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Research Paper

Language, Memory, and Resistance: Investigating Indigenous Cultural Heritage and Sovereignty through Language Ideology Theory in Cherie Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves

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Abstract
This study examines how Cherie Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves (2017) portrays Indigenous languages as cultural heritage, embodied inheritance, and tools of resistance through Paul V. Kroskrity's concept of language ideologies. The novel depicts a future where North America's Indigenous peoples are hunted for their ability to dream; a phenomenon closely linked to cultural memory and ancestral languages. Thus, the main argument focuses on how the novel presents Indigenous languages as both vital repositories of cultural memory and sovereign, embodied practices that oppose assimilation. Using Kroskrity's framework, complemented by insights from Leanne Hinton, Teresa McCarty, and Indigenous literary theory, this paper conducts close textual analysis of the novel's portrayals of language in dreams, stories, and everyday survival. The approach combines literary interpretation with linguistic anthropology, demonstrating how language functions not only as a means of communication but also as an ontological force connected to land, lineage, and collective future. The findings suggest that Dimaline views language as non-extractable and regenerative, challenging both historical policies of assimilation and potential biotechnological exploitation. Furthermore, this analysis advances scholarship on Indigenous language revitalization by emphasizing the embodied and ecological aspects of linguistic sovereignty in post-apocalyptic fiction.

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چکیده

پژوهش حاضر، بررسی می‌کند که چگونه رمان *سارقان مغز استخوان* (۲۰۱۷) نوشتهٔ چری دیمالین، زبان‌های بومی را به عنوان میراث فرهنگی، میراث تجسم‌یافته و ابزار مقاومت از طریق مفهوم ایدئولوژی‌های زبانی پاول وی. کروسکریتی به تصویر می‌کشد. این رمان، آینده‌ای را به تصویر می‌کشد که در آن مردم بومی آمریکای شمالی به دلیل توانایی‌شان در رؤیاپردازی دستگیر می‌شوند؛ پدیده‌ای که ارتباط نزدیکی با حافظهٔ فرهنگی و زبان‌های اجدادی دارد. بنابراین، بحث اصلی بر این متمرکز است که چگونه رمان، زبان‌های بومی را هم به عنوان مخازن حیاتی حافظهٔ فرهنگی و هم به عنوان شیوه‌های تجسم‌یافته و مستقلی که با جذب شدن مخالف هستند، ارائه می‌دهد. این مقاله با استفاده از چارچوب کروسکریتی، که با بینش‌هایی از لیان هینتون، ترزا مک‌کارتی و نظریهٔ ادبی بومی تکمیل می‌شود، تحلیل متنی دقیقی از تصاویر رمان از زبان در رؤیاها، داستان‌ها و بقای روزمرّه انجام می‌دهد. این رویکرد، تفسیر ادبی را با انسان‌شناسی زبانی ترکیب می‌کند و نشان می‌دهد که چگونه زبان، نه تنها به عنوان وسیله‌ای برای ارتباط، بلکه به عنوان یک نیروی هستی‌شناختی مرتبط با محیط، تبار و آیندهٔ جمعی عمل می‌کند. یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهد که دیمالین، زبان را غیرقابل استخراج و احیاکننده می‌داند و هم سیاست‌های تاریخی جذب و هم بهره‌برداری بیوتکنولوژیکی بالقوه را به چالش می‌کشد. علاوه بر این، این تحلیل با تأکید بر جنبه‌های تجسم‌یافته و اکولوژیکی حاکمیت زبانی در داستان‌های پساآخرالزّمانی، به پیشرفت پژوهش در مورد احیای زبان‌های بومی کمک می‌کند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: *سارقان مغز استخوان، چری دیمالین، بومیان پاول وی. کروسکریتی، ایدئولوژی‌های زبانی، هویت، فرهنگ.*

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1. Introduction

Indigenous languages are more than systems of communication; they are repositories of cosmology, ecological knowledge, and collective memory. In many Indigenous epistemologies, language is inseparable from land, lineage, and identity. Yet the histories of settler colonialism in Canada, particularly through residential schools and other assimilationist policies, have sought to suppress these languages, severing communities from the narratives and practices embedded within them. The erosion of Indigenous languages thus represents not merely a loss of words, but an assault on the cultural frameworks that sustain Indigenous sovereignty. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) engages directly with these stakes, envisioning an ecological and political catastrophe that leaves non-Indigenous populations incapable of dreaming while positioning Indigenous bodies, specifically their bone marrow, as biomedical commodities. The only remaining dreamers are Indigenous peoples, whose capacity to dream is rooted in their ancestral languages and cultural memories. In this speculative world, state authorities harvest Indigenous bone marrow as a biomedical resource to restore dreaming to settlers, enacting a new form of extractive colonialism. As survivors flee state-sanctioned capture, they protect not only their physical existence but also their oral traditions, songs, and keywords of belonging. Through this dystopian premise, Dimaline dramatizes the political and spiritual urgency of linguistic survival.

