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Memory in the Marrow: Hybrid Identities and Decolonial Futures in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves.*

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Abstract

The article examines how Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) represent ancestral memory as a decolonial force, and how each novel's characters, Tayo and Frenchie, embody Indigenous cultural hybridity. Drawing on Indigenous epistemology, the Native American Renaissance, and Indigenous Futurism, it argues that the forty years between the novels mark a shift in the function of memory. In *Ceremony*, memory is a restorative, ceremonial process rooted in Pueblo cyclical time. Tayo's recovery from war trauma and alienation comes through adaptive ritual, storytelling, and reconnection with the land, and the novel contrasts this with the numbing effect of Western medicine. Dimaline instead presents memory as an embodied, future-oriented tool of survival and resistance, in a dystopian Canada where Indigenous bone marrow holds the ability to dream. The article contends that both novels reject cultural purity in favour of dynamic, hybrid identities. It concludes that they move from historical reclamation and individual healing toward collective decolonization and nation-building, and that colonialism is shown to shift from a past event with lingering effects to an ongoing, systemic process.

Keywords: ancestral memory; cultural hybridity; Indigenous identity; Indigenous Futurism; Native American Renaissance; decolonization; historical trauma; oral tradition; Leslie Marmon Silko; Cherie Dimaline

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel *Ceremony*, which appeared in 1977, remains relevant to readers even today because it is a novel that speaks profoundly about human experiences of loss, disconnection, and yearning for belonging. The setting of the novel is mostly on the Laguna Pueblo reservation in New Mexico. It is about a mixed-race Native American male. Tayo, who has come back from the Second World War thoroughly changed. He is tormented by visions of violence and by the death of his cousin Rocky, who died beside him in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. Silko utilizes Tayo's broken consciousness as a prism through which to look at what occurs when a person's idea of self is untethered from the cultural narratives that have become a part of our habitual perception. *The Marrow Thieves*, on the other hand, is a striking piece of indigenous futurism that imagines a near-future Canada wrecked by climate change and plagued by a bizarre phenomenon: the inability to dream. But through this disaster, indigenous people are still capable of dreaming and are the only ones to do so as their bone marrow contains the key to recover this lost ability. As a result, they are hunted down, captured and harvested for their

bone marrow by a resurgent colonial regime. The novel follows Frenchie, a Metis teenager, who travels the fragmented landscape with a group of fellow survivors who have their own scars of history and carry the hopes of their people. Dimaline combines dystopian storytelling with rich cultural traditions to address themes of resistance, survival and displacement.

It is important to understand the historic factors that led to creation of works such as these, as it clearly demonstrates the internal struggles within the indigenous community that were suppressed due to colonialism. The clash of colonial and indigenous histories was one of the most common confrontations, and it still is to some extent. The disagreement illustrates the ongoing reality of colonialism, as well as the difficulties that indigenous peoples have in regulating historical representation and material development in their ancestral territories.[1] As we move on deeper into the stories, there are several culturally hybrid characters in both these works and the identity of being indigenous in these characters is also met with cultural hybridity internally. According to Eva Mackey, the idea of Cultural Hybridity suggests that indigenous people can embody multiple cultural influences while still being rooted in their historical and geographical contexts.[2] The Indigenous identity crisis is framed within the broader context of national narratives, globalization, and the ongoing struggle for representation and recognition in Canadian society. Hybridity is visible in a variety of fields, from linguistic phenomena like code-switching and creole languages to cultural products like fusion foods and music genres. While it is praised for its ability to promote inclusivity, innovation, and intercultural understanding, researchers warn of the dangers of homogeneity and the erasure of minority identities if power disparities are neglected. Thus, research on cultural hybridity not only broadens theoretical discourse but also informs inclusive policies and behaviours in heterogeneous countries.[3]

