e-ISSN 2420-823X

English Literature
Vol. 10 — Num. 1 — Gennaio 2024

Memory Carriers and Intergenerational Kinship in Indigenous Climate Change Fiction
Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017)

Teresa Botelho
Nova University of Lisbon, Portugal

Abstract The concept of anthropogenic climate change, in its most simplistic interpretation, implies that all humanity is collectively responsible for the present threats to planetary sustainability. This unquestioned discourse of collective responsibility also facilitates frames of understanding that isolate older generations and burden them as a whole, blaming them for the construction of a life model that has led to the present crisis, a discourse challenged by postcolonial and environmental justice literature and in particular by Indigenous fiction. A discussion of two novels, *The Swan Book* (2013) by the Waanyi Australian writer Alexis Wright, and *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) by the Métis Canadian writer Cherie Dimaline, scrutinises how they create alternative frames presenting older adults in scenarios of environmental devastation as carriers of memory that are agents in the construction of the spirit of resilience and resistance of young characters.

Keywords Climate change fiction. Environmental justice. Intergenerational gap. Indigenous literature. Dystopia.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-18
Accepted 2023-11-25
Published 2024-02-06

Open access

Citation Botelho, T. (2023). "Memory Carriers and Intergenerational Kinship in Indigenous Climate Change Fiction: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* (2013) and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017)". *English Literature*, 10(1), 19-36.

DOI 10.30687/EL/2420-823X/2023/10/001

1 Introduction: Climate Change and the Generational Gap Discourse

Matthew Schneider-Mayerson has argued that most of the early popular climate fiction failed to respond to the many challenges of addressing the pending crisis by portraying it primarily as a problem "for human beings in general – the monolithic and flattened 'we' of *homo sapiens*" (2019, 945),[1] ignoring the unjust distribution of responsibilities, vulnerabilities, and impacts. He thus proposed a reflection on the influence of a simplified reading of the frames invoked in accepted and influential discourses about the looming emergency. This critical engagement implies scrutinising the uncritical use of the concept of the Anthropocene, the proposed term that identifies a geological age in which humans have become a dominant force shaping Earth's climate and ecosystems.[2] This scientific proposition considers the collective agency of humans, seen as a species entangled and not separated from Nature, an 'us' that, in the words of Dipesh Chakrabarty "stumbled into being a geological agent" (2009, 210) through its collective actions and decisions, especially those related to the creation of an industrialised civilisation driven by fossil fuels.

But seen from a different temporal frame, this interpretation of collective human agency grounded in a deep history of species relations on Earth may seem to suggest, as Jason W. Moore argues, that all humans are to be blamed, retrospectively, for decisions they did not make, resulting in a dispersal of responsibility that elides "decisive questions of difference among humans, and how that difference is constituted through relations within the web of life" (2017, 595). This sense of collective blame, symbolised by the iconic slogan in Walt Kelly's poster issued for the first Earth Day in 1970 – "We have

1 Schneider-Mayerson's article discusses only two American works that seem to corroborate that reading, namely Nathaniel Rich's *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013) and Kim Stanley Robinson's *Science in the City* trilogy (2004; 2007; 2015).

2 Although the term has been widely accepted by geological scholars since it was first proposed by Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene E. Stoermer (2000), the dating of the starting point of this geological epoch has been far from consensual. Crutzen and Stoermer pointed towards the second half of the eighteenth century, coinciding with James Watt's invention of the steam engine, although, considering this date "somewhat arbitrary", they left open the possibility that "alternative proposals can be made" (2000, 18). Alternatives proposed since then vary significantly, from attributing its beginning to the Agricultural Revolution (Ruddiman 2003) to identifying the starting point of the Anthropocene with the post-WWII Great Acceleration (Zalasiewicz et al. 2011; McNeill, Engelke 2016). This hypothesis was recently validated by stratigraphers from the Anthropocene Working Group, who, in the summer of 2023, identified the chemicals and minerals in the sediments of Crawford Lake, in Ontario, Canada as evidence that the "golden spike" that marks the shift from the Holocene to the Anthropocene coincides with the 1950s acceleration of fossil fuel burning, widespread use of fertilisers, and the presence of radioactive plutonium associated with nuclear weapons tests (Voosen 2023).

met the enemy and he is us" (Moore 2019, 53) – has been systematically problematised by scholars from diverse fields (notably from postcolonial and environmental justice studies) who have raised pertinent questions not only about the different layers of responsibility for the crisis, but also about universalised visions of global threats. Chakrabarty's assertion that, in the long-term future, all humans will be equally vulnerable and that there will be no "life boats for the rich and the privileged" (2009, 211) may reveal itself to be accurate. However, all present evidence allows us to predict that now and soon, as Ursula Heise has argued, ecological risk scenarios will "superimpose themselves on and help reinforce existing structures of social inequality" (2008, 149).