Cherie Dimaline is a Métis author from the Georgian Bay Métis Community in Ontario, Canada, whose writing is deeply shaped by her Indigenous heritage. Across her novels, short stories, and essays, she returns to themes of cultural survival, land-based identity, and the enduring impacts of colonialism. *The Marrow Thieves*, which won multiple national and international awards after its release in 2017, draws directly on these concerns. Blending speculative fiction with the oral storytelling traditions of her community, she crafts a narrative that speaks to the loss of language and land while celebrating the resilience of Indigenous knowledge.

While existing scholarship has examined this novel concerning Indigenous futurisms, environmental justice, and the legacy of residential schools, less attention has been paid to its ongoing

engagement with language ideology, the social beliefs and values that influence how languages are perceived, used, and controlled. This gap is important because the novel not only portrays language loss and revival but also presents language as a site of resistance that cannot be commodified or exploited.

The major emphasis of this paper revolves around the way the novel constructs Indigenous languages as cultural heritage, embodied inheritance, and instruments of resistance when examined through the lens of language ideology theory. Paul V. Kroskrity's conception of language ideologies as "sets of beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social worlds" (2000, p. 5) offers a valuable lens for examining how the novel constructs Indigenous languages as sacred inheritances. Kroskrity notes that many Indigenous communities perceive their languages as morally authoritative and spiritually resonant, linked to land, blood, and lineage (2000, pp. 109–115). His framework of language ideologies, which situates language as a socially embedded practice tied to identity, power, and political struggle, is supplemented by insights from Leanne Hinton, Teresa McCarty, and Indigenous literary theory. Therefore, the methodology combines close textual analysis with concepts from linguistic anthropology to examine the way language in the novel operates across oral storytelling, dreams, and embodied acts of defiance. Dimaline's novel makes these ideologies tangible: words emerge in marrow, dreams manifest in ancestral tongues, and storytelling circles become spaces where identity is repaired after centuries of assimilative violence.

Consequently, this paper demonstrates that language in *The Marrow Thieves* operates on three intertwined registers: (1) cultural inheritance that safeguards ancestral wisdom, (2) embodied memory that endures in subconscious dreaming, and (3) tactical resistance against state structures that seek to commodify Indigenous bodies while silencing their voices. By bringing together literary analysis and language ideology theory, the study shows how Dimaline reimagines language not as a relic of the past but as a regenerative, sovereign force essential to cultural continuity and future-making. The findings highlight how the novel expands the discourse on language revitalization by foregrounding its embodied and

ecological dimensions, offering a model for understanding linguistic survival in contexts of historical and ongoing colonial violence.

2. Language as Cultural Heritage

For many Indigenous communities, language is not a neutral medium but a moral and cultural inheritance. Paul V. Kroskrity (2000) defines language ideologies as "beliefs, or feelings, about languages as used in their social worlds" (p. 5), noting that these beliefs often link language to land, kinship, and spiritual responsibility. Within this framework, *The Marrow Thieves* presents language as a living archive of tradition, ecological knowledge, and communal identity, resources that losing them destabilizes the cultural foundations of Indigenous life. In such a world, language becomes more than just a tool of communication; it serves as a safeguard for cultural identity.

Dimaline situates this valuation of language at the center of her dystopian narrative. In the world of the novel, Indigenous people are targeted not solely for their bodies but for their capacity to dream, a capacity deeply rooted in ancestral languages and oral traditions. Frenchie's remark, "The key doesn't have to be old, the language already is" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 179), underscores the reverence with which Indigenous language is treated throughout the narrative. This aligns with Kroskrity's assertion that "language serves as a repository of tradition and authenticity" containing the moral and historical codes by which a community defines itself (2000, p. 115). In *The Marrow Thieves*, speaking or even recalling ancestral words is an act of both personal grounding and collective survival. Here, language is framed as a form of timeless knowledge, older than state borders and older than the settler institutions trying to suppress it, and powerful enough to serve as a key to both personal identity and communal survival. Characters who speak or understand ancestral words are portrayed as carriers of knowledge, bearers of a sacred thread that connects them to the wisdom and endurance of their ancestors.

