"Seeing what might lie beyond": Hope and Indigenous Futurisms in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

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ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the role played by hope in an era of climate emergency, and how in Cherie Dimaline's (Georgian Bay Métis) prize-winning novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) hope not only emerges from surviving brutal genocidal and ecocidal historical experiences of settler colonialism and capitalism, but also from actively imagining a future that is Indigenous. In taking Dimaline's text as an example of how we can 'see what might lie beyond,' this essay considers the increasing impossibility of 'hope' in the face of climate emergency, how hope is itself refracted through individual and communal lived experiences, and how Indigenous forms of hope are inevitably and profoundly impacted by both genocidal colonisation and ongoing state-supported corporate ecocide on North American Indigenous lands. Through Dimaline's text, this essay explores how 21st century Indigenous North American fiction draws on contentious settler colonial capitalist histories of genocide and ecocide *and* on contemporary Indigenous experiences of ongoing colonisation, to look to the future. In this context, I assess *The Marrow Thieves* as an example of Indigenous Futurism: as a means by which hope can exist in the imagining of radically different decolonial futures that centre traditional Indigenous cultural knowledges and practices.

Introduction

Our experiences of hope in the face of an increasing climate emergency are determined in large part by who and where 'we' are. While we all experience a constant barrage of terrifying

images of climate emergency, our everyday experiences - of extreme weather and food production crises, rising temperatures and wildfires, droughts and floods, melting polar ice caps and rising sea levels - are dependent upon the historic experiences of the places where we belong and the peoples we belong to. We live in a world of inequality and inequity, where the privilege of some has long been built on the deliberate disadvantage of others, where 'natural' resources are hoarded from the majority for the exclusive use of the few, and where the climate emergency hits those least responsible for it the hardest, exacerbating ingrained inequalities even further. My use of the term 'we' therefore also challenges international climate discourse's representation of the current climate emergency as somehow equally 'shared'. Are our experiences of the climate emergency the same? Have we all experienced them at the same time, or to the same degree? 'Our' experiences are not equitable in any way, and I am acutely conscious of my own privilege as a white woman living in a 'first world' country (the UK) built on the riches of empire, racial capitalism and slavery, and working in a position of privilege (higher education) - even as my own experiences are inevitably filtered through the complex lenses of class, and gender. As Eric Gary Anderson notes, "the term *Anthropocene* falls short of naming who is doing what to whom," in part due to its "domineering universalism" (2021, 146) which deliberately obscures these longstanding inequalities and inequities.

This inequity is especially true of the experiences of those colonised by former and current imperial powers, whose experiences of oppression and dispossession continue in the 21st century because they remain colonised. For Indigenous peoples inhabiting the lands now known as the United States and Canada, the profound material, cultural, psychic, and physical damages wrought by settler colonialism were matched only by the brutal enactment of "anthropogenic environmental change" on those same groups (Whyte, 2017, 207). While these experiences were historic – including forced removal and relocation, and the destruction of resources as a means by which to 'control' Indigenous populations – they are also firmly contemporary: the imposition of contentious ecologically damaging projects upon Indigenous lands, such as the Dakota Access

pipeline, the Alberta tar sands, and a myriad other fossil fuel projects. For the majority of North American Indigenous peoples, therefore, "the Anthropocene is not a new event" but a "continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years" (Davis and Todd, 2017, 761). As Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) argues, historic Indigenous experiences of "ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration" (2017, 213) have resulted in Indigenous understandings of the 21st century climate emergency as the direct result of the ideologies, policies, and practices of settler colonial capitalism. The Anthropocene is an "*extension and enactment of colonial logic*" that is "intimately tied to the project of erasure that is the imperative of settler colonialism" (Davis and Todd, 2017, 769 original emphasis, 770). For the majority of North American Indigenous peoples, the climate emergency is thus "an unprecedentedly old catastrophe" (Whyte, 2018a, 9) precisely because the Indigenous peoples have "already…endured one *or many more* [anthropocenic] apocalypses" (Whyte, 2018b, 236, original emphasis). As Whyte comments, Indigenous responses to the 21st century climate emergency "are based on having already *lived through*" localised ecological devastation (2017, 213, emphasis added).

This notion of 'living through' is of crucial importance to my analysis here. I am interested in two related aspects: first, the increasingly contentious appropriation of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) by both western science and climate discourse; and second, how the experience of 'living through' earlier profound ecological change has influenced Indigenous thinking about the 21st century climate emergency. It is quite clear that Indigenous TEK is currently being appropriated by both science and climate discourse. While the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is happy to state that it "draws on enormously and respects indigenous knowledge the world over," because "indigenous knowledge systems and practices" are recognized internationally by climate scientists for their "resilien[ce]" to "many climactic changes," this statement openly fails to recognise the long

histories of colonisation that 'produced' such 'resilience.' And it also fails to recognise how the IPCC itself is acting to appropriate Indigenous traditional ecological knowledges (TEK) for a 'universalised' global benefit. As Rebeka Greenall and Elizabeth Bailey argue, there is a problem not only with "misrepresentation and misinterpretation," but also a drive to "distil" Indigenous TEK "down to ideologies that fit within and support Western science viewpoints" (2022, 4). For Melanie Benson Taylor (Herring Pond Wampanoag), this represents "the privatization of [Indigenous] cultural resources" (2021, 11), while Zoe Todd (Red River Métis) has stated that "'ontology' is just another word for colonialism" with Indigenous TEK appropriated to "serv[e] European intellectual or political purposes" (2016, 6, 7).[1]

In this context, Matt Hooley has asserted that our very conceptualisation of the Anthropocene "reproduce[s] [existing] structures of power" and "achieves disciplinary consolidation by erasing Indigenous thinking" (2021, 134, 136). As a result, contemporary Indigenous responses to climate emergency foreground the contentious and painful histories of settler colonial oppression with two interrelated aims: to expose the genocidal practices directed against Indigenous cultural groups for centuries in the Americas, and to demonstrate how the ideologies and worldviews responsible for Indigenous genocide are also responsible for the planetary ecocide we are currently living through. If "climate collapse is inseparable from the onset of settler colonialism, and settler colonialism is inseparable from genocide," then "genocide was and is ecocide" (Cheyfitz, 2021, 142). 'Living through' such horror, therefore, drives contemporary Indigenous responses to climate emergency, and create what Jonathan Lear has identified as "radical hope," the ability to face acts of extreme harm and nonetheless continue to believe in a future "that is at once…[Indigenous] and does not yet exist" (2006, 104).[2]

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[1] For discussions of the problem and wider examples, see the full text of Greenall and Bailey's essay; and Leanne Simpson's address to the Indigenous Knowledge Conference, 2001, 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Marginalization, Appropriation and Continued Disillusion' https://iportal.usask.ca/docs/IKC-2001-Simpson.pdf.

[2] I am indebted to Jasmin Kirkbride (whose essay is also included in this special issue) for introducing me to Lear's theorisation of radical hope.

Hope for Indigenous futures is inextricably linked to the essentially decolonial nature of Indigenous critical traditions, and "the specific histories of struggle and invention that animate them" (Hooley, 2021, 132). In this context, we should not forget that the term 'radical' is etymologically linked to 'revolution' and so to ideas of earthly processes by which all things turn and return: both terms are therefore also intimately connected to the natural world and to ways in which we might "restor[e]… balance in a world that is otherwise out of whack" (Linebaugh, 2014, 190). As a direct result, contemporary Indigenous responses to the climate emergency provide a decolonial account of the origins of climate emergency in the contentious and oppressive ideologies of settler colonial capitalism, while simultaneously foregrounding traditional Indigenous experiential ecological knowledges and practices to trace how we might regain enough balance to address our climate crisis. Most importantly, Indigenous responses to the climate emergency demonstrate "the legitimate roles that hope and imagination might play in the formulation and development of courageous ways of living" (Lear, 2006, 149-150).

This interplay of hope and imagination is perhaps best seen in contemporary North American Indigenous fiction, a fact identified in Grace Dillon's (Anishinaabe) groundbreaking work on Indigenous Futurisms, whereby "the images, ideology, and themes" (Lidchi and Frikce, 2019, 99) of science fiction are deployed by Indigenous writers to "renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples' voices and traditions" (Dillon 2012, -2). Dillon argues that, by contrast Indigenous science fiction draws directly on Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) theorisation of the continued presence of Indigenous peoples in the 21st century as 'survivance,' as the "active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (Vizenor, 1998, 15.) Moreover, Dillon contends that decolonisation is "central to" contemporary Indigenous science fiction, and so Indigenous Futurisms provide ways in which to "discove[r] how one personally is affected by colonization, discar[d] the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recove[r] ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (2012, 11, 10). Due to its crucial decolonial political significance, much work has since built upon Dillon's

conceptualisation of Indigenous Futurisms. Henrietta Lidchi and Suzanne Fricke argue that Indigenous Futurisms not only "propose the enduring relevance of Indigenous thought, artistic practice and expression" while "reconfigur[ing] the relationship between past, present and future…as entangled, compacted or cyclical," but also "re-iterate[s] the value Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, while framing new ways of tackling, and reckoning with, questions of colonialism, conquest, genocide, racism, misogyny, and environmental catastrophe" (2019, 100-101).

