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# Unsettling Private Property in Linda Hogan's *Mean Spirit*

Cécile Heim

Private property is a crucial concept for the nation-building process of the United States as it transforms land into an extractive entity while defining citizenship according to capitalist ideals. This concept has been and still is forcibly imposed onto Indigenous peoples while, simultaneously, dismissing Indigenous ways of relating to the land. This essay examines how *Mean Spirit* (1990) by Chickasaw author Linda Hogan unsettles settler notions of private property by exploring and promoting an Indigenous way of relating to the land. This relationship is epitomized in Michael Horse's relationship to his horse and Belle's cultivating of corn. The essay begins with a discussion of the development and importance of private property in the nation-building process of the United States and proceeds to analyse the depiction and unsettling of private property in *Mean Spirit*.

Keywords: Private property, Linda Hogan, Indigenous Studies, Osage Reign of Terror, Oklahoma oil boom

Chickasaw activist, poet, and novelist Linda Hogan's first novel, *Mean Spirit* (1990), tells the story of Osage Elder Belle Graycloud and her community during the 1920 Reign of Terror.<sup>1</sup> The Osages and their allies have to negotiate between assimilating or, on the contrary, trying

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<sup>1</sup> My heartfelt thanks to Daniela Keller, Ina Habermann, and Alexandre Fachard, as well as the reviewer for inspiring me to create the best possible version of this essay.

to maintain their traditional lifeways. The novel starts with the murder of Grace Blanket, a young, wealthy Osage who is killed for her land allotment which hides a well of oil. Her daughter, Nola Blanket, is adopted by Belle, and the Osages try to understand who is killing their fellow community members. The novel ties together various narrative strands centring on multi-dimensional characters such as Belle Graycloud, Michael Horse, or Stace Red Hawk within the Indigenous community of Watona, Oklahoma, and the ending reveals that oil barons and their followers are eliminating Osages to obtain their land allotments and the oil contained in them, forcing the surviving Osage community to flee.

Hogan's poetic prose shifts narrative focalization and spins intricate metaphors allowing her to create a universe full of life and wonder. Her complex characters and humour (re-)humanize Indigenous people and examine the complexity of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations in an increasingly oppressive settler state. While the novel explores multiple themes such as spirituality or writing and authority, I focus on the relationship between the notion of private property and the land that the novel lays out. I suggest that *Mean Spirit* unsettles extractive-capitalist practices toward the land that are exemplified by the oil business, while Indigenous relations with the land are epitomized by their way of growing corn, thus dislodging settler notions of private property.

*Mean Spirit* has generally received favourable reviews, except from Osage literary critics such as Robert Allen Warrior, who takes issue with Hogan's 'pan-Indianism': "Hogan uses a sort of pan-tribal New Age-ism with Southern Plains and Southeastern [...] features, presumably making it easier for her inter-tribal cast of characters to interact but losing the specificity of Osages in the process" (52). Hogan's use of non-nation-specific cultural heritage is problematic for scholars like Warrior who fight against stereotypical representations of Native Americans and for the sovereignty of Indigenous nations. For the mainstream public, however, the novel was a great success since it featured as 1991 Pulitzer Prize finalist. While heeding Warrior's criticism of the novel that this is not an accurate depiction of Osage culture, *Mean Spirit* is an important intervention in the representation of the Reign of Terror that forces its readers to question Western ways of relating to the land through private property.

Although Hogan's account is entirely fictional, the Reign of Terror in Osage country is a historical event. David Grann's non-fictional *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2018) documents these happenings and their influence on the development of the US police force and Federal Bureau of Investigation in great detail. The Reign of Terror took place in the 1920s

