

Decolonizing the Anthropocene: ‘Slow Violence’ and Indigenous Resistance in Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*

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Abstract Through a reading of Cherie Dimaline’s 2017 young adult novel *The Marrow Thieves*, a survival story set in a futuristic Canada destroyed by global warming, this article explores the conceptualization and reimagination of the Anthropocene in contemporary postcolonial and Indigenous theory and fiction. Firstly, I will argue that literary representations of climate change can be complicit in producing hegemonic strands of Anthropocene discourse that consider human destructiveness and vulnerability at undifferentiated species level. Secondly, I will suggest that the novel’s apocalypse reveals the processes of colonial violence and dispossession that have culminated in the eruptive event of environmental catastrophe, rather than portraying a story of universal and disembodied human threat that conceals oppression against Indigenous people.

Keywords Cherie Dimaline. Climate fiction. Indigenous knowledge. Slow violence. Apocalypse.

Summary 1 Decolonizing the ‘Anthropos’. – 2 A Silencing Apocalypse. – 3 Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*.



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1 Decolonizing the ‘Anthropos’

In the past two decades, climate change and its effects have been articulated in a range of literary works and have especially become major trends in anglophone fiction. Since then, a lot of literary criticism has explored the cultural challenges of writing climate fiction, and the ecopolitical value of environmental literature. Environmental humanities scholars such as Ursula K. Heise, Adam Trexler and Adeline Johns-Putra have been increasingly investigating the main challenges faced by authors of climate fiction, such as the more-than-human complexity of climate change, the novel’s anthropocentric tendencies, the planetary scale and the slowly unfolding pace of human environmental impact.

This article aims to investigate the extent to which literary imagining has been complicit in determining what counts as crisis, nature, human and planetary, and in producing hegemonic strands of Anthropocene discourse that consider human destructiveness and vulnerability at undifferentiated species level, de-emphasizing moral responsibilities. Through a reading of Cherie Dimaline’s Young Adult novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), I will explore how the notion of the Anthropocene is challenged and reimagined in contemporary postcolonial and Indigenous theory¹ and fiction. I argue that besides casting a new light on the relationship between climate change, colonial and neo-colonial violence and structural inequalities generated by intersecting systems of oppression, Dimaline amplifies the marginalized and forgotten experiences of those who are already experiencing the climate apocalypse.

Before approaching the novel, it will be necessary to introduce the current debate about the Anthropocene and its literary representations. The term Anthropocene, denoting the current geological age characterized by a significant human impact on global ecosystems, was first introduced in 1980 by the American biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, and subsequently popularized in 2000 by atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, together with Stoermer. The 35 members of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), an interdisciplinary research group established in 2009 to investigate, evaluate and critically analyze the still informal geological time unit, have identified July 16th 1945, the time of the world’s first nuclear bomb explosion at Alamogordo, New Mexico, as the possible beginning of the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al, 2014).

¹ As argued by Colorado-born citizen of the Cherokee Nation Daniel Heath Justice (Justice 2018, 8), the capital ‘I’ “affirms a distinctive political status of peoplehood, rather than describing an exploitable commodity, like an “indigenous plant” or a “native mammal”. The proper noun affirms the status of a subject with agency, not an object with a particular quality”.