Since Dillon's groundbreaking 2012 collection, there has also been a burgeoning of new Indigenous writers who have embraced and extended the political potential of Indigenous Futurisms.[3] Strikingly, as Dillon herself identified, this is in part because traditional forms of Indigenous storytelling share many themes with science fiction such as "time travel, alternate realities, parallel universes and multiverses, and alternative histories," but also because "viewing time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream is central to Native epistemologies" (2016, 345). In a 2017 'Indigenous Futurisms Roundtable' entitled "Decolonizing Science Fiction And Imagining Futures," Johnnie Jae (Otoe-Missouria and Choctaw, multimedia journalist and podcaster) and Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache, creative writer) expressed their own understandings of importance of hope; how hope is, for many Indigenous peoples, intimately and inextricably tied – historically and experientially - to apocalypse. Little Badger noted that because "many Indigenous cultures in North America survived an apocalypse" that "any future with us in it, triumphant and flourishing, is a hopeful one," while Jae commented that although "we have survived an apocalypse…with every generation our future continues to grow more hopeful. As we continue to preserve and reclaim

[3] Influential recently successful writers include Ramona Emerson (Diné), Michelle Good (Cree), Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache), Nick Medina (Tunica-Biloxi), Tommy Orange (Cheyenne and Arapaho), Marcie Rendon (White Earth Chippewa), Waubgeshig Rice (Wasauksing First Nation), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), and Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz). And of course this also includes widely read writers publishing prolifically in the 21st century, such as Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), and Stephen Graham Jones (Blackfeet). This trend is equally evident in other fields such as Indigenous art, film, and drama.

our identities, traditions, languages, lands, water, resources, and values in the face of every new threat, the future looks more and more beautiful" (Strange Horizons, 2017). Jae's subsequent comment that to hope is to "imagine that those future generations are no longer living in survival mode the way that we are now" (Strange Horizons, 2017) finds resonance with Rebecca Solnit's statement in her influential study *Hope in the Dark*, that "to hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable" (2016, 5).

While hope is thus elusive, it is nonetheless imperative to living and liveable futures of all kinds. And it is this understanding of hope - of its profound unbreakable links to the past, to the present, and to potential and/or possible futures – that is central to my analysis here of the role of hope in Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*. My argument traces two clear trajectories in Dimaline's novel. First, Dimaline challenges settler colonial 'historical amnesia' with regard to its own genocidal histories, exposing the inextricable relationships between that historic oppression and an imagined Indigenous future subject to further settler colonial acts of genocide because both moments are driven by the same ideological worldview. Here, Dimaline exposes the present climate emergency as part of a continuum of violence directed against Indigenous peoples and the Earth. Second, Dimaline shows how those genocidal futures are only one potential outcome of the present, imagining a powerful decolonial Indigenous future that recentres Indigenous traditional cultural knowledges and practices. This centring of hope enables both Dimaline and her readers to draws see "what might lie beyond" the present climate emergency (Solnit, 2016, 20).

Exposing Settler Colonial Genocidal and Ecocidal Histories

Set sometime after 2047, *The Marrow Thieves* focuses on a culturally diverse Indigenous 'community' of fugitive orphaned or 'lost' children/teenagers, including the primary teenage narrator Frenchie, led by two elders, Miigwan and Minerva. The text sets its scene immediately: this is a post-apocalyptic near-future Canada where the Earth and its multiple populations have

been devastated, as a direct result of the excesses of a range of interrelated and interdependent systems: settler colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy. In short, the Earth has been "broken" by "too much taking for too damn long" (2017, 87). Dimaline's world is one that has been irrevocably reshaped by global warming, where "the shapes of countries" have been "changed forever, whole coasts breaking off" with California "swallowed back by the ocean," all because capitalism has made a "miscalculation of [its own] infallibility." (2017, 87, 24, 87). This miscalculation has resulted in many acts of fatal pollution that are chillingly familiar to a 21st century reader: unsafe oil pipelines have "snapped like icicles and spewed bile over forests, drowning whole reserves and towns," the Great Lakes have been "fenced off, too poisonous for use" with "waters.. grey and thick like porridge," multiple earthquakes have "peel[ed] the … continents back like diseased gums," and wars have broken out over access to clean water as "America reached up and started sipping on our lakes" (2017, 87, 24, 25, 24). As Canada's water is "sucked south", the north is "melting" and creating climate refugees (2017, 25). After water conflicts lasting 10 years, the city skylines "looked like a ruined mouth of rotted teeth" (2017, 59). As a direct result of catastrophic climate emergency, the global population has been reduced by "half," both from the "disaster" and from "disease that spread from too many corpses" (2017, 26).

In setting this scene, Dimaline actively exposes and traces the direct connections between historic acts of settler colonial genocide against Indigenous peoples and the contemporary actions of the contemporary settler colonial state, and of global corporate capitalism. This continuum is driven by an ideological worldview that demands ever *more*, regardless of the cost: *more* land, *more* resources, *more* profit. The driving force of both colonialism and capitalism is thus "greed," and so, Whyte notes, "climate change and colonialism are interrelated" (2018a, 9). As a result, abilities to effectively address the contemporary climate emergency are hampered not only by the political and economic power of the institutions doing the most ecological damage, but also by popular adherence to inherently colonial capitalist

worldviews that create a widespread unwillingness to address the obvious causes. Since that unwillingness is inexplicable in the face of a growing climate emergency, Dimaline does not hold back in showing the results of our inaction and inattention: an even further consolidation of the power of settler colonial capitalism. In the text, 50% of the global workforce are lost to climate-induced disaster, and birthrates fall because the majority white population have "stopped reproducing without doctors" (2017, 26). In Dimaline's imagined future, this results in the settler colonial capitalist state forcing the remaining population to "wor[k] longer hours" to compensate, and this aggressive intensified capitalist production causes a "plague" of "dreamlessness" among the remaining settler colonial population, with many more "killing themselves" to avoid a "world… suddenly gone mad" or "*even worse*…refusing to work at all" (2017, 26, 54, 47, 88 emphasis added).

As the death toll rises and productivity (and so profit) falls even further, the settler colonial capitalist state "turned to the Church and the scientists to find a cure" among the Indigenous peoples who have retained their ability to dream, in large part because they have resisted the imposition of capitalist 'values' (2017, 88). Dimaline very deliberately exposes the obscured links between the mutually supportive systems of state, church, and science to expose and trace Canada's genocidal histories and the roles played by each system in the oppression of Canada's Indigenous Nations, replicating and revisiting historic settler colonial acts. Thus in their investigations into how they can "best appropriate" Indigenous dreams, the Church and the scientists produce a lethal solution, that Indigenous dreams can be "siphon[ed] right out of… bones" and redistributed to the settler colonial society to maintain the capitalist system (2017, 88, 89). While this new bone marrow 'industry' "asked for Indigenous volunteers first," it becomes clear that the extraction process is fatal and the authorities soon turn to Indigenous "prisoners" (a comment on the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous peoples) before sending out 'Recruiters' to round up entire Indigenous communities because they simply "nee[d] too many bodies" (2017, 87, 89). The diverse Indigenous 'family' of *The Marrow Thieves* are thus the fugitive

survivors of a concerted campaign to turn Indigenous bodies into 'resources' and 'harvest' them in exactly the same way that Indigenous lands have long been commodified and consumed by the settler colonial capitalist state. In this context, Dimaline carefully reveals how "climate change and colonialism are interrelated" (Whyte, 2018a, 9) through a juxtaposition of 'fatally siphoned' Indigenous bodies with equally damaged Indigenous lands that have already been appropriated and "commoditized….filled with water companies and wealthy corporate investors" (2017, 88).

