

# Preserving Cultural Heritage in Indigenous Pandemic Fiction: “Coming-to” Stories of Resistance in Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*

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**Abstract** This study intends to investigate Indigenous pandemic fiction through an analysis of *The Marrow Thieves* by Métis writer Cherie Dimaline. By depicting the journey of the Métis protagonist Frenchie, the novel explores Indigenous identity in a dystopian scenario where non-Indigenous people have succumbed to a plague affecting the ability to dream. Taking into consideration Jan Assmann’s concept of cultural memory and N. Scott Momaday’s depiction of the power of language, the paper would focus on the role of storytelling and linguistic heritage in the process of ‘survivance’ of Indigenous identity. The novel outlines dreams as spaces of resistance bound to the protection of cultural identity, by also revisiting the history of forced assimilation through the Residential School System. Frenchie’s journey presents the act of dreaming as the ultimate symbol of hope in a posthuman scenario where humankind has lost control over the Earth.

**Keywords** Cherie Dimaline. Indigenous pandemic fiction. Cultural heritage. Storytelling. Dreaming.

**Summary** 1 Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*: A Story of ‘Survivance’. – 2 Frenchie’s Journey. – 3 Memory, Knowledge and Survival: Miigwans’ Storytelling. – 4 Minerva and the Power of Language.



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## 1 **Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*: A Story of 'Survivance'**

In 1996, Gordon Residential School in Punnichy, Saskatchewan - the last federally-funded residential school in Canada - was permanently shut down, closing one of the most horrific chapters in Northern American history.<sup>1</sup> For more than a hundred and sixty years, Indigenous children all over Canada were forcibly removed from their families to eradicate their cultural identities. Since then, the trauma inflicted by the schools has become a central trope in Northern American Indigenous fiction, as a way of promoting resistance against genocide and forced assimilation.

The aim of Native American narratives of resistance is perfectly exemplified by the term 'survivance', which was coined by Gerald Vizenor, a member of the White Earth Nation of the Anishinaabeg in Minnesota:

Survivance is an active sense of presence, the continuance of native stories, not a mere reaction, or a survivable name. Native survivance stories are renunciations of dominance, tragedy, and victimry. Survivance means the right of succession or reversion of an estate, and in that sense, the estate of native survivance. (Vizenor 1999, vii)

As a blend of 'survival' and 'resistance', survivance describes "an active resistance and repudiation of dominance" (Vizenor 2008, 11). The importance of preserving cultural identity as a form of rebellion against colonialism was highlighted by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, who focused on Indigenous resurgence, namely "a set of practices through which the regeneration and reestablishment of Indigenous nations could be achieved" (Simpson 2017, 16). Resurgence is outlined as a means of severing ties with colonial thought, as it "maps a way out of colonial thinking by confirming Indigenous lifeways or alternative ways of being in the world" (Simpson 2011, 31). The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar further stressed the importance of storytelling as a decolonizing practice, an escape from cognitive imperialism

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**1** Residential Schools were religious government-sponsored boarding schools imposed on Indigenous children to eradicate their cultural identities through assimilation into Euro-Canadian culture. The students were forced to renounce their linguistic heritage and to convert to Christianity. More than 130 residential schools operated in Canada between 1831 to 1996, and an estimated 150,000 children - of whom approximately 6,000 died due to abuse and neglect - were forced to attend said institutions (Miller 2024). Between 2007 and 2015, the Government of Canada financially supported The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, providing those affected by the legacy of the Residential School System with an opportunity to share their stories.

that outlines new spaces of resurgence, this being a matter that the present study will explore at a later stage.<sup>2</sup> Resurgence is inextricably linked to the protection of cultural heritage. Whether they are transmitted orally or preserved in literary form, Indigenous stories of resistance assume an educational function by passing on cultural values to the knowledge-keepers of the future. Moreover, the idea of remembrance further outlines memory as a compelling force that empowers oppressed cultures to react in moments of crisis.

As was underlined by Jan Assmann, the importance of cultural memory goes beyond mere historiographical research. This specific kind of memory is linked to collective experience, shaped by society, and ultimately passed on through ritual ceremonies:

Just as an individual forms a personal identity through memory [...] so a group identity is also dependent on the reproduction of shared memories. The difference is that the group memory has no neurological basis. This is replaced by culture: a complex of identity-shaping aspects of knowledge objectified in the symbolic forms of myth, song, [...] even whole landscapes. Cultural memory circulates in forms of commemoration that were originally bound up with rituals and festivals. (Assmann 2011, 72)

Storytelling and language preservation can thus be highlighted as forms of resistance to assimilation, as they outline a safe space of dialogue and remembrance.