Drawing upon multiple Indigenous scholars who posit that the Anthropocene is a continuation of practices of extraction, dispossession and environmental transformation that started five hundred years ago and are still ongoing, rather than a new event, Heather Davis and Zoe Todd argue that the question of when the Anthropocene began is of the utmost importance and opens up diverse political implications. To begin the project of decolonizing the Anthropocene, they advance a dating of the Anthropocene that goes beyond its current universalizing (read: Eurocentric) framing, and places the ‘golden spike’ that might mark the advent of the epoch at 1610. Before them, geographers Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin had suggested that among the various proposed dates two might be described as ‘golden spikes’ (more precisely, Global Stratigraphic Section and Points, or GSSPs): 1610 and 1964. While the authors refer to the latter approach as the ‘bomb peak’, what is more important for the present discussion is that the former is named the ‘Orbis’ hypothesis, from the Latin for ‘world’, to indicate the beginning of the modern world system and the globalization of trade that followed the intensive European colonization of the Americas. This period of large decline in human numbers (stirred up by diseases carried by Europeans, war, enslavement and famine) led to the near cessation of farming and reduction in fire use which vastly increased carbon sequestration: such decline of atmospheric carbon dioxide reached its minimum in 1610. According to the authors, what makes 1610 a suitable marker for the Anthropocene is also the “mixing of previously separate biotas, known as the Colombian Exchange” (Simon, Maslin 2015, 174) and the subsequent “geologically unprecedented homogenization of Earth’s biota” (Simon, Maslin 2015, 174-5).²

One of the most striking contributions of Lewis and Maslin’s approach is that it introduces the violent legacies of colonialism into the Anthropocene debate. Similarly, Davis and Todd underscore that proposing a 1610 start date, or placing the ‘golden spike’ at the beginning of the colonial period, allows us to trace the origins of the current ecological crises in a “proto-capitalist logics based on extraction and accumulation through dispossession” (Davis, Todd 2017, 764), that continue to shape our current epoch. Not only colonialism, particularly settler colonialism, was always about processes of terraforming, but it can also be read as an anticipation of the conditions of the Anthropocene:

² It should be stressed, though, that members of the AWG have questioned this proposed dating of the Anthropocene: they claim that “1610 is not an ideal stratigraphic marker for an epoch-scale boundary. It is one small dip of several in the Holocene epoch” and that “by the time of the authors’ other suggested date of 1964, the ‘great acceleration’ in human activity was well under way” (Zalasiewicz et al., 2015, 436).

The forced displacement that many tribal communities suffered involved adaptation to entirely new environments, to new climates, new ecosystems, new plants and animals. These processes of environmental transformation and forced displacement can be understood as climate change, or more broadly, a preview of what it is like to live under the conditions of the Anthropocene. (Davis, Todd 2017, 771)

Further, by casting a new light on the continuities between colonial exploitation and climate change, the authors question and challenge the depoliticizing universalism intrinsic in the term Anthropocene. The ‘Anthropos’ after which geologists have named the current epoch does not seem to have a class, a race, a gender and, by inviting us to think at undifferentiated species level, runs the risk of erasing power hierarchies. As such, this universalizing logic has led many scholars to prefer more revealing terms (such as Capitalocene [Haraway 2015; Moore 2015; Malm 2016], Eurocene [Grove 2016] or White Supremacy Scene [Mirzoeff 2016])³ over Anthropocene. As postcolonial ecocritic Rob Nixon (2011) suggests, both human responsibility for climate change and vulnerability to environmental harm are ‘unevenly universal’. Postcolonial, decolonial and critical race studies join hands with ecofeminism(s) to posit that the dichotomy between humans and nonhumans is developed alongside racial and gendered hierarchies of difference (Gergan et al. 2018) and to challenge the ‘racial blindness’ (Yusoff 2018) and gender blindness of the universal human subject (read: white maleness) implied in the concept of the Anthropocene.

2 A Silencing Apocalypse

As noted by Susan Watkins, contemporary white male-authored post-apocalyptic fiction “tends towards conservatism” (Watkins 2020, 1) and a desire and longing for the confirmation of the status quo. Ideas of human civilization rely on traditional patriarchal and imperialist values and gesture towards a future that is either a “restoration of what has been lost during the apocalypse” or a “nostalgic mourning for the past” (Watkins 2020, 1). Conventional post-apocalyptic imagination cannot seem to move beyond traditional gender narratives (namely: the protection of the heteronormative nuclear family unit and the obsession with the father-son bond). Similarly, post-apocalyptic climate fiction tends to revolve around men: the protagonists with decision mak-