Evidence of this uneven distribution of responsibility and risk seems irrefutable. According to a 2020 study by the Stockholm Environmental Institute, the carbon emission inequality between and within countries is staggering. 1% of the most affluent humans are responsible for twice as much carbon emission as those produced by the poorest 50% in the 25 years (1990-2015) studied (Kartha et al. 2020). Concurrently, the impacts of climate change already visible are affecting and will probably continue to affect mostly those who contributed less to the crisis and are less likely to be able to apply effective mitigation measures. Studies on the dramatic consequences of irreversible permafrost melting on Indigenous communities in the Arctic (Mardikian, Galani 2023) and of the effect of prolonged droughts on cycles of crop failures and rapid desertification patterns in Sub-Saharan Africa (Toulmin 2009) exemplify this reality.

Even when critical analyses do not embrace alternative terms such as Capitalocene, proposed by Moore, or Plantationocene or Chthulucene,[3] offered by Haraway, and accept that there may be different communicational intentions in the unquestioned use of a sense of 'we' as a global actor in public discourses, they cannot ignore the

3 The term Capitalocene, resulting from a critique of the Anthropocene mainstream rhetoric that can be traced back to Malm and Hornborg (2014), and first theorised by Moore (2017), does not question the core geological concept, namely the reading of humans as a geophysical force that disrupts the dualism between Man and Nature, but proposes an alternative reading of that collective actor and a different periodisation, that has as a point of departure the beginning of colonialism and the emergence of a "historical capitalism as a world-ecology of power, capital and nature, dependent on finding and producing Cheap Natures" (Moore 2017, 595). A similar teasing of the cultural and historical simplicities and generalisations behind the Anthropocene discourses is at the heart of the alternative terms Plantationocene and Chthulucene. While the former examines the legacy of a long series of "devastating transformations of diverse kinds, of human-tended farms, pastures and forests into extractive and enclosed plantations mostly relying on slave labour" and "other forms of spatially transported labour" (Haraway 2015, 162), the latter decentres humans from "the ongoing multispecies stories of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times in which the world has not finished and the sky has not fallen – yet" (Haraway 2016, 55).

fact that this tendency to attribute an undifferentiated collective responsibility for the degradation of our shared environment also facilitates frames of understanding that homogenise particular generations and blame them as a whole for being the architects of a life model that has led to the present crisis. This suggestion of collective generational guilt, present, above all, in the Great Acceleration framing of the Age of the Anthropocene, which situates its inflexion point in the post-WWII age of economic growth, is frequently predicated on two entangled premises summarised by Gareth Davis, namely that "consumption now creates costs for future generations" and that therefore "mitigation by emission reduction requires the current generation to pay the costs of a benefit that future generations will receive" (2020, 267). Treating intergenerational justice as a transactional process assumes that all older people are a homogeneous entity, whichever way you define that category. In some media representations of climate action youth groups, these may appear to be directing their message towards a global generation of "greedy geezers" – a term first coined in the late 1980s (Fairlie 1988) to describe older citizen/voters who are accused of selfishly demanding short-term benefits "at the expense of longer-term social investment" (Greer et al. 2021, 40).

However, this stereotypical reading of intergenerational tensions obfuscates several pieces of counterevidence. It ignores that although voting pattern studies in many European countries show less inclination of older citizens to vote for Green Parties (Litchin et al. 2023), more senior citizens from high emission-producing countries have been active participants in protests usually associated with younger generations, such as the UK-based Extinction Rebellion and Insulate Britain, and have set up climate action groups, such as the American Grey is Green network and the Elders Climate Action.

On the other hand, several studies show that the intergenerational divide is a myth in many high-energy-consuming societies. A 2021 study of the attitudes across generations in the United Kingdom, for example, shows that, contrary to the expectations created by the "intergenerational moral storm" narrative (Gardiner 2006), the majority of baby boomers are slightly more inclined to feel that the climate crisis justifies significant changes to contemporary lifestyles (74%). In addition, there were almost identical levels of agreement across questions about individual readiness to make sacrifices to reduce the impact of fossil emissions (Duffy 2021). These results are not necessarily common to all major emission societies. Cross-generational surveys of urban residents in different continents reveal that while generational blame is a common thread, intergenerational

community-based and creative practices increasingly challenge that narrative[4] (Diprose et al. 2019).

Literature that represents scenarios of a world damaged by environmental threats has sometimes deliberately engaged the intergenerational blame motif. One of the most significant examples of that trend is John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019), where the young protagonist, about to start his compulsory two-year stint as a 'Defender' of the protective wall that surrounds Britain, blames "the olds" for "fucking up the world" (55) and for being responsible for "the Change", the environmental disaster that had caused drastic sea rising levels and extreme weather phenomena across the globe. But when postcolonial literature addresses the complexities of these links of causality and responsibility attribution, it frequently adopts a different logic, pointing out how unfair it is to blame older generations with little to no agency for decisions that were, in fact, forced on them by the aggressive pressure of corporation-government alliances and from which they did not benefit. The Cameroonian writer Imbolo Mbue's novel *How Beautiful We Were* (2021) presents this different approach. Its intergenerational story develops over forty years and is set in a small village in a nameless African country that could stand for diverse national experiences. It depicts the devastating impact of oil spills on the environment, leading to the depletion and degradation of nature. Parents and elders are helpless as they witness their children dying every day due to the untreated toxic waste resulting from the oil spills. They had once naively welcomed the activity, convinced it opened an escape door from poverty.