This reverence is embedded in the novel's structure itself. Dimaline does not isolate language as a linguistic artifact but integrates it into story, ritual, and everyday speech. Each "Story" night (Miig's term for communal storytelling) functions not merely as entertainment or reflection, but also as an inheritance. "It's time for Story" (p. 134), Miig

announces, signaling a moment of cultural reclamation and reaffirmation. Each story recalls histories of residential schools, broken treaties, and forced relocations (narratives the younger members never directly experienced but must understand to know who they are and why they run). Samuelson and Evans (2022) describe this as "intergenerational knowledge transfer that affirms cultural continuity" (p. 280). Here, Dimaline shows that cultural heritage is preserved not only through formal linguistic instruction but through the rhythms of oral storytelling, where history and language are inseparable. The oral structure of the novel itself, which moves between dreams, memories, and campfire tales, affirms the centrality of language as a medium for teaching, healing, and identity formation.

Language also functions in the novel as a vessel for ecological memory. Indigenous place-names and terminology carry embedded knowledge about landscapes, species, and seasonal cycles. In the novel, this is illustrated when characters reference place-names and natural phenomena using ancestral words, even though those names no longer appear on any map. These references are not merely nostalgic but instrumental. When Frenchie repeats an old river's name, he enacts what Kroskrity (2000) calls "re-occupation of territory through speech" (p. 110). Such naming is more than nostalgic; it restores land to its relational and precolonial context. This idea resonates with Xausa's (2020) extension of Rob Nixon's concept of "slow violence" to language loss: settler suppression of Indigenous languages parallels environmental degradation, each eroding the conditions for cultural and ecological survival. Xausa extends this idea to include the erosion of Indigenous languages, noting that settler-state suppression of language is part of a broader campaign that includes land theft, water contamination, and cultural erasure (p. 90). In Dimaline's narrative, these elements are intertwined: the ability to name a plant, a river, or a season in one's language is directly tied to survival, not only in the physical sense but also in the spiritual sense of belonging. Therefore, by preserving and using ancestral terms, characters not only assert linguistic sovereignty but also maintain the knowledge required to live responsibly on the land. In other words, it grounds Frenchie and his community in a landscape that remains legible to them, despite settler efforts to overwrite it.

Language as cultural heritage is also manifested in the emotional connections the characters form around particular words. When Frenchie encounters the word nishin (meaning "good" or "beautiful"), he turns it over in his mouth "like a stone," unable to speak it fully, but unwilling to let it go (Dimaline, 2017, p. 111). The word carries more than semantic content; it holds affective weight, familial memory, and cultural affirmation. Kroskrity (2004) refers to this as "emotional indexicality," where certain expressions evoke shared feelings and ethical understandings that are irreducible to their dictionary definitions (p. 503). In this way, a single word can present a character's sense of self, even when everything else (home, family, security) is lost.

Furthermore, Dimaline presents the Council (the fugitive group at the heart of the story) as a mobile, living archive. In a world without schools, churches, or other fixed institutions, the responsibility of cultural transmission falls to individuals. Each member of the group contributes a different facet of ancestral knowledge, from Minerva's songs to Miig's stories to the children's questions and mispronunciations. This distributed model of knowledge reflects what Hinton (2013) observes about community-driven language revitalization: that the most successful efforts often come not from formal education systems but from "intergenerational households and informal gatherings where the language is lived" (p. 25). Dimaline captures this dynamic with care, showing that even when a language is fragmented, its core remains intact if it continues to function as a source of shared meaning and identity.

Ultimately, the novel depicts language as a kind of cultural DNA passed through stories, songs, and silences. Frenchie and his companions are not fluent in their ancestral language in a conventional sense, but they carry it nonetheless: in their dreams, in their elders' voices, and in the moral frameworks that guide their resistance. Language here is a living force that holds together a people under siege. As Kroskrity emphasizes, language ideologies are always situated in relations of power (2000, p. 3).

3. Language as Embodied Inheritance

In *The Marrow Thieves*, language is not only a cultural possession but a biological essence. Dimaline collapses the divide between the

learned and the innate, suggesting that ancestral language is embedded in the very structure of the body, and it is not just culturally transmitted but also biologically encoded. This powerful theme is captured in the metaphor, "You are born with them. Your DNA weaves them into the marrow like spinners" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 93). The statement collapses the division between culture and biology, implying that language is not merely learned but inherited. This vision echoes Paul Kroskrity's claim that for many Indigenous communities, language is "symbolically linked to blood, territory, and lineage" (2000, p. 109). In Dimaline's fictional universe, language is not a detachable skill; it is marrow-deep, sustaining identity in the same way blood sustains life.