The crux of the novel, *Ceremony* is a dialogue between the pain of alienation and the redemptive power of cultural memory. Tayo is tormented by guilt and worthlessness. He has absorbed the society's racism and feels himself to be contaminated or lacking because he is part Native American. This existential uneasiness is translated into physical disease, depression, and a spacing-out from objective reality. This psychic dislocation of Tayo is illustrated by Silko through disjointed narrative sections which switch abruptly between present, past, and mythic time. The reader, along with Tayo, experiences reality broken into incoherence. But the author does not abandon Tayo in this state. Instead, she slowly works with the concept that ancestral memory itself can become a strong force of continuity and meaning. In *Ceremony*, ancestral memory is more than nostalgia for something lost. It is more of a living power that has the ability to redeem pain into wisdom. Tayo's path to healing starts when he goes to see Betonie, who is a non-traditional Navajo medicine man. Betonie conveys his idea to him that ceremonies need to change in order to serve new generations and new crises. The rituals that supported the Pueblo people cannot remain stagnant and static if they are to heal the wounds of colonialism and war. This is also an important theme of the novel. The realization that for cultures, survival depends as much on adaptability as it does on preservation. Betonie's ceremony is not an easy formula for health. But it is rather a difficult journey into the mountains to reclaim cattle stolen by white ranchers, which Tayo must embark on. The task is both symbolic and functional. It symbolizes the recovery of pilfered heritage. The conscious decision to participate in the land that has always supported the Laguna Pueblo.

The novel treats existential angst in a different manner. Existential angst is deeply painful but also the catalyst for growth. Tayo's agony compels him to challenge the boundaries of Western models of healing, which

[1] Elizabeth Furniss, "Systemic Ambiguity, First Nations, and Canadian Nationalism: Dilemmas of History-Making in the Development of a National Heritage Trail," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, 44.1 (2000), pp. 40–65.
[2] Eva Mackey, "Becoming Indigenous: Land, Belonging, and the Appropriation of Aboriginality in Canadian Nationalist Narratives," *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology*, 42–42.2 (1998), pp. 150–78 https://www.jstor.org/stable/23166573
[3] Haj Yazdiha, "Conceptualizing Hybridity: Deconstructing Boundaries through the Hybrid," *CUNY Academic Works*, 2010 https://academicworks.cuny.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1338&context=gc_pubs

regards trauma as a discrete psychological state. Through Tayo, Silko redefines it as what it is - as a shared, historical wound. She compares the antiseptic atmosphere of the Veterans' Hospital where Tayo was first treated, with the immersive, participatory rites of Betonie and the traditional healers.

> He had been sick, and the sickness had been in his stomach, in his head, and in his chest. But the medicine they gave him in the hospital only made him sicker. The medicine drained memory out of his thin arms and replaced it with a twilight cloud behind his eyes.[4]

Here we see how the effect of the depersonalizing treatment in the Veterans' Hospital. Their medicine numbs and erases memory rather than healing the root cause. Clearly the Western outlook. The storytelling itself becomes a deeper analysis of the condition they are in and what it has been falsely doctored to be perceived in. Another remarkable thing about *Ceremony* is the fusion of prose fiction with Pueblo poetry and myth. Interwoven throughout the book are poetic passages that tell the Laguna people's creation myths and adventures of different characters like the Gambler and the Sun Man. These mythic cycles are not merely ornamental in nature. They serve the purpose of being an antidote to Tayo's own narrative, and imply that his breakdown is merely a part of a much greater cycle. Silko is suggesting that the forces that destroy Tayo are the same forces that have always posed a threat to the balance of the world, which are none other than greed, violence and the desecration of the land.

> They are afraid, Tayo. They are afraid of you. The beliefs and the stories have always been here, and together they are the wall that has kept them out. You don't have anything that they can take from you. You have already seen it. And you have seen the destruction they can cause. You saw it all along, even if you didn't want to believe it. You saw how they would destroy the feeling between the people, how they would destroy the love the people had for the earth.[5]

This process of portrayal posits Tayo's personal healing as indivisible from the healing of the earth and society. Silko also makes the notion of returning to origins problematic by illustrating that such a return is always impure, never uncomplicated. Tayo's identity is certainly hybrid. He is Native and white. He is traditional and modern at once. He is an existence who could be best described as an amalgamation of binaries. His rebirth is not about eliminating aspects of himself or choosing a side and washing away the other. But it is about learning to assimilate and embrace them. The ritual he faces is one of acquiescence and his own contradictions. And this acquiescence is what enables him to break free from passive victimhood into active engagement with his people's survival. "He could feel it, alive with the breathing of the snow and the growing of the trees. The old instincts were alive in him again. The sound of the wind and the mountain was the feeling of being a part of everything".[6]

