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Hope From Within: Exploring Indigenous Resilience in Patti LaBoucane-Beson's

The Outside Circle and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*

Since colonization, Indigenous peoples have suffered through immense trauma from broken treaties, residential schools, family separation, and the suppression of language, culture, and traditions. These colonial practices have left deep intergenerational wounds, and pursuing hope amid such suffering seems difficult - if not impossible. However, in *The Outside Circle* (2015) and *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Cherie Dimaline assert that hope is not passive optimism but an active force of resistance and transformation. Through the symbolism of a web and the repetition of smudging, both authors depict hope as emerging from the rediscovery of an interconnected Indigenous identity and the revival of spiritual traditions. While LaBoucane-Benson portrays hope as a personal journey, Dimaline expands it as a collective resurgence that defies colonial erasure. Ultimately, both novels argue that Indigenous hope is found within Indigenous identity and traditions, and that reclaiming hope is essential not only for healing intergenerational wounds but for resisting colonial destruction.

Firstly, hope is depicted as the uncovering of an interconnected Indigenous identity through the symbolism of a web. In *The Outside Circle*, LaBoucane-Benson uses the symbol of a web to demonstrate that Indigenous hope is not found by viewing trauma as fragmented and isolated events but as an interconnected and honorable part of one's lived experience. This web is found in the latter half of the novel when Ray Carver recounts his broken childhood to Pete. LaBoucane-Benson visually represents Ray's painful memories - being

forcefully separated from his parents by authorities, living with an alcoholic father, and feeling lonely in residential schools - as a two-page spread of jagged frames that are all connected by a blue web of tears. Ray, as a healed Indigenous man, embodies how hope is not about forgetting or simply remembering trauma, but about understanding how the past can connect to the present. Just as a web is held by interwoven strands, healing emerges when one can see their pain as a connected part of a larger whole rather than in isolation. Through this interconnected lens, LaBoucane-Benson demonstrates that hope is found by acknowledging the origins of destructive patterns and by understanding their deep-rooted impact. By learning to see trauma not as a burden to forget but an honorable part of one's identity, Indigenous individuals can move past their pain and toward healing.

While *The Outside Circle* uses a web to illustrate how interconnectedness is essential for personal healing, *The Marrow Thieves* extends this symbolism by embedding a web within the body to explore how interconnectedness is inherent to Indigenous identity and survival. Unlike LaBoucane-Benson's web, which links traumatic memories, Dimaline describes webs as being "woven in your bones" and where "dreams get caught" (Dimaline, 24). By placing the web inside Indigenous bones, Dimaline suggests that an interconnected worldview is not merely a wholesome outlook on life but a physical, ancestral, and intrinsic part of who Indigenous people are. Furthermore, Dimaline connects webs with dreams - a symbol of life - to imply that Indigenous hope is found through living in deep connection with others, one's culture, and the land. Altogether, this proves true in the novel as Indigenous people survive colonial destruction by forming deep bonds between Indigenous peoples of different tribes and generations, reclaiming language and traditions, and cultivating a deeper appreciation of the natural world. In the face of colonial oppression, Indigenous people do not have to create hope from nothing but can rediscover it within themselves and their community. Dimaline's web challenges colonial individualism and

reaffirms the Indigenous worldview in which all things are deeply connected, shifting its meaning from personal healing to a broader collective and cultural significance.

This principle of interconnectedness as key to both healing and survival is further reinforced by Dr. Patrascu-Kingsley, who explores how trauma is also interconnected - passed down through social, psychological, and physiological processes - and must be healed holistically. In her lecture on *The Outside Circle*, Dr. Patrascu-Kingsley identifies that “the processes of transmitting trauma through the generations are all interconnected ... [and since] they are interconnected ... need to be addressed through holistic healing strategies that are Indigenous-led and implemented within all aspects of society.” (Patrascu-Kingsley). This analysis supports the web imagery in both texts as LaBoucane’s web of memories demonstrates how trauma links the past and present, while Dimaline’s web in the bones suggests that healing is not external but inherent within Indigenous identity. Dr. Patrascu-Kingsley consolidates these ideas by asserting that Indigenous trauma is not just an individual affliction but a collective reality, which means that healing must also be communal and deeply rooted in Indigenous traditions and led by Indigenous people. By restoring these connections between generations, tradition, and culture, Indigenous people exercise their autonomy in their healing processes. This defies the colonial framework of progress for Indigenous people, which only seeks to sever them from all that they are connected to - be it community, culture, or land. By returning to an interconnected worldview, Dr. Patrascu-Kingsley demonstrates that Indigenous hope can be found from within, which not only provides an appropriate path to healing but asserts Indigenous presence and sovereignty.

