Americans participated in the Vietnam War in a disproportionately large number in relation to their actual population in the United States. Approximately 42,000 Native Americans served in Vietnam. Although American Indians never comprised more than 0,6 percent of the total population in the same period, they made up more than 2 percent of the American troops in the Vietnam War (Holm 1996, 11, 123; Wendt 2018, 67-68). Moreover, they were often selected to undertake more dangerous duties than their non-Native peers because of white American racial stereotypes of them (Holm 1996, 137). Nevertheless, few Native American novelists have dealt with the war and its legacy in the United States.

In her article from 2002, Raphael-Hernandez discusses Louise Erdrich’s *Love Medicine* (1984), Michael Dorris’s *A Yellow Raft in Blue Water* (1987), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *The Almanac of the Dead* (1991) as the three Native American novels, which, to her knowledge, address the consequences from a domestic standpoint (Raphael-Hernandez 2002, 133). For historical reasons, spiritual healing is an important component of Native American culture, storytelling and literature. However, as far as the above-mentioned novels are concerned, healing is only possible for one of Dorris’s central female characters, whose brother dies in Vietnam (see Raphael-Hernandez 2002, 143-144). Significantly, a new discourse of “healing” emerged in mainstream American society and culture in the early 1980s. It was not only linked to the fact that the image of the silent, psychologically disturbed and stigmatised veteran gave way to the notion that the wounds of veterans and society had to be healed together, but also to the creation of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Hagopian 2009, 74). In view of this, it is noteworthy that Hogan’s *People of the Whale* complicates the narrative of trauma and healing in American Indian fiction by placing it in two different contexts, in the local Native community and at the national level.

In *People of the Whale*, Dark River is not only connected to ancient myths and ceremonies, but its littoral landscape is also seen as a site of healing. Similarly, the objective of the Vietnam Veterans Monument was associated with healing. As indicated above, the purpose of this article is to examine the significance of these two key locations to the protagonist’s war trauma in his search for spiritual healing. In her *Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, Michelle Balaev proposes a new pluralistic model of trauma in literary trauma

studies in which “the experience and remembrance of trauma are situated in a specific culture and place” (Balaev 2012, 18). In the pluralistic model of trauma, remembering is conceptualised as memory process, in which multiple internal and external contextual factors and landscape are “interacting and influencing the process of remembering” (Balaev 2012, xiv). Drawing upon Balaev’s insights, my analysis of Hogan’s novel investigates the processual nature of the protagonist’s remembrance of the traumatic event. While my reading pays attention to the importance of contextual factors and place vis-à-vis the protagonist’s process of recollection, it also looks at the narrative strategies employed in the novel in order to convey his memory process and gradual healing. In addition, I avail myself of ecological approaches when exploring the meaning of the two sites of healing, which are finally shown to be symbolically linked to one another.

### The Context of the A’atsika Past and the Vietnam War

Donelle N. Dreese argues that “the sense of place and its relationship to the self are perhaps nowhere more evident than in American Indian literatures” (Dreese 2002, 8). This is also true in light of recent literary criticism on *People of the Whale*. It employs ecocritical approaches and concentrates on the novel’s environmental issues and human-animal relations. Significantly, the littoral landscape and the interconnectedness of humans and animals are also contextually linked to the protagonist’s war trauma. In addition to linking traumatic experience in fiction to contextual factors, Balaev emphasises the role of narrative strategies in novelistic descriptions of trauma and memory (Balaev 2012, 22-23). Oral traditions play an important role in Native American literature in terms of retrieving a sense of origin and place, which is central to constructions of identity (Dreese 2002, 17). Hogan’s choice of the first-person narrative “I” in the prologue of *People of the Whale* is suggestive of the voice of a traditional storyteller who has an intimate relationship with her audience. Moreover, the narrator’s reference to “our people” reveals that she belongs to the A’atsika, and thus has organic ties to the local environment and community. The suffering protagonist is only mentioned proleptically, or in narrative flashforwards, at the end of the prologue, which situates his fate within the history of the social, cultural and spiritual contexts of the specific landscape of his A’atsika homeland. This narrative strategy implies that the storyteller’s evocation of the past is meaningfully related to the experience of trauma of Thomas, the protagonist.

Creation and emergence stories are vital to oral traditions. Hogan’s narrator underscores the importance of the ocean as “a great being” to the A’atsika community. Like many real whaling people, the inhabitants of Dark River consider the whales to be their ancestors (cf. Adamson 2012, 29). This is confirmed by the fact that ancient rock carvings show “humans being born from whales” (267, cf. 289). In *Sightings*, Hogan explains how Indigenous people “want to find a way back to the past, to lay claim to the older world that sustained our ancestors with its richness” (Peterson and Hogan 2002, 123). This also applies to her novel: the storyteller of *People of the Whale* describes ancient houses built of shells of “the earlier people, the Mysterious Ones” (9).

The mythic shimmering of the houses is enhanced by a suggestion that they may have been made of pearls, but the narrator adds that they can only be seen at the present time as “a memory made of words.” The discovery of these ancient dwellings is reminiscent of the exposure of in the 1970s of the ancient Makah village of Ozette, which Hogan describes in *Sightings* (Peterson and Hogan 2002, 168-169, 175-183, 185-186). Subsequently, both the prologue and rest of the novel contrast mythic elements with hardships caused by historical and social forces to the Native community.

