

**Post-digital Agency and the Indigenous Survival in Cherie Dimaline's
*The Marrow Thieves***

Aaron J

Assistant Professor, Don Bosco College (Co-Ed), Yelagiri Hills, Tirupattur

Article Received: 03/07/2026

Article Accepted:01/08/2026

Published Online:02/08/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.08.10

Abstract:

Literature has an important role in raising awareness about an equal society and opposing conventional ideologies of development. This article examines Cherie Dimaline's award-winning young adult novel *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) using the lenses of post digital theory, biopolitics, and Indigenous speculative fiction. The novel is set in a near-future Canada ravaged by ecological collapse, and it presents a dystopian situation in which the settler-colonial population has lost its ability to dream. The state sends out "Recruiters" to apprehend Indigenous peoples and extract their bone marrow, in which dreams are somaticized. Using a post digital perspective, this paper examines how the state's extractive infrastructure functions as a coercive, bio digital assemblage that molecularizes and commercializes the Indigenous body. This study focuses on "The Miracle of Minerva" as a dramatic disturbance of the technocratic machine, showing how traditional language, music, and blood memory materialize as relational, post digital action. By framing resistance through Gerald Vizenor's idea of survivance and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's theory of resurgence, the study shows how the text reclaims the body and land, envisioning a decolonial future beyond the brutal logics of digital and resource extractivism.

Keywords: Post digital Agency, The Indigenous Body, Biopolitics, Survivance, Speculative Fiction.

Introduction: The Speculative Form of the Post digital Condition

Contemporary global crises, including as pandemics, climate change, and the spread of digital monitoring, have radically altered how literature addresses the interconnected intricacies of technology, ecology, and capitalism systems. This overlapping demand has resulted in a significant body of literary studies aimed at understanding how fiction reflects, analyses, and reimagines modernity's structural forces. In the realm of speculative fiction, Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) is a seminal book that investigates the intersection of ecological disaster, colonial brutality, and biopolitical exploitation. The story envisions a future North America devastated by climate change, rising sea levels, and resource warfare, with the settler-colonial population suffering from a deadly epidemic of

dreamlessness. In response, the Canadian government sends bureaucratic agents known as "Recruiters" to hunt and arrest Indigenous peoples, whose bone marrow contains the secret to restoring the ability to dream.

While traditional postcolonial and ecocritical readings of Dimaline's novel have shed light on its allegorical engagement with the historical traumas of the Residential School System and environmental extractivism, there is still a critical analytical gap in understanding the technological and informational dimensions of the state's oppressive apparatus. To close the gap, this study examines *The Marrow Thieves* through the lens of post digital theory. The post digital is defined as an unavoidable state in which life unfolds, marked by the total and messy entanglement of digital technology, biological ways of being, capital, and social infrastructures. Within this approach, the distinction between digital and analog, virtual and physical, is regarded as a false dichotomy. Rather than seeing technology as a distinct, neutral layer of tools, post digital theory recognizes that every instant of learning, work, and subordination is already a socio-material fusion of the physical, biological, and informational.

This paper analyses *The Marrow Thieves*' coercive frameworks as a highly complex "bio digital assemblage" using a post digital perspective, moving beyond basic criticisms of technology. Biodigitalism is a technological convergence in which biology is viewed as digital information and digital information is incorporated into biological processes. In Dimaline's fictionalized world, the colonial state values the Indigenous body as a somatic database rather than its labor. The dream itself, which Indigenous cultures have historically understood as a spiritual, relational, and land-bound epistemic activity, is recast by the state as extractable biological data stored inside the marrow.

This study argues that *The Marrow Thieves* reveals the brutal constraints of bio digital extractivism and, more crucially, proposes alternative ways of post digital action. The story, told through the figure of the Anishinaabe elder Minerva, demonstrates how the biological body, traditional language, and collective memory may work together to disrupt, overload, and destroy the technocratic machineries of colonial capture. This somatic and linguistic resistance is theorized using Gerald Vizenor's survivance concept and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's resurgence theory, demonstrating how the text envisions a decolonial future that liberates both the body and the land from the logics of digital and resource capitalism.