3 “Given that the Anthropos in Anthropocene turns out to be our old friend the (imperialist) white male, my mantra has become, it’s not the Anthropocene, it’s the white supremacy scene” (Mirzoeff 2016, 123).

ing authorities are often white male heroes, mainly research scientists and government officials. Power and agency are divided along racial, ethnic and gender lines, and women are a silent backdrop and a site of innate vulnerability (Gaard, 2017; Mcgreavy, Lindenfeld, 2014). The most prominent examples are Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).⁴

If the "paradigmatic figure of the Anthropocene is the European or Western white male scientist", as Andrew Baldwin (2017) suggests quoting Yusoff (2018, 218), then climate fiction becomes a useful entry point for conceptualizing the meaning of the Anthropocene. The theme of climate justice is almost entirely absent from mainstream cultural representations of climate change; those whose agency is most constrained, however, are also the most vulnerable to the violence of climate shift, as well as the main victims.

Hsu and Yazell (2019) term 'structural appropriation' the process in which mainstream post-apocalyptic climate fiction projects into white American characters and readers the structural violence of climate catastrophe that has already been experienced by colonized, postcolonial and Indigenous populations. These future scenarios are often inhabited by small - and sometimes elitist - groups of survivors struggling to regenerate US culture and society, both endangered by a "third-worlding the West as a result of apocalyptic social collapse" (Hsu, Yazell 350). If, as Lawrence Buell has suggested, the "[a]pocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the environmental imagination has at its disposal" (Buell 1995 285), analyzing what these narratives conceal and obscure instead of revealing is an urgent task. Indeed,

rather than exploring environmental apocalypses that have already happened to populations outside the US (or to sovereign Indigenous nations putatively located "within" the US), post-apocalyptic fiction re-inscribes colonial and racial logics in imagined futures that, in many cases, have been unmoored from histories of race and empire. (Hsu, Yazell 2019, 349)

⁴ Conversely, many contemporary YA dystopian novels feature strong young women as central characters and attempt to deconstruct the idea of women as victims. When it comes to racial tensions, however, these novels are ambivalent at best and tend to perpetuate the hegemonic status quo, as highlighted by Mary J. Couzelis in *The Future is Pale. Race in Contemporary Young Adult Dystopian Novels*. Couzelis analyzes three contemporary dystopian novels recommended by the American Library Association's list for the best young adult books (Lois Lowry's *The Giver* [1993], Scott Westerfeld's *Uglies* [2005], and Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* [2008]), and observes that they "ignore race or present a monochromatic future implying that other ethnicities do not survive in the future or that their participation in the future is not important" (Couzelis 2013, 131).

In these narratives of apocalypse climate change is portrayed as a universal human threat that is experienced by a universal human subject (read: white Western man), silencing the manifold vulnerabilities to environmental catastrophes that have been conceptualized by global climate justice movements. The authors linger over a significant episode staged in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), when the father and son protagonists of the novel come across an old plantation house that has become a cannibal shelter. At first glance, this allusion seems to reveal that the novel is attempting to shed light on the structural violence of plantation slavery and thus explore the continuities between past, present and future apocalypse; however, Hsu and Yazell contend that this scene only serves to create a negative model for humanity that contrasts with the two protagonists. As noted by Eddie Yuen, what renders this language of catastrophe problematic is its being

‘apocalyptic’ only in the Hollywood sense: [...] devoid of ethical content. It says nothing of who we are and where we are going. (Yuen 2012, 678)

Besides being written from a universal and un-embodied position, stories about apocalyptic environmental disasters can be very escapist: they give the reader the illusion that a techno-science approach will solve the problems of climate change without addressing social injustices and without a radical change in the way we live and we consume. There is an urgent need for utopian visions of the future that do not focus on the advances of Western technology and economics but rather recognize the disparities accentuated by climate change and imagine hopeful futures where no one (human and non-human) is left behind.