The process of drawing from past trauma to provide narratives of resistance to the survivors of the present clearly outlines the strategy chosen by the Indigenous author Cherie Dimaline. In her young-adult dystopian novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Dimaline offers a rewriting of Canada's colonial past by addressing the traumatic experience of the Canadian Residential School System. As a member of the Georgian Bay Métis Nation of Ontario, Dimaline is a writer and activist dedicated to sharing stories of her community to promote Indigenous survivance.<sup>3</sup> Storytelling plays a vital role

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**2** As Leanne B. Simpson clarified, "storytelling then becomes a lens through which we can envision our way out of cognitive imperialism, where we can create models and mirrors where none existed, and where we can experience the spaces of freedom and justice" (Simpson 2011, 33).

**3** As Dimaline clarified in the Author's Note to *Hunting by Stars* (2021), she refuses to envision herself as a spokesperson for the entirety of the Northern American Indigenous Communities, as the latter are complex, differentiated cultures, each of them with their own separate identity. However, her novels display a wide range of different Indigenous cultures to promote inclusion and representation: "I am from a specific community with a specific history and an ongoing culture. I cannot and do not speak for all of us-no one can. The fictional characters in these books come from a diversity of land, families, backgrounds, languages, teachings and identities. I wrote it this way

as a culture-preserving practice in the Métis community, as Dimaline addresses remembrance as a strategy to prevent future oppression. When referring to the forced relocation that shaped her community,<sup>4</sup> Dimaline points to the bond between cultural memory and storytelling:

These 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. There must always be connection to nation when we tell stories. (Dimaline 2017b)

Relocation is a distinctive trait of Métis cultural memory, a fragment of history that it is imperative to remember.<sup>5</sup> "We're generally raised in story. We have traditional stories that hold our teachings. A lot of our culture is held within our stories" (Dimaline 2017c). With this statement, Dimaline defines storytelling as a political act, "a process of reclaiming the story, to own the story, rather than be defined or storied by others" (Chan 2021, 171). As the author observed in a recent interview, storytelling is paramount in order to cope with the darkness of the past and to overcome the crisis of the present. While referring to the Covid-19 pandemic, Dimaline explained:

Stories are the nomenclature by which we categorize and understand our world. Stories are the language of truly understanding who we are, in this place, at this time. It's like dreaming. It's the way we process everything that's swirling around us [...] we are experiencing this pandemic, a new time of plague, and selfishly, I'm excited for the stories that are going to come out of it and that are already coming out of it. I know that they will help me process and really figure out the impacts on myself and on the world of what we've just survived. (Dimaline 2021b)

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to include as many of us as I could, to show us together resisting and holding one another close through a dark time, to reflect the readers who deserve to see themselves in print. If I got something wrong, I am truly sorry and will try to do better. If I got something right, please accept it both as a gift and a responsibility to honor our ongoing cultures" (Dimaline 2021a, 386).

**4** The author refers to the relocation of the Métis Nation on Georgian Bay from their ancestral lands on Drummond Island.

**5** Native American remembrance is closely connected to a sense of belonging to the land, the latter being seen as a living entity provided with agency. When referring to the bond between the land and Indigenous cultures, Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday defined the Indigenous oral tradition as "an utterance that proceeds from the very intelligence of the soil" (Momaday 1997, 85).

*The Marrow Thieves* is an example of dystopian fiction which explores an imaginary pandemic phenomenon, and it is the first volume of a trilogy that comprises a second novel at present, *Hunting by Stars* (2021). In a posthuman scenario<sup>6</sup> where humankind has been deprived of control over a planet devastated by climate change, the environmental decline caused by the exploitation of nature has led to a degeneration of the mind, “a plague of madness” (Dimaline 2017a, 53) to which Indigenous people are immune. As a matter of fact, humanity no longer retains the ability to dream, unlike Indigenous people:

Years ago, other people, not us, they kinda got sick. Really the whole world itself got sick [...] After the rains started and the lands shifted so that some cities fell right into the oceans, people had to move around. Diseases spread like crazy. With all this sickness and movement and death, people got sad. One of the ways the sadness came out was when they slept. They stopped being able to dream. (29)

As the world’s most powerful countries are wrecked by war for the control of the remaining resources, by famine and plague, the suffering of humankind clearly echoes the affliction endured by the Earth during thousands of years of abuse. As was pointed out by Chiara Xausa, the dystopian scenario portrayed by Dimaline discloses “the processes of colonial violence and dispossession that have culminated in the eruptive event of environmental catastrophe” (Xausa 2020, 94).