The return to cultural roots here is thus symbolic of the rebirth of the self. A rebirth that does not efface the wounds of the past but burns and turns them into reservoirs of resilience. Through reclaiming the cattle and the forces that have dispossessed his people, Tayo regains his sense of agency, and above all, his tie to the ancestral land. This tie is constructed as mutual. As Tayo heals the land, the land heals him in return. The novel's final scenes underscore this interconnectedness, as Tayo achieves some sense of tranquility by affirming himself as part of an unbroken continuum of existence.

> He cried the relief he felt at finally seeing the pattern, the way all the stories fit together—the old stories, the war stories, their stories—to become the story that was still being told. He was not afraid anymore; the

[4] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986). Pp. 14
[5] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986). Pp. 204-205
[6] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986). Pp. 226-227

> fear had been in the pattern all along, and now he saw where it came from and how it could be stopped. He lay back on the sand, and the earth loved him back.[7]

The theme of interconnection is predominant in Silko's narrative strategy. The book's non-linearity encourages readers to perceive time as a web in which the past, present, and future are interlaced and interconnected. This cyclical understanding of time contradicts Western notions of progress and individualism. Instead, Silko presents a world where all things are connected through story, memory, and ritual. For Tayo, learning about this cycle is the key to transcending the division of his own mind. He has to be able to view his own loss as part of a much greater tapestry.

Ceremony has wider repercussions for the way societies account for historical trauma, aside from its direct attention to Tayo's recovery. Silko is implying that societies broken by colonization and erasure will not be able to turn outside themselves for answers. Rather, they must turn inward, into their own narratives, ceremonies, and values to find a way towards resuscitation and rejuvenation. This focus on self-initiated healing puts Ceremony in line with postcolonial literature which demands that histories oppressed by colonial powers must be reclaimed. But at the same time, the novel resists any simple idea of cultural purity or return to Eden before contact. Betonie's character represents the need to mix old knowledge and new wisdom. His ceremonies incorporate newspapers, calendars, and contemporary symbols with traditional herbs and incantations. Silko guides us to the recognition that cultural memory is not fixed but always dynamic.

> At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed were enough for the way the world was then. But after the white people came, elements in this world began to shift; and it became necessary to create new ceremonies. I have made changes in the rituals. The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth keeps the ceremonies strong.[8]

Ancestral memory is a foundational theme in indigenous North American literature. It is an inextricable part of the evolving landscape of indigenous literature. It is more than a mere literary device, but something that serves as the foundation of Indigenous epistemology and a vital mechanism for cultural continuity. In the vast arena of indigenous literature, memory is not a passive act of recalling a static past but a dynamic, living force that actively links past, present, and future. For many Indigenous nations, histories, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices are inextricably intertwined with the oral traditions and communal storytelling, which function as a primary means of transmitting knowledge across generations. These narratives are valuable sources of historical knowledge and a pedagogical tool that develops listening skills, and imagination in younger generations.

As a powerful reaction to the epistemological violence of colonialism, which has sought to systematically dismantle Indigenous cultures and cut off their connections to land, language, and identity, ancestral memory plays an important role in preserving the cultural identity of the native people. The literary works of Indigenous authors therefore can be seen as an attempt to reclaim and rejuvenate these memory systems. Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) are separated by four decades. They exemplify a significant shift in the literary and political function of ancestral memory – from a focus on historical reclamation and individual healing to a vision of future-oriented, collective decolonization. The 1960s witnessed a paradigmatic change in American Literature. There evolved a renewed interest in native American mythology and literature. It was a period of significant cultural and literary output that sought to reclaim and celebrate Native identity and cultural heritage. Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony* was published when Indigenous authors were actively writing back against Eurocentric narratives that had long silenced and misrepresented their communities. Silko, a writer with Laguna Pueblo ancestry, drew heavily on her native heritage and the traditional

[7] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986). Pp. 229-230
[8] Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Books, 1986). Pp. 126-127

oral stories she learned from her elders. The novel's narrative structure, which eschews a conventional linear progression in favour of interweaving traditional myths with a contemporary storyline, is itself a formal expression of this literary and cultural reclamation.

Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* is a key text of the contemporary movement known as "Indigenous Futurism". Indigenous Futurism uses speculative fiction and related subgenres to envision alternative futures where Indigenous peoples not only persist but also reclaim agency, sovereignty, and cultural continuity. This genre moves beyond simply critiquing the colonial present; it actively projects Indigenous existence and flourishing into a future that rejects the destructive logics of settler colonialism and global environmental collapse. Published in 2017, the dystopian setting of *The Marrow Thieves* is not a distant, separate world, but rather an extrapolated continuation of the historical processes of dispossession and genocide that indigenous people have already endured for centuries. This shift from Renaissance to Futurism reflects a change in the function of ancestral memory, from a focus on historical reclamation to a vision of future-oriented decolonization.

The Marrow Thieves is about Frenchie, a Metis boy who, after his mother and brother Mitch are taken by Recruiters, is discovered dying and saved by Miig an Anishnaabe man who acts as Frenchie's carer. Along with Miig, Elder Minerva, Chi-Boy and Wab, and the twin siblings Tree and Zheegwon, plus children RiRi and Slopper (later joined by Rose), Frenchie journeys north at the age of sixteen. We discover in Miig's Story that due to climate catastrophe, the majority of people could no longer dream. However, indigenous people were able to store their dreams within their bone marrow. In order to extract these, the government constructed new residential schools and in so doing murdered those from which they took the marrow. As the group tell each another of their traumatic 'coming-to' – such as Wab's rape and Miig's husband Isaac's death – they are double-crossed by Travis and Lincoln. During the ensuing fight, RiRi is killed and Travis is murdered by Frenchie. Minerva is then captured by the Recruiters. The group travel south and are taken to a secret rebel camp run by Frenchie's father and the Council. Frenchie experiences conflict between his relationship with his father and his attraction to Rose. A failed rescue mission results in Minerva being shot. Even in death she advises the group to go home. Moreover, her singing had previously damaged the school's equipment. The Council commences work on restoring both its language and Stories and establishes a young people's council in order to transmit these. After Rose departs, Frenchie's father allows him to join her. They come across a small nomadic party and one member is Isaac. His return enables Miig and Isaac to be together again.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, the concept of memory transcends simple historical recollection, taking on a profound, multi-dimensional significance rooted in Indigenous epistemology. From this perspective, memory is not merely a cognitive process but an inherited, lived experience that acts as a lifeline to their ancestors. It links Indigenous peoples to the foundational events that shaped their social and political lives, such as the forced removal of nations or the trauma of residential schools, while also preserving their lifeways, ceremonial knowledge, and social protocols amidst the loss of political autonomy. This form of memory persists over generations, becoming a collective consciousness akin to Émile Durkheim's sociological concept, a body of social facts that tells a people who they are. This knowledge is transmitted not through institutional archives but through oral storytelling, ceremonies, and rituals, which are regarded as places of knowledge that foster social cohesion and emphasize a people's connection with their forebears. The spiritual and cultural weight of this transmission is so significant that it is believed to be epigenetically imprinted on the body, its effects compounding over generations. The novel's central premise – the loss of dreams among the non-Indigenous population – can be understood as a physical manifestation of this lack of embodied memory and a profound spiritual void.

The post-apocalyptic world of *The Marrow Thieves* is a consequence of ecocide and environmental collapse, which are themselves outcomes of colonial capitalist ideologies. The spiritual and physical disconnection from the land, which is a core feature of settler culture, is presented as the direct cause of their inability to dream.

