

SYLWIA BOROWSKA-SZERSZUN

INDIGENOUS MEMORY IN THE DECAYING WORLD:
CHERIE DIMALINE'S *THE MARROW THIEVES*
AND *HUNTING BY STARS**

Set in the near-future North America, *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and its sequel *Hunting by Stars* (2021) by Cherie Dimaline, a writer from the Georgian Bay Métis Nation, portray a dystopian, climate-changed, decaying world, which has nearly been destroyed by global warming. The setting of the novels is the world that entered a new era of a fully-fledged Anthropogenic crisis, not only in environmental but also in social terms. The population has been decimated, families have been torn apart, people suffer from infertility, but worst of all they stopped dreaming, which severely affects their physical and mental health. The only demographic group resistant to the virus of dreamlessness are Indigenous people, who are hunted for their bone marrow—a source of their immunity—by the “Recruiters” from the

SYLWIA BOROWSKA-SZERSZUN, PhD, University of Białystok, Faculty of Philology, Department of North American Literatures; e-mail: s.borowska-szerszun@uwb.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9764-3744>.

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Government of Canada as well as by ordinary citizens. Directed at YA readership, *The Marrow Thieves* follows a teenage Métis protagonist, Frenchie, and his companions struggling for survival and fleeing North to escape the system of “factories” or “clinics”, where the bone marrow of Indigenous people is forcibly extracted to provide a cure for the settler population. The core group consists of five boys, three girls, and two Elders (Miigwans/Miig and Minerva), most of whom are Cree, Métis, or Anishinaabe. In *Hunting by Stars*, Frenchie gets separated from the group and captured by the recruiters, which allows Dimaline to provide more insight into how the system works and explore difficult ethical choices related to survival and sacrifice.

In line with many Indigenous thinkers, activists and artists, Dimaline makes it clear that the environmental and social apocalypse envisaged in the novel is something new to the settler society, but not to Indigenous peoples, who have already experienced it as a result of colonial violence (Dillon 2012, 8; Gross 2014, 33; Whyte 2018, 224). As Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi) argues, the “hardships many nonIndigenous people dread most of the climate crisis are ones that Indigenous peoples have endured already due to different forms of colonialism: ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration” (Whyte 2018, 226). In *The Marrow Thieves* the environmental damage affects everyone, yet it is the Indigenous people who were removed from their ancestral lands to reservations first, and then relocated again due to the shortage of unpolluted water supplies affecting the settlers. Furthermore, it is explained that the network of clinics set up by the government to extract Indigenous bone marrow draws on the old residential school system (Dimaline 2017, 7). In their attempt to flee from the Recruiters and avoid “the schools”, many Indigenous families form temporary settlements along the roads that are referred to by elders as “New Road Allowance” (8). With this short reference, Dimaline again directs the reader’s attention to the long history of Métis peoples, often misrecognized due to the settler discourse of biological “mixedness” between whiteness and indigeneity (Andersen 2014, 26–58), who after experiencing dispossession, relocation and migration settled on road allowances and lived there despite marginalization.

While teenage protagonists cannot remember these events, they eventually become fully aware of the past atrocities, which puts their own life experiences in a wider perspective. This is mainly achieved through Miig’s Story, narrated as separate chapters and aimed to “set the memory in perpetuity” because “it was imperative that [the youngsters] know” and “make the kinds

of changes that were necessary to really survive” (Dimaline 2017, 25). In this article I aim to discuss Dimaline’s narrative in the context of sovereign memory and argue that the transmission of memory and knowledge through Story and everyday practices is presented in her novels as indispensable not merely for survival but for survivance (“to really survive”). Situating the nature of survivance in “native stories, natural reason, remembrance, traditions, and customs”, Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) states that it “creates a sense of native presence over absence, nihility, and victimry”, becoming a powerful tool of “renunciation of dominance, detractions, obtrusions, the unbearable sentiments of tragedy, and the legacy of victimry” (1). In my reading of Dimaline’s novels, I am also indebted to Celiese Lypka’s analysis of *The Marrow Thieves* as a powerful instance of Métis survivance novel, in which the protagonists who “have forgotten Métis practices and ways of being” (27) overcome the effects of colonization through “the processes of learning and putting into practice Indigenous storytelling rooted in landedness” (28).¹ While storytelling is vital for Indigenous memory and will be discussed here as well, my goal is to draw attention to other aspects of remembrance as represented in Dimaline’s narrative in order to situate it within a broader context of Indigenous memory.