*The Marrow Thieves* is set in Canada, where the Residential School System has been reopened and readapted to a new purpose, namely ‘harvesting’ Indigenous people to provide a cure for the pandemic: “We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them, in the honeycombs of slushy marrow buried in our bones” (Dimaline 2017a, 90). Noticeably, in the novel the ability to dream is said to be harbored in the bone marrow. Indigenous people all over Canada are being forcibly taken to the schools for the extraction, a process that culminates in the death of the person ‘harvested’. By revisiting history, Dimaline exposes the cyclical presence of violence, tracing a parallelism between the horrors of the past and a fictional future devastated by greed, hatred, and genocide, that has much in common with our own present.

When referring to the residential schools, the novel never ceases to point at Indigenous resilience: “We suffered there. We almost lost

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘posthuman’ hereby refers to humanity’s loss of centrality in a scenario marked by the rise of non-human agency, and the subsequent elaboration of “alternative ways of conceptualizing the human subject” (Braidotti 2013, 37), based on the recognition of the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human ‘other’.

our languages. Many lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives. But we got through it [...] We returned to our home places and rebuilt, relearned, regrouped” (24). Likewise, residential school narratives usually convey an idea of “survival, resistance, and continuance of cultures against colonial policies aimed at the annihilation of Indigenous presence” (Eigenbrod 2012, 280). The tropes of survival and apocalypse are crucial to understand the extent of the repercussions of past trauma on the present. Indeed, the main characters of the novel seem to have “a blueprint for surviving the apocalypse” (Dimaline 2021b), as their cultures have already survived another apocalyptic event, namely settler colonialism. Despite the incessant reemergence of trauma, the novel is a “healing story of survival” (Xausa 2020, 97) addressing the exploitation of Indigenous bodies and cultures to trigger an inter-generational and inter-cultural dialogue.

## 2 Frenchie’s Journey

In a dystopian scenario where Indigenous people are constantly on the run from the Recruiters – the government officials appointed to pursue Natives – the teenager Métis protagonist of the novel Francis Dusome, alias ‘Frenchie’, tries to resist along with other survivors. As a young man who has never had the chance to grow up in a safe environment where Métis culture can flourish, Frenchie struggles to hold on to his heritage. Apart from his nickname, a reference to his mixed European ancestry,<sup>7</sup> Frenchie’s knowledge about his heritage is limited to general information about his ancestors, despite his longing to hold on to a culture that has been silenced for a very long time:

I was nicknamed Frenchie as much for my name as for my people – the Métis. I came from a long line of hunters, trappers, and voyageurs. But now, with most of the rivers cut into pieces and lakes left as grey sludge puckers on the landscape, my own history seemed like a myth along the lines of dragons. (Dimaline 2017a, 21)

Following the disappearance of his parents and the loss of his brother to the schools, Frenchie is rescued by Miigwans, an Anishinaabe

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<sup>7</sup> The Métis are one of the officially recognized Aboriginal peoples in Canada, along with Inuit and First Nations. The term ‘Métis’ is used to refer both to a specific community, the Métis Nation, and to communities of mixed Indigenous and European ancestry in Canada (Gaudry 2023). The term is controversial and complex, as it refers to a unique blending of Indigenous and European traditions and ancestry. Most of the Métis descend from French-Canadian fur traders and Native women, usually Cree, as the fur trade was an important business in the early stages of Canadian history (Lobo, Talbot, Morris 2016, 37).

man who welcomes the young boy into his family, an intertribal group of Natives. Non-Indigenous people are depicted throughout the novel as predators hunting Natives to preserve their ways of life. As human society crumples under the pressure of climate change, Indigenous people are living the nomadic life of the hunted:

After the cities crumbled off the coastlines, after the hurricanes and earthquakes made us fear for a solid ground to stand on, even now we were waiting for the planet to settle so we could figure out the ways in which we would be safe. But for now there was just movement, especially for us: the hunted trying to hunt. (46-7)