With regard to narratives of ultimate destruction, fear caused by implausible stories struggles to galvanize action in response to climate change. As Stephanie LeMenager (2017) suggests, much of the climate fiction of Europe, white America, Britain and Scandinavia is indeed concerned with what Roy Scranton has termed ‘learning to die’ in the Anthropocene: according to Scranton one of the main challenges of the Anthropocene is learning to die not as individuals, but as a civilization, because it is too late to imagine effective responses to the challenge of living in the Anthropocene.

But who is learning to die as a civilization? As the Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Whyte makes clear in *Indigenous Science (Fiction) for the Anthropocene: Ancestral Dystopias and Fantasies of Climate Change Crises*, narratives of apocalypse that project climate crisis in “horrific science fiction scenarios” (Whyte 2018, 225) obscure ongoing oppression against Indigenous people, and conceal their perspectives on the continuities between colonial violence and climate change. “Having endured one *or many more* apocalypses” (236) and having suffered the most severe hardship arising from environmental transformation

due to different forms of colonialism, most Indigenous people live in a present which is already dystopian. Among such dreadful transformations Whyte mentions “ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (226) and a disrupted relationship with the nonhuman. A key feature of what the philosopher has defined “living Indigenous science fiction” (230) is the contrast between a spiraling time of constant change and ongoing crisis - which sheds light on the role of colonial dispossession in environmental transformation - on the one hand, and linear narratives of upcoming crisis and dire futures of climate change on the other.

3 Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*

The Marrow Thieves, a Young Adult novel published in 2017 by Métis writer, activist and member of the Georgian Bay Métis Community in Ontario Cherie Dimaline, is a survival story set in a futuristic Canada destroyed by global warming. In this age of “rising waters, tectonic shifts, and constant rains” (Dimaline 2017a, 26) white people have lost the ability to dream as a result of environmental trauma. The novel makes clear that at the foundation of this ecological crisis does not lie a hostile nature that is allegedly retaliating against human beings, but rather a neocolonialist and capitalist logic, its consumptive force and its turning of habitats, environments and bodies into resources to be subjugated, transformed and exploited. To save themselves from the water they have poisoned and from the air they have polluted so much that “the earth shook and melted and crumbled” (47), settlers turn to Indigenous people for salvation. North America’s Indigenous People are being hunted for their bone marrow, that could restore the dreams of the rest of the world:

Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That’s where they live, in that marrow there. (18)

The Marrow Thieves’ protagonist and first-person narrator is Frenchie, a fifteen-year-old fictional character from Cherie Dimaline’s community, as the writer confesses in an interview (Dimaline 2017b). Early in the novel, he escapes capture while his brother falls into the hands of government’s Recruiters, hunting Indigenous people to bring them to marrow-stealing ‘factories’. As he flees the Recruiters, he is rescued from Miig, a middle-aged Anishinaabe man, who invites him to join an intergenerational group of Indigenous people also seeking safety. Together, they struggle for survival, attempt to reunite with their loved ones, and take refuge from the recruiters.

Miig is the keeper of the so-called ‘Story’, the account of the events that led to the post-apocalyptic world. As much of the importance of

the novel lies in the articulation of stories that keep culture intact, I quote this 'Story' at length:

Anishnaabe people, us, lived on these lands for a thousand years. [...] We welcomed visitors, who renamed the land Canada. [...] We lost a lot. Mostly because we got sick with new germs. And then when we were on our knees with fever and puked, they decided they liked us there, on our knees. And that's when they opened the first schools. We almost lost our languages. [...]

