



The Suffering of Indigenous Communities: Environmental Racism in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

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Climate change and racism, both inextricably intertwined, are two of the biggest challenges of this century. Evidence of heightened exposure to environmental hazards in communities of color and their unreasonable exposure to air pollution is mounting, according to an essay by American emergency medicine physician Renée Salas, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*. These facts undergird the concept of “environmental racism” – a notion long regarded as a fringe issue that has now clawed its way back into the limelight, thanks to growing awareness of both climate change and racism.

There is scant research exploring the theme of environmental racism in climate fiction novels, despite the fact that Indigenous voices are among the most deafening in the global movement for climate justice – as Kyle Whyte, Professor of Native American Studies at the University of Michigan, stated in his 2018 essay “Is it Déjà Vu? Indigenous Peoples and Climate Injustice.” According to Laura Pulido, Professor of Geography at the University of Oregon, who explored the interface of geography and racial inequality in her 2017 essay “Geographies of race and ethnicity II,” there is strong evidence that environmental inequality between white and non-white communities has not vanished but worsened.

A pertinent question that arises when exploring Cherie Dimaline’s novel *The Marrow Thieves* within the context of climate change and racism is how the Indigenous community’s attitude toward the environment differs from the relationship the non-Indigenous population has with nature. The young adult novel is set in a dystopic future in Canada, in a world ravaged by global warming. Non-indigenous people have lost their ability to dream, which is why the Canadian government deploys “Recruiters” to capture Indigenous people to extract their bone marrow to find a cure for the rest of the world. By contrasting the attitude toward the environment of the two different communities, the novel suggests that the relationships are inherently different, aiding the development of environmental racism. This essay provides an overarching theoretical framework by sketching the basic contours of the concept of environmental racism. It illustrates the stark contrast between the attitudes of the two communities toward nature in the novel by broaching the question of how neo-colonial narratives have led to heightened exposure of the protagonist Frenchie’s Indigenous community to pollution, disease, and land grabbing.

The genesis of the term environmental racism can be found in the 1980s and traces back to the African-American civil rights leader Benjamin Chavis. Environmental racism serves as an umbrella term that encompasses a form of racism whereby

marginalized and systematically disenfranchised communities are exposed to greater environmental risks and harm than other population groups. The concept is further characterized by government apathy, poor funding and discrimination in environmental policies. Several precedents have indicated that minority groups often bear the brunt of health problems linked to detrimental, life-threatening pollutants because they are more likely to live in hazard-prone areas, often targeted for toxic waste facilities. As Whyte says, it is important to note that Indigenous peoples face climate risks largely because of how colonialism, in conjunction with capitalist economics, shapes the geographic spaces and the socio-economic conditions they live in.

“It Seemed as Though the World had Gone Mad”

From *The Marrow Thieves*' opening pages, the Indigenous community's attitude toward nature is starkly in contrast with how the non-Indigenous population treats the environment. This dichotomy serves as the fundamental framework for the development of environmentally racist policies. While the non-Indigenous population poisons its own drinking water (Dimaline 47) and sparks “Water Wars” (10), which result in a litany of apocalyptic events, Frenchie blisteringly criticizes this practice and says “it seemed as though the world had gone mad. Poisoning your own drinking water [...] How could this happen?” (47). Moreover, Frenchie's peaceful encounter with a moose symbolizes the sacred reverence his community has for the environment. This is most ostensibly exemplified by Frenchie's thought process when contemplating killing the moose but then deciding otherwise.

Furthermore, “the freshest lakes and the clearest rivers” (24) have always been on the lands of Indigenous people, which buttresses the notion of them being more respectful toward their surroundings than the non-Indigenous population, which puts the environment through “too much pollution and too much change” (91). The non-Indigenous population is thus responsible for freshwater sources being “too poisoned for use” (24), which jeopardizes the natural world.

Over the course of the novel, the Indigenous community is subjected to more detrimental environmental health hazards than the non-Indigenous population, which is reflected through

the exposure of Frenchie and his friends to poisons and pollutants. In this context, it is vital to understand that even though the neo-colonial mentality of the non-Indigenous population is responsible for an environment ravaged by global warming, it is the Indigenous community that suffers the consequences. This is exemplified by the causal nexus between the poisoned environment and Frenchie's “annual bronchitis” (47), as well as by Frenchie and Miig, another character in the novel who is an elder, mentioning that:

“the Great Lakes were polluted to muck [...], too poisonous for use. [...] The waters were grey and thick like porridge” (24), “the smell from the lake here was nauseating. [...] this lake, like all the industry-plundered Great Lakes, was poison [...] the smell was pungent for us. We breathed into bandanas and built shelter from the stench with plywood and a tarp” (11) and that “[...] people had to move around. Diseases spread like crazy.” (29)

Land Inherently Imbued with Racism

The conflict surrounding Frenchie's endeavour to not fall into the hands of “Recruiters” is spurred on by the dire consequences of a polluted landscape due to climate change. This shows that even within the parameters of the severe consequences of climate change, the dominant struggle is still between an imperialist, capitalist system and the colonized. This notion shines through when Frenchie's dad asserts that the colonizers do not think of Indigenous people as humans, “just commodities” (203), demonstrating how this vicious cycle was sparked in the first place.

The theme of land grabbing in the novel illustrates how the non-Indigenous population continues to acquire land and extract nature's resources for the short-term benefit of a few, without the slightest consideration of possible long-term consequences. The vernacular term land grabbing can be defined as “a dynamic of land-use change that can enable especially rapid environmental transformations across vast spatial scales” (Lazarus 74) and “is driven by the increased marketization of ‘land’ and its potential production” (Gilbert 350). This is crucial within the context of environmental racism in the novel, as it proves that land ownership is inherently imbued with racism and showcases the flagrant disrespect of the non-Indigenous population toward land that belongs to others. Exemplified by the metaphor that Miig includes in his second story: “America reached up and started sipping on our lakes with a great metal straw” (24) and the fact that

the Indigenous communities “were moved off lands that were deemed ‘necessary’ to that government, same way they took reserve land during wartime [...]” (88) – the novel illustrates the capitalist and imperialist mentality of the non-Indigenous population. The way of life of Frenchie’s community is “commoditized” (89), their lands are “filled with water companies and wealthy corporate investors” (89) and they live near the “industry-plundered Great Lakes” (11) and “pipelines in the ground” (87) – showing that long-standing patterns have sealed the community’s reputation as a toxic wasteland.

The Marrow Thieves clearly shows that environmental hazards are inequitably distributed. It spotlights how the non-Indigenous population avoids taking responsibility for its destructive actions. The attitude that Frenchie’s community has toward the environment is inherently different to how the non-Indigenous population views nature, water, and land.

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This difference in perception and values leads the non-Indigenous population to exploit the land and resources of the Indigenous people. The dilemmas that the novel highlights extend to the world we live in today. Whether there will ever be a solution remains to be seen. In the meantime, the fate of Indigenous communities is in limbo as the world is far from quashing environmental racism, and climate change continues to wreak havoc. A decisive shift in government policy is needed, or else the poison of environmental racism will most likely continue to spread in the future. And if precedence is anything to go by, Indigenous communities will likely once again shoulder an overwhelming part of the burden and fall prey to the consequences of years of deprioritizing, normalizing, and trivializing the quandary that is environmental racism.

Works Cited

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