The Earth has been poisoned by the reckless actions of humankind, and the latter has been punished in return with plague and madness. The starting point of this never-ending cycle of suffering can be located in humanity's failure to recognize the land as a "system of reciprocal relations and obligations" (Coulthard 2014, 13), as a gift and not as property subjected to human will. This vision is exemplified by 'grounded normativity', namely a "place-based foundation of Indigenous decolonial thought and practice" (13) theorized by the Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard. Grounded normativity refers to Indigenous ethics and values that are inherently shaped by a profound connection to the land, and which recognize the reciprocity between Indigenous cultures and non-human subjectivities. Moreover, it promotes a nonexploitative relationship between the human and the more-than-human, as it indicates "the modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (13).

Through Frenchie's voice, the novel explores the protagonist's journey as he passes from innocence to experience. Gwen Rose classified *The Marrow Thieves* as an "Indigenous Bildungsroman" (Rose 2022, 8) that stresses the importance of connectedness and reciprocity.<sup>8</sup> Frenchie's journey towards adulthood is marked by the adoption of Indigenous philosophies and ways of knowledge which point at "the value of [...] land-based practices both for their protagonists and their readers" (15). One of the pivotal moments in Frenchie's life that defines his relationship with the land is a hunting session that involves

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<sup>8</sup> On the discrepancy between the European conception of Bildungsroman narratives and the Indigenous Bildungsroman, Rose clarifies: "Indigenous Bildungsromane integrate a specifically Indigenous theory of ethics through which cultural values which stress the development of the collective, as opposed to the European emphasis on the individual, are integral to the journeys to adulthood that otherwise qualify certain narratives as Bildungsroman" (Rose 2022, 9).

the presence of a moose. As the protagonist is hunting in the woods, he becomes aware of the vitality of nature:

The world out here was quiet, like the land was holding its breath. But if you listened, really put conscious action into listening, things began to sing. Insects with wings pirouetted somewhere above my prone head. From the hole where the tree had once held on to the earth came the sound of deep movement, maybe just the mud shifting. And a group of small birds chatted with some clipped formality in the pines on the other side of the clearing. (Dimaline 2017a, 48)

In this passage, the act of listening to otherness - that is, the non-human - requires the adoption of an "ethics of care" (Whyte, Cuomo 2015) towards the land, which comprises "approaches to moral life and community that are grounded in virtues, practices, and knowledges associated with appropriate caring and caretaking of self and others" (234). The quiet is suddenly interrupted by the sound of a moose wandering in the woods. Frenchie spares the animal, a prey that could have easily fed his family for weeks, because he realizes that due to his condition as a fugitive, he would have to discard most of the animal's meat to continue his escape. The protagonist resists the temptation of self-gratification, though he imagines himself, even if just for a moment, as "a long-haired warrior" (Dimaline 2017a, 49) returning to his family carrying the prize of victory:

This was me, the conquering hero, marching into camp with more meat than all of us could carry, taking the others back to field dress this gift. [...] This was my chance. But could we travel with this meat before it rotted? No. [...] So we'd be leaving half, at least half, behind to rot. (49)

Frenchie spares the moose because he understands the difference between sustenance and exploitation. The protagonist also rejects the western conception of the conquering hero, abiding instead by the protection of the delicate balance upon which the natural world rests, humankind included. The moose here appears as a symbol of endurance and survival, and its encounter with Frenchie moves the latter one step closer to adulthood.



### 3 **Memory, Knowledge and Survival: Miigwans' Storytelling**

We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them, in the honeycombs of slushy marrow buried in our bones. And us? Well, we join our ancestors, hoping we left enough dreams behind for the next generation to stumble across. (90)

With these words, Miig – short for Miigwans – introduces the theme of continuity. As one of the Elders of the family – along with Minerva, a character who will be thoroughly analysed in a further section of this study – Miig's responsibilities are not limited to ensuring the well-being of the community, but also comprise the protection of Northern American Indigenous cultural memory.