Analysing the activist memory projects of four Indigenous female artists, May Chazan and Jenn Cole argue that Indigenous ways of relating to memory challenge the limitations of conventional settler modes of remembrance. Despite different approaches of the storytellers involved in these projects, there are certain similarities in the ways all four of them practice, access and circulate memory to reclaim sovereignty. Chazan and Cole demonstrate that sovereign memory involves creative or artistic practices, is rooted in the body, land-based, reciprocal and relational, and also future-oriented. Importantly, sovereign memory projects question the very idea of colonial archives, which deprive Indigenous stories of their original context and frame them within the time-span and perspective of settler narratives. As

¹ Despite being a recently published novel, *The Marrow Thieves* has already received critical attention. Childers and Menendez (2022) focus on the aspects of storytelling and spiralling time; Samuelson and Evans (2022) discuss Indigenous storytelling and language as tools of resurgence; Pravinchandra (2021) examines the novels as Indigenous counter-genetic fiction; Turner (2021) interprets water as key to anticolonial Indigenous resurgence; Zanella (2020) establishes storytelling as crucial for creating kinship relationships; Canella (2020) explains how the dystopian genre is used to address the issues of colonialism; Xausa (2020) focuses on Indigenous conceptualization of the Anthropocene.

Chazan and Cole observe, settler memory projects predominantly “fail to account for Indigenous ways of being, knowing and relating to memory” and show a tendency “to relegate Indigenous peoples to the past” (4). In contrast, Indigenous memory practices tend to re-story the past, celebrate the continuous presence of Indigenous peoples and remind them of who they really are. Thus, apart from remembering colonial oppression and violence, these projects focus on pre-contact times, continuity of cultural heritage and resistance as means of constructing identity that rejects the narrative of Indigenous absence and victimry. For instance, one of the participants finds it essential to remember who her people were before the invasion and to find ways not to identify herself with the subjugation. “I know that on the path to being whole,” Mojica explains, “remembering who we were in 1491 has been essential. And finding ways not to identify myself by virtue of those oppressions alone” (Chazan and Cole 2020, 9). In *The Marrow Thieves*, Miig’s Story plays a similar function and establishes the young listeners as descendants of people who lived “on these lands for a thousand years”, welcomed “visitors, who renamed the land Canada”, and successfully fought with them. In his storytelling Miig refers to residential schools as places where the Indigenous populations suffered, “lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives,” yet he simultaneously emphasises a recovery from the trauma:

We returned to our home places and rebuilt, relearned, regrouped. We picked up and carried on. There were a lot of years where we were lost.... But we sang our songs and brought them to the streets and into the classrooms.... And once we remembered that we were warriors, once we honored the pain and left it on the side of the road, we moved ahead. We were back. (Dimaline 2017, 23–24)

Accessing time beyond the lived memories of his listeners, Miig acknowledges the hardships and the pain their ancestors endured, but emphasises “moving ahead” to instil a sense of pride and resistance, which facilitates reclaiming identity outside of colonial frameworks.