after oil was discovered on Osage land. Oil companies rented land from Osages and paid them royalties which allowed them to become increasingly wealthy. Soon, however, Osages started to disappear or be killed; it is estimated that twenty-seven Osages died under suspicious circumstances between 1921 and 1925 (Cowan). Jon D. May, writing for the Oklahoma Historical Society, states that most crimes were “rarely investigated by local authorities; some were never solved” (n.p.). Three white men were suspected of these murders: Ernest Burkhart, who was sentenced to life for the murder of William E. Smith (Osage); William K. Hale (Burkhart’s uncle) and John Ramsey (a local farmer), who were sentenced to life imprisonment in 1929 for the murder of Henry Roan (Osage).<sup>2</sup> All three were eventually paroled and Burkhart even received a full pardon in 1965 (May). Grann concludes in his book that Hale was the leader of the conspiracy to appropriate Osage land and, thus, the oil in it. His historical examination, however, does nothing to deconstruct racism, capitalist extraction of the land, or settler colonialism in general, and never mentions Hogan’s novel. Yet *Killers of the Flower Moon* has received positive critical acclaim and even inspired Martin Scorsese to direct a movie on the topic, scheduled to be released in 2021. The movie will feature Leonardo DiCaprio and Robert De Niro and is shaping up to be another uncritical celebration of settler-colonial values and, therefore, a failed attempt at honouring Indigenous nations. Hogan’s novel, then, serves as an important counter-narrative to current and future white cultural productions on the Reign of Terror against the Osage community since it addresses notions of property and extractive relations to the land.

That property is at the core of national US identity shows in past and ongoing struggles for territory. The fight for national territory initiated with colonization and perpetuated with such federal policies as the General Allotment Act continues today in Supreme Court cases such as *Tommy Sharp, Interim Warden Oklahoma State Penitentiary v. Patrick Dwayne Murphy*. As the podcast *This Land*, by Cherokee journalist Rebecca Nagle, explains, this case originates in a 1999 murder case where Patrick Murphy (Muscogee Creek) killed George Jacobs (Muscogee Creek). Murphy was arrested and sentenced to die by the state of Oklahoma, but he appealed on the grounds that the murder did not take place on state land, but on the Muscogee Creek Indian Reservation. The argu-

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<sup>2</sup> Grann’s *Killers of the Flower Moon* opens with a description of Mollie Kyle (Osage), Ernest Burkhart’s wife, and her family, but focuses on the development of the police force and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

ment runs that while the surface land has been sold to white farmers, the mineral rights still belong to the Muscogee Creek and Congress has never explicitly dissolved the reservation, which is why this land is still Muscogee Creek land. This argument, which applies not only to the Muscogee Creek reservation, but also includes the ones of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Choctaw nations, was confirmed by the Tenth Circuit Court. The state of Oklahoma appealed, in turn, and the Supreme Court now has to decide whether the land of the above-mentioned five Indigenous nations, which constitutes about half the size of Oklahoma, is Reservation land, and thus subject to tribal sovereignty, or not. The Supreme Court was unable to reach a decision in this case because Justice Neil Gorsuch recused himself, thus leaving the case in a deadlock with a four to four opinion. However, the decision of the Tenth Circuit Court in favour of Murphy encouraged other people who were sentenced by the state to appeal their conviction based on the same arguments as Murphy. This is the case of Jimcy McGirt, who was sentenced for sex crimes against a child by the state even though this should have been a matter of tribal jurisdiction. The Supreme Court accepted McGirt's appeal and heard arguments on *Jimcy McGirt v. Oklahoma* in May 2020. It published its opinion in July 2020 ruling in favour of the petitioner with a five-to-four majority, thus confirming that the land of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee Creek, Seminole, and Chickasaw nations are Indigenous land and reverting jurisdiction of Indigenous citizens on this territory to tribal sovereignty. These cases illustrate the ongoing fight for ownership of the land, highlighting that colonialism is not a thing of the past.

These two Supreme Court cases and the Reign of Terror reveal how, even today, property and ownership dominate our relationship to the land and with each other.<sup>3</sup> Private property is one of the central concepts of settler-colonial discourse that shape the US nation.<sup>4</sup> It has been ratified as one of the fundamental rights of US citizens in the fourth and fifth amendments of the US Constitution in 1791. Especially the fifth amendment stipulates that “[n]o person shall [...] be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation” (Arnheim 393).

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<sup>3</sup> By ‘our’ I mean everybody who participates in capitalist practices, thinks in terms of private property, and/or does not conceive of the earth as a living being.

<sup>4</sup> Settler colonialism is a land-based project where, as Eve Tuck (Unangax) and K. Wayne Yang state, “settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land, a homemaking that insists on settler sovereignty over all things in their new domain” (5). It is an ongoing form of colonialism.