European colonialism and US westward expansion had devastating consequences on Native American communities. Indeed, Hogan points out that the words “[w]hen the white men arrived” mark the beginning of many Native stories “that tell of change, from forces without, for all the tribes of the Americas” (Peterson and Hogan 2002, 129). In a similar vein, the residents of Dark River are described as having fallen on hard times after 1910, when white whalers arrived bringing with them deadly influenza. This past is shown to have direct implications for the present in the form of the ecological disasters that beset the poverty-stricken coastal area: “The nearby fishing towns are now abandoned, as is the sawmill in disrepair, the forest missing” (9). Even the whales, which used to be plentiful in the past and were the A’atsika people’s main source of sustenance, have been over-hunted by the time Thomas reaches maturity. Yet, sea-creatures such as whales and octopuses maintain their great significance in the spiritual life of the A’atsika in the novel.

Thomas is linked to sea-creatures from the beginning of his life. In the non-linear first chapter, a mysterious octopus comes out of the ocean and walks on land on the day after his birth. What is more, he was born at the old people’s place on the other side of the large bay, which symbolically links him to generations of his whaling ancestors. Although the inhabitants of Dark River had lived in the same place “for thousands of years”, nobody had ever seen an octopus behave like this. Nevertheless, Thomas’s mother, the daughter of Witka, a legendary whaler, is “convinced the octopus would be the spirit-keeper of her son” (16). For this reason, its appearance portends good things for Thomas. In addition, the first chapter entitled “Octopus” narrates the history and the extraordinary deeds of Witka, who had a special, interactive affinity with the whales. His story is depicted in a manner that seems to forebode that Thomas will follow in his grandfather’s footsteps.

However, like the ending of the prologue, the ending of the first chapter proleptically points to Thomas’s future life as a traumatised veteran long after he “had taken to the sky, a most unnatural thing for a human” (23) on his way to Vietnam. According to Balaev, the central thematic dynamic in novels that describe an individual’s experience of trauma is that they oscillate between private and public meanings. Thus, the traumatised protagonist in fiction “functions as a cultural figure to raise awareness about a historical event” (Balaev 2012, 17). From the beginning of his involvement in the Vietnam War, Hogan’s protagonist serves as such a representative figure whose individual trauma reflects large social and cultural forces. This is evident in the depiction of Thomas’s departure for the war: on the one hand, it underlines the abruptness of his separation from the northwestern coastal landscape with its Native traditions,

but on the other hand, it anticipates how his life will be disrupted by the war and his subsequent war trauma.

The narrator stresses the distance of the close-knit Aʼstsika community where they all share “the same histories like one tree with the same roots and fallen leaves” (26) from the rest of the world and from a remote, small country called Vietnam, in particular. Yet, one day the war comes to the village when recruiters arrive and succeed in enlisting young men such as Thomas. In *Strong Hearts, Wounded Souls*, Tom Holm, who is of Cherokee-Creek descent and served in Vietnam in 1968, gives a number of reasons as to why young Native men enlisted for the war. According to Holm, Native Americans regarded military service as part of family and/or tribal traditions and wanted to gain respect from other American Indians whose nations also honoured treaty obligations (see Holm 1996, 118-119). However, those reasons are not among the explanations Thomas gave to Ruth, whom he had recently married in a tribal ceremony, when she probed him on the subject. Thomas relates that his decision was made when he and other young men had been drinking together, and he had apparently succumbed to peer pressure (Krašteva 2015, 128). Yet, he also appeals to patriotic reasons: “I’m not just an Indian, I am an American, too” (30). He had assumed that he would be sent to the war together with his Aʼstsika friends, because, according to him, the army had promised them that a “buddy system” would be adopted, whereby they would be able to maintain their masculine bond. This promise was soon renegeed upon as, in reality, the aim of basic training during the Vietnam era was to break a recruit’s ties with everyday civilian life (Holm 1996, 124). The recruiter’s promise that Thomas’s friends would “catch up with each other” also has a hollow ring to it due to the American military’s individual rotation policy. Bereft of his community and his companions, Thomas’s war experience is pervaded by an intense sense of loneliness, which also marks his life as a traumatised war veteran back in the United States.

#### The whale hunt: an attempt to achieve renewal and healing

Balaev criticises previous models of literary trauma, which have burgeoned since the 1990s, for their monocular view of traumatic experience and memory. According to her, the major source of these models is Sigmund Freud’s theory of psychological trauma. Hence, she argues that they tend to regard traumatic experience as an unrepresentable “timeless void that ‘shatters’ identity, produces everlasting muteness and lack of knowledge regarding the exact event” (Balaev 2012, 4, 6). Whilst this traditional model of trauma and memory “implies that the self is a fixed entity”, other psychological models suggest that people react differently to traumatic events and offer “a view of the self as a relational entity, one that is in flux and contingent upon an assortment of contextual factors” (Balaev 2012, 9). With this in mind, Balaev also criticises the use of traditional psychological theories of memory, because they regard memories of traumatic events as fixed and frozen in the past (Balaev 2012, 8-9). Instead, she emphasises the processual nature of remembering and considers views, such as those of the psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett as being suitable for the literary study of trauma. Bartlett maintains that much

of human remembering is influenced by factors that are social in origin (Bartlett 1977, 95). What is more, he posits that remembering is a process, an imaginative reconstruction, or construction “rather than one of mere reproduction” (Bartlett 1977, 205, 213). This description of the processual nature of remembering applies to Hogan’s protagonist.