Dimaline's depiction of the new marrow harvesting industry makes stark links to historic settler colonial acts of genocide as the settler state 're-purposes' still-existing Residential School buildings where abuse was historically enacted upon Indigenous bodies. Under a new form of 'relocation', entire Indigenous family groups and communities are forced into former Residential School buildings for the fatal extraction process. For the capitalist settler colonial state, it makes economic sense to re-purpose existing buildings, and this represents the most efficient way to organise "the culling" of its Indigenous 'volunteers' (2017, 81). Dimaline's careful locating of these new fictional "death camps" exposes the real extra-textual Indigenous Residential School buildings as actual historical sites of genocidal "culling" (2017, 89); and it should be noted that, in both the USA and Canada, Indigenous residential schools were very carefully situated in remote and isolated areas with few witnesses, while Indigenous children were often relocated hundreds of miles from home in order to cut them off from their families and communities. Through the key role holders in the new marrow industry, Dimaline further traces the historical roles played by the state, by science, and by the church in the genocidal policies of the Canadian Residential School system. Reflecting the long histories of scientific racism, the scientists develop fatal extraction procedures with no recognition of the humanity of their "product" and via a process that enacts "murde[r] real slow;" state 'Recruiters' are deployed to hunt for Indigenous bodies "for the good of the nation;" and in the re-purposed school buildings, the brutality of religious figures in the historic Residential School system are reflected in the "Cardinals" and

"Headmistresses" who have absolute authority over new generations of Indigenous bodies (2017, 92, 81, 150, 170).

Dimaline's examination of Canada's history provides a reflection on the 2015 Final Report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which estimated "that 15,000 to 25,000 [Indigenous] children may have died" at these sites while exhaustively documenting the abuses that individuals suffered (Sage, 2021). *The Marrow Thieves* echoes these abuses, tracing the brutal historic removal of cultural, communal, and individual identity from generations of Indigenous children at the hands of Residential Schools in its descriptions of an inhuman and inhumane industrial process whereby living Indigenous bodies are reduced to "viscous fluid" in "frosted test tubes" identified only by number, age, gender, and tribe: "46522Y. 64 year-old female. Métis" (2017, 144). The descriptions are an unsettling reminder not only that the Canadian state historically sanctioned the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of Indigenous children, but also that there are potentially thousands more Indigenous children's bodies lying in unmarked graves in both Canada and the United States. I would contend, therefore, that *The Marrow Thieves* exposes a Canadian settler colonial state in thrall to and in collaboration with global capitalists interests via an industrialised form of 'necropolitics', whereby the state not only has "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" but also the authority to consign identified groups to "*death-worlds*" (Mbembe, 2003, 11, original emphasis). These death-worlds, described by Achille Mbembe as "new and unique forms of social existence" where entire "populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*," bear a striking similarity to the conditions created both by colonisation and by anthropogenic climate change in Dimaline's text (2003, 40, original emphasis). While Mbembe's analysis intersects with theorisations of the 'Plantationocene' – the "devastating transformation" of land into "extractive and enclosed plantations" reliant upon "slave labor" (Haraway, 2015, 162) - as a defining precursor of the current climate crisis, it is clear that the theoretical intersections of necropolitics with necroecologies is also pertinent to Dimaliane's

text. In a colonised state, Gautam Thakur has argued, "relations between humans and non-humans…are always fraught, always rotten, always in a state of death and dying" so that "colonial ecology is always necroecology" (2016, 203), whereby ecology is understood only in deadly/deathly terms, and Indigenous bodies are equated to Indigenous lands and marked as extractable resources. It is no coincidence that Miig describes the rapid proliferation of the bone marrow extractions sites in terms that evoke global warming: they pursue Indigenous peoples "like a bushfire" (2017, 147).

Dimaline's portrayal of the transformation of Indigenous bodies into "little more than a crop" that can be "harvested for medicine" (2017, 26, 47) exposes the callous brutality of settler colonial acts of genocide and of capitalist pursuit of profit at any cost. In short, she exposes the greed at the heart of the climate emergency, and the "fundamental lack of respect" that allows the policies of genocide to become the policies of ecocide (Arias, 2021, 115). But she also exposes the complicity of all those who inexplicably refuse to act in their own interests against their oppressors, both textually and extra-textually, via the Indigenous teenage character Frenchie. Frenchie not only draws together the two interrelated threads of Indigenous genocide and corporate ecocide, but he also shows Dimaline's readers the questions that they should be asking about the 21st century climate emergency:

> …it seemed as though the world had suddenly gone mad. Poisoning your own drinking water, changing the air so much the Earth shook and melted and crumbled, harvesting a race for medicine. How? How could this happen? Were they that much different from us? Would we be like them if we had a choice? Were they enough like us to let us live? (2017, 47).

Dimaline's readers might be forgiven for thinking that this is a situation bereft of hope. However, this is just half of the story.

Imagining Decolonial Indigenous Futures

The Marrow Thieves is also a story of radical hope. While the narrative seems overwhelmed with the story of the settler colonial capitalist oppression and destruction of Canada's First Nations, and with the deep terrors of the Indigenous found-family at the centre of the text, there is nonetheless a spine of Indigenous survivance that points to an alternative and far more hopeful future. As Megan Canella has argued, Dimaline's novel is "propel[led]" by "the idea of leaving hope or dreams for a future generation" (2010, 112). In this second section, I read Dimaline's text as an example of Indigenous Futurism, as a means by which hope can exist in the imagining of radically different decolonial futures that centre traditional Indigenous cultural knowledges and practices.

From the outset, Dimaline warns us that Indigenous memory and mindfulness of the histories of genocide-ecocide is essential to Indigenous survival in the present. Indeed, when Miig's husband Isaac is captured because he fails to flee in time due to his inability to believe that anyone could be capable of acting with such depravity, Miig expressly notes that Isaac's inability to believe in settler colonial evil derives from his lack of family memories of "the original schools": "he didn't have grandparents who'd told residential school stories" about Indigenous languages being "suck[ed]… right out of your lungs" (2017, 106-107). Accordingly, for Miig's found-family, hope exists in storytelling, and the text is structured to saturate the tale of ecocidal-genocidal horror with entire chapters given over to "Story" (2017, 21), where Miig explains traditional Indigenous cultural knowledges that act not only as an educational and experiential process but also provide information on survival, and present resistance to the settler colonial capitalist state as a crucial form of cultural and physical survival. Alongside Story, the text is threaded through with chapters of "coming to stories" (2017, 1), which detail how each individual family member joined the group, and their experiences before they arrived. While Dimaline's novel exposes the ways in which Indigenous literature is itself "a form of resistance" (Cheyfitz, 2021, 140), it becomes clear that telling stories *within* the text is central both to

Indigenous epistemologies and to the imagining of hopeful Indigenous futures: the stories and their tellings represent a crucially important "enactment of sovereign agency" (Ingwersen, 2020). As Frenchie comments, "we needed to remember Story. It was his [Miig's] job to set the memory in perpetuity" because, as Miig himself asserts, "A general has to see the whole field to make good strategy" (2017, 25).

And so we can read Dimaline's use of Story and Coming-to-Stories as an example of Indigenous Storywork that Jo-ann Archibald (Sto:lo) *et al* describe as a powerful "decolonizing methodology" that "speak[s] back" to "the violence of colonial storytelling" to centre the "meaningful" and "education[al]" nature of Indigenous methodologies (2019, 12, 7, 1). In a profoundly decolonial move, Dimaline offers a challenge to harmful settler colonial capitalist extractivist ideologies though a philosophical centring of the Earth: Miig's Story is "deeply informed by what the land *as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (Coulthard, 2014, 14, original emphasis). The Indigenous Storywork of *The Marrow Thieves* therefore foregrounds the ways in which Indigenous narrative traditions are examples of "mindfulness in action" that actively overturn settler colonial capitalist genocidal-ecocidal behaviours, and instead insist that every human action is governed by a consideration of "respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy" (Archibald, 2019, 12, 1).

Importantly, in her depiction of Indigenous Storywork, Dimaline emphasises the power of *language* and *voice* to Indigenous resistance and survival. Alongside the telling of Indigenous experiences and cultural traditions as Story, *The Marrow Thieves* emphasises the power of song. For the majority of North American Indigenous peoples, song is not only inextricable from prayer, spiritual observance, and traditional knowledges, but also a powerful decolonial act that enacts and performs radical hope. Song – the voicing of Indigenous worldviews - thus embodies Indigenous Futurism in its imagining of hopeful futures that overturn the settler colonial death-

worlds. In this context, as Miig makes the horrific discovery of the vials of Indigenous bone marrow and sees whole and healthy bodies reduced to parts for profit, he is not only paralysed by his fear that one of the vials contains all that remains of his missing husband Isaac ("66542G, 41 year-old male. Euro-Cree"), but also overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of Indigenous lives that have been violently appropriated as evidenced by the marrow extraction numbering system: "46522Y, 64 year-old female, Metis," "67781F, 15 year old male, Inuit" (2017, 144). The horror has the potential to rob Miig of his voice and of his agency, to enact a further colonial "erasure of the individual" (Cannella 2020, 115). However Miig's response, significantly, foregrounds the importance of both story and voice as forms of resistance, agency, and sovereignty, as he asserts and celebrates the irreducible humanity of Indigenous bone marrow. Linking fragmented and violated bodies with equally fragmented and violated lands, Miig locates the last fresh water lake unpoisoned by capitalist industrial processes that "still held fish" in which to empty the vials (2017, 145). And, crucially, even though it takes "four days" due to the volume of vials, Miig demonstrates the respect and responsibility demanded by Indigenous Storywork as he "sang each of them home" (2017, 145). As the Cree musician Cheryl L'Hirondelle notes, "'the power of having your own song'" is itself "a survival tool, a means to sound an Indigenous future grounded in freedom and self-determination" (2019, interview abstract).