This embodied view intensifies the novel's critique of colonial violence. In the dystopian world of the novel, language is not simply at risk of disappearance, but it is under direct assault. The state's harvesting of Indigenous bone marrow, framed as a solution to widespread dream loss among settlers, mirrors the extractive logics of historical residential schools, where bodies became sites of linguistic and cultural erasure. In both cases, bodies are sites of intervention, control, and epistemological violence. Just as residential schools sought to empty young bodies of their linguistic and cultural identities under the guise of education, the clinics in the novel attempt to drain the dream, closely associated with ancestral language, straight from the bones. The violence here is not metaphorical but embodied, suggesting that erasure operates at the deepest levels of selfhood.

Dimaline presents the characters' resistance as equally embodied. Throughout their journey, the fugitives engage in speech practices that revitalize the linguistic remnants within them. During long treks, Chi-Boy invents mnemonic games that associate new words with constellations and terrain, allowing the younger members to learn while on the move. Minerva hums ancestral songs whose vibrations, as Frenchie observes, seem to "settle the camp" like a medicine. Hinton (2013) emphasizes that revitalization "begins in the smallest, most resilient units of community, families" (p. 27), and Dimaline illustrates this beautifully: around each campfire, language is reacquired not through formal education but through

storytelling, teasing, lullabies, and guidance from elders. These informal, embodied teaching practices resist settler-state narratives that depict Indigenous languages as unfit for the demands of the modern world. When Frenchie remembers how Minerva once corrected his pronunciation, he reflects not with shame but with affection, understanding that linguistic correction is not judgmental but relational, it is an act of love. Language becomes a collective inheritance and a shared responsibility, much like the gift of dreaming.

Perhaps the most powerful illustration of embodied linguistic inheritance comes during Minerva's final act of defiance inside the marrow-harvesting laboratory. Despite the wires fastened to her, despite the probes designed to penetrate her "heartbeat and instinct," it is language that erupts from her body. She opens her mouth and releases a "heartbreaking wail that echoed through her relatives' bones, rattling them in the ground under the school itself" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 214). This act is not a symbolic performance but a material disruption: her song shatters the laboratory's systems, short-circuiting the extraction process. Stoica (2023) terms such acts "embodied resistance", a defiance expressed through the physical, sonic, and emotional capacities of the body (p. 445). The destruction of the clinic signifies more than the end of one experiment; it marks the implosion of the logic that framed Indigenous bodies as resources and their languages as extractable data. By vocalizing in her ancestral tongue, Minerva asserts that her language cannot be possessed, translated, or commodified. It is not an object to be decoded, but a relation to be lived and honored.

The significance of Minerva's act also lies in the way it reconnects body and memory across generations. Frenchie reflects that "every dream Minerva had ever dreamed was in the language. It was her gift, her secret, her plan" (p. 214). Language here is not just the content of Minerva's dreams but the medium through which dreaming itself becomes possible. This line resonates deeply with Kroskrity's idea of "ideological persistence," where language shapes identity even when external structures attempt to eradicate it (2000, p. 122). For Frenchie and the others, Minerva's song

becomes both a legacy and a challenge: to dream in the language is to keep alive an epistemology the world insists is extinct.

When Frenchie tries to articulate "nishin", he describes the word as something heavy and alive, "a prayer I couldn't add breath to, a word I wasn't willing to release" (p. 111). The physicality of this moment suggests that ancestral language resides not merely on the tongue but within the chest, the throat, the bones. Words are not just spoken; they are carried. The hesitation to speak reflects the emotional risk of loss and the fear that, once spoken, the word may vanish, or worse, return with a different meaning. These moments, scattered throughout the narrative, deepen the theme of language as embodied inheritance. Frenchie and his fellow travelers are not fluent in the conventional sense. But fluency, Dimaline suggests, is not always the point. What matters is the emotional, relational, and spiritual connection to language. As Hinton emphasizes, even partial use of endangered languages can spark revitalization if accompanied by care, intention, and intergenerational transmission (2013, p. 28). This view complicates dominant metrics of language loss and success, inviting readers to see revitalization not as a return to a pure or static past, but as an ongoing, embodied practice of cultural reassembly.

By linking language to marrow, Dimaline reframes inheritance as a form of regeneration. Bone marrow produces blood cells; without it, the body cannot renew itself. Likewise, without an ancestral language, the cultural body cannot fully heal or reproduce its ways of knowing. The Council's belief that "We get the Elder, we have the key" (p. 172) reflects recognition of the Elder's body as both archive and transmitter of the collective future. In this way, language as embodied inheritance operates as a living covenant, binding generations together through the flesh, the dream, and the breath.