Ownership is hence an inalienable right of US citizens and a crucial element of US citizenship and national consciousness. Yet, as I would argue, it is equally an economic and legal construct which serves the settler nation-building project that legitimates Indigenous land dispossession. For private property is inseparable from US settler colonialism, which is justified by the fraught idea that Indigenous nations do not own property, especially not real property, and do not tend to the land in what a capitalist society considers profitable ways. At the core of US nation-building, then, lies a reinforcement of the Euro-Western idea of possession over Indigenous ways of relating to the land. In the Indigenous epistemology, people belong to the land instead. The land is seen as the source of life, knowledge, and spirituality. In other words, all of creation in Indigenous ways of being springs from the land. Rather than owning it, Indigenous peoples guard and protect the land, which is why No Dakota Access Pipeline (NoDAPL) protestors, for instance, are called water protectors.<sup>5</sup> These competing ways of relating to the land become evident in contemporary Indigenous land protection movements such as the NoDAPL movement near Standing Rock, North Dakota, or the Mauna Kea sacred site protection by the Kanaka Maoli.<sup>6</sup> *Mean Spirit* intervenes precisely in these competing relations to the land by reinforcing Indigenous land-human relations that unsettle private property – a concept that wrongfully serves as justification for land dispossession and extraction.

### Dispossession through Private Property

Private property is a legal concept in the nation-building process of Euro-Western nations that shapes socio-political relations, territory, and our relation to the land. The shift from commonly held lands to enclosure and the transformation of land into private property occurred in various waves in Europe, with a significant one in sixteenth-century England (Dunbar-Ortiz 34-36; Blomley “Territory”). It is especially John Locke’s description of private property which was most influential

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<sup>5</sup> The NoDAPL (No Dakota Access Pipeline) Standing Rock water protection movement led by Lakota and Dakota elders started in early 2016 and aims to protect the bodies of land and water which will be destroyed and contaminated by the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (see Faith; Standing Rock Water Protectors).

<sup>6</sup> Starting in 2018, the Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiians) fight the construction of one of the world’s largest telescopes on their sacred mountain, Mauna Kea (see Goodyear-Ka’opua and Mahelona).



for the nation-building process of the United States. Property, according to Locke, already exists outside the state, as he claims in his *Two Treatises of Government*: “The great and chief end therefore of men’s uniting into commonwealths and putting themselves under government is the preservation of their property” (2831). In this statement, Locke reasons that property is a concept which serves as primary motivation for the social contract as it needs to be protected and secured by the state. Hence, property is a concept around which socio-political relations are organized. This is maintained by contemporary property scholars, most emphatically by Nicholas Blomley, who defines property as “a right to some use or benefit of land. Such a right is necessarily relational, being held against others. [...] Property’s ‘bundle’ of rights includes the power to exclude others, to use, and to transfer” (“Law” 121). More than this, property is the vector that defines citizenship on an individual level and sovereignty on the state level. As Robert Nichols emphasizes, “[f]or a Lockean, ‘no property’ equates to non-political, or ‘no sovereignty’” (“Realizing” 48). For Locke, then, property serves as core entity around which the creation of the state is organized and alongside which citizenship is defined.

Locke’s understanding of private property as a basic feature that delimits citizenship is adopted by the Founding Fathers for the purpose of nation-building as well as shaping the territory of the new nation of the United States of America. The counter-example of the ‘civilized’ state, that is, the Western European, for Locke is Native Americans. Nichols explains that “[b]ecause indigenous peoples did not till the soil or enclose the land, they could not exist in a civil society properly defined and thus could not claim political sovereignty” (“Realizing” 48). While the perception of Indigenous peoples as ‘savages’ does not emerge with Locke, he solidifies this notion in his political writings.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Jefferson admired Locke’s writing and inherited his conception of private property as essential to a ‘civilized’ state and convenient justification for stealing land from Indigenous peoples. Nichols asserts that Jefferson “was the first person to translate Lockean thought into a systematic theory of ‘savagism,’ which founded U.S. Indian policy for decades” (“Realizing” 51). Locke’s description of Native Americans as property-less ‘savages’ and Jefferson’s use of Locke to justify land grabbing