Post digital Extractivism and the Molecularization of the Indigenous Body

The fundamental source of conflict in *The Marrow Thieves* is the colonial state's desperate attempt to treat its own psychic disintegration through the somatic harvesting of Indigenous peoples. This diagnostic premise represents a significant biopolitical transformation that took place throughout late capitalism: the molecularization of life. According to scientific sociologists, modern biopolitics is increasingly operating at the sub-microscopic level, with biological life broken down into genetic sequences, stem cells, and molecular tissues that can be mapped, manipulated, and commodified. In the post digital era,

molecularization has collided with bioinformatics, changing the organic body into an informational asset that can be duplicated, patented, and exchanged in a global bio-economy.

The story literalizes molecularized biopolitics through the search for bone marrow. The state's recruiters strive not only to erase Indigenous peoples physical presence, but also to harvest their bodily material in order to create a therapeutic serum that restores dream-capacity to the settler population. This approach exemplifies a harsh type of post digital extractivism in which the textures of Indigenous existence, cultural memory, and spiritual practice are considered as a valuable resource. The logic of extractivism always assumes the subject's identity and arranges their biological coordinates appropriately, converting the living human to a data-generating object.

This somatic reduction exposes a fundamental contradiction in the settler-colonial logic of *The Marrow Thieves*. The Indigenous body is acknowledged as very important since the settler population simply cannot exist or maintain its sanity without it but, the real human individuals who bear this biological asset are classified as completely disposable and targets for destruction. Their extinction is portrayed as a necessary biopolitical goal, a life-saving action intended to safeguard the "universal" human person. This selective humanism exemplifies how the state uses scientific and technical advancement to create racialized hierarchies, distinguishing between those whose lives must be maximized and those whose lives are reduced to extractable biological data. To comprehend the dynamics of this post digital extractivism, consider the scattered components of agency in this technology-saturated environment. In a post digital educational and political world, agency (A) is not an isolated human ability but rather relationally formed through a system of biological, technical, cultural, and environmental factors:

$$A_{\text{postdigital}} = f(B_{\text{soma}}, T_{\text{machinic}}, C_{\text{episteme}}, L_{\text{spatial}})$$

Whereas B_{soma} represents the biological and somatic coordinates of the body, T_{machinic} represents the technological infrastructures of capture and processing, C_{episteme} denotes the cultural and linguistic frameworks of knowledge, and L_{spatial} denotes the connection to the geographic land and space. The state's bio digital matrix aims to convert $A_{\text{postdigital}}$ to a simply extractive, measurable value by confining and depleting the biological body (B_{soma}) and deleting the epistemic and spatial coordinates ($C_{\text{episteme}}, L_{\text{spatial}}$). However, the novel's people demonstrate their sovereignty by actively strengthening cultural and land-bound coordinates, overloading the machinic infrastructure.

Table 1 depicts how the speculative conceptions found in modern post digital study match precisely to the narrative elements and thematic frameworks of Dimaline's novel.

Table 1: Theoretical Mapping of Post digital Concepts to Speculative Fiction Elements

Post digital Theoretical Concept	Scholarly Origin / Definition	Speculative Application in The Marrow Thieves	Thematic and Narrative Function in the Text
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Post digital Positionality	Rejects static, audited measurements of identity and instead argues for dynamic, ecological, and inclusive narratives of life.	Survivors reject the state's recognition of their identities as simple biological resource measures.	Empowers characters to reclaim their narratives via "coming-to-stories" that are rooted in personal and social history.
Entangled Pedagogy	Rejects technical and pedagogical determinism, emphasizing the collaborative development of tools, techniques, and ideals.	Frenchie's educational journey involves learning survival skills through an ongoing dance with land and ancestral tools.	Repositions learning as a collaborative, relational process including young, elders, and the non-human environment.
Biodigitalism / Bioinformatics	Technoscientific convergence occurs when biology operates as information and information acts as biological memory.	The state views dreams as somatic data contained inside the molecular architecture of bone marrow.	Materializes the brutal processes of late-capitalist extractivism, transforming spiritual life into a physical serum.
Post digital Memory	Memory is an emerging combination of biology, technology, and social environment that goes beyond the individual brain.	The practice of "story," in which the Anishinaabe's communal history is kept and reactivated around a campfire.	Undermines colonial attempts to obliterate Indigenous history by demonstrating that memory is maintained via relational activity.