Whereas contemporary postcolonial novels about environmental destruction, such as Mbue's, tell stories about the slow violence of petro-imperialism that render visible the environmental injustices hiding behind paradigms of generational guilt attribution, other works of fiction that respond to different patterns of dispossession and identity erasure tend to offer distinctive readings of intergenerational relations grounded in an affirmation of collective cultural memory. This is the case of works authored by Indigenous authors from English-speaking countries (United States, Canada, New Zealand, Australia) who write against a history of effacements promoted by states that have failed to "fully recognize the nationhood of Native collective existence… despite the longevity of the ties that connect these communities to place" (Gilio-Whitaker 2019, 24).

The following discussion will focus on how intergenerational interdependencies are woven in the construction of scenarios of both

4 The study covers three industrial cities in three continents – Jinja in Uganda, Nanjing in China, and Sheffield in the UK.

environmental and cultural loss in two Indigenous[5] novels – *The Swan Book* (2013) by the Waanyi Australian writer Alexis Wright and the young adult novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) by the Métis Canadian writer Cherie Dimaline, both set in future worlds already damaged by climate change.

In her discussion of Indigenous climate change literature, Shelley Streeby argues that the most relevant contributions to the genre by female Indigenous authors assume defiance of literary genre boundaries and approach the narrative through a creative investment in the deep associations between accumulated "place-based knowledge, and storytelling traditions [...] connecting ecological and climate change literature to a spectrum of cultural practices inextricable from activism" (2022, 203). While that may be true for the examples Streeby examines, namely the classic *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) by Robin Wall Kimmerer (Potowatomi Nation), the speculative novels that I will discuss in this article are set in a dystopian post-climate apocalyptic future and focus on the trauma of losing that knowledge and the impulse to recover what had been forcibly erased. These processes inform the intergenerational dynamics of survival in a hostile environmental and political world. This background explains why older generations tend to be represented as agents of change, rather than obstacles, in fictional worlds where the survival of Indigenous communities depends on the retrieval of collective knowledge and practices – understood here as the "webs of signification" that can explain "beliefs, relationships of kinship, relations with nature and ways of living" (Arias 2017, 1).

In both Streeby's and Kimmerer's novels, the catastrophic impacts of climate change are shaped by the temporalities of the experience of Indigenous communities. As Kyle Powys Whyte points out, Indigenous peoples do not always share the mainstream "imaginaries of dystopian or apocalyptic futures when they confront the possibility of a climate crisis" (2018, 226), since the linear narrative of climate destabilisation on which they are based contradicts their own experience of a history of constant change, marked by "different forms of colonialism, that have destroyed their "links with place and familiar ecosystems" (226). As a result, Indigenous peoples have already experienced the impacts of climate change that many non-Indigenous people dread, albeit caused by violent colonial human action that led to "ecosystems collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic dislocation and cultural disintegration" (226) rather than global warming.

5 The adjective is used here as a general term to designate the identity of peoples who inhabited lands before the arrival of British colonisers. Its use or that of the alternative terms 'First-Nations' or 'Aboriginal', applied in the same sense in Canada and Australia, does not imply any sense of essentialist homogeneity, but a common pattern of historical experiences.

The destruction of this nature-based model of sustainability, which Paula Gun Allen described as acknowledging "the essential harmony of all things" and seeing "all things as being of equal value in the scheme of things", allowing "all animals, and minerals (the entire biota, in short) the same or even greater privileges than humans" (1992, 56-7), is reflected in an approach to time that problematises linearity and interweaves past and current dystopian experiences. These "spiralling temporalities", to use Whyte's term for the Anishinaabe perspective on intergenerational time, provide a frame that allows Indigenous subjects who share that approach to consider themselves "as living alongside future and past relatives simultaneously as we walk through life" (2018, 228-9). A perspective that views past and present as interdependent and concurrent facilitates the construction of intergenerational kinships that accentuate the role of older generations as carriers of semi-lost knowledge and, thus, as potential agents of recovery.

These two motifs – the ever-present violence and effacement of the past in a future climate crisis that is not new for those who have suffered a similar experience of cultural and historical disruption and a loss of sustainability knowledge that can only be healed by intergenerational interaction – are at the core of the two novels under discussion, both set in landscapes of ecological disaster that are new for some humans but not for the Indigenous protagonists.