Finally, the embodied nature of language in *The Marrow Thieves* offers a rebuke to external systems of classification. Institutions that once labeled Indigenous speech as inferior or deviant now attempt to appropriate it for profit and control. In this reversal, Dimaline reminds readers that what settler society once discarded, it now desires, but only on its own terms. Indigenous language, Dimaline insists, is not for sale, not for translation, and not for medical exploitation. It lives in the marrow, in the song, in the story, and most of all, in the breath.

4. Dreaming in Cree: Language and Subconscious Memory

In *The Marrow Thieves*, dreaming is not a private or purely psychological act; it is a communal and epistemological space where cultural memory resurfaces beyond the reach of assimilationist control. The recurring refrain "I dream in Cree" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 215) signals that the subconscious is a protected archive, immune to the colonial surveillance and to the biotechnological apparatus designed to extract and decode Indigenous knowledge. Even when settlers harness biometric scanners to tap marrow, they cannot decode the syntax of these dreams because they have already dismissed the language itself as irrelevant to progress.

Paul V. Kroskrity names this phenomenon "ideological persistence" which is the capacity of a language to continue shaping selfhood long after overt suppression (2000, p. 122). For Frenchie, dreams function as an unbroken chain between past and future. He recalls "words I didn't know in daylight shining across the back of my eyelids like northern lights" (p. 167), framing nocturnal cognition as an alternate classroom where forbidden vocabulary returns in color and sound. In these moments, the dream becomes an encrypted medium of instruction, accessible only to those who already belong to the linguistic and cultural network it sustains. Settler attempts to harness dreams, such as attaching electrodes to Minerva in the laboratory, fail precisely because the dream's syntax is rooted in an Indigenous lexicon that colonial ideologies have dismissed as obsolete.

Dreams in the novel also challenge settler temporalities. Childers and Menendez (2022) describe this as "spiralic time," in which past, present, and future fold into one another (p. 218). Frenchie dreams of paddling a birchbark canoe with his father in a river that "had not existed for a hundred years" (p. 142), collapsing historical and speculative realities into a single moment. Ruthven (2024) calls this process "storied becomings," wherein ancestral voices shape emergent identities (p. 5). Through such dream sequences, Dimaline portrays the subconscious as a site of active authorship, where cultural knowledge is adapted for future survival. Every dream, then, performs double work: it replays suppressed history and simultaneously scripts emergent possibilities.

Minerva's dreams blur the threshold between sleeping and waking. Before falling asleep by the campfire, she hums syllables "older than breath," claiming later that in her dreams she "talks with the grandmothers" who teach her songs too powerful to utter in waking life (p. 155). These dream-teachings affirm that the subconscious operates as a ceremonial space for apprenticeship, where the ethical protocols of language use are preserved alongside its vocabulary. Even partial understanding of these dream-words has restorative effects, as when Frenchie receives an ancestral lullaby "soft as pine pitch" in a dream and wakes with a renewed sense of safety (p. 161). Hinton (2013) underscores that even limited reintroduction of ancestral language can trigger intergenerational reconnection and resilience (p. 28), a dynamic Dimaline captures with precision.

The novel repeatedly pairs these intimate, interior dreamscapes with violent attempts by the settler state to externalize and commodify them. In the laboratory, researchers attach electrodes to Minerva's temples, hoping to extract "dream essence" while she sleeps. Yet their technology fails, because the dream logic is keyed to an Indigenous lexicon they cannot parse. "They needed our words like they needed our marrow," Frenchie realizes. "But words, thank the ancestors, weren't so easily bottled" (p. 195). The failure illustrates Kroskrity's observation that dominant language ideologies, which dismiss Indigenous tongues as impediments, simultaneously render settler institutions ill-equipped to understand the knowledge those tongues carry (2000, p. 115).

Dreaming also functions as emotional repair. After the fugitives lose two companions to a raid, Frenchie lies awake, afraid of nightmares. When sleep finally comes, he is greeted by an ancestral lullaby "soft as pine pitch," sung in the language. "It wasn't my mother's voice, but it felt like her arms," he confesses (p. 161). Trauma is metabolized through phonemes that summon not literal relatives but the kinship architecture embedded in the language itself. Hinton (2013) emphasizes that even partial use of endangered languages can foster resilience by reactivating intergenerational attachment patterns (p. 28). Frenchie's dream-lullaby exemplifies this: though he cannot yet translate the words, their cadence restores a sense of safety the waking world denies him.

Moreover, dreams become tactical resources. When the group debates whether to head north or east, Rose dreams of "three stars lining up like a road" and hears a word that translates as clear water (p. 173). The next day, they find a hidden river matching her vision. Such episodes echo Indigenous epistemologies that regard dreams as forms of land-based instruction, reinforcing Kroskrity's link between language, territory, and lineage (2000, p. 109). By embedding these instructions in an Indigenous lexicon, the novel suggests that survival knowledge cannot be fully transmitted or enacted without the language itself.