In *People of the Whale*, Thomas returns to the United States after the US military had found and arrested him in a rural village on the other side of the Pacific Ocean. He had been living in the rural village for five years after the Vietnam War had ended with a group of displaced Muong people, an ethnic minority native to Vietnam. He was presumed dead because his dog tag, which he had thrown down on the ground when he deserted, had been given to Ruth during the war. Deeply traumatised, he does not return home, but instead decides to hide in San Francisco. It is as if Thomas had managed to block out his life with Ruth in Dark River in order to protect himself while he was living with his Muong wife and daughter in the remote village. Hiding in San Francisco, Thomas feels that he is a lie, a man with two lives both of which seem to belong to another man. At the same time, he attempts to suppress or bury his painful war memories. Ultimately, he decides to return to the reservation, which signifies his active search for a coherent self, which he had lost in the war. It is as if Thomas intuitively feels that his reconnection with his community and the littoral landscape might aid his process of remembering and reconstructing his traumatic memories.

Hogan’s protagonist also allegedly suffers from symptoms characteristic of veteran trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which include negative thoughts and feelings about oneself or others, flashbacks, insomnia and nightmares related to the traumatic event. In Western countries, mental disorders such as PTSD are seen “as individual-centered events”, but psychologist Derek Summerfield points out the importance of social setting and wider social supports for traumatised people like the US Vietnam veterans (Summerfield 1995, 18, 19-20, 23). He also draws attention to the meaning of the reparative power of social justice and to the significance of traditional ceremonies as coping patterns (Summerfield 1995, 21-22). According to Holm, Native American Vietnam veterans were “readily accepted in the Red Power Movement”, which demanded self-determination for Native Americans in the United States, and among American Indians in general. A large percentage of the returning veterans also participated in tribal ceremonies of spiritual healing, which maintain tribal identity and thereby aided in veteran adjustment after the Vietnam War (see Holm 1995, 187-197). In Hogan’s novel, it is the ceremonial whale hunt that attracts the protagonist back to Dark River. I have already underlined the great importance of whales to the A’atsika. Whales pass Dark River twice a year when they migrate between Baja California and the Bering Strait. Whales are said to have only been hunted in the past when people were hungry. Furthermore, a traditional whale hunt was based on an ancient pact between humans and whales, and required ceremonies and rituals. Thomas feels compelled to attend because he believes that a ceremonial whale hunt will not only bring about his personal renewal but also that of the A’atsika community.

On his arrival in Dark River Thomas is unaware of an ongoing internal conflict vis-à-vis whaling. Hogan bases this on a real controversy regarding the Makah nation's decision to resume whaling. The Makah live in Neah Bay at the northwest corner of Washington State, and had stopped whale hunting in 1915, when commercial hunting had severely reduced the whale population. By the early 1990s, the grey whale population had rebounded and the whale was taken off the Endangered Species List. In the past, the Makah, like the fictional Aatsika, had not only hunted passing whales for subsistence, but also as a spiritual practice. Now the Makah appealed to a new category of "cultural whaling" and claimed that whale hunting "is integral to their cultural identity" (Gaard 2001, 14). In actual fact, their right to whale was guaranteed by the Treaty of Neah Bay of 1855, which also resulted in their losing most of their land. In 1999, the Makah returned to whaling. Hogan herself was one of the outspoken opponents of the Makah hunt, but she also stood for treaty rights (see Peterson and Hogan 2002, 102; Hogan 1996). In *People of the Whale*, her Aatsika people, who had not hunted whales since the 1920s, appeal to their treaty rights and frame whaling as a lost cultural tradition when they want to resume hunting the species.

Elders are held in high regard, in principle, in Native American communities. Holm, for instance, expounds that they "function as links to traditions, customs and rituals that give identity to the tribe" (Holm 1995, 102). Elders also possess traditional ecological knowledge and act as spiritual leaders. In Neah Bay, a group of active female elders were opposed to the Makah whale hunt, while, in *People of the Whale*, a small group of local Native women, led by Thomas's wife, intrude the tribal council's "secret" meeting in order to protest their plan to kill the first whale since the 1920s. Like Thomas, Ruth, who is described as being born with gill slits, is "a creature of the ocean" (57). As a fisherwoman, she also has a close affinity with whales. Ruth is aware that the local elders, like herself, were against the whale hunt. Consequently, she accuses the men of not having consulted the elders.