Miig's use of traditional song is reflected in the significance that Dimaline also accords to Indigenous languages. As the diverse family group endlessly travel to avoid the Recruiters, the younger members not only begin to understand the significance of language to their own cultural survival but also to become painfully aware of their *lack* of language, and the elder Minerva's fluent understanding of her Indigenous language thus becomes an intergenerational resource for knowledge transfer for the entire group as they undertake language lessons. When the group finally join the Indigenous resistance community later in the text, it is notable that the larger and equally culturally diverse community have prioritised language learning in order to "piec[e] together the few words and images each of us carried" and "start a youth council" so as to

"pas[s] on the teachings right away" (2017, 214). In a decolonial act that actively and hopefully imagines Indigenous Futurisms, Frenchie deliberately writes his first learnt word - "family" – on "a creamy curl of birch bark" (2017, 214) to physically embody the centrality of "*reciprocal relations and obligations*" between all life forms to Indigenous philosophical worldviews (Coulthard, 2014, 14). Both language and song are always directly connected to the earth as an "organic part of the…[Indigenous] environment" (Whidden, 2007, 1).

But perhaps the most significant episode of the text is when Minerva deliberately sacrifices herself to the Recruiters to protect the rest of her small family group. Despite her central status as one of the few fluent Indigenous language speakers and so a repository of essential cultural knowledge, Minerva understands that language equates to power: that voicing Indigenous language is itself an act of radical hope. Language is, quite simply, a cultural weapon. This, ironically, it is one of the central tenets not just of settler colonialism but also of the historical residential school system, which sought to break Indigenous cultures by severing an entire generation from their own languages. Voicing Indigenous languages claims an Indigenous present and ensures an Indigenous future. Minerva's significance is evident in the descriptions of the dreams that have become so essential to the survival of the settler colonial population: "every dream Minerva had…was in the language. It was her gift" (2017, 172). Yet Dimaline carefully shows us that this 'gift' is also "her secret" and "her plan" because Minerva understands that the marrow extraction machine cannot compute Indigenous language precisely because the settler colonial capitalist system cannot understand core Indigenous values such as respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and interrelatedness. These are languages that the machine and its creators cannot speak. And this is evident in her captors' increasing speculation that "there might be something fatally wrong with the subject's mind" as she is observed "singing in increasing volume" but without any "sensible words – English words" (2017, 171). As she is "processed," Minerva uses song to draw on "her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors" to "gather the dreams like bright beads" and transform them into a song that the machine cannot survive

because it is sung in a historically forbidden language that carries Indigenous ceremony (2017, 171, 172, 173). Minerva's song also gains power from exposing the hidden residential school histories where the extractive machinery is located, to "ech[o] through her relatives bones, rattling them in the ground under the school itself….morphing her singular voice to many" and "changing her heartbeat to drum" (2017, 173). As Minerva sings powerful "words…that the conductor couldn't process, words the Cardinals couldn't bear, words the wires couldn't transfer," she becomes "the weapon that could bring them all down" (2017, 172, 206). In the end, the "broken system" is "torn down by the words of a dreaming old lady" who sacrifices her own life to dream a better future for her community (2017, 173).

Crucially, Dimaline's imagined decolonial future is organised by Indigenous understandings of 'home'. If we extend our understandings of 'home' to include our relationships to the natural world in planetary and ecological terms, then we can begin to understand Minerva's final spoken instruction - "Kiiwen… go home" (2017, 210-2011) – even as we also begin to comprehend the urgent care with which Miig sang "each of" the bone marrows remains "home" earlier in the text (2017, 145). Minerva's instruction suggests that the Indigenous group need to do more than simply relocate to safety, they need to fully centre a more sustainable Indigenous way of being in the world in order to achieve a hopeful decolonial Indigenous future. Importantly, this can be detected in the positive changes in the natural landscape as Miig's family near the location of the Indigenous resistance community where there are unexpected signs of ecological recovery: the teenage Rose discovers that there is not only "real water" flowing in a "thin brown brook" but also "fish" (2017, 157). Home, then, is a *lived experience*; it is not just the intricate relationships between living beings and place, but also the experiential knowledges that derive from these relationships. This understanding allows the wider fugitive Indigenous community to overcome the settler colonial "transgenerational narratives of displacement and abuse" (Canella, 2020 120) that threaten to overwhelm them due to Minerva's loss, and instead embrace the belief that "as long as there are dreamers left, there

will never be want for a dream" (2017, 231). The community's certainty of a decolonial Indigenous future is finally rewarded at the close of the text when the fluent Cree speaking Issac returns to the community and reveals that he too "dreams in Cree" (2017, 228).

Conclusions

Hope is at the very centre of *The Marrow Thieves*. In its attempts to 'see what might lie beyond' the current climate emergency, the text draws heavily on Indigenous histories of oppression and dispossession to reject Euroamerican necropolitics and necroecologies, to celebrate Indigenous survivance, and to weave hopeful Indigenous futures. And Dimaline's focus on home and what home means demands that we ask searching questions about our own complicity in ecological damage. At the close of the text, an Indigenous future is discussed which demonstrates how human and planetary health, disease, and healing are inseparable. Clarence's declaration that "all we need is the safety to return to our homelands. Then we can start the process of healing" is narrowly interpreted by Frenchie to mean healing the community, and Clarence is forced to clarify that "I mean we can start healing the land" (2017, 193). Clarence's subsequent elaboration, "when we heal our land, we are healed also" (2017, 193), is an important message for us all in an era of climate emergency. It is especially pertinent for us to be able to see what might lie beyond the complex and far-reaching necropolitical and necroecological operations of powerful multinational corporations and national interests/governments. Pointing to the kinds of settler colonial capitalist ideologies that actively cause climate crisis, *The Marrow Thieves* demonstrates the 'mindfulness in action' of Indigenous Storywork to centre the kinds of obligationary worldviews and practices that are necessary to combat the climate emergency. As readers, we witness Frenchie and the other young Indigenous characters gaining an experiential understanding of the world, and this is presented to us as an essential requirement as our world experiences growing climate uncertainty. Dimaline's active imagining of viable Indigenous

Futures not only promotes sustainable ways of seeing and living in the world, but offers a hopeful way of 'seeing what lies beyond.'

In a capitalist world defined by the value of 'natural resources,' it is essential that we begin to understand and accept that "hope is a natural resource too" (Greenberg, 2023). Solnit's argument that "Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action, action is impossible without hope" (2016, 5) best captures the productive tensons of Dimaline's text. The combination that Solnit identifies of a lack of guarantee and continual mediation with a sense nonetheless of hopeful action is precisely encapsulated in *The Marrow Thieves*. And this productive tension between taking action and seeing immediate effective results hits at the very heart both of the slow violence of climate emergency, and of the inexplicable popular unwillingness to take action regardless of the cost to the world in which we live. It is perhaps best expressed by the teenage character Chi Boy in his consideration of Minerva's self-sacrifice, which expresses a deep understanding of Indigenous Futurism as built on many small but important individual actions: "sometimes you risk everything for a life worth living, even if you're not the one that'll be alive to live it" (2017, 152). Minerva's sacrifice is therefore an important example of the kinds of "courageous ways of living" that are required by radical hope (Lear, 2006, 150).