The novel frames dreaming in an Indigenous language as a non-extractable, non-translatable act of sovereignty. When a scientist interrogates Frenchie, asking him to describe his dreams in English, he replies, "You wouldn't understand even if I told you" (p. 209). The moment underscores the epistemic impasse between a state that seeks data and a people who possess relational knowledge. McCarty (2018) argues that language revitalization is an enactment of political self-determination (p. 199); in the dream context, this self-determination extends to epistemic autonomy. Frenchie's refusal is not mere stubbornness; it is a declaration that some forms of knowledge are inseparable from the language and community that generate them.

Even within the group, dreaming in the language is not uniform. Younger fugitives, who were born after the worst periods of cultural suppression, sometimes experience "half-English, half-something-older dreams" (p. 134). Dimaline does not regard this hybridity. Instead, she presents it as evidence of what Kroskrity called "ideological remapping", new generations adapting inherited symbols to contemporary contingencies (2000, p. 118). Hybrid dreams become laboratories for linguistic evolution, suggesting that revitalization is not about purist recovery but about relational creativity.

Toward the novel's close, Frenchie experiences a dream in which he is simultaneously inside his own body and the body of a yet-unborn child, "seeing through someone else's eyes but hearing in [his] own language" (p. 230). The scene collapses generational distance, embodying Ruthven's notion of "storied becomings" where future selves are authored through ancestral grammar (2024, p. 5). Childers and Menendez's "spiralic time" is also evident; the

dream loops lineage backward and forward, refusing the settler timeline that positions Indigenous cultures as relics of the past.

The significance of dreaming reaches its pinnacle when Minerva sings within the laboratory. Although physically trapped, she is psychically unbound, channeling "voices so old the syllables felt round like stones in her mouth" (p. 213). Her song is both dream and wakefulness, collapsing that binary altogether. The sonic force shatters the clinic's glass panels, confirming Stoica's claim that vocalized language constitutes embodied resistance (2023, p. 445). After her death, Frenchie dreams of Minerva weaving new words into the night sky, "like beads on a necklace too long to finish" (p. 238). The dream implies continuity; while individuals perish, the lexicon lengthens, constellating across generations.

Ultimately, the motif of dreaming in an Indigenous language underscores Dimaline's broader argument: that language is not simply stored in memories; it stores memory. Dreams are community archives that cannot be broken by extraction technology. They carry recipes for resilience, ecological protocols, and maps for return. Kroskrity's ideological persistence, Ruthven's storied becomings, and Childers and Menendez's spiralic time converge to reveal a worldview in which subconscious speech is not secondary or accidental; it is a sovereign domain where culture regenerates. In the novel's final pages, Frenchie at last interprets a recurring dream: "My family stood in a circle, speaking words I finally understood… they were calling me home" (p. 241). The linguistic clarity marks a threshold at which subconscious memory merges with conscious articulation. The dream becomes prophecy, guiding the fugitives toward the future.

5. Language Loss and the Legacy of Residential Schools

The legacy of residential schools spreads over the novel, forming a spectral presence in the narrative and functioning as a reminder that language loss is not merely historical but ongoing. The understated but powerful line, "But we got through it, and the schools were shut down" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 102), points to the brutal campaigns waged by state and religious institutions to eliminate Indigenous languages and reprogram cultural identities through assimilation. The schools were not simply places of education but sites of linguistic dispossession,

where Indigenous children were systematically punished for speaking their languages, often facing physical and emotional abuse for doing so. While the state-run institutions in the novel have been replaced by biomedical extraction facilities, their underlying goal remains the same: to sever Indigenous peoples from their languages, cultures, and identities. As Frenchie reflects, "They didn't teach us the language. They were too scared we'd get punished the way they did" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 101). This intergenerational fear illustrates what Leanne Hinton (2013) calls "cultural aphasia" (the silencing of speech through systemic violence), which not only erases words but also fractures the confidence and joy needed to speak them (p. 23).

Paul V. Kroskrity (2000) situates such suppression within dominant language ideologies that treat Indigenous languages as obstacles to national unity and modern progress (p. 115). In this framework, residential schools were not merely educational institutions but tools of linguistic dispossession, designed to replace Indigenous epistemologies with settler norms. Dimaline captures the trauma of such ideologies not only through historical reference but through the emotional residue they leave on her characters. Frenchie confesses, "There were a lot of years where we were lost, too much pain drowned in forgetting" (p. 136). Without the words to name their ancestors, ceremonies, or homelands, the characters grapple with a diminished sense of self. The silence enforced in schools becomes internalized, passed down like an inherited wound.