Then, the wars for the water came. America reached up and started sipping on our lakes. And where were the freshest lakes and the cleanest rivers? On our lands, of course. Anishnaabe were always the canary in the mine for the rest of them. Too bad the country was busy worrying about how we didn't pay an extra tax on Levi's jeans and Kit Kat bars to listen to what we were shouting. [...] 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. [...] The water Wars lasted ten years before a new set of treaties and agreements were shook on between world leaders in echoing assembly halls. The Anishnaabe were scattered, lonely, and scared. On our knees again, only this time there was no home to regroup at. (Dimaline 2017a, 26)

What this passage implies is a strong continuity between the legacies of residential schools and past exploitation on the one hand, and a post-apocalyptic and post-climate change future on the other.⁵ Far from being implausible and disconnected from the material reality, Dimaline's dystopian world sheds light on the ongoing repetition of past and current traumas. By putting the story of residential schools through the lens of future, and through the lens of climate change, the novel's apocalypse reveals the processes of colonial violence and dispossession that have culminated in the eruptive event of environmental catastrophe, rather than portraying a story of universal and dis-embodied human threat that conceals oppression against Indigenous people. Further, Frenchie and the other members of the group do not respond to the dangers posed by climate change by 'learning to die' in the Anthropocene: they have already experienced such threat of loss – loss of

5 Residential schools were government-sponsored boarding schools established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture by adopting Christianity and speaking English or French, eradicating all aspects of Indigenous cultural and spiritual identity. The residential school system operated in Canada from 1876 to late 1990s, although the origins can be traced to as early as the 1830s. It is estimated (Miller 2012) that 150,000 First Nation, Inuit and Métis children attended residential schools, while the number of school-related deaths remains unknown (as many as 6,000 children may have died).

culture, loss of language, loss of lands. The story moves perhaps more slowly than other post-apocalyptic narratives on climate change, particularly in the YA field, but I read this slowness as a strategy to enlighten what Rob Nixon has termed the ‘slow violence’ of climate change, which is “neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental” and “occurs gradually and out of sight” (Nixon 2011, 2). The main casualties of slow violence are the unseen ‘poor’ (hence the title *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*) lacking resources. Nixon brings together postcolonial studies, ecocriticism and literary studies to address the representation of climate crises in an age when the media often chooses the instant sensational event over the long-term effects of disasters that are “anonymous and star nobody” (3).

Besides underscoring the links between colonization and the Anthropocene, the novel voices a more contemporary threat to land, language, culture and identity that might be increased by current vulnerabilities to climate change. Once again, this mirrors the history of settler colonialism in the Americas. In a future devastated by extreme weather events a huge part of the population would be displaced, and the so-called uninhabited traditional territory would be the first space to be reclaimed by the dominant society (Dimaline 2017b). As Miig recounts, indeed, after the advent of climate crises the Indigenous people of North America were removed from lands that “were deemed ‘necessary’ to the government, same way they took reserve land during wartime” (Dimaline 2017a, 88). Like land, Indigenous culture is under serious threat: when settlers find out that Indigenous marrow holds the cure for the rest of the world, their initial openness and real interest towards Indigenous forms of knowledge soon turns into appropriation and commodification:

At first, people turned to Indigenous people the way the New Agers had, all reverence and curiosity, looking for ways we could help guide them. They asked to come to ceremony. [...] And then they changed on us, [...] looking for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves. How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? (88)

After having asked for volunteers, they turned to history and built new residential schools where the marrow was forcibly extracted. I propose to read Indigenous ability to dream in spite of environmental threat as an allegory of Indigenous knowledge on climate change: a potential resource to be exploited and decontextualized instead of allowing Indigenous communities to make meaningful and contributions.

Kinship relations too are an explicit target of attack. As Colorado-born citizen of the Cherokee Nation Daniel Heath Justice underscores in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, one of the fundamental purposes of residential schools was to “dismantle Indigenous resistance

through a direct, sustained attack on families and the full network of relations and practices that enabled health and self-determination” (Justice 2018, 85). Marrow-stealing schools function in similar ways: every member of the group’s connections to family members has been broken by government’s Recruiters, with devastating results for all of them. Frenchie has first lost his father, then his mother, last of all his brother; Miig has lost his husband Isaac; Minerva, the elder of the group, was feeding her new grandson when the Recruiters “busted into her home, took the baby, and raped her” (Dimaline 2017a, 98). Bodies too, indeed, are sites of struggle, especially women’s bodies. The chronological order of the novel is sometimes interrupted by a number of flashbacks or ‘coming-to-stories’, in which some characters of the group share the circumstances that led to their separation from their communities. Besides Minerva, we get to know the background story of Wab, an eighteen-year-old girl who is also a rape survivor. The rape profoundly debilitates her body, to the point that she gives up running, having previously depended on her strong legs to survive and earn a living as a messenger. Through these female characters, referred to as “the dissenting voice to the way things are” (32), the novel stresses that bodies can carry indelible marks of a violence caused by intersecting forms of oppressions: racial, colonial and gender violence, but also the violence of climate shift.