2 Indigenous Loss in Devastated Futures: *The Swan Book*

In *The Swan Book*, Alexis Wright's third novel, the author revisits the theme of environmental degradation, conflict, and resource exploitation that she already approached in *Carpentaria* (2006) but deploying the mode of speculative fiction. The novel, set in Wright's ancestral Waanyi land in the Gulf of Carpentaria in Northern Australia, roughly one hundred years from now, intersects a historical map of aggression and dispossession of sovereignty against those who had lived in those lands for 50,000 years before the arrival of the first Europeans and the radical damage caused by global warming and the ensuing wars. In this fictional future, climate change has already destroyed most of Europe, turning the Northern Hemisphere descendants of the colonial settlers into stateless and homeless nomads, suffering what had already been endured long before by guardians of Country, a term that for the aboriginal communities "describes conceptions of land and its complex interrelations with human and non-human beings, containing both their knowledge systems and the notion of reciprocal relations of care" (Gleeson-White 2016-17, 29).

The young Aboriginal Oblivia Ethyl(ene) is at the centre of the multi-layered novel, which Sefton-Rowston describes as a "pastiche of

metanarratives" (2016, 363), interweaving different textualities from the realist to the metaphoric, the allegoric, the mythic, and the folkloric. After suffering an act of sexual aggression, she falls into the underground bowels of a giant eucalyptus tree, where she remains asleep, forgotten by all, until she is rescued a decade later by an elderly European climate refugee, Bella Donna of the Champions, the sole survivor of a group of destitute exiles whom a black swan guided to the shores of Australia. The story of Oblivia, who was forgotten by everyone who knew her, and the aggression she suffered serve as an allegory for the traumas caused by the Australian policies of compulsory separation of children from their parents and communities, which were aimed to promote identity reconfiguration.[6] Bella Donna accommodates Oblivia, who refuses to speak to anyone, near a swamp that had once been a lake around which an Aboriginal community had lived for centuries. The once pristine lake has been damaged by climate change-driven sandstorms and by rotting junk and toxic waste dumped on it from the skies. Later in the narrative, Warren Finch, a member of the Brogla Nation, becomes the first Aboriginal president of Australia. His people have learned to accept anything offered to them, saying "yes, yes, yes to anything on offer – a bit of assimilation, a bit of integration, a bit of giving up your own sovereignty" (116). Warren claims the still silent Oblivia, whose first-person perspective dominates some chapters, as his wife without her consent. Oblivia's traumatic experience of Warren's attempts to change her, in a city where the only thing she recognises is the wild garden lurking through the cracks in the pavement, eventually leads her to escape towards the North in an attempt to return to her homeland. On this journey, she is guided by black swans who have become her kin. They communicate with her without any hindrance, as her silence is no obstacle to communication.

Besides the multispecies kinship symbolised by the protective tree that embraces Oblivia and keeps her alive and by the swans that are her constant companions, there are some interconnections with Indigenous cultural and historical experiences that the narrative addresses and that propose alternative views of climate change and generational responsibility. The most significant is how it presents the environmental devastation known as the 'Dust Cycle' as two juxtaposed disasters. The "caretakers" (9), the Aboriginal people who were responsible for the lake, experience the first dust storms, which

6 This policy, which began in 1869, with the passing of the *Aboriginal Protecting Act*, authorised the removal of Indigenous children from their parents. It lasted until the 1970s. According to the *Bringing Them Home* report (1987), the number of children from the Stolen Generations who were taken from their parents to be 're-educated' in state and church institutions is not precise, but it is estimated to have been around 100,000 (cf. Haebisch 2017).

transform the lake into a swamp, as a double invasion: first the sand and then the army, which dumps the rotting junk collected elsewhere on their ancestral home. It is the second incursion that breaks the sense of precarious autonomy they had experienced before, when "they felt secluded in their isolation, even invisible to the outside world" (8). Alarmed by this military presence, they temporally flee into the bush. When they return, the first thing they notice is the "audacity of the floating junk" (10) in the lake that, as they are told, no longer belongs to them as their temporary flight has cancelled their Native Title.[7] But this combined attack on their land does not destroy the ancestral connection of the "stubborn" owners. They stay, "sticking to the earth of the ancestors, even though they knew well enough that the contaminated lake causes bellyaches, having to eye each cup of tainted water they drank from the lake, but drinking it anyway" (11).

Since the caretaker elders had no responsibility for the double crisis that destroyed most of the ancestral environment, it can be argued that *The Swan Book* interrogates the generational blame trope through the filter of a cultural experience of dispossession. The novel adds a second textual disruption to this paradigm by portraying the old European refugee who lands on the Waanyi territory. Although Bella Donna of the Champion may seem to have been designed to represent the typical Northern Hemisphere's selfish and careless consumer of resources, her function in the narrative is not limited to that. Instead, she plays the role of a storyteller and memory creator who connects the local community to the global climate crisis and links the past with the present.