Native American elders are considered to be human repositories of memory, and therefore have an important role as transmitters of traditional ways of life and skills to young people. In *People of the Whale*, the elders or the traditionalists are strongly associated with the whales. Ruth's son with Thomas, Marco, is described as an unusual child, like his father before him. Born with webbed feet, he is also connected with the ocean and with the spirits in his great-grandfather Witka's house. Endowed with leadership possibilities and powers, Marco is taken in by the elders after his schooling and his real education will now begin in their white house place. No wonder, then, that he is ultimately chosen by the elders, who have taught ancient whaling rituals to him, to be the head of the whaling crew. Like the Makah whale hunt, the Aatsika whale hunt attracted a lot of media attention and led to heated arguments for and against whaling. In her article on the Makah hunt, Greta Gaard raises a number of complex ethical issues and debates surrounding it. She argues that the category "cultural whaling" is problematic and discusses the possibility that it may clear the way for other Indigenous people and whaling nations to follow suit (Gaard 2001, 11, 13,14). In Hogan's novel, the character Dwight is a childhood friend of Thomas and is also one the "buddies" with whom he enlisted. By the time

Thomas returns to the reservation, the masculinist and materialist Dwight has become the tribal chairman. He has made secret deals with Japan in order to sell whale meat to them at a large profit and also wants to open a whale market in Norway. In the meantime, Thomas and Marco prepare for the hunt trusting that “the rituals were still with them” (84) and are totally unaware of Dwight’s dishonest scheme, which leads to disastrous consequences.

As discussed above, Thomas returns to Dark River with the hope of being healed from his traumatic wartime experiences by participating in the whale hunt. Hogan employs an interesting narrative strategy in her depiction of Thomas’s state of mind before the hunt. Marco, who was born while Thomas was in Vietnam, does not really know his father. As the focaliser of this passage, he wishes that he could “snap his father open and see what might fall out” (84). The omniscient narrator continues the story by shedding light on Marco’s thoughts:

But if he did he would be surprised to find that the room would fill with visions of fire and a woman blown to pieces, not just one woman, but many. A little girl would fall out of him, his daughter, Lin in the other country. His remembered and cherished childhood with Ruth. The days they loved in the greenhouse by the river. (84)

Thomas’s traumatised mind has previously been described as “a human labyrinth of memory”, but as in San Francisco, he is still consumed with a sense of traumatic guilt and shame for having unwittingly ended up with two families in two different parts of the world.

Instead of healing Thomas’s trauma, the hunt turns into a chaotic spectacle. Large crowds watch from the shore as the new whalers leave for the ocean in two canoes, which are followed by speedboats. A helicopter also follows the whalers, with the pilot helping to spot whales for the participants. As the only traditionalist among the whalers, Marco prays as he had been taught by the elders. When they finally see a whale, he knows that it is too young and too friendly, according to tradition, to be killed, but nobody listens to him. Some of the men, including Thomas, had plausibly learnt to shoot in order to kill human targets in Vietnam (Richter 2015, 169), and the hunt not only begins to resemble a war, but it also makes Thomas behave as if he were fighting in combat. Indeed, he is one of the first men, if not the first one, to fire at the whale. This episode suggests that Thomas’s war trauma has several different layers. He keeps shooting and simultaneously wonders why he is doing it as if the rifle “had its own will.” Associating the gun with the Vietnam War, Thomas hears “[s]omewhere, in the old or new of his memory.... other shots” (93). These shots are suggestive of the rounds he once fired in Vietnam and tries to repress. Afterwards he thinks of the men he had killed in the war, which brings back “a tsunami of memories...faces, ghosts, loves” (99). The novel contains several comparisons between the ocean and the war. Early in *People of the Whale*, Thomas thinks that “[t]he war was like an ocean where everyone burned or drowned, and only a few could swim it” (49). At sea, the blood-shed and the guns of the whalers invoke an important narrative parallel between the Vietnam War and the whale hunt. Ultimately, the new whalers, covered with the blood of the whale, have to be rescued by white coast guard from the sea, which is also red with blood. When the whaling



crew reaches the shore, nobody follows the tradition of covering the beached whale with eagle feathers or apologises to its spirit.

### The Process of Reconstructing Traumatic Memories and Moving Forward

After the failed hunt Thomas withdraws into his grandfather's house on the ocean shoreline, which invokes the intrinsic relationship between trauma, memory and the seaside as a specifically meaningful landscape in the novel. Combat veterans suffered from the consequences of their terrifying experiences, which were subsequently diagnosed as the leading factor that led to the development of PTSD (see Hagopian 2009, 57-58; see Holm 1995, 6; Holm 1996, 9), which was added to its *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980. Evidence also suggests that racialised veterans displayed war-related stress symptoms to a greater degree than other groups. According to Holm, PTSD was also "regrettably common and sometimes severe" in Native American Vietnam veterans (Holm 1996, 9; Holm 1995, 83). Thomas's war trauma is revealed to have originated in the horrors of his combat experience. Yet, even when painful memories surreptitiously try to get hold of him, he remains silent about them.

In her discussion of trauma and silence, Balaev maintains that literary theorists have regarded silences "as proofs of trauma's unspeakability." However, she maintains that narrative omission that produces a silence may create a "gap" in time, which can be used as a narrative strategy (Balaev 2012, 22). In addition to temporal disruption, the narrative strategies of creating silence also include spatial disruption, and taken together they "portray the disjointed perception or disparate states of consciousness" (Balaev 2012, 23). Initially, Hogan's protagonist tries to prevent the intrusion of painful memories by building a wall between himself and the Pacific. However, the narrative employs temporal and spatial disruption to depict how his inescapable traumatic past keeps haunting him in his self-imposed isolation. One of the narrative means employed in the novel to create distance to Thomas's suffering is the insertion of chapters that mainly focus on Ruth or Lin. The chapter entitled "Light-Years", for instance, mainly concentrates on Lin's story after her father's has been brought back to the United States. Thomas maintains silence about his past in the Muong village, but, in his mind, he frequently returns to the war whilst carrying out his everyday chores in Dark River. For example, he is reminded of how he protested the laying of landmines by the US Army in a civilian area in the war, when he is digging postholes for a wall in Dark River. In Dark River, Thomas is also brought back to the war by nightmares. Many of his war memories only appear as brief flashbacks, the meaning of which will emerge as an essential part of his most traumatic war experience much later. Sometimes even a smell, such as the one emanating from an act of arson in Dark River, evokes a war memory.

