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Zeno Deleon Guerrero

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Zeno Deleon Guerrero, Jr.
William Kupinse
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The Story of Slow Violence

The climate crisis, given its sheer scale, has been forcing many people to rethink their definitions of violence. One such reimagination is Rob Nixon's term and framework of "slow violence" - a type of violence that "occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all" (Nixon, 2). Nixon mentions that slow violence poses a representational challenge of how to make often invisible calamities visible. Thus, Nixon looks toward narrative and literature as a possible response. This paper argues people can find such a response to slow violence within Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*. The novel depicts the genocide of indigenous people and their languages as forms of slow violence. The ways Dimaline's characters identify, articulate, and respond to these existential threats give a path for readers to acquire similar skills to address slow violence in the real world.

The novel's chronology of indigenous trauma coincides with the temporal elements of slow violence. A marked feature of slow violence is that these "events" are gradual and not bound by discrete moments of time. To achieve this effect, the novel intersperses the violence throughout itself. For example, readers witness the kidnappings and deaths of Mitch (presumed dead), RiRi, and Minerva as the most recent instances of violence. However, flashbacks through the form of "coming-to-stories" interrupt the linear flow of trauma. This interruption amalgamates present instances of violence with past ones; thus, creating the sense of an expansive timeline of violence being inflicted upon indigenous communities. The novel then

expands this timeline by rooting it with a certain history, specifically that of the first residential schools. During “Story”, Miig mentions “we suffered there [at the schools]. We almost lost our languages. Many lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives” (Dimaline, 23-24). This description of a past iteration of residential schools mirror the schools that are being built during the course of the novel. Perhaps, to take a step further, readers can view this mirroring not just as mere similarities but as a repetition of violence. In other words, the violence against indigenous people never fully went away. The violence supersedes time and gives readers a sense of timelessness. The violence was always present albeit hidden.

This hidden quality plays into another aspect of slow violence - that it is out of sight. The violence within the novel tinkers with this idea of visibility, or rather, invisibility. First and foremost, the violence’s primary purpose is to cure people of their inability to dream - something that is by its nature hidden and invisible. Even after finishing the novel, readers are still left unsure or, in other words, in the dark as to how a cure works. This lack of closure evokes feelings of uncertainty for readers, and it is this uncertainty that pervades many aspects of the book. For example, during part two of Story, Miig tells the family about their current situation by saying

It began as a rumor, that they had found a way to siphon the dreams right out of our bones, a rumor whispered every time one of us went missing, a rumor denounced every time their doctors sent us to hospital and treatment centers never to return. They kept sending us away, enticing us to seek medical care and then keeping us locked up, figuring out ways to hone and perfect their ‘solution’ for sale. (Dimaline, 89)

In this excerpt, Miig describes the very real existential threat indigenous people face in mysterious and uncertain terms. It would seem that the violence, in the form of whispered

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rumors, is trying to hide itself. The doctors’ attempts at covering up this violence support this

notion. There is also evidence for the success of this deception. Isaac and French's father among many others failed to heed these rumors and paid the costs. Aside from active deception, the process by which the doctors and government execute this violence is also ridden with uncertainty. Indigenous people would go "missing" or were even hunted and kidnapped. These acts are physical representations of "out of sight". They take what is visible - indigenous people - and make them invisible - imprisoning them in schools never to be seen again.

By connecting the novel to slow violence, readers can get an idea as to how slow violence manifests itself within their lives. In the earlier discussion about time, readers can now see how multiple instances of violence are interconnected irregardless of how much or little time separates those moments. Also, readers can soon understand that violence does not stay rooted in the historical past. As the old adage goes "history repeats itself" and that is quite true of the violence that has occurred throughout history within this novel. Additionally, readers can be more vigilant as to how violence attempts to stay hidden. Perhaps those in power, similar to the doctors, hide their violence behind a moral imperative for a "cure" to some ailment affecting humankind. Perhaps the rumors might be truer than people would like to believe.

So now by having a better understanding on how to identify slow violence, this paper will move to how one can articulate and perhaps respond to it. First, one must understand that slow violence stems from Western epistemologies, or rather, Western ways of thinking are a form of slow violence. The novel demonstrates this point by structuring the main antagonists to be doctors, recruiters, and governors and the institutions they reside in such as the hospitals, government, and schools. Each of these places are spaces where power and knowledge,

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especially in a Western context, are produced, enforced, and disseminated. Together, these institutions, the people within them, and their systems and processes treat indigenous people as objects. The reader sees evidence of this objectification from the Council's spy. He describes

Minerva's treatment as

She hummed on the five-hour drive in and began singing in increasing volume as they processed her: cutting her hair, shaving her skin, scrubbing her body, and preparing her to be hooked up to the conductor. Sensible words - English words - could not be made out, and she refused to answer any questions, not that that was integral to the process. All they needed was to insert the probes, tether the wires, and begin the drain. (Dimaline, 171)