Every week the family gathers around Miig for a ceremony called 'Story', during which the Elder recounts the events leading to the environmental collapse of the planet and the rise of the plague. While also reminiscing on the history of Northern American Indigenous peoples with a specific reference to Canada, Miig establishes an intergenerational dialogue, thus confirming continuity as a fundamental part of survivance. Storytelling acquires such importance for Frenchie's family that every member is encouraged to share their own 'coming-to story', meaning the recollection of the events leading to the characters' estrangement from their families and the way they connected to their adoptive one. Through storytelling, everyone can claim ownership of their past and identity: "Everyone tells their own coming-to story. That's the rule. Everyone's creation story is their own" (79). With this statement – which recalls the tradition of Creation stories –<sup>9</sup> Miig highlights the generative power of words, and storytelling as an act of resistance against oppression. 'Coming-to stories' are "an act of agency as each person shapes and shares themselves without interference from others" (Horner, Muñoz, Petrone 2021, 13).

*The Marrow Thieves* outlines storytelling as a sacred act that requires intimacy, trust and respect, as "the story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story" (Smith 1999, 145). 'Story' is a moment of recollection during which the community gathers new strength:

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<sup>9</sup> As Kovach clarified, there are two kinds of stories in Indigenous epistemologies: "There are stories that hold mythical elements, such as creation and teaching stories, and there are personal narratives of place, happenings, and experiences as the *kókomos* and *mósoms* (Aunties and uncles) experienced them and passed them along to the next generation through oral tradition. Both forms teach of consequences, good and bad, of living life in a certain way" (Kovach 2009, 95).

We needed to remember Story. It was his job to set the memory in perpetuity. [E]very 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. (Dimaline 2017a, 25)

Memory, knowledge and survival: this triad exemplifies the intentions underlining Miigwans' storytelling, and it also highlights the role of remembrance in the survival of Indigenous lives and cultures. Noticeably, Paul Harland pointed out that "storytelling provides human beings with an evolutionary advantage. By passing on valuable information in a memorable and therefore repeatable form, humans can enhance their chances at survival" (Harland 2016, 594). Furthermore, Margaret Kovach highlighted storytelling as an intercultural practice, since it is not restricted to Indigenous knowledge systems: "Story is practised within methodologies valuing contextualized knowledge, such as feminism, ethnography, phenomenology, and narrative inquiry" (Kovach 2009, 96).<sup>10</sup>

In *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (1997), Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday explained the role of language and storytelling practices in the preservation of Northern American Indigenous cultures. The storyteller is a creator, and storytelling is outlined as an innate trait of humankind:

To tell a story in the proper way, to hear a story told in the proper way - this is a very old and sacred business, and it is very good. At that moment when we are drawn into the element of language, we are as intensely alive as we can be; we create and we are created. That existence in the maze of words is our human condition. Because of language we are, among all the creatures in our world, the most dominant and the most isolated. Our dominance is supreme, and our isolation is profound. That equation is the very marrow of story. It is a story in itself. We have no being beyond our stories. (Momaday 1997, 169)

Words retain strength, and those who engage in storytelling hold a position of power which exposes them to the danger of indifference or misunderstanding on the listener's side. The power of stories as spaces of resistance in further outlined in *Hunting by Stars*, where Miig confirms that "Story is a home, it's where we live, it's where we

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<sup>10</sup> About the Indigenous oral tradition, Kovach further clarifies: "Stories hold within them knowledges while simultaneously signifying relationships. In oral tradition, stories can never be decontextualized from the teller. They are active agents within a relational world, pivotal in gaining insight into a phenomenon. Oral stories are born of connections within the world, and are thus recounted relationally. They tie us with our past and provide a basis for continuity with future generations" (Kovach 2009, 94).

hold everything we'll need to truly survive - our languages, our people, our land" (Dimaline 2021a, 21).

#### 4 Minerva and the Power of Language

"Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That's where they live, in that marrow there. [...] You are born with them. Your DNA weaves them into the marrow like spinners" (Dimaline 2017a, 18-19). The exploitation of Indigenous people's bodies echoes the violence of colonization, as Natives are seen, once again, as a "resource to be exploited" (Xausa 2020, 95). According to Dimaline, dreaming represents the ability of holding onto hope, as it outlines spaces of survivance:<sup>11</sup>

When I started writing about dreams [...] I learned about the science behind them, oneirology, the study of dreams. We really can't process our thoughts without that secondary layer of dreams - I hadn't realized that. We literally need that safe space within ourselves to be able to process life. What a great metaphor for holding onto hope. (Dimaline 2021b)

In the novel, dreams outline spaces of resistance to colonial exploitation where Indigenous identity can flourish. Without the ability to dream, human beings are reduced to their corporeality, as indeed "a man without dreams is just a meaty machine with a broken gauge" (Dimaline 2017a, 88). The act of dreaming is presented as a "communicative sacred activity" (Million 2011, 315) that is linked to resurgence, and that also highlights the bond between the Canadian land and Indigenous peoples. As Dian Million clarifies, dreaming is linked to Indigenous survivance: "If we as the myriad Indigenous peoples have a gift to give the world, it may be our ardent belief and practice of dreaming, dreaming intensely and brilliantly against all odds" (331).