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"Seeing what might lie beyond": Hope and Indigenous Futurisms in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

KEYWORDS:

Hope; climate fiction; climate emergency; Indigenous Studies; Indigenous Futurisms; Necropolitics; Necroecologies; American literature; Cherie Dimaline; *The Marrow Thieves*

ABSTRACT:

This essay explores the role played by hope in an era of climate emergency, and how in Cherie Dimaline's (Georgian Bay Métis) prize-winning novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) hope not only emerges from surviving brutal genocidal and ecocidal historical experiences of settler colonialism and capitalism, but also from actively imagining a future that is Indigenous. In taking Dimaline's text as an example of how we can 'see what might lie beyond,' this essay considers the increasing impossibility of 'hope' in the face of climate emergency, how hope is itself refracted through individual and communal lived experiences, and how Indigenous forms of hope are inevitably and profoundly impacted by both genocidal colonisation and ongoing state-supported corporate ecocide on North American Indigenous lands. Through Dimaline's text, this essay explores how 21st century Indigenous North American fiction draws on contentious settler colonial capitalist histories of genocide and ecocide *and* on contemporary Indigenous experiences of ongoing colonisation, to look to the future. In this context, I assess *The Marrow Thieves* as an example of Indigenous Futurism: as a means by which hope can exist in the imagining of radically different decolonial futures that centre traditional Indigenous cultural knowledges and practices.

Introduction

Our experiences of hope in the face of an increasing climate emergency are determined in large part by who and where 'we' are. While we all experience a constant barrage of terrifying images of climate emergency, our everyday experiences - of extreme weather and food production crises, rising temperatures and wildfires, droughts and floods, melting polar ice caps

and rising sea levels - are dependent upon the historic experiences of the places where we belong and the peoples we belong to. We live in a world of inequality and inequity, where the privilege of some has long been built on the deliberate disadvantage of others, where 'natural' resources are hoarded from the majority for the exclusive use of the few, and where the climate emergency hits those least responsible for it the hardest, exacerbating ingrained inequalities even further. My use of the term 'we' therefore also challenges international climate discourse's representation of the current climate emergency as somehow equally 'shared'. Are our experiences of the climate emergency the same? Have we all experienced them at the same time, or to the same degree? 'Our' experiences are not equitable in any way, and I am acutely conscious of my own privilege as a white woman living in a 'first world' country (the UK) built on the riches of empire, racial capitalism and slavery, and working in a position of privilege (higher education) - even as my own experiences are inevitably filtered through the complex lenses of class, and gender. As Eric Gary Anderson notes, "the term *Anthropocene* falls short of naming who is doing what to whom," in part due to its "domineering universalism" (2021, 146) which deliberately obscures these longstanding inequalities and inequities.

This inequity is especially true of the experiences of those colonised by former and current imperial powers, whose experiences of oppression and dispossession continue in the 21st century because they remain colonised. For Indigenous peoples inhabiting the lands now known as the United States and Canada, the profound material, cultural, psychic, and physical damages wrought by settler colonialism were matched only by the brutal enactment of "anthropogenic environmental change" on those same groups (Whyte, 2017, 207). While these experiences were historic – including forced removal and relocation, and the destruction of resources as a means by which to 'control' Indigenous populations – they are also firmly contemporary: the imposition of contentious ecologically damaging projects upon Indigenous lands, such as the Dakota Access pipeline, the Alberta tar sands, and a myriad other fossil fuel projects. For the majority of North American Indigenous peoples, therefore, "the Anthropocene is not a new event" but a

"continuation of practices of dispossession and genocide, coupled with a literal transformation of the environment, that have been at work for the last five hundred years" (Davis and Todd, 2017, 761). As Kyle Powys Whyte (Potawatomi) argues, historic Indigenous experiences of "ecosystem collapse, species loss, economic crash, drastic relocation, and cultural disintegration" (2017, 213) have resulted in Indigenous understandings of the 21st century climate emergency as the direct result of the ideologies, policies, and practices of settler colonial capitalism. The Anthropocene is an "*extension and enactment of colonial logic*" that is "intimately tied to the project of erasure that is the imperative of settler colonialism" (Davis and Todd, 2017, 769 original emphasis, 770). For the majority of North American Indigenous peoples, the climate emergency is thus "an unprecedentedly old catastrophe" (Whyte, 2018a, 9) precisely because the Indigenous peoples have "already…endured one *or many more* [anthropocenic] apocalypses" (Whyte, 2018b, 236, original emphasis). As Whyte comments, Indigenous responses to the 21st century climate emergency "are based on having already *lived through*" localised ecological devastation (2017, 213, emphasis added).

This notion of 'living through' is of crucial importance to my analysis here. I am interested in two related aspects: first, the increasingly contentious appropriation of Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledges (TEK) by both western science and climate discourse; and second, how the experience of 'living through' earlier profound ecological change has influenced Indigenous thinking about the 21st century climate emergency. It is quite clear that Indigenous TEK is currently being appropriated by both science and climate discourse. While the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is happy to state that it "draws on enormously and respects indigenous knowledge the world over," because "indigenous knowledge systems and practices" are recognized internationally by climate scientists for their "resilien[ce]" to "many climactic changes," this statement openly fails to recognise the long histories of colonisation that 'produced' such 'resilience.' And it also fails to recognise how the IPCC itself is acting to appropriate Indigenous traditional ecological knowledges (TEK) for a

'universalised' global benefit. As Rebeka Greenall and Elizabeth Bailey argue, there is a problem not only with "misrepresentation and misinterpretation," but also a drive to "distil" Indigenous TEK "down to ideologies that fit within and support Western science viewpoints" (2022, 4). For Melanie Benson Taylor (Herring Pond Wampanoag), this represents "the privatization of [Indigenous] cultural resources" (2021, 11), while Zoe Todd (Red River Métis) has stated that "'ontology' is just another word for colonialism" with Indigenous TEK appropriated to "serv[e] European intellectual or political purposes" (2016, 6, 7).[1]

In this context, Matt Hooley has asserted that our very conceptualisation of the Anthropocene "reproduce[s] [existing] structures of power" and "achieves disciplinary consolidation by erasing Indigenous thinking" (2021, 134, 136). As a result, contemporary Indigenous responses to climate emergency foreground the contentious and painful histories of settler colonial oppression with two interrelated aims: to expose the genocidal practices directed against Indigenous cultural groups for centuries in the Americas, and to demonstrate how the ideologies and worldviews responsible for Indigenous genocide are also responsible for the planetary ecocide we are currently living through. If "climate collapse is inseparable from the onset of settler colonialism, and settler colonialism is inseparable from genocide," then "genocide was and is ecocide" (Cheyfitz, 2021, 142). 'Living through' such horror, therefore, drives contemporary Indigenous responses to climate emergency, and create what Jonathan Lear has identified as "radical hope," the ability to face acts of extreme harm and nonetheless continue to believe in a future "that is at once…[Indigenous] and does not yet exist" (2006, 104).[2]

Hope for Indigenous futures is inextricably linked to the essentially decolonial nature of Indigenous critical traditions, and "the specific histories of struggle and invention that animate

[1] For discussions of the problem and wider examples, see the full text of Greenall and Bailey's essay; and Leanne Simpson's address to the Indigenous Knowledge Conference, 2001, 'Traditional Ecological Knowledge: Marginalization, Appropriation and Continued Disillusion' https://iportal.usask.ca/docs/IKC-2001-Simpson.pdf.
[2] I am indebted to Jasmin Kirkbride (whose essay is also included in this special issue) for introducing me to Lear's theorisation of radical hope.

them" (Hooley, 2021, 132). In this context, we should not forget that the term 'radical' is etymologically linked to 'revolution' and so to ideas of earthly processes by which all things turn and return: both terms are therefore also intimately connected to the natural world and to ways in which we might "restor[e]… balance in a world that is otherwise out of whack" (Linebaugh, 2014, 190). As a direct result, contemporary Indigenous responses to the climate emergency provide a decolonial account of the origins of climate emergency in the contentious and oppressive ideologies of settler colonial capitalism, while simultaneously foregrounding traditional Indigenous experiential ecological knowledges and practices to trace how we might regain enough balance to address our climate crisis. Most importantly, Indigenous responses to the climate emergency demonstrate "the legitimate roles that hope and imagination might play in the formulation and development of courageous ways of living" (Lear, 2006, 149-150).

This interplay of hope and imagination is perhaps best seen in contemporary North American Indigenous fiction, a fact identified in Grace Dillon's (Anishinaabe) groundbreaking work on Indigenous Futurisms, whereby "the images, ideology, and themes" (Lidchi and Frikce, 2019, 99) of science fiction are deployed by Indigenous writers to "renew, recover, and extend First Nations peoples' voices and traditions" (Dillon 2012, -2). Dillon argues that, by contrast Indigenous science fiction draws directly on Gerald Vizenor's (Anishinaabe) theorisation of the continued presence of Indigenous peoples in the 21st century as 'survivance,' as the "active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry" (Vizenor, 1998, 15.) Moreover, Dillon contends that decolonisation is "central to" contemporary Indigenous science fiction, and so Indigenous Futurisms provide ways in which to "discove[r] how one personally is affected by colonization, discar[d] the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recove[r] ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (2012, 11, 10). Due to its crucial decolonial political significance, much work has since built upon Dillon's conceptualisation of Indigenous Futurisms. Henrietta Lidchi and Suzanne Fricke argue that Indigenous Futurisms not only "propose the enduring relevance of Indigenous

thought, artistic practice and expression" while "reconfigur[ing] the relationship between past, present and future…as entangled, compacted or cyclical," but also "re-iterate[s] the value Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, while framing new ways of tackling, and reckoning with, questions of colonialism, conquest, genocide, racism, misogyny, and environmental catastrophe" (2019, 100-101).