In contrast, the Indigenous population, with its deeply embedded ancestral memory and reciprocal relationship with the land, retains this vital spiritual link, making their dreams and bone marrow a coveted commodity. The novel, therefore, establishes a clear causal link: the historical act of forgetting and destroying the land has resulted in a spiritual and cultural catastrophe for the colonizing population. The novel's central allegory here is that dreams are not figments of the imagination but are literally stored in the bone marrow of Indigenous peoples. The body thus becomes a literal "repository of knowledge, of memory, of dreams and of magic."[9] This powerful literary trope turns the intangible nature of ancestral memory into a physical resource, and thus stealable. The non-Indigenous community, having lost its capacity for dreaming through a spiritual illness and environmental destruction, has been driven into madness and an epidemic of suicide. In desperation, they track Indigenous individuals to extract their bone marrow, which they believe contains the cure. This bone marrow theft is not a plot device; it is an explicit and creepy allegory for the colonial commodification and taking of Indigenous culture, identity, and spirituality historically and currently.[10]

One important distinction between *Ceremony* and *The Marrow Thieves* is their differing temporal orientations. Silko's novel, a work of the Native American Renaissance, has a cyclical, non-linear temporality based on Pueblo cosmology. In Pueblo thought, the past is not a time but an ever-present influence that can heal the present. The interweaving of past myths with the modern-day narrative in this narrative captures this assumption and indicates that answers to issues of the present are in the wisdom of the past. The hope in the novel relies on a reestablishment of balance, a going back to the old ways in which the fractured self and community may be healed. On the other hand, Dimaline's book, a book of Indigenous Futurism, employs the science fiction genre to imagine a dystopian future. But here, this future is unambiguously an extension and a gut-wrenching hyperbole of historical colonial violence and ecocide. This disruption in time in Indigenous literature is deeply meaningful. The forty-year timeline between the novels is a progression in the conceptualization of colonialism—from being a past event that continues to bear consequences to being an on-going, systemic process. This change requires the role of ancestral memory to change as well. For Silko, memory is an instrument of psychological and cultural repair, which leads a person to heal and reconcile with the world that actually exists. For Dimaline, memory is a tactical, existence-preserving map for actively constructing a new, independent future in a world that is already collapsing in apocalyptic fashion. The first work attempted to 're-member' a disjointed self and society; the second aims to 're-member' a whole nation. The political sphere of memory moves from one of cultural restitution to one of radical construction and nation-making.

While Silko's *Ceremony* presents ancestral memory as a restorative ceremonial process vital for healing from intergenerational trauma, Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* re-imagines it as a tangible, embodied power essential for cultural and physical survival in a post-apocalyptic future. This evolution in the representation of ancestral memory reflects a broader shift in Indigenous literary strategy from the historical reclamation of the Native American Renaissance to the future-oriented decolonial vision of Indigenous Futurism. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* as a seminal work of Indigenous speculative fiction that uses a post-apocalyptic setting to interrogate historical and ongoing colonial realities. The core argument is that Dimaline's novel posits Indigenous ancestral memory, transmitted through oral tradition and embodied knowledge, as the primary force of resistance and survival against genocidal-ecocidal forces. Through a detailed analysis of the novel's central allegory – the link between dreams, bone marrow, and cultural identity – this paper will demonstrate how Dimaline reframes memory not as a passive relic of the past, but as an active, living, and decolonial tool. The analysis will also explore

[9] Niranjana Iyer. "Cherie Dimaline: The Importance of Dreams". *Herizons Magazine*, 2020.
[10] Rebecca Tillett, "'Seeing What Might Lie Beyond': Hope and Indigenous Futurisms in Cherie Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves," *Comparative American Studies an International Journal*, 2025, pp. 1–14, doi:10.1080/14775700.2025.2488103.

how the novel's literary devices and symbolism create a powerful narrative of hope, resilience, and the possibility of a sovereign Indigenous future.

Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, differing by four decades and distinct literary tendencies, both forcefully assert the long-lasting and transformative potency of ancestral memory as a decolonial force. Ceremony set an initial paradigm for healing the psychological and spiritual devastation of historical trauma, proving that a return to cyclical temporality, oral tradition, and ceremonial practice is necessary for individual and communal rebalancing. Silko's work presents a vision of hope based on the recovery of a fractured past to mend an injured present. In contrast, Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* evolves this theme to address the ongoing, contemporary violence of settler colonialism and climate change.

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