The Residential School as a Bio digital Factory of Somatic Yield

The physical and metaphorical reintroduction of residential schools serves as the foundation for The Marrow Thieves' oppressive architecture. Residential schools were religious, state-sponsored institutions that forced Indigenous children to abandon their language heritage and adapt into Euro-Canadian culture. Dimaline's hypothetical version of these institutions pushes its logic into a high-tech future in which they work as industrialized physical extraction factories. These environments reflect the pinnacle of biopolitical

confinement and technocratic monitoring, with sophisticated cybernetic systems controlling biological life.

The horrible acts of body harvesting take place in "schools," thus subverting the conventional function of educational environments. Rather than providing spaces for human growth, intellectual discovery, and social development, speculative schools are intended to impose a strict, extractive governmentality. They adopt a highly organized "dispositif" of capture, monitoring, and medical abuse, with Indigenous people reduced to clinical test subjects. The recruiters use brain hookups, bio-monitors, and electronic monitoring devices to guarantee that the somatic yield of the marrow is maximized before the donor's body is removed.

The growth of institutional violence is portrayed as an intentional continuation of colonial history of scientific experimentation on Indigenous communities, rather than an unintended transition. Under the cover of addressing a worldwide health crisis, the government restores these schools as critical infrastructure for public safety and social stability. This reveals how technocratic governments use crises whether ecological, digital, or biological to increase biopolitical control and justify state-sanctioned violence. The speculative schools are the physical incarnation of a post digital biosecurity grid that strives to save the lives of the dominant class by actually devouring the biological lifeblood of underprivileged communities.

To highlight the systemic continuity of this institutional brutality, Table 2 compares the real Canadian Residential School System with the fictional "Schools" managed by the Recruiters in the novel:

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Institutional Oppression

Dimension of Comparison	Historical Canadian Residential School System (1831–1996)	Speculative "Schools" in The Marrow Thieves (Dystopian Future)
Primary Ideological Objective	Cultural absorption, forced integration, and the systematic eradication of Indigenous identity and language.	To treat settler dreamlessness, somatic extraction, molecular commodification, and actual dream harvesting are used.
Technological and Material Infrastructure	Agricultural work implements, religious catechisms, and physical seclusion within basic boarding houses.	Cybernetic neural connections, electronic surveillance monitors, bio-information databases, and industrial extraction facilities.

Nature of Bodily Violence	Disciplinary subjugation, physical punishment, forced labour, and somatic confinement are all used to change behaviour.	Necropolitical execution involves the physical draining of bone marrow, which results in the donor's instantaneous death.
Epistemic Strategy	Cognitive imperialism is replacing indigenous Indigenous knowledge systems with Western, Eurocentric educational approaches.	Epistemic extractivism entails disassembling Indigenous epistemologies and transforming their biological containers into data-rich assets.
Spatialization of Control	State-funded, church-run institutions are purposefully located to separate children from native territories and family systems.	Panoptic, high-tech factories (such as School 47 EE) that produce bodies as raw materials are fully isolated from geographic treaty regions.

The Miracle of Minerva: Song, Traditional Language, and the Disruptive Glitch

The narrative's crucial turning point comes in Chapter 20, "The Miracle of Minerva," which offers a tremendous subversion of the state's bio digital extractivism. Minerva, an elderly Anishinaabe matriarch, is seized by recruiters and taken to School 47 EE for marrow harvest. The technicians try to integrate her body into their technological system by attaching brain connections to her skull and placing probes into her heart rate and instincts. The system is programmed to read, interpret, and transmit her biological indicators, making it easier to retrieve her dreams.