What becomes apparent through the course of *The Marrow Thieves* is that Story, which functions as a memory device necessary for both community and individual identity formation, is dynamic. As Bruce Ballenger notes, “[a]t the heart of ‘oral transmission’ ... is the story and the memory of the story, but also the memories that change the story” (1997, 792). In Dimaline’s novels, such memories—which perhaps do not necessarily change but significantly contribute to Story—are structured as “coming-to-stories,”

through which individual characters relate their personal experiences before they joined the group of refugees. Sharing these personal accounts of survival is never forced; it is emphasised that “Everyone tells their own coming-to-story. Everyone’s creation story is their own” (Dimaline 2017, 78–79). Sovereignty of memory, its voluntary sharing, is thus at the core of the group’s ethics, which stands in vivid contrast to the coercive process of bone marrow extraction exercised by the settler community. Furthermore, shared memories not only become an important part of a larger Story—a form of collective memory (cf. Childers and Menendez 2022, 214–15), but also create mutual understanding and trust within the group, becoming crucial for the formation of family ties and friendships. Memories are thus strings that bind individuals together, which again aligns with the Indigenous conception of sovereign memory, perceived as “reciprocal and relational, networked across generations, throughout time, and among all beings” (Chazan and Cole 2020, 13).

Another quintessential aspect of sovereign memory projects noted by Chazan and Cole is the emphasis on the body as “a living archive” and “an integral source of knowledge and memory” (13), which is also prominent in Dimaline’s novels. The past of the protagonists is literally written on their bodies, which are often scarred and mutilated. For example, Wab, a nearly-18-year-old young woman, bears a huge scar, running from her forehead to her chest and covering one of her eyes. The origin of the scar remains a source of speculation for the group until it is finally revealed in Wab’s coming-to story, when it turns out that her face was cut by a man who then locked her in a broken walk-in freezer, where she was raped for a few days before she managed to escape (Dimaline 2017, 80–81). Wab’s scarred body is thus a living archive, providing “the documentation of gendered forms of violence” (Goeman 2017, 103), the documentation which remains meaningless until the woman shares her memory. It is also significant that Wab is perceived by the group members not as victim but as survivor—she is described as “movie star beautiful” (Dimaline 2017, 74), strong, independent, intelligent and caring. Her scarred body testifies to the colonial violence she endured and makes the erasure of this violence impossible; yet, it is also posited as a site of Native women’s “resilience, healing, and alternative conception of history and futurity” (Goeman 2017, 114). Refusing to define Wab by her past and the effects of her body violation, Dimaline shows her as pregnant at the end of the first novel—the physically and emotionally scarred woman is depicted as a bearer of a new life, and therefore a future for her community.

Fundamental to the novel is also the trope of the Indigenous body as a site of immunity to the dreamlessness disease. As Miig explains, “[d]reams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That’s where they live, in the marrow there.... You are born with them. Your DNA weaves them into the marrow like spinners” (18–19). The very ability to dream is thus central to indigeneity; it is something that is transmitted genetically. However, as one critic argues, the novel “dispel[s] any illusion that Indigenous belonging can be attained by claiming to possess so-called Indigenous DNA” (Pravichandra 2021, 138), which Dimaline emphasises by introducing the characters of “other Indians,” who “find other ways to fit in and get by” (Dimaline 2017, 117) in the system by betraying the values of their communities, collaborating with the Recruiters and turning in Indigenous people in exchange for personal safety. In fact, as Pravichandra argues, “the novel wrests indigeneity away from genetics and roots Indigenous distinctiveness in the practices that have enabled survivance” (2021, 141). These “practices” are not inborn, and must be learned within a community in which the memory of the old times is transmitted through generations. In *The Marrow Thieves* the youngsters learn the skills necessary for physical survival in the woods from Miigwans (hunting, trapping, building shelter, using weapons) and Minerva (caring for the homestead, skinning and preparing animals, cooking, making camps) (Dimaline 2017, 33–39). What is crucial for this transmission is a physical, bodily presence and the reproduction of knowledge that is based on the memory of lived experiences and rooted in the ways of the ancestors. Together with the skills necessary for physical survival, the youngsters learn from their Elders what they cannot remember themselves: “the old timey” customs (they braid their hair and build sweat lodges), oral history (Story) and snippets of the Anishinaabe language that they perceive as a real treasure. All these embodied forms of remembrance contribute to creating strong family ties among the people who are not related biologically—a sense of kinship which, as Daniel Heath Justice (2018) notes in *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*, is not “based on blood relation, but on shared histories and values” (170). Such kinship, he writes, is “about extra- or even non-biological cultural and community relationships, chosen connections and commitments, as well as political, spiritual, and ceremonial processes that bring people into deep and meaningful affiliation” (75). Dimaline’s novels present this type of affiliation as a key site of strength and resistance, more important in fact than genetic inheritance. This is emphasised particularly strongly in *Hunting by Stars*, when Frenchie is faced with an emotionally