However, Dimaline is careful to frame this loss not as final. Language in *The Marrow Thieves* remains concealed, capable of reawakening in the form of song, dream, and shared memory. Minerva embodies this persistence. As an Elder, her speech carries "archival memory" (McCarty, 2018, p. 199), preserving histories and protocols that exist outside of written records. When she sings in the laboratory, her voice reverberates "through her relatives' bones" (p. 214), reawakening cultural memory beneath the very building meant to suppress it. This act collapses the spatial and symbolic distance between past and present, echoing McCarty's observation that revitalized speech can resurrect entire cultural practices embedded in language.

Dimaline also portrays language revival as a communal process rather than an individual achievement. Children in the group learn words for plants, rivers, and constellations from older members, while teenagers experiment with hybrid idioms that blend English with Indigenous syntactic patterns. Xausa (2020) describes such acts as "micro-resurgences", small-scale but cumulative efforts that chip away at the silence imposed by colonial authority (p. 96). These moments affirm that revitalization is not solely about returning to a pre-contact linguistic state but about adapting language to contemporary contexts while retaining its cultural authority.

The role of Elders in this resurgence is central. The character of Minerva functions as the narrative's linguistic and moral compass. She speaks little, but when she does, her words carry immense weight. Even her silences are meaningful, described by Frenchie as "full of the things she didn't say yet somehow passed on anyway" (p. 167). Her body, her voice, and her dreams embody what McCarty (2018) terms archival memory, encoding practices, values, and histories that cannot be found in textbooks but are instead transmitted through lived presence and affective connection (p. 199). When she is arrested by state authorities, the urgency to rescue her stems not just from love or solidarity, but from the recognition that her survival ensures the continuation of a linguistic lineage. "We get the Elder, we have the key," the Council declares (p. 172). The metaphor is telling: Minerva is not only a person but a key, a living archive whose body contains the codes of cultural regeneration.

The novel further links language recovery to ecological restoration. The mantra "When we heal our land, we are healed also" (p. 172) underscores the interdependence of territory and speech, aligning with Kroskrity's assertion that many Indigenous languages encode place-based ecological knowledge (2000, p. 110). For example, when Miig names a tree in the old language and explains that the term means both "tree" and "breath," he restores a relational understanding of the natural world that settler cartography has tried to overwrite. In the novel, this philosophy is enacted through the group's efforts to remember the Indigenous names for rivers, plants, and constellations, many of which have been erased or overwritten by settler cartography. These moments reflect a deeper

truth: without the language to describe the land, the land itself becomes unfamiliar, vulnerable to exploitation and misrecognition.

The traumatic legacy of residential schools also manifests in intergenerational memory gaps. The youth in *The Marrow Thieves* struggle not only with the absence of fluent speakers but also with the shame and silence inherited from their parents' and grandparents' generation. Dimaline asserts in the novel: "They didn't teach us the language. They were too scared we'd get punished the way they did" (p. 101). This intergenerational fear exemplifies the way violence perpetuates absence not only the absence of speech, but of confidence, joy, and ease in using one's mother tongue. Hinton (2013) emphasizes that one of the most difficult hurdles in language revitalization is overcoming the emotional scars that surround speech. It is not just a matter of teaching vocabulary; it requires restoring trust and dignity to a community still healing from psychic injury (p. 24).

Despite these wounds, Dimaline's narrative is ultimately one of resilience. Each act of storytelling, singing, or naming constitutes a refusal of the silence imposed by residential schools. Even when the characters hesitate, they continue to speak, listen, and dream in ways that honor the language they are reclaiming. In one of the final scenes, Frenchie describes a moment of clarity: "I heard her song again, not with my ears this time, but with something in my chest. I knew the words, even though I had never learned them" (p. 238). This moment expresses the novel's central message: that language, once carried in the body, never truly disappears. It waits in the marrow and the dreams.

By portraying language loss not only as a consequence of historical violence but as a battleground for contemporary resistance, the novel demands that readers reconsider what it means to reclaim a language. It is not merely a linguistic task but a spiritual, ecological, and political act. The novel suggests that the ghosts of the residential schools will never be fully exorcised until the languages once silenced within them are spoken aloud on the very lands from which they were divided. Through its focus on reclamation and resilience, Dimaline's narrative affirms that the path forward is not a return to a lost past, but the careful and courageous construction of a linguistic future built from the fragments that remain.