The passage begins with Minerva having some sense of agency through the use of the pronoun "she" and the passage's focus on what she was doing - humming and singing. However, that agency diminishes as these people violate her through their "process", so much so that at the last sentence there is no mention of Minerva. There is only mention of what procedures will be done but no mention of who it will be done onto. In essence, Minerva transforms into an object to be studied and examined. All her distinguishing features such as her hair (a feature that holds great significance in indigenous cultures) is cut. Minerva is sanitized to be indistinguishable from other "subjects". Such a process mirrors what is often done in many hospitals and laboratories. People must sanitize themselves to study. Additionally, research specimens themselves must be sanitized. These processes conform to Western standards of objectivity in producing knowledge. People must extricate themselves - their humanity - from their work for it to be considered valuable. Furthermore, there is an equation of English to "sensible words". This equation reinforces the power of Western hegemony. English is the only language that makes sense according to this passage. Other languages such as the many indigenous ones do not make sense

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and therefore, do not have value. One should note that the systems and institutions within the novel are not dissimilar from their real world counterparts. Thus, by having ability for comparison, readers can visualize how these real world Western (colonialist and imperialist) systems create slow violence in the real world.

With this understanding of Western epistemologies as slow violence, the novel responds with indigenous ways of producing knowledge - centering individual experiences. The main mode the novel approaches its response is through the use of the aforementioned “Story” and “coming-to-stories”. The tradition of “Story” has many uses unlike its Western counterpart that denotes fairy tales, fiction, and mere art. French during *Story: Part One* remarks that

We needed to remember Story. It was [Migg’s] job to set the memory in perpetuity. He spoke to us every week. Sometimes Story was focused on one area, like the residential schools: where they were, what happened there, when they closed. Other times he told a hundred years in one long narrative, blunt and without detail. Sometimes we gathered for an hour so he could explain treaties, and others it was ten minutes to list the earthquakes in the sequence they occurred. . . . But every week we spoke, because it was imperative that we know. [Miig] said it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive. (Dimaline, 25)

Here, readers get a sense as to the vast scope of Story. It superseded genres - cultural history, politics, and environmental history, etc. Story also still mattered irrespective of time. Here, Story, unlike its Western counterpart is very real and although there is an artistic aspect to it, Story is also a duty. Story is the mechanism to preserve history - one that is told through experiences not through universal, objective, and sanitized “facts” or “truths”. Moreover, Story is alive. Story is

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not something that can just be written down and studied. People’s experiences live within that story and living people must be around to internalize those stories and experiences.

Through understanding how powerful a response indigenous epistemologies to slow violence can be, readers are empowered to share their experiences. They might also partake in that duty to listen to the stories of others as a means to resist the violence.

The novel, itself, is perhaps the best example of responding to slow violence and how there is still much work to do to combat slow violence. The novel is a narrative told almost exclusively through French's perspective. Thus, it would not be far-fetched to interpret *The Marrow Thieves* as French participating in the tradition of Story. As such, given that the novel is told using the past tense, readers can infer that French is recalling all these experiences and stories some time after the events of *The Marrow Thieves*. Therefore, since French has preserved these narratives within this book or "Story", one can deem the mode of "Story" as a successful means of resisting slow violence. Readers can remember the stories of RiRi, Minerva, Mitch, and so many others. They continue to "live" past their physical deaths, and, in the case of Mitch, he might still be alive. However, with this hope comes some caveats such as the fact that French wrote or is telling these stories in English. Such a decision can be interpreted a few ways but each has significant consequences in people's understanding of slow violence. One interpretation is that French is not yet fluent enough in his native tongue to be telling such complicated stories. Although the audience does get a few words in an indigenous language, those words are the same ones French learned during the (now past) events of the novel. By ascribing to this interpretation, one could infer that despite discovering Isaac, the family and the other native people still have a lot of work to revitalize their language and resist the slow violence that has sought to eradicate it.

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Another interpretation would be that French is fluent in his native tongue but chooses to tell the novel or "Story" in English for the sake of his audience. However, one should note that the identity of French's audience is not quite clear to readers. Perhaps French is telling these stories to non-Indigenous people, and so, his choice to have it in English does make sense but would imply that non-Indigenous people are still unaware of the ongoing violence against indigenous folks. Or perhaps, even more compelling is that the intended audience are other indigenous folks. Therefore, stories in English would then imply that most other indigenous people still have a lot to do in reclaiming and learning their native tongues. Regardless of which

interpretation a reader chooses, the end result remains the same. Although the story is an effective resistance to slow violence, more work outside of this narrative still needs to be done to undo the harm caused by slow violence.

And hopefully, this essay is contributing to the work needed to undo the effects of slow violence. By highlighting characteristics of slow violence such as its tendency to hide or be hidden and seeming omnipresence in time, readers can better identify slow violence in its many forms. Thus, by being better identifiers, these same people can actively resist and respond to slow violence by listening to the stories of those affected by slow violence and spreading the message to others. In short, listen to stories, create stories, and tell stories.

Works Cited

Dimaline, Cherie. *The Marrow Thieves*. First ed., Dancing Cat Books, an Imprint of Cormorant Books Inc., 2017.

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