Since Dillon's groundbreaking 2012 collection, there has also been a burgeoning of new Indigenous writers who have embraced and extended the political potential of Indigenous Futurisms.[3] Strikingly, as Dillon herself identified, this is in part because traditional forms of Indigenous storytelling share many themes with science fiction such as "time travel, alternate realities, parallel universes and multiverses, and alternative histories," but also because "viewing time as pasts, presents, and futures that flow together like currents in a navigable stream is central to Native epistemologies" (2016, 345). In a 2017 'Indigenous Futurisms Roundtable' entitled "Decolonizing Science Fiction And Imagining Futures," Johnnie Jae (Otoe-Missouria and Choctaw, multimedia journalist and podcaster) and Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache, creative writer) expressed their own understandings of importance of hope; how hope is, for many Indigenous peoples, intimately and inextricably tied – historically and experientially - to apocalypse. Little Badger noted that because "many Indigenous cultures in North America survived an apocalypse" that "any future with us in it, triumphant and flourishing, is a hopeful one," while Jae commented that although "we have survived an apocalypse…with every generation our future continues to grow more hopeful. As we continue to preserve and reclaim our identities, traditions, languages, lands, water, resources, and values in the face of every new threat, the future looks more and more beautiful" (Strange Horizons, 2017). Jae's subsequent

[3] Influential recently successful writers include Ramona Emerson (Diné), Michelle Good (Cree), Darcie Little Badger (Lipan Apache), Nick Medina (Tunica-Biloxi), Tommy Orange (Cheyenne and Arapaho), Marcie Rendon (White Earth Chippewa), Waubgeshig Rice (Wasauksing First Nation), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (Mississauga Nishnaabeg), and Elissa Washuta (Cowlitz). And of course this also includes widely read writers publishing prolifically in the 21st century, such as Louise Erdrich (Turtle Mountain Chippewa), and Stephen Graham Jones (Blackfeet). This trend is equally evident in other fields such as Indigenous art, film, and drama.

comment that to hope is to "imagine that those future generations are no longer living in survival mode the way that we are now" (Strange Horizons, 2017) finds resonance with Rebecca Solnit's statement in her influential study *Hope in the Dark*, that "to hope is to give yourself to the future, and that commitment to the future makes the present inhabitable" (2016, 5).

While hope is thus elusive, it is nonetheless imperative to living and liveable futures of all kinds. And it is this understanding of hope - of its profound unbreakable links to the past, to the present, and to potential and/or possible futures – that is central to my analysis here of the role of hope in Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*. My argument traces two clear trajectories in Dimaline's novel. First, Dimaline challenges settler colonial 'historical amnesia' with regard to its own genocidal histories, exposing the inextricable relationships between that historic oppression and an imagined Indigenous future subject to further settler colonial acts of genocide because both moments are driven by the same ideological worldview. Here, Dimaline exposes the present climate emergency as part of a continuum of violence directed against Indigenous peoples and the Earth. Second, Dimaline shows how those genocidal futures are only one potential outcome of the present, imagining a powerful decolonial Indigenous future that recentres Indigenous traditional cultural knowledges and practices. This centring of hope enables both Dimaline and her readers to draws see "what might lie beyond" the present climate emergency (Solnit, 2016, 20).

Exposing Settler Colonial Genocidal and Ecocidal Histories

Set sometime after 2047, *The Marrow Thieves* focuses on a culturally diverse Indigenous 'community' of fugitive orphaned or 'lost' children/teenagers, including the primary teenage narrator Frenchie, led by two elders, Miigwan and Minerva. The text sets its scene immediately: this is a post-apocalyptic near-future Canada where the Earth and its multiple populations have been devastated, as a direct result of the excesses of a range of interrelated and interdependent systems: settler colonialism, capitalism, heteropatriarchy. In short, the Earth has been "broken"

by "too much taking for too damn long" (2017, 87). Dimaline's world is one that has been irrevocably reshaped by global warming, where "the shapes of countries" have been "changed forever, whole coasts breaking off" with California "swallowed back by the ocean," all because capitalism has made a "miscalculation of [its own] infallibility." (2017, 87, 24, 87). This miscalculation has resulted in many acts of fatal pollution that are chillingly familiar to a 21st century reader: unsafe oil pipelines have "snapped like icicles and spewed bile over forests, drowning whole reserves and towns," the Great Lakes have been "fenced off, too poisonous for use" with "waters.. grey and thick like porridge," multiple earthquakes have "peel[ed] the … continents back like diseased gums," and wars have broken out over access to clean water as "America reached up and started sipping on our lakes" (2017, 87, 24, 25, 24). As Canada's water is "sucked south", the north is "melting" and creating climate refugees (2017, 25). After water conflicts lasting 10 years, the city skylines "looked like a ruined mouth of rotted teeth" (2017, 59). As a direct result of catastrophic climate emergency, the global population has been reduced by "half," both from the "disaster" and from "disease that spread from too many corpses" (2017, 26).

In setting this scene, Dimaline actively exposes and traces the direct connections between historic acts of settler colonial genocide against Indigenous peoples and the contemporary actions of the contemporary settler colonial state, and of global corporate capitalism. This continuum is driven by an ideological worldview that demands ever *more*, regardless of the cost: *more* land, *more* resources, *more* profit. The driving force of both colonialism and capitalism is thus "greed," and so, Whyte notes, "climate change and colonialism are interrelated" (2018a, 9). As a result, abilities to effectively address the contemporary climate emergency are hampered not only by the political and economic power of the institutions doing the most ecological damage, but also by popular adherence to inherently colonial capitalist worldviews that create a widespread unwillingness to address the obvious causes. Since that unwillingness is inexplicable in the face of a growing climate emergency, Dimaline does not hold

back in showing the results of our inaction and inattention: an even further consolidation of the power of settler colonial capitalism. In the text, 50% of the global workforce are lost to climate-induced disaster, and birthrates fall because the majority white population have "stopped reproducing without doctors" (2017, 26). In Dimaline's imagined future, this results in the settler colonial capitalist state forcing the remaining population to "wor[k] longer hours" to compensate, and this aggressive intensified capitalist production causes a "plague" of "dreamlessness" among the remaining settler colonial population, with many more "killing themselves" to avoid a "world… suddenly gone mad" or "*even worse*…refusing to work at all" (2017, 26, 54, 47, 88 emphasis added).

As the death toll rises and productivity (and so profit) falls even further, the settler colonial capitalist state "turned to the Church and the scientists to find a cure" among the Indigenous peoples who have retained their ability to dream, in large part because they have resisted the imposition of capitalist 'values' (2017, 88). Dimaline very deliberately exposes the obscured links between the mutually supportive systems of state, church, and science to expose and trace Canada's genocidal histories and the roles played by each system in the oppression of Canada's Indigenous Nations, replicating and revisiting historic settler colonial acts. Thus in their investigations into how they can "best appropriate" Indigenous dreams, the Church and the scientists produce a lethal solution, that Indigenous dreams can be "siphon[ed] right out of… bones" and redistributed to the settler colonial society to maintain the capitalist system (2017, 88, 89). While this new bone marrow 'industry' "asked for Indigenous volunteers first," it becomes clear that the extraction process is fatal and the authorities soon turn to Indigenous "prisoners" (a comment on the disproportionate incarceration of Indigenous peoples) before sending out 'Recruiters' to round up entire Indigenous communities because they simply "nee[d] too many bodies" (2017, 87, 89). The diverse Indigenous 'family' of *The Marrow Thieves* are thus the fugitive survivors of a concerted campaign to turn Indigenous bodies into 'resources' and 'harvest' them in exactly the same way that Indigenous lands have long been commodified and consumed by

the settler colonial capitalist state. In this context, Dimaline carefully reveals how "climate change and colonialism are interrelated" (Whyte, 2018a, 9) through a juxtaposition of 'fatally siphoned' Indigenous bodies with equally damaged Indigenous lands that have already been appropriated and "commoditized….filled with water companies and wealthy corporate investors" (2017, 88).