It would be tempting to read *The Marrow Thieves* as a bleak story of dispossession and climate catastrophe; what needs to be stressed, however, is that Dimaline’s authorial focus lies in subverting toxic colonial stories about Indigenous people to voice persistence and survival. In an interview with *Publishing Perspectives*, talking about the Métis Nation on the Georgian Bay, forcibly removed from Drummond Island, she explains that

removals and relocations of a culture are specific to my community, although experienced in different ways by all Indigenous people. It’s part of our stories. And it’s a huge piece of why we share stories and keep that history intact, just as we’ve kept our culture intact. [...] My community has struggled and survived, and I’m enormously proud to be able to carry our voices forward. (Dimaline 2017d)

Similarly, Justice (2018) stresses the importance of stories of “that which continues, that which remains” (56), stories about the “now” that subvert dominant colonial narratives seeing Indigenous people as disappearing historical artifacts. North American Indigenous people are more than descendants of those who survived the apocalypse: they are “survivors, too” (5) of the apocalypse of colonization and environmental transformation that continues today. Furthermore, I argue that Dimaline’s choice to propose a story about the ‘now’ of climate change helps readers to deconstruct dominant apocalyptic

narratives concealing, obscuring and appropriating the structural violence of environmental crises that has already been experienced by colonized, postcolonial and Indigenous populations.

The Marrow Thieves is a healing story of survival where Indigenous youth are able to see themselves in the future (Dimaline 2017b). By the end of the novel, Frenchie and the other members of the group are still trying to escape from the Recruiters and learning to coexist with climate change and a drastically altered environment. As such, the novel does not propose a “naïve story of hard effort overcoming all struggles” (Justice 2018, 137); instead, it was

hard, desperate work. We had to be careful we weren’t making things up, half remembered, half dreamed. We felt inadequate. We felt hollow in places and at certain hours we didn’t have names for in our languages. (Dimaline 2017a, 214)

Yet they keep resisting because they have each other (“we were still hopeful. Because we had each other. New communities to form” 88), because they establish new forms of kinship and relationality that rebuild what settler colonialism has mutilated. As Justice suggests, it is telling that near the novel’s end Frenchie uses the word ‘family’ to describe his small group of fellow Indigenous runaways. In this context, the term serves to contrast colonial notions of ‘Indian blood’ – figured here as bone marrow – used by settler governments to define who is ‘Indian’, control access to Indigenous land, create standards of Indigenous authenticity and claim belonging without Indigenous kinship, as established by the Indian Act, first introduced in 1876. It is through resistant kinship practices which include inter-generational dialogue that the protagonists step towards a more hopeful future. As opposed to more mainstream YA narratives about climate change that focus on inter-generational conflicts and raise ethical questions about inter-generational responsibility (see *The Carbon Diaries* 2015 by Saci Lloyd), in *The Marrow Thieves* the relationship between ancestor and future generations strengthens the struggles of the present while providing “secret sources of agency” that empower protagonists and help them “survive the dystopia” (Whyte 2017, 231). We could think of relationship – with the human community, with ancestors, but also with the land and the more-than-human world – as the driving force of the novel. As Miig states near the novel’s conclusion,

we can start healing the land. We have the knowledge, kept through the first round of these blasted schools, from before that, when these visitors first make their way over here like angry children throwing tantrums. When we heal our land, we are healed also. (Dimaline 2017a, 193)

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