However, Minerva does not play the passive position of data subject. Instead, she posits a relational and diffused type of post digital agency, which utterly destroys the school's mechanical and technical structures. Minerva opens her mouth and begins to sing in her own tongue while connected to the conductors. Her song is more than just an artistic expression; it is a mobilization of "blood memory" the ancestral heritage, lessons, and traditional wisdom passed down through the centuries.

The article portrays the transforming moment of her resistance using significant auditory and biological imagery:

Minerva hummed and tapped an ancient melody on her flannel legs the entire while... She sang. She sang with volume, pitch, and a devastating lament that rang through her ancestors' bones, rattling them under the school. Wave after wave, she transforms her heartbeat into a drum, her unique voice into many, and incorporates every fantasy from her own marrow into her music. And there were words: words in the language that the conductor couldn't understand, words that Cardinals couldn't tolerate, and words that the wires couldn't carry.

Minerva's song serves as a post digital "glitch" in the colonial machine. In post digital aesthetics, the glitch or system breakdown is a key artistic and political instrument that demonstrates that our entire control over technology is an illusion. The glitch demonstrates dominant infrastructures' weaknesses by exposing their failure to contain and comprehend complex, non-linear reality.

Minerva's resistance is a somatic glitch that functions via three main mechanisms:

First, her song converts her bodily heartbeat into a ceremonial drum, transforming her biological signals from a passive source of data into an active, self-organized rhythm. Second, her dreams are completely inscribed in her native Indigenous language. The school's conductors and cybernetic systems, which were created to handle standardized English and quantitative somatic signals, are incapable of processing or translating her language's complicated semantics. Third, her agency is diffused and collaborative; she does not sing as an isolated individual, but rather transforms her solitary voice into many, inviting the ancient bones buried under the school to join her fight.

The powerful, localized energy of her song overloads the computational wires, causing electrical devices to fail and ignite. The breakdown of the equipment under her voice power finally causes the school to collapse and burn down. This structural wreckage reveals that even the most powerful biopolitical control systems are extremely vulnerable when confronted with true, embodied cultural revival. Minerva's bodily disruption demonstrates that dream-capacity is not a physical material that can be easily separated and removed; rather, it is an indivisible component of a living culture, language, and collective memory that defies technological containment.

Table 3 describes the many forms of agency and bodily resistance that function within the novel's post digital context, drawing on the multidimensional framework of post digital agency:

Table 3: Typology of Post digital Agency and Somatic Resistance

Dimension of Agency	Theoretical Definition	Narrative Manifestation in The Marrow Thieves	Systemic and Biopolitical Impact
Individual Agency	The learner/subject's ability to exercise autonomy, establish objectives, and make thoughtful, self-regulated decisions.	Frenchie's growth as a Metis adolescent, preferring to take on responsibilities and lead others rather than run.	Reclaims personal sovereignty and transforms a traumatized exile into a mature, conscious resistance leader.

Proxy Agency	Achieving desired results by convincing others, such as instructors, peers, or computer systems, to act on one's favor.	The state's use of recruiters and cybernetic conductors to gather somatic resources on behalf of settler communities.	Instantiates the bureaucratic delegation of violence, allowing the colonial state to retain the appearance of democratic development.
Spatial Agency	The ability to navigate and maximize interactions in hybrid physical, social, and technology environments.	The party moves north across the ravaged Canadian wilderness, using conventional land navigation to avoid capture.	Transforms colonial cartography and confinement areas into flowing paths for survival and territorial recover.
Collective Agency	Shared action and issue solutions are negotiated through peer networks, mutual help, and collaborative communities.	The survivors formed a "found family" (Frenchie, Miig, Wab, Chi-Boy, Tree, Zheegwon, Slopper, and RiRi).	Creates a different social organism of care by undermining the isolating, individualizing power of colonial biopolitics.
Shared / Relational Agency	Human actors, ancestors, and non-human systems interact and co-create knowledge.	Minerva uses music and "blood memory" to interfere with the extraction school's cybernetic wiring.	Demonstrates that ancestral language cannot be digitalized or commercialized by collapsing the extractive biodigital assemblage.