The studying of dreams as sources of knowledge on the inner life of individuals can be traced back to Freudian psychoanalysis, which presented dreams as products of the unconscious. It was then with psychoanalytic anthropology that dreams were finally perceived as gateways to understanding culture, linking the studying of dreams to ethnography (Plane, Tuttle 2014, 918). In *The Marrow Thieves*,

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<sup>11</sup> Dimaline also highlighted the role of dreaming in relation to the creative process, as the author declared that many of her stories have sprung from oneiric activity: "I do like to keep paper by my bed, because I don't want to lose the dreams. They start to dissipate quickly when you wake up [...] There are stories I've written that have started with snippets of dreams" (Dimaline 2021b).

dreaming is closely related to otherness, an element that can be traced back to the first colonial encounters between the European settlers and Indigenous peoples. As a matter of fact, the communal organization in the interpretation of dreams among Natives was a cause for concern for the first explorers of ‘The New World’, as was clarified by Mary B. Campbell:

Not only did the Jesuits regard the task of overcoming this belief as paramount to conversion, but they seem to have regarded it as an important first step in accomplishing that task to influence the *content* of these dreams, so that the sleeping Montagnais and Huron people they encountered in the earliest years of the mission would limit their nocturnal vision to visions of ‘God, Mary and the angels’ - that is, of purely spiritual substances. (Campbell 2013, 41)

In *The Marrow Thieves*, the bond between dreaming, memory, and language is exemplified by Minerva, the eldest of Frenchie’s family. This character is described as the spiritual guide of the group, a wise woman and a connoisseur of “the language” (Dimaline 2017a, 38). The specific language spoken by Minerva is never explicitly identified, as was pointed out by Anah-Jayne Samuelson and Vanessa Evans, who argued that the words spoken by Minerva can be traced back to Anishinaabemowin (Samuelson, Evans 2022, 279).<sup>12</sup> Throughout the novel, language is characterized by duality: it can be a world-shaping tool and an instrument of non-violent resistance, but also a potential weapon. Frenchie perceives “the language” as both soothing and empowering. As the protagonist is saved by Miig, he notices the comforting musicality of “the language”: “Voices. Voices with the pulled vowels and cut lilt of my father. Voices with the low music of my mother. [...] This was too beautiful a dream, even just in audio” (Dimaline 2017a, 15); and then, again: “The words from our language, like a prayer” (16).<sup>13</sup>

Just as Miig leads the group with courage, compassion, and wisdom, Minerva is the backbone of the family, not only because she is the eldest, but also for her knowledge of “the language”. This character highlights the bond between femininity and the transmission

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<sup>12</sup> Anishinaabemowin is an Indigenous language spoken from Manitoba to Québec, especially in the Great Lakes area, and it is part of the Algonquian language family (Horton 2023). As was suggested by Turner, Dimaline’s decision to not explicitly label the language is intentional, to highlight “the language’s ability to resonate across time and space” (Turner 2021, 121). On this matter, also see Samuelson, Evans 2022.

<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, English often conveys a negative rendering of the power of words, as it is linked to the forced assimilation of the residential school system. When referring implicitly to the Bible, Miig describes it as “a book that was like a vacuum, used to suck the [Indigenous] language right out of your lungs” (Dimaline 2017a, 107).

of knowledge, as she decides to teach ‘the language’ to the girls of the group. After initially deeming Minerva’s lessons to be uninteresting compared to Miig’s teachings, Frenchie recognizes language as a repository of culture and an instrument to hold on to his heritage. When thinking of a word in the language taught by Minerva, Frenchie points to the salvific power of words:

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. (39)

Minerva ultimately sacrifices herself to the schools to save her family, but, unexpectedly, she manages to survive the deadly process of bone marrow extraction. Her story becomes legendary, as she manages to resist the procedure in an astonishing way, by singing in the language:<sup>14</sup>