charged choice between his new family and biological brother working for the Recruiters (Dimaline 2021, 243).

Like in other sovereign memory projects, in *The Marrow Thieves* the Land is also depicted as “an entity with distinct memories” (Dimaline 2017, 13) and functions as an alternative archive. “The stories are in the Land,” Mojica explains, “as long as the land is there, as long as the rivers are there, as long as we remain connected and open enough to be receptors and transmitters, the stories are there (Chazan and Cole 2020, 972). Her words resonate with the situation of Indigenous characters of the novel, who are left with the remains of the once thriving culture. Yet, Dimaline’s narrative strongly emphasises the connection to the Land as a core element of Indigenous identity and memory through her insistence that dreams are embodied not only in the Indigenous bone marrow, but also in the Land: “Where exactly do you think our dreams come from? My dreams are full of lakes and the small islands that skip across them like a heartbeat. They are all that I am. They are my land.... Our lands are who we are. That’s not something easily replaced” (Dimaline 2021, 134). The conclusions of both novels foreground the Land as a necessary precondition for starting anew. In *The Marrow Thieves*, the characters continuously head north in an attempt to find a safe haven, and eventually reach relative safety in the camp of the resistance group. Yet, this is just the first stage of the journey. “All we need is the safety to return to our homelands. Then we can start the process of healing,” the leader of the group explains, “[w]hen we heal our land, we are healed also” (Dimaline 2017, 179). Although *The Marrow Thieves* ends on a positive note, the very idea of return is questioned in *Hunting by Stars*, when it turns out there is nowhere to go back to. Experiencing even more pain and loss, the protagonists are chased out of Canada and at the end of the sequel find themselves in a totally new territory in the South.

While this might initially appear as a victory of the settlers, it is not. As Miig explains, borders are just “imaginary lines” for the Indigenous people and “[t]he only thing we have to worry about is who the original people are so we can honor the lands we are on. And if we do that, remember to keep doing that, they don’t win. *They never win when we remember*” (Dimaline 2021, 314, emphasis mine). The last line of this quote can be interpreted as a final message of Dimaline’s story: the settlers never win if the Indigenous stories and ways of being—that is, ancestors’ practices, ties of kinship, and the connection to the land—are remembered and passed on. The final scene of *Hunting by Stars* symbolically emphasises this continuity, when Rose,

Frenchie's girlfriend, decides to make a Jingle Dress for Ishkode, Wab's new-born daughter. Although Rose has never been to a *powwow* and seen a Jingle Dress herself, she knows the pattern from her grandmother and realises she can use the jingles carved by Minerva from tin cans and lids to make one in the future. Drawing on knowledge and artifacts she inherited from her female ancestors, both biological and non-biological ones, she is ready to pass on the memory to the next generation of women, embodied in Ishkode, the girl who would be loud and make "a sound like nothing else in the world" (323). This orientation towards the future aligns Dimaline's narrative with the body of artistic and creative practices that propagate sovereign memory as crucial for survivance. In all of them, reclaiming the past and grounding it within the framework of rich cultural heritage is a prerequisite for making not only vibrant Indigenous presents but also sovereign futures. As Chazan and Cole conclude,

Sovereign memory ... does not focus on colonial trauma, nor does it seek to insert Indigenous people and stories into state archives.... [It] is much more than this—it is memory that exists beyond confrontations with colonization; memory about and from Land, spirit, knowledge, gender, power, creativity and relationships. This is a powerful, future-oriented circulation of Indigenous memory. (2020, 975)

The Marrow Thieves and *Hunting by Stars* clearly reflect these observations. And the ultimate power of Dimaline's narrative—a story which grounds a possibility of flourishing in the future in the memory of past persistence, resistance and adaptation—lies in presenting memory not as a thing of the past, but as a tool with a potential to affect the future.