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<sup>7</sup> As Lumbee lawyer Robert A. Williams, Jr., underlines: “His clichéd stereotypes and grossly inaccurate caricature of the Indian’s savage, hunter-gatherer state defined a life of irredeemable hardship and irremediable want compared to the highly civilized state of humanity in an advanced agricultural society” (*Savage Anxieties* 205).

served as crucial tools for the settler-colonial nation-building process of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

To justify settler-colonial appropriation of land with the Lockean concept of property and to institutionalize it in the US Constitution and legal landscape is not only a territorial and/or socio-political enterprise, but it is, most of all, an imperial imposition. Paradoxically, settler colonialism turns land that is already home to a variety of Indigenous nations into private property. Seneca scholar Mishuana Goeman explains that “[p]rescribing the shape of land in colonial history was largely done with intent to claim land and make it readable as property” (“Land” 77). Land, which is “at the heart of indigenous identity, longing, and belonging” (73), is thus recoded into property. Instead of honouring the land as a source of life and knowledge, as Indigenous nations do, settler colonialism transforms land into property from which as much material and financial profit as possible has to be drawn. In other words, the land-turned-property becomes an extractable surface in the capitalist US nation. Contrary to the settler argument that Indigenous peoples did not tend to the land, which is why their taking it without consent is not theft, Nichols clarifies that

[c]olonization entails the large-scale transfer of land that simultaneously *re-codes* the object of exchange in question such that it appears *retrospectively* to be a form of theft in the ordinary sense. It is thus not (only) about the *transfer* of property, but the *transformation into* property. (“Theft” 14)

This process of land appropriation and its simultaneous transformation into property is called dispossession – a method that is inherent to settler colonialism. Nichols defines it as “a broad macro-historical process related to the specific territorial acquisition logic of settler colonization” (“Theft” 11). Not only is the invention of private property, therefore, a prerequisite for Indigenous land dispossession upon which the US nation is founded, but the transformation of land into property also creates the necessary conditions for the growth of US capitalism.

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<sup>8</sup> Williams demonstrates how the savagery discourse continues even today in legal decisions: “The racist precedents and language of Indian savagery used and relied upon by the justices throughout this ongoing historical period of legalized racial dictatorship have most often worked [...] to justify the denial to Indians of important rights to property, self-government, and cultural survival. [...] Indians get treated legally by our ‘present day’ justices just as Indians were treated by the justices in the nineteenth century: as savages whose rights are defined according to a European colonial-era legal doctrine of white racial superiority over the entire North American continent” (*Like a Loaded Weapon* xxv).



Once the land of Turtle Island was claimed by the US government, it periodically attempted to assimilate Native Americans into its settler, capitalist society.<sup>9</sup> The most forceful attempt at assimilation and one of the most important moments of Indigenous land dispossession happened through the 1887 General Allotment Act, also called Dawes Act. This act was supposed to ‘civilize’ Native Americans by giving, initially, each individual 160 acres of land and was executed before the discovery of oil on these lands.<sup>10</sup> Kristen A. Carpenter explains: “The idea was that Indians would abandon traditional patterns of subsistence to become American-style farmers” (607). As a consequence of the General Allotment Act, Indigenous landholdings were reduced from 138 million acres in 1887 to 48 million acres in 1934 within two generations (Deloria and Lytle 10), 20 million acres of which were desert or semi-arid land. Part of the US nation-building process thus happens through the legal enforcement of private property, which enables the extractive economy of the United States because it grants exclusive access to the resources of the land. While Indigenous relations to the land determine their entire way of being as the land is a living source of all creation and knowledge, the settler relation to land reduces it to an entity from which profit needs to be extracted and, as such, produces the settler understanding of citizenship as capitalist.<sup>11</sup>

### The Imposition of Private Property in *Mean Spirit*

*Mean Spirit* engages with the theme of private property and relates to the land in two ways. It embeds actual legislature and historical events into its narrative and it forces its readers to contemplate the earth as a living being which renders its fragmentation into private property an excessively violent, if not impossible, process. Featuring characters of the

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<sup>9</sup> Turtle Island is the name for North America used by Indigenous nations on the eastern shores of the continent such as the Haudenosaunee.