6. Conclusion

Consequently, the analysis shows that, through the lens of language ideology theory, Cherie Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves presents Indigenous languages as cultural heritage, embodied inheritance, and tools of resistance. Drawing on Paul V. Kroskrity's theoretical framework and supported by the work of Leanne Hinton, Teresa McCarty, and Indigenous literary scholars, the novel goes beyond depicting language loss and recovery after colonial violence. Instead, it views language as a living, regenerative force embedded in the body, the land, and the collective memory of a people. The novel's portrayal of language as cultural heritage places ancestral speech at the heart of identity and survival. Through storytelling rituals, the preservation of place-names, and the emotional significance of certain words, Dimaline emphasizes Kroskrity's claim that languages are repositories of moral authority, ecological knowledge, and historical continuity. In the speculative world of The Marrow Thieves, this heritage isn't just symbolic; it's a practical and spiritual resource that sustains the fugitives' will to endure and resist.

Throughout the novel, language is presented in four interconnected registers. First, it appears as cultural heritage: a repository of ceremonies, place names, ecological protocols, and ancestral laws. Second, it emerges as embodied inheritance: woven into DNA, resonating in heartbeat, held in bone marrow, and sensed in the ache of collective trauma. Third, it functions as a subconscious archive: surfacing in dreams where forbidden words reorder time, invite counsel from the dead, and envision survivable futures. Finally, it serves as an insurgent strategy: a code the settler state cannot decipher, a sonic force capable of dismantling extraction labs, and a daily medium for micro-acts of resurgence.

Paul V. Kroskrity's work on language ideologies provides the most useful framework for understanding these concepts. Kroskrity reminds us that languages are valued, suppressed, or resurrected based on deeply political beliefs about who belongs, who governs, and who gets to remember (2000, pp. 3–6). Dimaline brings these insights to life through story. She illustrates how dominant ideologies once criminalized speech in residential schools and are now attempting to harvest it in biotechnological facilities. Both regimes

rely on the same premise: that Indigenous words can be separated from Indigenous bodies, and that annihilating or commodifying them will facilitate national cohesion. In contrast, every whisper of nishin, every dream spoken in an ancestral tongue, and every story Miig shares around the fire demonstrates a counter-ideology: language is relational, sovereign, and non-extractable.

Dream sequences deepen this vision by portraying language as a subconscious archive, a domain where ancestral speech continues to instruct, guide, and protect beyond the reach of assimilationist technologies. Here, Kroskrity's concept of ideological persistence intersects with Indigenous temporalities described by Childers and Menendez (spiralic time) and Ruthven (storied becomings). Dreams in the novel are not passive memories but active sites of cultural reproduction, generating tactical knowledge and emotional repair. This sovereign dream-space resists colonial intrusion precisely because it operates in an epistemological framework outsiders cannot decode.

Finally, by invoking the legacy of residential schools, Dimaline places the novel's speculative premise in direct continuity with historical structures of linguistic erasure. Yet she refuses a narrative of finality. Instead, she foregrounds micro-resurgences (children learning plant names, hybrid idioms emerging in everyday speech, and the reclamation of land-based vocabulary) that align with McCarty's and Hinton's emphasis on community-driven revitalization. The link between language and ecological restoration reinforces the point that linguistic survival is inseparable from land sovereignty, a connection often underexplored in existing literary analyses of the novel.

In contrast to scholarship that treats *The Marrow Thieves* primarily as a work of Indigenous futurism, environmental critique, or trauma narrative, this study centers language ideology as the unifying lens through which the novel's political and affective force becomes legible. While prior research has acknowledged the importance of language in the text, few readings have integrated Kroskrity's theoretical model to examine how Dimaline conceptualizes language as simultaneously cultural, embodied, and ecological. This framework reveals that the novel not only mourns linguistic loss but also offers a

blueprint for revitalization, one rooted in the lived, physical, and communal dimensions of speech.

Ultimately, *The Marrow Thieves* insists that language is non-extractable and sovereign. It cannot be divorced from the bodies, lands, and relationships that sustain it. In Dimaline's vision, every whispered nishin, every dream in Cree, and every reclaimed place-name becomes an act of resistance against the ongoing logics of colonialism. The novel challenges readers, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to recognize that the struggle for linguistic survival is not merely a linguistic matter but a political, ecological, and ethical imperative. By embedding language in marrow, song, and dream, Dimaline encourages us to expand our analytical perspective. If, as Kroskrity argues, language ideologies mediate all struggles over identity and power, then literary texts like this novel illustrate how those ideologies become embodied and transformed. They also remind us that language revitalization is never solely linguistic. It is ecological, affective, epistemic, and political. Recognizing this holistic dimension is crucial for any revitalization initiative that seeks to be more than symbolic.

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