Relationality, Post digital Memory, and Indigenous Survivance

Minerva's dramatic resistance at School 47 EE serves as a critical educational shift for the other characters, demonstrating that their ultimate weapon against the recruiters is their own cultural and language preservation. This paradigm of resistance is closely related to Gerald Vizenor's idea of survivance. Vizenor defines survivance as "an active resistance and

repudiation of dominance," a method that goes beyond victimization or tragic response to express an active, creative presence. The Marrow Thieves never portrays survival as a solely individualized, competitive struggle. Dimaline instead portrays survival as a communal, intergenerational effort including care, ritual, and shared responsibility.

This survival endeavour is perpetuated by what post digital researchers refer to as "post digital memory". Rather of understanding memory as an internal cognitive file saved within the human brain or a digital database, post digital memory sees remembering as an emergent, dispersed phenomena generated by communal, socio-material, and spatial behaviours. This is expressed in the novel's "Story" practice. The survivors do not keep their history on screens or in physical archives; instead, they form a circle around the campfire and listen "with every cell" as the elder Miigwans recount the history of their people, the environment, and the schools.

This collaborative hearing and remembering is a decolonizing practice that addresses the cruelty of colonial narrative. It is a conscious, somatic exercise that links live characters with their ancestors and the earth. Dimaline connects this with what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson characterizes as "resurgence" a collection of behaviours that enable Indigenous cultures to regenerate and restore themselves by validating alternative ways of being in the world. Storytelling is a potent arena of revival because it defies cognitive imperialism, paving the path out of colonial thinking by rooting the community in its own knowledge-keeping practices.

Furthermore, the revived memory is inextricably linked to the landscape. As the protagonists travel north, their existence depends on their ability to read the landscape, engage with animal life, and establish an ethical, reciprocal relationship with the environment. The novel depicts the environment as an active, agential participant in the protagonist's journey, rather than a passive backdrop or static resource to be exploited. The earth itself is shown as a living organism with reciprocal relationships and duties. The characters' interactions with water, earth, and animals depict a posthuman relationality that clearly contradicts the anthropocentric, extractive logics of past colonialism and current digital capitalism. Memory and identity are therefore revealed to be ecological activities that cannot be perpetuated apart from the lands that produced them.

Conclusion:

Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* is a sophisticated diagnostic analysis of how biopolitical power and late-capitalist extractivism function in the post digital age. By speculating on a future in which the state molecularizes the Indigenous body in order to collect its dreams, the novel reveals the terrible pathways of a technocratic society that views human life as an informational commodity. This bio digital extractivism perpetuates past colonial brutality through a highly sophisticated system of cybernetic capture and somatic yield.

However, the novel's main contribution is its depiction of resistance and optimism. Dimaline's *Miracle of Minerva* demonstrates how the human body, traditional language, and communal memory may work together to destabilize and collapse even the most modern

technical control systems. Minerva's song exemplifies relational and dispersed post digital action, illustrating that dream-capacity is a holy, immutable post digital commons that cannot be digitized, hoarded, or privatized. Her opposition motivates her people to regain its sovereignty, language, and intergenerational relationships.

The Marrow Thieves exemplifies what Roberto Esposito and other critical theorists refer to as "affirmative biopolitics". Rather of fighting authority with individualistic, counter-violent strategies that replicate the colonizer's competitive logic, the novel's protagonists create alternative public spaces based on caring, mutual help, and ecological reciprocity. Dimaline's speculative narrative liberates technology and biology from capitalist violence by demonstrating that survival is primarily a social, land-bound, and relational practice. The Marrow Thieves is therefore a strong speculative novel that adds to the mission of Indigenous Futurism by presenting a revolutionary road ahead in which ancestral wisdom and posthuman relationality emerge as the final coordinates for a decolonial and sustainable future.

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