Welcomed with some curiosity by the local Aboriginal community, the strange woman "as old as the hills" (50), who owes her life to a swan, tells stories that make sense of what her audiences have already perceived but cannot contextualise. Through her, they understand that what was making their lives worse – turning what was left of their lake into a "parched paper" landscape filled with sand that they could not heal as the weather "flipped sides" shifting seasons (17-18) – was not unique to their land. Through her, they learn how "when the world changed, people changed" (6). She assumes some guilt when she describes her country of origin as one "where people of the modern world once lived happily, by doing more or less nothing, other than looking after themselves from one day to the next to fuel the stories of their life, but they were *finished now*" (25). Still,

7 This can be read as an allegory of the policy of government direct control in Aboriginal prescribed areas, introduced by the *Northern Territory Emergency Response Act* of 2007, which introduced several controversial regulations and control measures in Aboriginal lands under the pretext of stopping alleged patterns of family violence and child abuse. The Act was repealed in 2012.

when she explains the catastrophe that finished them, that nuance is drowned by the brutality of its effect:

> One day some devil, not a person but a freak of nature, went to war with her people. *Old woman what kind of freak was that*? Well? Swamp people wanted to know, had a right to know. She looked startled, as though she had been asked to describe the inexplicable, of what happened to people affected by climate change in wild weather storms, or the culmination of years of drought, high temperature and winds in some countries, or in others, the freezing depths of prolonged winters [...]. Listen to what I say: Cities, towns, homes, land as well as animals and crops, were flattened and could be no more. (25)

From her, they hear that once "Mother Nature had become mother of catastrophe, of flood, fire, drought and blizzard" (6-7), "poverty people" like herself "had to walk herdlike, cursed from one border to another, through foreign lands and seas" (17), turned into "refugees marching onwards like deer would through winter steppes to nowhere" (27). And through her stories, they understand their attachment to their damaged place even better, saying to themselves that compared to these "new gypsies" like Bella Donna, they were luckier: "They had a home. Black people like themselves had somewhere, whereas everywhere else, probably millions of white people were drifting among the other countless stateless, millions of sea gypsies, looking for somewhere to live" (23).

For Oblivia, starved of cultural memories that only Aboriginal Elders could have passed on, Aunty Bella Donna opens horizons not only to the lost worlds she could not have imagined but to the interspecies connections that had always been part of her missing heritage. What Bella Donna had learned about swans, she passes on to the young girl as she tells her stories of the way they "fly, soaring above the swamp, crashing to the ground, taking flight again", feeds them, talks and dreams of them, leaving a legacy that will help Oblivia reject the material emptiness of the city into which her President husband would drag her. It is guided by swans who never leave her side that she escapes the Northern urban landscapes to return to what is left of Country, in a gesture of fragile hope of a dreamed restoration of a land that still contains promises and that the recovery of knowledge that started with Bella Donna´s stories of interspecies kinship might heal.

3 Memory and Intergenerational Survivance: *The Marrow Thieves*

In *The Marrow Thieves*, a young adult speculative novel set in Canada in the near future (around 2050), a land dramatically altered by the impacts of an apocalyptic environmental crisis, stolen pasts and recovered legacies are also mediated by elders, who act as agents of what Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor called survivance, understood as "an active sense of presence over absence, deracination and oblivion [...] the continuance of stories, not a mere reaction, however pertinent" (2008, 1). In an interview given shortly after the publication of the novel, Cherie Dimaline explains how her story about people who had already lived through an apocalypse, surviving another, was constructed by "putting together two different ideas: that Indigenous people's survival has been based, in part, on the ability to keep dreaming/hoping and using story to walk culture forward, and the understanding that cultural survival is as imperative as physical survival, and, in fact, is intertwined" (Diaz 2017).

The fifteen-year-old Métis boy Frenchie narrates the novel's future dystopian vision. The first-time readers encounter the teenager, he and his older brother are alone, running north from an undisclosed danger through a landscape where devastated cities that used to have a unique name have become instead a direction – "West City, Northern Metropolis, Southern Township" (Dimaline 2017, 12). When the true reason for their panicked flight is disclosed, they hide in a tree house in the forest near Southern Metropolitan City, which used to be Toronto. They are trying to evade the Recruiters, agents of Canada's Department of Oneirology, whose job is to capture First Nation individuals and take them to Residential Schools. At this early juncture of the narrative, the novel highlights the intersections between past abuses against First Nation communities and the climate disaster futurities. Thus, it establishes the central roles of memory and storytelling.

Frenchie's recollection of a conversation between his parents reveals that these twenty-first-century schools were based on the old residential school system:[8] "they used to try to break our people to begin with, way back" (15). Whereas in those days breaking the cultural identity and sovereignty of the First Nations meant kidnapping children from their parents and communities and forbidding them to use their language, sing their songs, and follow their cultural

8 Residential Schools, sponsored by government-supported religious institutions, were established after 1880 to isolate Indigenous children from their language and culture and force Euro-Christian values on them. In total it is estimated that around 150,000 Inuit and Métis children were forced to attend these schools and that around 6,000 of them died in their premises. The last school was closed in 1996, and Prime Minister Stephen Harper issued an official apology to the First Nations in 2008.

traditions, in the narrative the term is used to conceal an even more predatory and violent practice. In this post-apocalyptic world, where so much had been taken away by climate disasters, the majority of the population of Canada had lost their ability to dream, leading to waves of sadness and depression. The realisation that Indigenous people were still able to do it (and therefore to hope) had led the authorities, after concluding that this unique capacity hid deep inside the essence of their bodies, to create a process of medical bone marrow extraction that killed the unwilling giver but allowed the receiver to dream again, thus turning the Indigenous bodies into products that could be harvested and reinventing the Residential Schools as deadly laboratories.