Dimaline's depiction of the new marrow harvesting industry makes stark links to historic settler colonial acts of genocide as the settler state 're-purposes' still-existing Residential School buildings where abuse was historically enacted upon Indigenous bodies. Under a new form of 'relocation', entire Indigenous family groups and communities are forced into former Residential School buildings for the fatal extraction process. For the capitalist settler colonial state, it makes economic sense to re-purpose existing buildings, and this represents the most efficient way to organise "the culling" of its Indigenous 'volunteers' (2017, 81). Dimaline's careful locating of these new fictional "death camps" exposes the real extra-textual Indigenous Residential School buildings as actual historical sites of genocidal "culling" (2017, 89); and it should be noted that, in both the USA and Canada, Indigenous residential schools were very carefully situated in remote and isolated areas with few witnesses, while Indigenous children were often relocated hundreds of miles from home in order to cut them off from their families and communities. Through the key role holders in the new marrow industry, Dimaline further traces the historical roles played by the state, by science, and by the church in the genocidal policies of the Canadian Residential School system. Reflecting the long histories of scientific racism, the scientists develop fatal extraction procedures with no recognition of the humanity of their "product" and via a process that enacts "murde[r] real slow;" state 'Recruiters' are deployed to hunt for Indigenous bodies "for the good of the nation;" and in the re-purposed school buildings, the brutality of religious figures in the historic Residential School system are reflected in the "Cardinals" and "Headmistresses" who have absolute authority over new generations of Indigenous bodies (2017, 92, 81, 150, 170).

Dimaline's examination of Canada's history provides a reflection on the 2015 Final Report of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which estimated "that 15,000 to 25,000 [Indigenous] children may have died" at these sites while exhaustively documenting the abuses that individuals suffered (Sage, 2021). *The Marrow Thieves* echoes these abuses, tracing the brutal historic removal of cultural, communal, and individual identity from generations of Indigenous children at the hands of Residential Schools in its descriptions of an inhuman and inhumane industrial process whereby living Indigenous bodies are reduced to "viscous fluid" in "frosted test tubes" identified only by number, age, gender, and tribe: "46522Y. 64 year-old female. Métis" (2017, 144). The descriptions are an unsettling reminder not only that the Canadian state historically sanctioned the emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of Indigenous children, but also that there are potentially thousands more Indigenous children's bodies lying in unmarked graves in both Canada and the United States. I would contend, therefore, that *The Marrow Thieves* exposes a Canadian settler colonial state in thrall to and in collaboration with global capitalists interests via an industrialised form of 'necropolitics', whereby the state not only has "the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" but also the authority to consign identified groups to "*death-worlds*" (Mbembe, 2003, 11, original emphasis). These death-worlds, described by Achille Mbembe as "new and unique forms of social existence" where entire "populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*," bear a striking similarity to the conditions created both by colonisation and by anthropogenic climate change in Dimaline's text (2003, 40, original emphasis). While Mbembe's analysis intersects with theorisations of the 'Plantationocene' – the "devastating transformation" of land into "extractive and enclosed plantations" reliant upon "slave labor" (Haraway, 2015, 162) - as a defining precursor of the current climate crisis, it is clear that the theoretical intersections of necropolitics with necroecologies is also pertinent to Dimaliane's text. In a colonised state, Gautam Thakur has argued, "relations between humans and non-humans…are always fraught, always rotten, always in a state of death and dying" so that

"colonial ecology is always necroecology" (2016, 203), whereby ecology is understood only in deadly/deathly terms, and Indigenous bodies are equated to Indigenous lands and marked as extractable resources. It is no coincidence that Miig describes the rapid proliferation of the bone marrow extractions sites in terms that evoke global warming: they pursue Indigenous peoples "like a bushfire" (2017, 147).

Dimaline's portrayal of the transformation of Indigenous bodies into "little more than a crop" that can be "harvested for medicine" (2017, 26, 47) exposes the callous brutality of settler colonial acts of genocide and of capitalist pursuit of profit at any cost. In short, she exposes the greed at the heart of the climate emergency, and the "fundamental lack of respect" that allows the policies of genocide to become the policies of ecocide (Arias, 2021, 115). But she also exposes the complicity of all those who inexplicably refuse to act in their own interests against their oppressors, both textually and extra-textually, via the Indigenous teenage character Frenchie. Frenchie not only draws together the two interrelated threads of Indigenous genocide and corporate ecocide, but he also shows Dimaline's readers the questions that they should be asking about the 21st century climate emergency:

> …it seemed as though the world had suddenly gone mad. Poisoning your own drinking water, changing the air so much the Earth shook and melted and crumbled, harvesting a race for medicine. How? How could this happen? Were they that much different from us? Would we be like them if we had a choice? Were they enough like us to let us live? (2017, 47).

Dimaline's readers might be forgiven for thinking that this is a situation bereft of hope. However, this is just half of the story.

Imagining Decolonial Indigenous Futures

The Marrow Thieves is also a story of radical hope. While the narrative seems overwhelmed with the story of the settler colonial capitalist oppression and destruction of Canada's First Nations, and with the deep terrors of the Indigenous found-family at the centre of the text, there is nonetheless a spine of Indigenous survivance that points to an alternative and far more hopeful future. As Megan Canella has argued, Dimaline's novel is "propel[led]" by "the idea of leaving hope or dreams for a future generation" (2010, 112). In this second section, I read Dimaline's text as an example of Indigenous Futurism, as a means by which hope can exist in the imagining of radically different decolonial futures that centre traditional Indigenous cultural knowledges and practices.

From the outset, Dimaline warns us that Indigenous memory and mindfulness of the histories of genocide-ecocide is essential to Indigenous survival in the present. Indeed, when Miig's husband Isaac is captured because he fails to flee in time due to his inability to believe that anyone could be capable of acting with such depravity, Miig expressly notes that Isaac's inability to believe in settler colonial evil derives from his lack of family memories of "the original schools": "he didn't have grandparents who'd told residential school stories" about Indigenous languages being "suck[ed]… right out of your lungs" (2017, 106-107). Accordingly, for Miig's found-family, hope exists in storytelling, and the text is structured to saturate the tale of ecocidal-genocidal horror with entire chapters given over to "Story" (2017, 21), where Miig explains traditional Indigenous cultural knowledges that act not only as an educational and experiential process but also provide information on survival, and present resistance to the settler colonial capitalist state as a crucial form of cultural and physical survival. Alongside Story, the text is threaded through with chapters of "coming to stories" (2017, 1), which detail how each individual family member joined the group, and their experiences before they arrived. While Dimaline's novel exposes the ways in which Indigenous literature is itself "a form of resistance" (Cheyfitz, 2021, 140), it becomes clear that telling stories *within* the text is central both to Indigenous epistemologies and to the imagining of hopeful Indigenous futures: the stories and

their tellings represent a crucially important "enactment of sovereign agency" (Ingwersen, 2020). As Frenchie comments, "we needed to remember Story. It was his [Miig's] job to set the memory in perpetuity" because, as Miig himself asserts, "A general has to see the whole field to make good strategy" (2017, 25).

And so we can read Dimaline's use of Story and Coming-to-Stories as an example of Indigenous Storywork that Jo-ann Archibald (Sto:lo) *et al* describe as a powerful "decolonizing methodology" that "speak[s] back" to "the violence of colonial storytelling" to centre the "meaningful" and "education[al]" nature of Indigenous methodologies (2019, 12, 7, 1). In a profoundly decolonial move, Dimaline offers a challenge to harmful settler colonial capitalist extractivist ideologies though a philosophical centring of the Earth: Miig's Story is "deeply informed by what the land *as a system of reciprocal relations and obligations* can teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and the natural world in nondominating and nonexploitative terms" (Coulthard, 2014, 14, original emphasis). The Indigenous Storywork of *The Marrow Thieves* therefore foregrounds the ways in which Indigenous narrative traditions are examples of "mindfulness in action" that actively overturn settler colonial capitalist genocidal-ecocidal behaviours, and instead insist that every human action is governed by a consideration of "respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy" (Archibald, 2019, 12, 1).