Secondly, just as interconnectedness fosters hope, hope is also depicted as a return to traditional practices, particularly through the repetition of smudging, as a means of personal and collective transformation. In *The Outside Circle*, Pete’s key moments of transformation occur through the repeated act of smudging. Pete smudges after struggling to explain his

family history, which breaks through his emotional barriers of anger. Later, he smudges in the woods while questioning his identity, leading to the revelation of his spirit animal, the bear. Finally, smudging bookends the novel, symbolizing how his transformation is grounded in this sacred practice. The consistency of the smoke's visual representation during each moment - fluid lines with bear paws - emphasizes how healing is not simply a temporary shift in mindset but an embodied, continuous, life-long process of personally transforming Pete's core identity. By consistently returning to this practice, LaBoucane-Benson highlights the stability that practicing traditions offers to Indigenous people. This stability is best exemplified in Pete as he consistently returns to smudging whenever he confronts difficult moments of emotional turmoil and doubt to find peace and clarity again. LaBoucane-Benson suggests that embracing smudging - and other traditional practices - provides Indigenous peoples a firm foundation to root themselves in, thereby sustaining hope and cultivating Indigenous resilience.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, Dimaline also uses the repetition of smudging, but instead of depicting smudging as a personal act of transformation, she redefines it as a collective act of resistance, proving that traditional practices are vital for Indigenous survival and the preservation of hope. Dimaline emphasizes this through the repetition of a powerful phrase: "they made their hands into shallow cups and pulled the air over their heads and face, making prayers out of ashes and smoke. Real old-timey." (Dimaliane, 24 and 174). This phrase links two pivotal moments: Minerva's smudging ritual and the youth's smudging after escaping the residential school. In the first instance, the "ashes and smoke" come from a ceremonial fire; while in the second, the ashes come from a burning school. By using the same phrase for both, Dimaline asserts that smudging is not only a personal, intimate sacred tradition but can also be a powerful form of cultural resistance. The shift in context, from ceremony to survival, demonstrates that Indigenous spiritual traditions are not static, but they persist,

adapt, and resist colonial erasure. Through this transformation, Dimaline reveals that cultural survival is rooted in a communal reclaiming and redefining of traditions as they can both provide a source of spiritual solace and turn sites of oppression into spaces of hope and renewal. In this way, smudging offers Indigenous people hope as they are reminded that even in the face of horrid destruction, their traditions can still endure and can carry the promise of a future where they can reclaim their autonomy and sovereignty.

Recent scholarship reinforces LaBoucane-Benson's and Dimaline's assertion that smudging carries both personal transformative power and cultural resistance. In "'Real Old-Timey': Storytelling and the Language of Resurgence in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*," Samuelson and Evans argues that retaining Indigenous language are "acts of resurgence that are perceived as rebellion by settler society," and can offer Indigenous communities to "dream of a decolonized space." (Samuelson and Evans, 288). While their focus is on language, their argument extends to all Indigenous traditional practices as they frame Indigenous traditions not as simply nostalgic relics of the past but as active forces of resistance and renewal. This challenges the misconception that traditional practices are meant to merely preserve memory; rather, they perpetuate and assert Indigenous identity in the present. This aligns with LaBoucane-Benson's emphasis on the transformative power of smudging, providing Pete with a spiritual anchor throughout his healing journey, and Dimaline's emphasis on smudging as a communal act of defiance, reinforcing its role in cultural survival.

Samuelson and Evans further argue that these traditions can also lead to the reclamation of Indigenous autonomy, where Indigenous people can regain control over their own ways of living, knowing, and healing. This is possible because smudging reconnects Indigenous individuals to their heritage and ways of thinking, allowing them to address their issues through their own cultural frameworks rather than relying on Western systems. Thus,

the repetition of smudging found in *The Outside Circle* and *The Marrow Thieves* - alongside Samuelson and Evans's scholarship - reveals that traditional practices reinforce hope, not by reconstructing the past, but by proving the endurance of Indigenous life through colonial oppression. Tradition, then, is not a bridge to the past but a foundation for survival.

In *The Outside Circle* (2015) and *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), Patti LaBoucane-Benson and Cherie Dimaline demonstrate that Indigenous hope is not passive optimism but an active force rooted in identity and tradition - one that heals intergenerational wounds and resists colonial erasure. Through the symbol of the web and the repetition of smudging, both authors illustrate how hope can be found by reclaiming an interconnected Indigenous identity and returning to traditional spiritual practices. While LaBoucane-Benson presents this hope as a deeply personal journey, Dimaline expands it into a collective resurgence, demonstrating that survival and resistance are inherently communal. By examining hope through these two lenses and grounding it in lived experience rather than external interventions, both novels reject the colonial narrative that healing must come from outside forces. Instead, they affirm that the path of hope is found within Indigenous knowledge, resilience, and the continued reclamation of culture.

Works Cited

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- Samuelson, Anah-Jayne, and Vanessa Evans. "'Real Old-Timey': Storytelling and the Language of Resurgence in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*." *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2022, pp. 274–92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2022.0023>.

Annotated Bibliography

Samuelson, Anah-Jayne, and Vanessa Evans. “‘Real Old-Timey’: Storytelling and the Language of Resurgence in Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves*.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2022, pp. 274–92, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2022.0023>.

In this article, Samuelson and Evans examine how Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), an Indigenous dystopian novel, complicates the conventions of young adult fiction by defying settler narratives of supremacy and the suppression of youth rebellion. Through their analysis, the authors explore how the youth characters’ return to traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being act as a form of resistance against the exploitative and colonialist practices of bone marrow extraction. The novel highlights how Indigenous storytelling and language learning serve to empower youth to combat cultural erasure and preserve ancestral knowledge, thereby resisting settler institutions and structures against Indigenous peoples.

I will cite Samuelson and Evans’ reading of language as a means of resistance to inform how traditional Indigenous practices are not mere relics of the past, but hold power to resist against colonial erasure. Specifically, I will relate language learning with the practice of smudging and explore how these practices hold power to garner Indigenous resurgence, and propel Indigenous communities to envision decolonized futures. By reclaiming Indigenous traditions, Indigenous communities assert their presence in a settler society that continually seeks their disappearance, gain autonomy over their ways of living and being, and transform sites of oppression into hope and renewal.