Yet, when Thomas looks into "the chambers of himself" and simultaneously reconnects with the land of his ancestors he experiences a process that helps him to move forward in his life, beyond an identity that is only defined by his war trauma. In the course of this process, the values attributed to the traumatic event gradually begin to change as the protagonist reconstructs and revises his memories. Instead of hating himself, Thomas realises that he also possesses compas-

sion. Thinking of the men he killed during the war, he alters the meaning of his most traumatic experience: "I killed, he thinks, but I saved" (136). Admitting to himself that there are no clear lines between good and evil, Thomas perceives that the vast body of the Pacific Ocean, named for peace, not only separates, but also unites his ancestral home in the United States and Vietnam; two interconnected coastal countries on opposite sides of the world (cf. Huang 2016, 175; Richter 2015, 155). Thus, it provides an important link between the present and the past. Instead of sealing himself off from the ocean, Thomas begins to plunge into the water at night. In diving to the bottom of the ocean and holding his breath like whales, as his grandfather had done, he metaphorically seeks to return to a time prior to the arrival of white whalers. The bottom of the ocean later changes into a war scene as if it were keeping alive a long historical continuum of violence and oppression to which Native American have been subjugated.

Thomas's transformed consciousness and his changed relation to others becomes evident in the chapter entitled "Out there," in which the flow of his memories is more continuous. In his mind, he re-experiences his duty as a combat soldier in the midst of the horrors of the war. This culminates in scene in which his men cruelly destroyed a village in what he knew was outside of the war zone. Although the reconstructed memory of this traumatic event follows Thomas's reminiscences about his life in the makeshift Muong village, he knows that they are the people he saved from the US Army. Vietnamese people often remarked during the war that their eyes and skin colour were similar to those of Native American soldiers and that therefore they were "the same, the same" (Raphael-Hernandez 2002, 140-141, 144). Similar cross-racial recognitions between racialised Americans and Asians not only occur in Native American literature. In his *Southwest Asia*, Jayson Gonzalez Sae-Saue, for instance, analyses the different ways in which Mexican American and Vietnamese identities are represented "as the same" in Chicana/o texts produced during the Vietnam War (Gonzales Sae-Saue 2016, 23-44). In Hogan's novel, the Muong accept Thomas because they look alike, and he identifies them as "people of the earth." Moreover, growing rice and fishing, he had managed to continue to stay in as close physical contact with the earth and water as in *Dark River*.

Not all of Thomas's reminiscences are negative, and, as an outward sign of his gradual change, which connotes his inner healing, he finally feels the need to break his silence and to communicate his traumatic memories. Living alone in Witka's house, he addresses his grandfather's spirit as an understanding representative of the A'atsika community from the past. Society also influences the comprehension of traumatic experience, and, according to Balaev, "the meaning of trauma is found between the poles of the individual and society" (Balaev 2012, 17). Thomas's decision to travel to the capital of the United States with his war medals, which his father had received while it was believed that his son was dead, highlight the protagonist's changed conception of self and his relation to American society at large. The trip begins with a visit to the Memorial Wall.

#### From Interacting with "the Wall that heals" to Reformulating the Self

The motif of a wall is reiterated throughout the novel. At the beginning of the chapter entitled "The Wall: The Names," Hogan's narrator draws attention to

different kinds of walls, many of which are immaterial. Including the high wall with which Thomas fenced in his psychic walls of silence, the narrator explains:

There are walls of history and the secrets of history, there are the ones no one can breach or climb, the invisible boundaries of humans. Some walls seem righteous instead of ruthless. They don't claim property or hold something in and out (243).

In a way, the creation of mental walls contributed to the building of the Vietnam Memorial Wall. When veterans left the context of the military and the Vietnam War and returned to the United States as individuals, they faced a particularly difficult homecoming. They were frequently regarded as the living embodiments of guilt and failure, and many American civilians tended to block them off by a wall of ignorance, indifference, and silence which could be imbued with hostility. The tense relations between the veterans and the public worsened after the revelation of the cover-up of the My Lai massacre in 1969. Moreover, veterans' homecoming experiences caused them to heighten their psychic barriers against non-veterans (Hagopian 2009, 63-64). In the end, veterans themselves contributed to the building of the national memorial. Despite the heated debate about its design, the Wall, designed by architect Maya Lin, was constructed and dedicated in 1982.