Importantly, in her depiction of Indigenous Storywork, Dimaline emphasises the power of *language* and *voice* to Indigenous resistance and survival. Alongside the telling of Indigenous experiences and cultural traditions as Story, *The Marrow Thieves* emphasises the power of song. For the majority of North American Indigenous peoples, song is not only inextricable from prayer, spiritual observance, and traditional knowledges, but also a powerful decolonial act that enacts and performs radical hope. Song – the voicing of Indigenous worldviews - thus embodies Indigenous Futurism in its imagining of hopeful futures that overturn the settler colonial death-worlds. In this context, as Miig makes the horrific discovery of the vials of Indigenous bone

marrow and sees whole and healthy bodies reduced to parts for profit, he is not only paralysed by his fear that one of the vials contains all that remains of his missing husband Isaac ("66542G, 41 year-old male. Euro-Cree"), but also overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of Indigenous lives that have been violently appropriated as evidenced by the marrow extraction numbering system: "46522Y, 64 year-old female, Metis," "67781F, 15 year old male, Inuit" (2017, 144). The horror has the potential to rob Miig of his voice and of his agency, to enact a further colonial "erasure of the individual" (Cannella 2020, 115). However Miig's response, significantly, foregrounds the importance of both story and voice as forms of resistance, agency, and sovereignty, as he asserts and celebrates the irreducible humanity of Indigenous bone marrow. Linking fragmented and violated bodies with equally fragmented and violated lands, Miig locates the last fresh water lake unpoisoned by capitalist industrial processes that "still held fish" in which to empty the vials (2017, 145). And, crucially, even though it takes "four days" due to the volume of vials, Miig demonstrates the respect and responsibility demanded by Indigenous Storywork as he "sang each of them home" (2017, 145). As the Cree musician Cheryl L'Hirondelle notes, "'the power of having your own song'" is itself "a survival tool, a means to sound an Indigenous future grounded in freedom and self-determination" (2019, interview abstract).

Miig's use of traditional song is reflected in the significance that Dimaline also accords to Indigenous languages. As the diverse family group endlessly travel to avoid the Recruiters, the younger members not only begin to understand the significance of language to their own cultural survival but also to become painfully aware of their *lack* of language, and the elder Minerva's fluent understanding of her Indigenous language thus becomes an intergenerational resource for knowledge transfer for the entire group as they undertake language lessons. When the group finally join the Indigenous resistance community later in the text, it is notable that the larger and equally culturally diverse community have prioritised language learning in order to "piec[e] together the few words and images each of us carried" and "start a youth council" so as to "pas[s] on the teachings right away" (2017, 214). In a decolonial act that actively and hopefully

imagines Indigenous Futurisms, Frenchie deliberately writes his first learnt word - "family" – on "a creamy curl of birch bark" (2017, 214) to physically embody the centrality of "*reciprocal relations and obligations*" between all life forms to Indigenous philosophical worldviews (Coulthard, 2014, 14). Both language and song are always directly connected to the earth as an "organic part of the…[Indigenous] environment" (Whidden, 2007, 1).

But perhaps the most significant episode of the text is when Minerva deliberately sacrifices herself to the Recruiters to protect the rest of her small family group. Despite her central status as one of the few fluent Indigenous language speakers and so a repository of essential cultural knowledge, Minerva understands that language equates to power: that voicing Indigenous language is itself an act of radical hope. Language is, quite simply, a cultural weapon. This, ironically, it is one of the central tenets not just of settler colonialism but also of the historical residential school system, which sought to break Indigenous cultures by severing an entire generation from their own languages. Voicing Indigenous languages claims an Indigenous present and ensures an Indigenous future. Minerva's significance is evident in the descriptions of the dreams that have become so essential to the survival of the settler colonial population: "every dream Minerva had…was in the language. It was her gift" (2017, 172). Yet Dimaline carefully shows us that this 'gift' is also "her secret" and "her plan" because Minerva understands that the marrow extraction machine cannot compute Indigenous language precisely because the settler colonial capitalist system cannot understand core Indigenous values such as respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and interrelatedness. These are languages that the machine and its creators cannot speak. And this is evident in her captors' increasing speculation that "there might be something fatally wrong with the subject's mind" as she is observed "singing in increasing volume" but without any "sensible words – English words" (2017, 171). As she is "processed," Minerva uses song to draw on "her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors" to "gather the dreams like bright beads" and transform them into a song that the machine cannot survive because it is sung in a historically forbidden language that carries Indigenous ceremony (2017,

171, 172, 173). Minerva's song also gains power from exposing the hidden residential school histories where the extractive machinery is located, to "ech[o] through her relatives bones, rattling them in the ground under the school itself….morphing her singular voice to many" and "changing her heartbeat to drum" (2017, 173). As Minerva sings powerful "words…that the conductor couldn't process, words the Cardinals couldn't bear, words the wires couldn't transfer," she becomes "the weapon that could bring them all down" (2017, 172, 206). In the end, the "broken system" is "torn down by the words of a dreaming old lady" who sacrifices her own life to dream a better future for her community (2017, 173).

Crucially, Dimaline's imagined decolonial future is organised by Indigenous understandings of 'home'. If we extend our understandings of 'home' to include our relationships to the natural world in planetary and ecological terms, then we can begin to understand Minerva's final spoken instruction - "Kiiwen… go home" (2017, 210-2011) – even as we also begin to comprehend the urgent care with which Miig sang "each of" the bone marrows remains "home" earlier in the text (2017, 145). Minerva's instruction suggests that the Indigenous group need to do more than simply relocate to safety, they need to fully centre a more sustainable Indigenous way of being in the world in order to achieve a hopeful decolonial Indigenous future. Importantly, this can be detected in the positive changes in the natural landscape as Miig's family near the location of the Indigenous resistance community where there are unexpected signs of ecological recovery: the teenage Rose discovers that there is not only "real water" flowing in a "thin brown brook" but also "fish" (2017, 157). Home, then, is a *lived experience*; it is not just the intricate relationships between living beings and place, but also the experiential knowledges that derive from these relationships. This understanding allows the wider fugitive Indigenous community to overcome the settler colonial "transgenerational narratives of displacement and abuse" (Canella, 2020 120) that threaten to overwhelm them due to Minerva's loss, and instead embrace the belief that "as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream" (2017, 231). The community's certainty of a decolonial

Indigenous future is finally rewarded at the close of the text when the fluent Cree speaking Issac returns to the community and reveals that he too "dreams in Cree" (2017, 228).

Conclusions

Hope is at the very centre of *The Marrow Thieves*. In its attempts to 'see what might lie beyond' the current climate emergency, the text draws heavily on Indigenous histories of oppression and dispossession to reject Euroamerican necropolitics and necroecologies, to celebrate Indigenous survivance, and to weave hopeful Indigenous futures. And Dimaline's focus on home and what home means demands that we ask searching questions about our own complicity in ecological damage. At the close of the text, an Indigenous future is discussed which demonstrates how human and planetary health, disease, and healing are inseparable. Clarence's declaration that "all we need is the safety to return to our homelands. Then we can start the process of healing" is narrowly interpreted by Frenchie to mean healing the community, and Clarence is forced to clarify that "I mean we can start healing the land" (2017, 193). Clarence's subsequent elaboration, "when we heal our land, we are healed also" (2017, 193), is an important message for us all in an era of climate emergency. It is especially pertinent for us to be able to see what might lie beyond the complex and far-reaching necropolitical and necroecological operations of powerful multinational corporations and national interests/governments. Pointing to the kinds of settler colonial capitalist ideologies that actively cause climate crisis, *The Marrow Thieves* demonstrates the 'mindfulness in action' of Indigenous Storywork to centre the kinds of obligationary worldviews and practices that are necessary to combat the climate emergency. As readers, we witness Frenchie and the other young Indigenous characters gaining an experiential understanding of the world, and this is presented to us as an essential requirement as our world experiences growing climate uncertainty. Dimaline's active imagining of viable Indigenous Futures not only promotes sustainable ways of seeing and living in the world, but offers a hopeful way of 'seeing what lies beyond.'

In a capitalist world defined by the value of 'natural resources,' it is essential that we begin to understand and accept that "hope is a natural resource too" (Greenberg, 2023). Solnit's argument that "Hope just means another world might be possible, not promised, not guaranteed. Hope calls for action, action is impossible without hope" (2016, 5) best captures the productive tensons of Dimaline's text. The combination that Solnit identifies of a lack of guarantee and continual mediation with a sense nonetheless of hopeful action is precisely encapsulated in *The Marrow Thieves*. And this productive tension between taking action and seeing immediate effective results hits at the very heart both of the slow violence of climate emergency, and of the inexplicable popular unwillingness to take action regardless of the cost to the world in which we live. It is perhaps best expressed by the teenage character Chi Boy in his consideration of Minerva's self-sacrifice, which expresses a deep understanding of Indigenous Futurism as built on many small but important individual actions: "sometimes you risk everything for a life worth living, even if you're not the one that'll be alive to live it" (2017, 152). Minerva's sacrifice is therefore an important example of the kinds of "courageous ways of living" that are required by radical hope (Lear, 2006, 150).

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