<sup>10</sup> Dakota scholar Vine Deloria, Jr., and Clifford M. Lytle state the precise amount that the government gave to each Native American: “1. To each head of a family, one-quarter section; 2. To each single person over eighteen years of age, one-eighth section; 3. To each orphan child under eighteen years of age, one-eighth section; 4. To each other single person under eighteen years of age living, or who may be born prior to the date of the order to the president directing allotment of the lands, one-sixteenth section” (9).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion on how white supremacy is included in the concept of private property, see Harris and Moreton-Robinson.

novel who comment on legislature is a strategy for Indigenous authors to reframe historical and political events from an Indigenous perspective. In other words, it is a way of (re)narrating history from a perspective that is not only continually obscured and silenced, but where, in addition, storytelling and literacy do not have the same status as in Euro-Western cultures.<sup>12</sup> Without reading novels such as *Mean Spirit* as historical documents, these fictitious texts still create a space which allows readers ephemerally to imagine the distress and confusion that actual historical processes, in this case the forceful implementation of private property, might have provoked. This is crucial for Indigenous nations who have consistently been dehumanized and written out of settler history, especially in such nations as the United States, Canada, and Australia where the national narrative is founded on Indigenous people's disappearance.

The forced transformation of land into private property is powerfully demonstrated when the narrator or various characters comment on actual laws. About the General Allotment Act, Hogan's omniscient narrator states that it

seemed generous at first glance so only a very few people realized how much they were being tricked, since numerous tracts of unclaimed land became open property for white settlers, homesteaders, and ranchers. [...] No one guessed that black undercurrents of oil moved beneath that earth's surface. (8)

The General Allotment Act is treacherous as it turns Indigenous peoples into landowners while at the same time dispossessing them of more than half of their land. In addition, the narrator foreshadows the danger and conflicts that this notion of private property will bring to the Osages as soon as oil is discovered on their land. The fact that the narrator is voicing this warning while most characters seem unaware of the danger produces a structural irony which increases the reader's sympathy with the Indigenous characters of the novel.

When Hogan intertwines the law, oil-based capitalism, and private property in her novel, the latter becomes a way of determining who is included and excluded in the given settler economy. However, this inclusion is constantly regulated by the government as Hogan shows with regard to Belle's allotment: "Her land was 'without improvement,' as they called it when a person left the trees standing and didn't burn off

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<sup>12</sup> For more information on Indigenous storytelling, see Archibald, Borrows, Justice, and Kovach.

the brush or put in a fence to contain their property” (80). Because Belle’s land tenure is not considered civilized enough, it is taken over by the government and rented out to local farmers, an expropriation that Belle only realizes when a farm-hand comes to build a fence – a fence that represents the material transformation of land into property. When Belle complains to the Indian agent, his only answer is: “‘You didn’t improve it,’ he said as he sat with his light gray eyes on her face. He’d seen it fit to strike up a deal with Hale [a white, wealthy farmer]. ‘It’s best not to leave the land lying idle,’ he said” (213). It becomes evident in this response that the Indian agent executes and affirms contemporary property law enforcing the perception of land as a lifeless entity which is to be owned and exploited. Crucially, Indian ‘ownership’ is only respected as long as the land is visibly ‘improved’ according to Euro-Western standards of farming.

Accordingly, Indigenous people cannot simply own the land but are required to transform it into recognizable private property. This process, however, creates considerable confusion and upsets Osage Elder and water diviner Michael Horse’s ability to read the land. He is responsible for keeping the fire of the community burning, helping them with any spiritual and existential questions, and finding water for his community members. But at the beginning of the novel, Horse has temporarily lost his gifts; instead of finding water, he discovers oil on Grace Blanket’s allotment:

He was worried. He didn’t know how he had gone wrong. He had 363 wells to his credit. There was no water on Grace Blanket’s land, just the thick black fluid that had no use at all for growing corn or tomatoes. Not even zucchini squash would grow there. (8)

Finding himself unable to rely on his traditional skills to understand the land, he discovers oil instead of water on Grace’s land. While water is essential to the growth of plants and, thus, Osage subsistence, oil is the primary material extracted from the earth to make profit. The imposition of private property has thus rendered the land illegible for Horse, who continues to perform traditional Osage practices. Unfortunately, far from simply having “no use at all,” this discovery has detrimental effects on the Osage community: Grace Blanket is murdered at the beginning of the novel by an oil rig company owner, to whom she had rented her land and who had made her wealthy. Thus, the novel depicts a loss of legibility of the land following the imposition of private property as well as the violent implications this transformation has on the local Indigenous communities.

