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Reclaiming Memory and Identity: Indigenous Culture in Cherie Dimaline's The Marrow Thieves and Kim Scott's True Country

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of Indigenous culture in Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and Kim Scott's *True Country* (1993), with a focus on how memory and identity are reconstructed through storytelling, kinship, and land. Both writers emphasize the resilience of Indigenous culture in the face of colonial violence and erasure, situating oral traditions and collective memory as tools of resistance. By drawing upon decolonial perspectives that highlight the reclamation of knowledge and cultural survival, the paper argues that the two novels, though different in genre and national context, converge on the affirmation of Indigenous identity as dynamic, adaptive, and deeply rooted in community. Dimaline envisions a dystopian future where dreams preserve cultural memory, while Scott portrays the rediscovery of Aboriginal identity in a fragmented present. Together, these works demonstrate the role of Indigenous literature as a decolonial space where memory and identity are reclaimed and celebrated.

Keywords: Indigenous culture, memory, storytelling, identity, decolonization, hybridity, Cherie Dimaline, Kim Scott.

Introduction

Indigenous culture encompasses the knowledge systems, traditions, spiritual beliefs, and lived practices of First Peoples across the world. Rooted in deep relationships with land, ancestry, and community, Indigenous cultures conceptualize identity as collective and relational rather than individualistic. Colonialism disrupted these systems through land dispossession, forced assimilation, residential schools, and the suppression of Indigenous languages and epistemologies. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith observes, "Imperialism frames the indigenous experience. It is a shared history, shared language, and shared experiences of resistance" (Smith 2). Colonial domination thus functioned not only as a political project but also as an epistemic one.

Literature has become a crucial site for resisting this epistemic violence. Indigenous writers reclaim storytelling as a means of cultural survival and self-definition. Aleida Assmann defines cultural memory as "the collective store of knowledge from which a group derives its identity and sense of continuity" (Assmann 5). When institutional histories erase Indigenous presence,

literature becomes a vital repository of collective memory.

Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and Kim Scott's *True Country* exemplify this literary reclamation. Emerging from different national contexts and employing distinct narrative strategies, both novels challenge colonial narratives of Indigenous disappearance and assert cultural survival as adaptive and future-oriented.

Indigenous Literature and Decolonial Perspectives

Decolonial theory emphasizes reclaiming Indigenous knowledge systems marginalized by colonial domination. Smith argues that decolonization requires "centering our concerns and worldviews and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives" (Smith 39). Indigenous literature participates in this process by privileging Indigenous voices, oral traditions, and communal modes of knowing.

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity further complicates Indigenous identity. Bhabha explains that identity is "never simply a return to origins, but a negotiation with difference" (Bhabha 55). Rather than signaling loss, hybridity in Indigenous contexts often represents cultural survival. Both Dimaline and Scott reject static notions of authenticity, portraying identity as relational and evolving. Maurice Halbwachs' theory of collective memory reinforces this perspective. He asserts that "memory is a collective function, dependent on social frameworks" (Halbwachs 38). In both novels, memory exists not as private recollection but as communal practice.

Storytelling as a Site of Cultural Continuity

Storytelling functions as the primary means of transmitting Indigenous culture in both *The Marrow Thieves* and *True Country*. In Dimaline's dystopian world, storytelling becomes essential for survival. Miigwans repeatedly insists, "We need to remember so we don't repeat" (Dimaline 23). This repetition reflects Indigenous oral traditions where stories sustain ethical responsibility and cultural

continuity. Smith emphasizes that storytelling is a decolonial act because it restores Indigenous authority over history. Dreams themselves become narrative vessels carrying ancestral knowledge across generations. In *True Country*, Scott embeds storytelling into the novel's structure. Rejecting a single authoritative narrator, the text unfolds through multiple voices. As one character declares, "The story isn't mine. It's ours" (Scott 84). This collective narration affirms what Bhabha calls "the right to narrate" as central to identity formation (Bhabha 200).

Memory: Dreams and Country

Memory operates as a central metaphor in both novels. In *The Marrow Thieves*, dreams function as repositories of cultural memory. Frenchie reflects, "Sometimes the dreams we have are the only things we have left" (Dimaline 25). Dreams sustain identity when material conditions collapse. The settlers' desire to harvest marrow allegorizes colonial extraction of culture and memory. Yet memory cannot be fully stolen because it is embodied and communal. Assmann notes that "cultural memory is embodied in symbols, rituals, and narratives rather than stored in written records" (Assmann 24).

In *True Country*, memory resides in land or "Country." Billy recognizes this connection when he realizes "the land was telling me something" (Scott 142). Memory is embedded in place, songlines, and ancestral presence. An elder explains that stories remain "in the ground, in the trees, in the rivers" (Scott 176). Both novels reject colonial narratives of disappearance by affirming memory as resilient and enduring.

Kinship, Community, and Indigenous Identity

Both novels challenge Western individualism by portraying identity as communal. In *The Marrow Thieves*, colonial violence fractures biological families, yet new kinship networks emerge. Frenchie acknowledges, "This wasn't my blood family, but it was my family just the same" (Dimaline 157). Similarly, Billy's Abo-

iginal identity in *True Country* develops through community participation. An elder reminds him, “It doesn’t matter how white you look... What matters is that you belong” (Scott 188). This aligns with Bhabha’s assertion that identity is produced through negotiation rather than fixed origins (Bhabha 56).

Trauma, Erasure, and the Work of Healing

Colonial trauma permeates both texts. In *The Marrow Thieves*, Miigwans recounts the residential school experience: “That was the last time I saw my parents” (Dimaline 135). Trauma is shown as intergenerational and ongoing. Scott similarly portrays the effects of colonial policies in *True Country*, where cultural fragmentation marks Aboriginal life. Yet both novels resist narratives of victimhood. Smith emphasizes that “survival, resistance, and recovery are not separate processes but interconnected dimensions of Indigenous experience” (Smith 202). Storytelling and cultural memory thus become pathways toward healing.

Temporal Strategies of Resistance

Dimaline’s speculative future dramatizes the consequences of cultural erasure while imagining Indigenous survival beyond apocalypse. Dreams act as bridges between past and future. Scott’s narrative, rooted in the postcolonial present, mirrors fractured Aboriginal identity while emphasizing recovery as an ongoing process. Both temporal strategies resist colonial narratives that confine Indigenous culture to the past.

Comparative Insights: Literature as Decolonial Space

Both novels demonstrate how Indigenous literature functions as a decolonial space. Storytelling reclaims voice, memory sustains identity, and community enables survival. As Bhabha argues, it is within the “interstices” or “third space” that “new signs of identity are negotiated” (Bhabha 2). *The Marrow Thieves* and *True Country* occupy this space, refusing erasure while reimagining Indigenous futures.

Conclusion

Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* and Kim Scott’s *True Country* offer complementary explorations of Indigenous memory and identity. Through dreams, Country, storytelling, and kinship, both novels reclaim cultural knowledge suppressed by colonialism. Indigenous culture survives not despite trauma but through adaptive resilience. Indigenous literature thus emerges as a vital decolonial practice -one that restores memory, rebuilds identity, and affirms survival across time.

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