The initial purpose of the Wall was "to recognise and honor" (qtd. in Ng 1999, 203) the more than 58,000 members of the US armed forces who were killed or went missing as a result of the war. The memorial is also commonly known as "the Wall that heals". It was not only meant to provide psychological comfort for veterans suffering from painful memories of the war, but also to further societal healing in a country that was divided by the war (Hagopian 2009, 400-1). Like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund that built the Wall, Lin associated the monument with healing and recovery. She planned the V-shaped memorial so that it was attuned to its site, a beautiful park-like area surrounded by trees. Lin described her design as a cut in the earth, "an initial violence and pain that in time would heal" as "[t]he grass would grow back" (Lin 2000). The unconventional memorial is regarded as being inviting rather than threatening due to its ambiguous material form (Foss 1986, 331, 333). Significantly, the design of the Wall not only allows, but also invites the formation of multiple meanings from patriotic to critically anti-war statements, as well as apolitically reconciliatory personal responses to grief. Since its dedication the Wall has become one of the country's most visited monuments.

The aim of Thomas's visit to Washington is to reconcile himself with what he did wrong in the past in order to aid his healing process. Before he enters the large park, he endows the Wall with apocalyptic associations: he calls it "a wall of revelations", and a little later it becomes "the dark wall of this country" (245). It is significant in light of the previously discussed vital connection between place, trauma and memory that the Wall is "integrated into and interdependent with the earth as it is engulfed and conforms to the earth's contours" (Foss 1986, 333). When Thomas walks down the path leading into the memorial, it seems to him that it is sinking into the earth. This is why he first looks at the ground where visitors have left various objects in remembrance of their relatives and friends. Subsequently, he notices the heat, which emanates from the black gran-

ite wall on hot days. This brings back memories for him of the heat in Vietnam. It is only later that Thomas observes the names carved into the face of the wall.

The names of the casualties are recorded on the submerged memorial in the order in which they were killed in Vietnam. When Thomas was sent to Vietnam, his flight crashed and he was the only survivor. At the memorial, he stops in front of the names of the young men killed in this crash. Instead of quietly reflecting on the loss of their lives, Thomas feels anger at having been saved from their fate. He curses the army and regrets that he did not walk away when he was rescued from the accident. Significantly, the two black panels, which are built into the earth, point to the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial, which brings the Wall into the historical context of the United States. Lin chose black granite for the Wall's material for specific reasons: when polished it turns into a mirror, into "an interface between the world of the living and the world of the dead". She also pointed out that "[t]he mirrored effect would double the size of the park" (Lin 2000). The granite panel Thomas is looking at points to the Lincoln Memorial, and for a while he looks at the image of "an old president, behind him, before him" (245). The purpose of linking two such strong symbols of the United States to the memorial was to "create a unity between the nation's past and present" (Lin 2000). Absorbed in his traumatic memories, Thomas eschews ruminations on the nation's historical past and moves away carrying "his own reflections" as he continues to read the names on the shiny black wall.

One of Lin's goals was to design a memorial that would be a psychological space, a space to which visitors could relate on a personal level (Lin 2000). Grief appears to be the unifying emotion that draws the visitors together at the memorial, but it can also elicit a number of different emotions (Foss 1986, 336). When Thomas thinks of the number of young soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the war, he experiences a mixture of contradictory feelings of "dread and sorrow, love and hate" (146). In "Making the Memorial," Lin refers several times to the power of a name. It is also worth noting that the mirror effect allows visitors to see themselves together with the name they have come to see, and as each name has a physical presence, it "asks to be touched" (Lin 2000; Hass 1988, 14). In reality, many visitors feel that they can literally be in contact with those whose names are engraved on the black granite by touching them. In *People of the Whale*, the protagonist watches other visitors touching names and realises that the names are more than just names. Subsequently, Thomas is overwhelmed by a personal memory from the war. He remembers his fear of death when he and other men were pushed out of a helicopter to the ground, and senses how the war smelled of "human flesh, chemicals, smoke, fear" (247). It is also true that polished black granite is capable of drawing the spectator into the Wall, among the names of the dead, so that those who died in Vietnam and those who visit the Wall are seemingly no longer separated. Drawn into the Wall, among the names of the dead, Thomas touches them.

The next group of names Thomas wants to look at are the names of the men who were with him on his last special operation. To his bewilderment, he finds his own name listed among the dead. The names of soldiers missing in action whose status is unknown are denoted by a cross on the memorial, but

if a missing person returned alive, the cross is circumscribed with a circle. On a closer examination, Thomas realises that the cross next to his name is surrounded by a circle. He interprets this to mean that he was resurrected. His confusion deepens when he looks at his own reflection on the other names, symbolically obliterating “them with his life” (248). At first Thomas thinks of his fellow soldiers as “good boys at home. Wholesome. Once” (248). He deeply mourns them until he is engulfed by darker memories and the word “once” gathers more meaning. In *Masculinity in Vietnam War Narratives*, Brenda M. Boyle contends that the combined influence of the war and the social movements of the Vietnam era assaulted American conceptions of a “monolithic” masculinity. According to her, traditional American mythology holds that “boys become men through the experience of war, and that conversion makes them real Americans.” Moreover, according to Boyle, this also means that to be a man is “to be white, heterosexual, and able-bodied” (Boyle 2009, 3). Thomas’s memories reveal that the men in his platoon were not only sexist and racist towards the Vietnamese, but also harassed and taunted him because of his responsible behaviour and his “foreign” appearance, which made him look like the Vietnamese. In Thomas’s reconstruction of the memory of the other Americans, the tensions between them and himself not only escalated because of the other soldiers’ defoliation of poor local peasants’ rice with Agent Orange at harvest time, but also due to their cruelty towards the local people. Thomas also recalls that they used to make fun of the dead. At the same time, he remembers how he used to feel protected from his own men by identifying with the land in the jungle to which he created a similar connection as his home landscape of Dark River.