Capitalist relations with the land are fatal and, perfidiously, capitalism additionally encourages the Osage community to inflict damage upon themselves. Hogan describes the shifting attitude of the Osages: “The Indians were happy to learn business ways, but before long they had no choice themselves but to become meat-eaters with sharp teeth, devouring their own land and themselves in the process” (54). Private property becomes innately violent and self-destructive. This description invokes the Anishinaabe, Algonquian, Cree, and Blackfeet figure of the weendigo – a cannibalistic creature that eats human flesh, who the more it eats, the more it craves this flesh. This singularly evil creature in Indigenous cosmologies is understood to be a personification of greed. Greed is a characteristic that is closely associated with settler colonialism as Anishinaabe Elder and author Basil Johnston shows: “Actually, the Weendigos did not die out or disappear; they have only been assimilated and reincarnated as corporations, conglomerates, and multinationals. [...] But their cupidity is no less insatiable than that of their ancestors” (235). By invoking the weendigo, then, Hogan underlines the transformation of Osage community members into greedy capitalists – that is, into ‘mean spirits’ – alongside the transformation of land into private property. Native Americans have internalized settler practices that lead to unlimited land exploitation and self-destruction. Yellowknife Dene political theorist Sean Glen Coulthard points out that the internalization of settler-colonial values is inherent to settler colonialism as it

operates through a circumscribed mode of recognition that structurally ensures continued access to Indigenous peoples’ lands and resources by producing neocolonial subjectivities that coopt Indigenous people into becoming instruments of their own dispossession. (156)

*Mean Spirit* therefore powerfully demonstrates how the internalization of private property understood as a way of relating to the land imposed by the settler state leads Indigenous people to be defencelessly exposed to an insidious and harmful system that is profitable to others. The novel, however, equally reveals that these processes are far from smooth and met with resistance designed to unsettle private property.

## Unsettling Private Property

More than testifying to the distress and precariousness caused by settler impositions and creating empathy for Indigenous characters, *Mean Spirit* forces its readers to reconsider our relations to the land. If the first half

of the novel depicts how the Osage community endures oppressive policies and racism, the second half shows how the protagonists increasingly resist the assault on their community. The novel is, ultimately, pessimistic concerning the capacity for change since the Indigenous people of Watona have to flee from their lands while the earth is burning. Still, the sense of power emanating from the earth remains and some Indigenous characters such as Michael Horse, who appeared lost and confused at first, reconnect with their Indigenous values and ways of being. *Mean Spirit* unsettles the settler concept of private property by emphasizing that the earth is a living being, rewriting hierarchical human and non-human relations into kinship and by (re)mapping the land, which Gorman defines as a re-appropriation of space by re-claiming Indigenous relations to the land (*Mark My Words*).

*Mean Spirit* portrays the land as a living being throughout the novel even though most characters only realize this in its second part. The novel opens with a description of the hot summer nights that forced people to sleep outside:

In that darkness, the white beds were ghostly. [...] A hand hung over the edge of a bed, fingers reaching down toward bluegrass that grew upward in fields. Given half a chance, the vines and leaves would have crept up the beds and overgrown the sleeping bodies of people. (3)

While the sleeping bodies are described as passive, empty shells, the earth, acting through plants, is alive attempting to embrace whoever lies on her. The beginning thus underlines the earth's liveliness and potential for growth. Moreover, the earth nurtures the Indigenous characters' power and resistance. For example, when Lettie, Belle's daughter, visits her secret lover in jail, "[h]er sorrow had turned to careless rage. It was as if the fiery land took the caution from deep inside the murmurings of her own skin" (186). Similar to the opening scene, the earth is assigned all the agency in this passage which, paradoxically, empowers Lettie to finally acknowledge her love for Benoit and help him prove his innocence. Thus, the land's agency, which is initially imperceptible and, therefore, confusing to some characters, builds the novel's sense of wonder and mystery by emphasizing its own power as living being.