Escaping North, hiding in the forests from bands of Recruiters, this fleeing-for-survival is also not new but an instance of the "spiralling temporalities" proposed by Whyte. Before Frenchie and his brother leave, their sick mother tells them that "[t]here were generations in our family where all we did was move [...] first by choice, then every time the black cars came from town and burned out our homes along the roadside. Now the cars are here again" (21). Thus, in the once popular town where they parted from their mother and where the lake that made it famous was sheer poison, blocked by a fence, "there were no Indians left anyway" (22).

When the Recruiters catch Frenchie's brother, the boy's desperate, lonely flight leads to an unexpected haven when a small band of survivors finds him. The group consists of four boys, two girls and two adults – Miigwans, a middle-aged Anishinaabe man who had escaped from a School but is haunted by the belief that his Cree husband had been taken, and old Minerva, who carries a powerful gift: the ancestral language of her people that she never lost. The group also heads northward, hoping not only to help each other survive but to find a home and heal, recovering the stories and memories stolen long ago.

As they follow their perilous paths, living as hunter-gatherers, evading not only the Recruiters but also the occasional informers ready to betray them, the cohesion of their informal kinship is enhanced by the transmission not only of practical knowledge but also of cultural and historical memories that the elders share with the youngsters, a tool of survivance without which healing and restoration cannot happen. Samuelson and Evans argue that "empowerment through reconnection to knowledge systems and ways of being (old-timey) both accounts for what has been lost to colonial infrastructures, while also creating conditions for a collective resurgence" (2022, 275), and this is the process the novel engages through the teachings of the old memory carriers.

While on the run and in permanent danger, the group establishes a teaching system. The youngsters are divided into two rotating groups to learn two different sets of practical skills needed for

nomadic survival (ancestral techniques of hunting and homesteading), but another kind of knowledge transmission complements this, this one feeding their dreams of a different future by bringing the erased past into their lives. From Miig, they hear "Story", the assemblage of their nation's half-forgotten historical experiences. As Frenchie explains, Miig's job was

> to set the memory in perpetuity. He spoke to us every week. Sometimes Story was focused on one area, like the first residential schools. [...] Other times he told a hundred years in one long narrative, blunt and without detail [...] Sometimes we gathered for an hour so he could explain treaties and others it was ten minutes [...] But every week we spoke, because it was imperative that we know. He said it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive. (36)

Through "Story", the teenagers learned the impacts of the climate apocalypse on the planet and the Anishinaabe, when their slow cultural recovery was interrupted:

> once we honored the pain, and left it on the side of the road. We moved ahead. We were back. [...] Then the wars for the water came. America reached out and started sipping on our lakes with a great metal straw. And where were the freshest lakes and the cleanest rivers? On our lands, of course. [...] The Great Lakes were polluted to muck. It took some doing, but by the time California was swallowed back by the Ocean, they were fenced off, too poisonous for use. [...] The Water Wars raged on, moving north seeking our rivers and bays, and eventually, once our homelands were decimated and the water leached and the people scattered, they moved on to the towns. (36)

After ten years, the water wars were ended by international treaties and agreements, Miig adds, but "the Anishinaabe were scattered, lonely and scared. On our knees again, only this time there was no home to regroup at" while "the rest of the continent sank into a new era", plagued by rising waters, tectonic shifts, constant rains and diseases that killed half the population (37).

These Story interludes, which, like the personal Coming-to stories of the young characters, are presented as independent chapters, function, as Patrizia Zanella points out, as "narratives of continuity, and adaptability that provide the young protagonists with a sense of pride and hope" that prepares them "for their role of future ancestors" (2020, 179), a gathering of knowledge that braids the present with the past and claims the cultural sovereignty that has long been denied.

If the youngsters, whose numbers expand, receive this knowledge of what they could hardly gather by other means from Miigwans, it is from old Minerva that they receive the gift of words that had been taken away from them. It was their first introduction to Anishinaabemowin, one of the ancestral Indigenous languages the author described as "being shaped after the waters, the hills and the features of their landscapes" (Diaz 2017). These words that Minerva begins to pass on to the teenagers have a power that none of them suspects even when, like Frenchie, they repeat their sounds with reverence and enchantment: "Nishin. Nishin. Nishin.[9] I turned the word over in my throat like a stone; a prayer. I couldn't add breath to, a world I wasn't willing to release. It made my lungs feel heavy, my heart grow light" (Dimaline 2017, 51).