Nevertheless, when Thomas’s thoughts about the past return to the Wall, he experiences a cacophony of feelings and perceptions which, according to Balaev, can produce “a disjunction, which is often portrayed as a doubling.” In the process of doubling, the boundaries between the past and present are blurred, when the traumatic past “is brought into conflict with the present” (Balaev 2012, xvii): “He [Thomas] looks at this wall as if it is a living thing, not only names carved into stone, but the silencing of a jungle, the sudden flare of deafening bombs, every sense attacked.” (251) The process of doubling is used in narrative dissociation in order to depict the fictional character’s emotional struggle. Balaev further explains that narrative dissociation is linked to place in fictional depictions of trauma, “because place has the ability to explain the emotional experience in terms not only the physical environment, but also in relation to particular landscapes and communities” (Balaev 2012, xvii). Crucially, Thomas’s thoughts travel from the place of trauma back to Washington, where he associates the Wall with Native history and Native landscapes.

When pondering that human beings “have carved on stone throughout all their brief existence” (251) Thomas thinks that the Wall should be covered by pictures, instead of names, such as those of whales found on stones in sacred Native places. Actually, many Native Americans believe that all natural phenomena, including mountains, rocks and stones, are manifestations of spirituality. At an early point during his visit to the Wall, Thomas is reminded of an Āatsika story about a speaking stone. Linking the meaning of this stone to the

meaning of the shiny Wall before him, he gains an insight about how it provides “a direction home.” This suggests that a sense of inner coherency is ultimately connected to a familiar natural Aʼatsika landscape.

When Thomas reaches the motel where he is staying with his Aʼatsika companions Dwight and Dimitri, “he does not recognise himself” (252). Importantly, his cathartic interactions with the Wall seem to have changed him in a manner that gives the impression that he has finally moved past his worst war trauma and has regained his strength. In *Dark River*, Thomas had heard that Dwight may have killed Marco during the whale hunt in order to catch the young whale for money. After finding incriminating evidence of the murder in one of their motel rooms, Thomas confronts the swaggering war veteran with his accusation. In the same emotional scene, which takes place in the middle of the night, Thomas also confesses that he had shot his own men in the war. As indicated above, the roots of the cruelties suffered by American Indians lie in the history of European colonialism. The parallel between the history of the Aʼatsika and the hardships endured by the displaced Muong people in Vietnam and Cambodia (cf. Straß-Senol 2017, 282) is reinforced in Thomas’s confession. He makes clear that he associated the innocent local people he wanted to save from the white American soldiers with Native Americans at the place of his trauma: “It was like us, our history” (155). As if to underscore the symbolic meaning of his last name “Just”, he thinks of “the long line of American tragedies that had shaped him” (157) and refuses to remain in history as an American citizen who murdered innocent women and children.

Thomas’s awareness of great injustices perpetrated by Americans in the war were shared by numerous real-life participants in the anti-war movement. In the early 1970s, Vietnam veterans were at the forefront of the anti-war movement expressing their deep moral indignation over the violence of the war. In April 1971, almost a thousand veterans threw away their medals outside the Capitol building and called on Congress to end the war in a storm of protest. This became one of the iconic moments of the Vietnam War (Hagopian 2009, 18, 50; Prados 2002, 409). In *People of the Whale*, Thomas, in his soldier’s uniform, visits the Pentagon before leaving Washington in order to demonstrate similar moral indignation. Like the war veterans in the past, he wants to return his medals. Moreover, he feels the need to confess that he was a deserter, who killed American soldiers. After his confession Thomas is told the following by two military officers: “The war is over, son. We have to let the past rest” (265).<sup>1</sup> This complacent and condescending response to Thomas ultimately encapsulates how the novel seriously questions the lack of morally meaningful scrutiny of the war in the United States.

Fittingly, the Potomac River catches Thomas’s attention as he exits the Pentagon. Knowing that the name is of American Indian origin, he wonders exactly who gave the river its name. Like the story about the speaking stone, the river seems to show the protagonist his way home. Recovery from trauma is often a long process during which support from other people can help in relieving the symptoms. In *Dark River*, Thomas received Ruth’s silent empathy, and he is consoled by thinking about his daughter, Lin. In her study, Balaev points out that it is possible for a traumatised character to reformulate his or

her identity and to regain a coherence of the self “in relation to society or to a particular place” (Balaev 2012, 36, cf. 40, 55). Back in Dark River, Thomas feels like he wants to be at one with and even to melt into the natural landscape of his ancestral home (cf. Steinwald 2011, 189). He moves in order to live with the community of the elders, who want him “to open a new pathway into the future” (267). Indeed, Thomas grows stronger, learns ancient songs, and sits in silent council with the elders. In other words, he undergoes a transformation into a traditional A’atsika. Throughout the novel the relationship between Thomas and Dwight is reminiscent of the connection between Tayo and Emo, the two veterans of the Second World War in Silko’s *Ceremony*, in the sense that the protagonist’s adversary envies and keeps tormenting the other man. Unlike Emo, however, Thomas’s evil nemesis, Dwight, admires the dominant white society. In particular he views the ruthless money-grubbing culture of America in a favourable manner and disdains the traditional Native values embodied by Thomas. When Dwight sees Thomas canoeing together with a group of young men, he murders Thomas with a pistol. Yet, this dramatic moment does not conclude the novel, because a magical episode is used as a narrative strategy in Hogan’s evocation of a world imbued with spirituality.