The land's agency only becomes perceptible to all when it defends itself from excessive extraction. After an oil rig explosion,

[t]he sweating men worked in the intense heat with steam rising from their reddened, flushed bodies. They dug a hole and plugged one side, and even as they worked, the snow beside China [one of Watona's inhabitants] melt-



ed off the ground. It steamed upward, and the vision of it changed her. It was like watching hell rise up. She knew then, she knew that the earth had a mind of its own. She knew the wills and whims of men were empty desires, were nothing pitted up against the desires of earth. (186)

The oil rig workers are revealingly described as steaming, red bodies, as if they were swallowed by the ground and the earth was taking back control. The land acquires a "mind of its own," a living being with its own "desires." Like China, Horse recognizes the land's resistance and reads the quakes provoked by the explosion as "the rage of mother earth" (189). When the earth defends itself, not only does its agency become perceptible again to characters such as China and Horse, but also its strength and power, which are incomparable to humans' since "the wills and whims of men were empty desires." A sense of humility is thus inherent to the acknowledgement of the earth as living being.

The novel demonstrates through Horse's relationship with his horse and the use of corn that it is abusive and destructive to conceive of any living being, whether this concerns animals, plants, or the earth, as private property. Thus, the relationship between Horse and Redshirt is rewritten as one of kinship rather than possession, and corn is respected as a source of subsistence rather than a source of one-sided exploitation. Cherokee author Daniel Heath Justice broadly defines kinship as "an active network of connections, a process of continual acknowledgement and enactment" (41-42) which includes not only blood relations but "can also be about extra- or even non-biological cultural community relations, chosen connections and commitments" (75) with humans and other-than-human beings. He further calls it "the complex, embodied practice of sovereign belonging" (104). In other words, kinship describes a way of understanding the world that does not focus on the individual, but on the relational. Moreover, these relations among humans and/or between humans and other-than-human beings are based on mutual care, responsibilities, and respect. Indigenous kinship principles are therefore inherently connected to Indigenous ways of relating to the land, since the earth is seen as a powerful relative and source of life which defies Euro-Western conceptions of social organization including the heteronormative nuclear family or the individualist concept of private property.

The impossibility of turning a living being into private property is depicted in the relationship between Horse and his horse, Redshirt, as it embodies an Indigenous understanding of kinship. As discussed above, the role of Osage Elder Horse as water diviner and knowledge keeper is crucial in the Watona community. Throughout the first half of the nov-



el, he can no longer rely on his divinations and keeps losing his horse. This could be read as Horse's loss of identity since he is named after the animal he keeps losing. However, instead of letting this irony stand for the sake of its tragicomic effect, Hogan elaborates on it: Horse is shown during a ceremony that Redshirt is near Sorrow Cave, which will become a crucial site of Indigenous resurgence in the novel. Throughout the second half of the novel, Horse regains his spiritual capacities and, simultaneously, learns to appreciate Redshirt's freedom. This mutual respect allows them to find an understanding at the end of the novel as Redshirt lets Horse ride him. To read Horse's relationship with Redshirt as one of loss and gain only works from a Euro-Western point of view where to have a horse is to own a horse; that is, to have it at one's disposal at the expense of its freedom. What Hogan offers instead is a vision of kinship. This kinship that defies the Western binary distinction between human and non-human is shown in Horse's and Redshirt's name. While Horse is called after the animal, the name Redshirt implies the human attribute of clothing. By thus deconstructing the human/non-human binary, the Western justification for Horse's ownership of Redshirt is undermined. Their relationship therefore illustrates the impossibility of turning another living being into private property while maintaining a mutually respectful relationship. Their story can thus be read as a model for how humans are to relate to any living being and respect it as sovereign being, whether this concerns a horse or the earth.

In a similar manner, Hogan (re)maps the land in and around Watona from an exploitable land of oil into an empowering land of corn. If the novel maintains that the earth is a living being, mapping is the process of rendering the land legible. In her monograph, *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, Goeman defines (re)mapping as

the labor Native authors and the communities they write within and about undertake, in the simultaneously metaphoric and material capacities of map making, to generate new possibilities. The framing of 're' with parentheses connotes the fact that in (re)mapping, Native women employ traditional and new tribal stories as a means of continuation. (3)

It is therefore a process which aims to discursively and, ultimately, materially reclaim lands from which Indigenous nations have been dispossessed. Hogan does so by undermining settler perceptions of the land as a commodity and turning it into a source of strength and survival. The novel thus changes the legibility of the land from one that is based on capitalist practices to one that is based on Indigenous values.