Dimaline's engagement with sovereign memory makes her storytelling appeal to young Indigenous audience as a narrative of *biskaabiiyang*, an Anishinaabe word denoting the process of "returning to ourselves," which encompasses "discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in the post-Native Apocalypse world" (Dillon 2012, 10). As Dimaline herself states in one of the interviews, her primary motivation behind choosing the framework of YA novel has been to achieve wide circulation in schools and empower her Indigenous readers: "I thought, perhaps arrogantly, that if Indigenous kids had this book, they would feel proud and less alone" (Dimaline 2019, 31). Her novels show no positive settler characters, point to the lack of shareable

future if the system colonialism remains intact, and are clearly meant to challenge settler memory frameworks. Yet, they also promote strong emotional involvement with the protagonists among both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, and consequently Dimaline's message seems to be directed at both groups. "If Canadian kids had it," she adds in the same interview, "they would have the chance to learn and live and love with us—in our ways" (31). Thus, the pathway out of the dystopian present may be available to both Indigenous and settler youth, but only if the latter fully acknowledge the impact of colonial invasion on the communities of the former and willingly learn from them. If memories, or the stories we tell ourselves about the past, can shape our future and create kinship ties, then perhaps it is not too late to act.

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Summary

The aim of this article is to read Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and *Hunting by Stars* (2021) in the context of Indigenous ways of relating to memory that challenge the limitations of conventional settler modes of remembrance and are crucial for Indigenous survivance. Situating the setting of the narrative within the framework of Native Apocalypse, I move on to examine the novels as acts of sovereign memory—a distinctly Indigenous conception of remembrance that is land-based, embodied, relational and future-oriented. Construed as survivance narratives directed at YA readership, Dimaline's novels firmly ground a possibility of Indigenous future in the memory of past persistence, resistance and adaptation. Simultaneously, they are meant to unsettle the settlers' conceptualization of the future, which is characterised by the avoidance of responsibility and the tendency to relegate the Indigenous people to the past.

Keywords: indigenous memory; indigenous literature; Canadian literature; young adult; speculative fiction

INDYGENNE PRAKTYKI PAMIĘCI W PRZEMIJAJĄCYM ŚWIECIE:
THE MARROW THIEVES I *HUNTING BY STARS* CHERIE DIMALINE

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest analiza powieści Cherie Dimaline *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) i *Hunting by Stars* (2021) w świetle indygennej praktyki pamięci, które nie tylko odbiegają od konwencjonalnych zachodnich sposobów upamiętniania, lecz również są kluczowe dla przetrwania ludów rdzennych i ich tradycji. Osadzając narrację Dimaline w kontekście apokalipsy rdzennych mieszkańców, przechodzę do interpretacji powieści jako aktów suwerennej pamięci — indygennej koncepcji pamięci, która jest usytuowana w konkretnym miejscu, ucieleśniona, relacyjna i zorientowana na przyszłość. Powieści Dimaline, skonstruowane jako narracje o przetrwaniu i skierowane do młodych czytelników, przedstawiają przyszłość jako głęboko zakorzoną w pamięci o przeszłości, podkreślając nieprzerwane trwanie, opór i zdolności adaptacyjne rdzennych społeczeństw. Tym samym podważają one te tendencje w konceptualizacji przyszłości, które charakteryzują się unikaniem odpowiedzialności za efekty kolonizacji oraz relegowaniem rdzennych wartości do przeszłości.

Słowa kluczowe: indygenna koncepcja pamięci; literatura indygennej; literatura kanadyjska; literatura młodzieżowa; fantastyka