However, the secret power of the ancestral language, "the miracle of Minerva", is only fully revealed when she is captured by the Recruiters and sings in her native language throughout the bone marrow extraction process, disrupting it by the use of a language that the wires could not transfer. And as "every dream Minerva has ever dreamed was in the language" (188), the extraction system fails, the computers burn, and the structures of the Residential School where she has been held collapse. This gesture of self-sacrifice (she lets herself be captured to distract the Recruiters from the rest of the group) turns out to be an act of powerful resistance. Language that carries dreams and memories is the key to survival and restoration.

That is why, at the end of the novel, after the group of runaways meets organised resisters that include members of other First Nations and non-Indigenous allies with whom they plan to reconstruct what had been broken, all understand that one of their most important tasks is to reconstruct the languages some elders still remember and to write down all the stories they can recall. Anchored in this belief is the idea that, once they have accumulated the lost knowledge not only of language and "Story" but also of the intimate relations with the land, they can dream of a hopeful future. In the future, the group will return to restore those Great Lakes, which had been poisoned during the water wars, to their former glory:

> We have the knowledge, kept through the first round of these blasted schools, from before that, when these visitors first made their way over here like angry children throwing tantrums. [...] When we heal our land, we are healed also. (208)

So, they will be prepared to inherit the knowledge of their elders and become the memory keepers of the future.

9 In Anishinaabemowin, Nishi means 'good'.

4 Reconfiguring Anthropocene Temporalities

Dystopic climate change literature by Indigenous authors reconfigures the customary timeframes of the Anthropocene and challenges the intergenerational oppositions that some climate crisis and risk discourses foreground. The two novels gesture towards what Grace Dillon identified as "the possibility of an optimistic future, by imagining a reversal of circumstances" (2012, 8) and suggest the presence of alternative frames for understanding time and experience. These frames identify continuity and interdependence rather than generational fault lines. They respond to the long-lived experience of cultural and environmental violence through a sense of kinship that transcends the human and encompasses nature in all its forms.

Seeing living time as overlapping, so that everyone is aware of being at the same time an ancestor and a descendent, and all living involving what was, what is and what will be, also grounds a vision of intergenerational memory, where cultural knowledge, always under threat of effacement and carried by elders, is seen as a source of survivance and renewal, turning older generations into allies rather than adversaries of the next generations. In this framework, the impending climate crisis is, as Inuit environmental activist and author Sheila Watt-Cloutier says, "yet another rapid assault on our way of life [...] which cannot be separated from the first waves of change and assaults that have come our way", but one which, as the characters of *The Marrow Thieves* believe, they can survive, using the memories of their accumulated intergenerational knowledge to heal the land and themselves.

Bibliography

Allen, P.G. (1992). *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Arias, A. (2017). "Indigenous Knowledges and Sites of Indigenous Memory". *Transmodernity*, Spring, 1-17. https://escholarship.org/content/qt6mw7x7v1/qt6mw7x7v1_noSplash_4e2f24ae0ebf6071aeae09ee000745c2.pdf?t=quw9si.

Chakrabarty, D. (2009). "The Climate of History: Four Theses". *Critical Inquiry*, 35(2), 197-222. https://doi.org/10.1086/596640.

Crutzen, P.; Stoermer, E.F. (2000). "The Anthropocene". *IGBP's Global Change Newsletter*, 41, 17-18. http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f1832132347017758000 1401/1376383088452/NL41.pdf.

Davis, B.G. (2020). "Climate Change and Reversed Intergenerational Equity: The Problem of Costs Now, for Benefits Later". *Climate Law*, 10, 266-81. https://doi.org/10.1163/18786561-10030002.

Diaz, S. (2017). "Cherie Dimaline on Erasure, the Power of Story, and *The Marrow Thieves*". Interview. *School Library Journal*, 2. https://www.slj.

com/story/cherie-dimaline-erasure-power-story-marrow-thieves.

Dillon, G.L. (2012). "Imagining Indigenous Futurisms". Dillon, G.L. (ed.), *Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1-12.

Dimaline, C. (2017). *The Marrow Thieves*. London: Jacaranda.

Diprose, K. et al. (2019). *Climate Change, Consumption and Intergenerational Justice: Lived Experiences in China, Uganda and the UK*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Duffy, B. (2021). "Who Cares about Climate Change: Attitudes Across the Generations". *The Policy Institute. King's College/ New Scientist*. https://www.kcl.ac.uk/policy-institute/assets/who-cares-about-climate-change.pdf.

Fairlie, H. (1988). "Talkin' 'bout my Generation". *The New Republic*, March 28, 19-22.

Flood, J. (2019). *The Original Australians: The Story of the Aboriginal People*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Gardiner, S.M. (2006). "A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption". *Environmental Values*, 15(3), 397-413. https://doi.org/10.3197/096327106778226293.

Gilio-Whitaker, D. (2019). *As Long as the Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Gleeson-White, J. (2016-17). "Country and Climate Change in Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*". *Australasian Journal of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology*, 6, 29-38.