Part II of *Mean Spirit*, which solidifies and amplifies Indigenous resurgence and resistance to settler colonialism, opens with Belle Graycloud's corn planting. Belle Graycloud, the matriarch of her community and a leading voice in Indigenous resistance, never lost any of the traditional ways and is closely associated with corn. She and other Osage Elders

conditioned their fields with words and songs, first sprinkling sacred cornmeal that was ground from the previous year's corn, to foster the new life. The old corn would tell the new corn how to grow. [...] Some of the younger people made fun of her. They were embarrassed by the old ways and believed the old people were superstitious. [...] But after a few weeks, Belle's corn began to germinate and push upward while their fields remained bare, except for an occasional weed. Those few younger Indians who still planted corn stood by silently looking at their empty fields until finally they swallowed their pride and asked Belle if she'd come by and bless the crops. (209-10)

Corn thus represents traditional Indigenous culture, which Dunbar-Ortiz's historical reading of corn confirms as she states that "[s]ince there is no evidence of corn on any other continent prior to its post-Columbus dispersal, its development is a unique invention of the original American agriculturalists" (16). But more importantly, just as Belle plants old corn with the new one to teach the latter how to grow, Belle and other Osage Elders show their younger community members how to tend to the corn. While the oil pumps metonymically represent all forms of exploitative, capitalist relations to land, the planting and nurturing of corn preserve Indigenous ways and build bridges between Indigenous pasts, presents, and futures through the teachings of the land. Hogan counters Euro-Western capitalist logics with Indigenous land-based knowledge by highlighting the ways in which this relation to land strengthens Indigenous nations and kinship rather than enriching the community in a purely material manner.

Even some of the white characters sense the richness of corn without understanding it. Upon discovering that Calvin Severance, a white drunk, is the one digging holes in her cornfield, Belle asks him what he is looking for. He responds: "I don't know." He continued to dig. "I just heard that there was a hidden treasure in a cornfield" (250). While corn represents a form of power or richness, it is a richness that differs from the materialist-capitalist sense of the term and is, ironically, illegible to white settlers such as Calvin. Crucially, corn's richness is constructed through the reciprocity between the land and the people as they help

each other grow and subsist, and is not recognized as farming or 'improvement' in a Euro-Western sense – contrary to oil extraction, which relates to the land in unequal and destructive ways. To turn corn into the symbol of the strength, richness, and wisdom of the Osage community, then, is to ground that strength and richness in the land and gain knowledge and wisdom from it. In sum, Hogan's novel unsettles private property and the capitalist relations it implies by offering an Indigenous model of relating to the living land and its human and non-human members.

## Conclusion

Private property is essential to the US nation-building process as well as to its capitalist economy. It has been imposed on Indigenous peoples who do not relate to the land through ownership and capitalist extraction. Hogan's novel resists and unsettles this shift from land-based knowledge to the capitalist regime of private property by (re-)Indigenizing relations to the land. The unequal and dehumanized, capitalist relationship between owner and property becomes rewritten as mutual and reciprocal kinship between human and other-than-human beings in *Mean Spirit*. This transformation of property into kinship reconnects the Osage community to pre-colonial ways of subsistence. Thus, without giving all the responsibility or authority of cultivating and, maybe even, reinventing relations that are not based on private property to Indigenous nations, Indigenous artists, scholars, and activists such as Hogan offer visions of what non-property-based relationships can look like.

While this essay has focused on the Osages in Oklahoma, the way we relate to the land is constitutive of how we define citizenship, build our economy, and relate to one another across the globe. That the notion of private property is central to human relations, especially in the Euro-Western part of the world, is further emphasized by such contemporary social justice movements as Black Lives Matter or feminist protests, since we still fight against the legacies of belonging to groups of people who used to be property and who still suffer from the disenfranchisement that the status of humans-as-property produced. Considering the extractive, capitalist economy and society that private property generates, it hardly seems the most sustainable way of relating with the land and each other. We therefore need relations that are not based on own-

ership, profit, and extraction; instead, we must learn to decolonize our relationships.

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