When the wires were fastened to her own neural connectors, and the probes reached into her heartbeat [...] she called on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors. She sang. She sang with volume and pitch and a heartbreaking wail that echoed through her relatives’ bones, rattling them in the ground under the school itself. Wave after wave, changing her heartbeat to drum, morphing her singular voice to many, pulling every dream from her own marrow and into her song. And there were words: words in the language that the conductor couldn’t process, words the Cardinals couldn’t bear, words the wires couldn’t transfer. [E]very dream Minerva had ever dreamed was in the language. It was her gift, her secret, her plan. She’d collected the dreams like bright beads on a string of nights that wound around her each day, every day until this one. (172-3)

Minerva’s song is so powerful that it sets the entire building on fire, interrupting the extraction process.<sup>15</sup> The Elder is ultimately killed by government officials, despite her family’s heroic attempt to save her

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**14** When underlining the role of storytelling in promoting cohesion and continuity, Kovach points at the different forms for transmitting knowledge, including singing: “Stories are vessels for passing along teachings, medicines, and practices that can assist members of the collective. They promote social cohesion by entertaining and fostering good feeling. In times past, as now, stories were not always transferred in lexical form, but through visual symbols, song, and prayer” (Kovach 2009, 95).

**15** The power of words is further remarked on in *Hunting by Stars*, where Minerva’s sacrifice underlines the dual function of language, that of salvation and of destruction: “The words were powerful. After all, Minerva had used the language to escape the machinery of the school, the one that had ended up burnt to the ground” (Dimasline 2021a, 141).

life. While providing an analysis of the element of water in *The Marrow Thieves* under the lens of ‘wahkohtowin’ – a specific Métis and Cree conception of kinship –<sup>16</sup> Christina Turner argued that “Dimaline combines blood and water in metaphor to invoke the power of Minerva’s song” (Turner 2021, 117). The words in the language, spreading like waves of power across the walls of the school, destroy a colonial symbol of oppression and underline the importance of remembrance.

In a study on the critical production of N. Scott Momaday, Anna M. Brígido-Corachán highlighted the “performative power of language” (Brígido-Corachán 2012, 64) in many Indigenous storytelling practices. Indigenous storytelling is seen as an act of creation in which words “have the potential to release certain sacred energies” (61), as they are “intrinsically powerful” (Momaday 1997, 15). As Momaday further clarifies, “language is the context of our experience. We know who we have been, who we are, and who we can be in the dimension of words, of language” (87). Minerva undoubtedly expresses herself through “speech acts that have the power to intervene in surrounding realities” (Brígido-Corachán 2012, 56). As Momaday suggests, words are powerful and magical, and both of these elements shape Minerva’s song:

Our stories explain us, justify us, sustain us, humble us, and forgive us. And sometimes they injure and destroy us. Make no mistake, we are at risk in the presence of words. Perhaps the greatest stories are those which disturb us, which shake us from our complacency, which threaten our well-being. It is better to enter into the danger of such a story than to keep safely away in a space where the imagination lies dormant. (Momaday 1997, 169)

With these words, Momaday once again presents storytelling as a sacred act of creation. Cherie Dimaline employs storytelling as a decolonial instrument of awareness against the perils of the Anthropocene, the latter being the expression of the colonial and ecological violence affecting both the natural world and Indigenous communities and cultures. As a geological era marked by human influence over the planet, in which “people and nature are dynamically intertwined and embedded in the biosphere” (Andersen, Hulgaard 2023, 301), the Anthropocene exposes the human threat to the planet’s ecology by means of the commodification of the non-human. In this prospect, storytelling practices promoting forms of place-based solidarity which highlight the reciprocity between the human and the more-than-human can spread awareness of the danger of an anthropocentric, colonial way of perceiving the Earth and its custodians.

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<sup>16</sup> Wahkohtowin is defined by Turner as “the Metis and Cree concept variably translated as ‘kinship’, ‘family’, or ‘relation’” (Turner 2021, 98).

Moreover, the novel highlights the importance of preserving memory through taking ownership of one's own story. Frenchie, Miig and Minerva embody the role of cultural memory in the process of survival of Indigenous peoples, also emphasizing the restorative power of telling stories. *The Marrow Thieves* is a celebration of Indigenous identities and cultures, which comes to an end with a hopeful message of resilience, as Frenchie decides to fight for his future:

I understood that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream. And I understood just what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of a dream, the bigger dream that held us all.

Anything.

Everything. (Dimaline 2017a, 231)

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