In his introduction to *God Is Red*, Vine Deloria Jr. writes about the importance of an unbroken connection with the spirit world among Native Americans (Vine Deloria, Jr. 2009, xvii). In *People of the Whale*, the elders are in a constant and close relationship with the spiritual realm, which pertains to the ocean and their littoral landscape. It is no small wonder, then, that after Thomas’s death, he is reincarnated at their place. What is more, after Thomas has been “emptied of all his stories and secrets, even his deeds” (291) he experiences a different kind of healing during a ceremony: he sheds his skin, and a new, better version of him is visible that looks like a young boy. In effect, whilst the novel appears to circle back to its beginning where the octopus portended good things for Thomas, it also returns him into his old, innocent A’atsika self. Scholars of Native American literature agree that a circular structure often appears in Native American fiction. As in *People of the Whale*, it connotes continual healings, spiritual and cultural survival as well as spiritual and cultural renewal (cf. Palmer 1997, 105, 106, 107). Ruth is a strong individual, and in many ways, she embodies these positive qualities. Furthermore, she is not only a guardian of tradition, but also capable of living everyday life in a modern world. According to the narrator, some people in Dark River believed that Thomas was carried away by a whale or lifted up in the air by an octopus (the animal of his clan), when he finally disappears. Nonetheless, it is crucial that before his departure Thomas bequeaths Witka’s house, an emblem of spiritual continuity, to Ruth, the symbol of the A’atsika future.

### Conclusion

The controversial Vietnam War has had far-reaching effects in Vietnam and in the United States. One of consequences for the United States has been the high degree of combat-related psychiatric disorders among veterans in the aftermath of the war. The main purpose of my reading of *People of the Whale* has been to investigate the meaning of two places - the littoral landscape of

the protagonist's Native American homeland and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall - in terms of the protagonist's healing process from symptoms reminiscent of PTSD. To meet this aim I have applied Michelle Balaev's insights into the role of place and contextual factors in fictional portrayals of trauma and memory developed in her pluralistic model of literary trauma theory. My reading has also benefitted from her emphasis on narrative strategies in the depictions of novelistic responses to trauma as well as from ecological approaches to literary analysis.

As I have indicated, place is of great importance to a protagonist's sense of self in Native American literature. Initially, Hogan's nonlinear novel firmly situates Thomas in the social, cultural and spiritual contexts of his native village. His traumatic war experience disrupts his coherent identity, and he returns from the war as a different person. In contrast to traditional trauma theory within literary criticism, *People of the Whale* highlights the processual nature of remembering. Whales are very significant to the fictional A'atsika. Yet, instead of healing Thomas's trauma and generating the renewal of the A'atsika community, his participation in a supposedly ceremonial but ultimately disastrous whale hunt only serves to bring back the first involuntary shards of his suppressed traumatic war memories. Several narrative strategies, such as temporal and spatial disruption, for instance, are skilfully employed throughout the novel in order to depict Thomas's slow and excruciating memory process. The view of memory as a reconstructive process necessitates a self that is not permanently anchored in a traumatic event from the past. Thomas reconnects with the Pacific coast as a specifically meaningful landscape at the time when he is living in isolation in his grandfather's house which finally helps him to move forward.

The protagonist's trip to the Wall casts his relationship with mainstream American society in stark relief, but, like many other phenomena in the novel, the two places of healing are interconnected as Thomas's process of remembering continues at the memorial. Remembering is an interactive process, and, as I have demonstrated, the protagonist's memories are under continual revision. In his bewildering and cathartic interactions with the Wall, Thomas once again revisits the place of his trauma, which ultimately forces him to face his war crime. Hogan raises serious moral and political issues in her depiction of Thomas's confession at the Pentagon where the legacy of the failed war is no longer deemed worthy of any attention.

In my reading, the symbolic connection between the two places of healing is further underscored by the fact that the Wall is not only associated with Native American history and Native American landscapes, but it also makes the protagonist compare the innocent people he had saved from his white fellow soldiers with Native Americans. Furthermore, the Wall shows Thomas the way back home, where he reformulates his A'atsika identity. In sum, *People of the Whale* is an important contribution to Native American and American literature, because it offers a full and nuanced fictional exploration of a traumatised Native American veteran's painful process of reconstructing his devastating memories from the Vietnam War and of his process of reformulating his self.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>There were as many as 8,000 so-called friendly fire incidents in the Vietnam War. In her study *Friendly Fire*, Katherine Kinney writes: “The idea that we fought ourselves, literalized in the repetitious image of Americans killing Americans, is, I would argue, virtually the only story that has been told by Americans about the Vietnam War. In novels, memoirs, oral histories, plays and films the image of friendly fire, the death of one American in the hands of another, structures the plotting of both realist gestures toward ‘what really happened’ in Vietnam and symbolic expressions of what Vietnam meant.” Kinney 2000, 4.

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