Greer, Scott L. et al. (2021). "Ageing Equally: Politics, Health and Solidarity". *Ageing and Health: The Politics of Better Policies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 38-58.

Haraway, D. (2015). "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin". *Environmental Humanities*, 6(1), 159-65. https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-3615934.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Heise, U. (2008). *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environment Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Haebisch, A. (2017). "Reflections on the Bringing Them Home Report". Marczak, N.; Shields, K. (eds), *Genocide Perspectives V. A Global Crime, Australian Voices*. London: Ubiquity Press, 26-42.

Helon, H. (2010). *Oil on Water*. London: Penguin.

Karpf, A. (2020). "Don't Let Prejudice Against Older People Contaminate the Climate Movement". *The Guardian*, January 18. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/18/ageism-climate-movement-generation-stereotypes.

Kartha, S. et al. (2020). "The Carbon Inequality Era". *Stockholm Environment Institute Research Report*. September. https://www.sei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/research-report-carbon-inequality-era.pdf.

Kimmerer, R.W. (2013). *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*. London: Penguin.

Kimmerer, R.W. et al. (2017). *Let Our Native Voices be Heard*. Indigenous Support Letter to the March for Science. https://sites.google.com/view/indigenous-science-letter.

Lanchester, J. (2019). *The Wall*. London: Faber and Faber.

Lichtin, F. et al. (2023). "Generational Replacement and Green Party Support in Western Europe". *Electoral Studies*, 38(June), 1-10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2023.102602.

Malm, A.; Hornborg, A. (2014). "The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative". *The Anthropocene Review*, 1(1), 62-9. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291.

Mardikian, L.; Galani, S. (2023). "Protecting the Arctic Indigenous Peoples' Livelihood: The Potential of Regional Human Rights Law and the Law of the Sea". *Human Rights Review*, 23(3), 1-24. https://academic.oup.com/hrlr/article/23/3/ngad020/7237938.

Mbue, I. (2021). *How Beautiful We Were*. New York: Random House.

McNeill, J.R.; Engelke, P. (2016). *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene since 1945*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.

Moore, J.W. (2017). "The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of Our Ecological Crisis". *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44(3), 594-630. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036.

Moore, J.W. (2019). "Capitalocene and Planetary Justice". *Maize*, 6, 49-54.

Rich, N. (2013). *Odds Against Tomorrow*. London: Picador.

Robinson, K.S. (2004). *Forty Signs of Rain*. New York: Bantam Books.

Robinson, K.S. (2007). *Fifty Degrees Below*. New York: Bantam Books.

Robinson, K.S. (2015). *Sixty Days and Counting*. New York: Bantam Books.

Ruddiman, W.F. (2003). "The Anthropogenic Greenhouse Era Began Thousands of Years Ago". *Climatic Change*, 61, 261-93. https://doi.org/10.1023/B:CLIM.0000004577.17928.fa.

Samuelson, A.J.; Evans, B. (2022). " 'Real Old-Timey': Storytelling and the Language of Resurgence in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*". *Studies in the Novel*, 54(3), 274-92. https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2022.0023.

Schneider-Mayerson, M. (2019). "Who's Odds? The Absence of Climate Justice in American Climate Fiction Novels". *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 26(4), 944-67. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isz081.

Sefton-Rowston, A.L. (2016). "Hope at the End of the World: Creation Stories and Apocalypse in Alexis Wright's *Cartenteria* and *The Swan Book*". *Antipodes*, 30(2), 355-68.

Streeby, S. (2022). "Indigenous and Black Feminist Knowledge-Production, Speculative Science Stories and Climate Change Literature". Johns-Putra, A.; Sultzbach, K. (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Climate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 203-13.

Thunberg, G. et al. (2020). "At Davos We Will Tell World Leaders to Abandon the Fossil Fuel Economy". *The Guardian*, January 10. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/jan/10/greta-thunberg-davos-tycoons-fossil-fuels-dismantle-climate-crisis.

Toulmin, C. (2009). *Climate Change in Africa*. London: Zed Books.

Whyte, K.P. (2018). "Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change". *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, 1(1.2), 224-42. https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848618777621.

Wright, A. (2013). *The Swan Book*. London: Constable.
Vizenor, G. (2008). "The Aesthetics of Survivance: Literary Theory and Practice". Vizenor, G. (ed.), *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1-23.
Voosen, P. (2023). "Anthropocene's Emblem May be Canadian Pond". *Science*, 381(6654), 114-15. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adj7016.
Zalasiewicz, J. et al. (2011). "The Anthropocene: A New Epoch of Geological Time?". *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A*, 369, 835-41. https://doi.org/10.1098/rsta.2010.0339.
Zanella, P. (2020). "Witnessing Story and Creating Kinship in a New Era of Residential Schools: Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*". *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 32(3-4), 176-200. https://doi.org/10.1353/ail.2020.0023.