Wahkohtowin vs. Exploitation: Indigenous Sustainability and the Limits of Settler Utilitarianism in The Marrow Thieves

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Utilitarianism, to explain briefly, is the ethical theory that the best course of action will always be the one that benefits the greatest number of people, and harms the least. When learning this theory in class, we were presented with the classic "trolley problem": if you were in the scenario to harm one person to save five people, would you? Utilitarianism says you should, regardless of who that one person may be. Surely, a utilitarian would claim, the lives of five people outweigh the life of one. And on the surface, when we learned about this theory, I thought that conclusion seemed understandable, even preferable. I believe people tend to govern our lives in a way we believe to be fair, and behave in a way that we feel is justifiable— therefore shaping society around a theory that serves the majority may seem sensible. However, in *The Marrow Thieves*, Métis author Cherie Dimaline offers much more nuance, and shows us glaring issues that utilitarianism overlooks. She challenges the notion of

utilitarianism, showing it to have created a divided society, surrounded by a diseased world. In the novel, the settler society in power had failed to consider the health of the land, and therefore failed to consider its own longevity. Through this, we are shown how utilitarianism may essentially collapse in on itself. Dimaline instead proposes that an ideal society is rooted in reciprocity, thus calling for harmony, balance, and unity between humans, animals and all of nature.

Instead of a culture that promotes continued division, *The Marrow Thieves* demonstrates that an ideal culture promotes unity and understanding. In practice, utilitarianism creates a divide among people, and leaves a minority group who at best is overlooked, and at worst is overtly harmed. In the case of *The Marrow Thieves,* the government pursues the capture of all Indigenous people for the extraction of their bone marrow. It is implied that this process results in death, however it is permitted under utilitarian society as it better serves the majority of the population. This is contrasted by the mindset taught to protagonist Francis (French, or Frenchie) Dusome by the Indigenous elders in his adopted family.

In the novel, the group that essentially becomes Frenchie's adopted family is also of mixed Indigenous ancestry; Miigwans (Miig, an Elder), who is the "leader,"of the group is Anishinaabeg, Riri, Frenchie, and Minerva (the other Elder), are

Métis, Chi-boy is Cree, and Slopper "came from the east coast" (Dimaline 21). In class, we were introduced to Chadwick Allen's perspective of trans-Indigenous communities. In short, his lens is that trans-Indigenous communities serve as a response to the shared experiences, struggles, and cultural connections among Indigenous peoples. They recognize that while each Indigenous group is diverse and holds their own unique traditions, and languages— there are also commonalities that unite them, like the impact of colonialism, cultural assimilation, and oppression. Forming these communities, especially in the context of *The Marrow Thieves,* allows for the sharing of traditions, knowledge, and practices between Indigenous communities. While each Indigenous nation has its own unique identity, this perspective is that united groups are stronger, and together may elevate each other and work towards common goals. In the novel, Dimaline seems to align with this perspective. It matters not that the adopted family of Frenchie comes from different backgrounds. What matters is what connects them: their shared values of freeing themselves, and the desire to work towards a better future.

The importance Dimaline places on the unification of cultures' ability to strengthen each other also shows itself through Frenchie's Métis ancestry. To be Métis is more than just being of mixed settler and Indigenous descent. Métis history is

rooted in the distinct culture created largely in the Red River valley, by the unification of both Cree and French people. The people who emerged were the result of this unity, and combined aspects of each culture. However, people of Métis origin have long fought for acceptance. Métis scholar and poet Marilyn Dumont writes about Michif (the traditional language of the Métis) in her poem "These Are Wintering Words" from *Pemmican Eaters*:

"[...] combining two grammatical/maps [...] twice the language twice the culture [...] neither Cree, Salteaux nor French exactly, but something else

not less not half not lacking" (16)

Historically, to be Métis was to be viewed through the racist lens of being a "half-breed", with the implication that to be Métis meant that you were of less cultural value than someone of full First Nations or settler descent. The term "half-breed" implies that as a Métis individual, you are made up of two half-cultures, instead of a whole. Marilyn Dumont writes about her language and culture as distinct in her line "not less not half not lacking". Dimaline, from the Georgian Bay Métis Nation, can represent the value of the combination of these cultures accurately, and Frenchie knows he comes from "a long line of hunters, trappers, and voyageurs." (Dimaline 21). Through this unity, Indigenous and settler cultures primarily in the Red River

Valley came together to create another culture, unique from but connected to both sides. Where a utilitarian mindset will always create division, overlooking those who are outnumbered, Dimaline writes of a society where cultures coming together and connecting is invaluable.

This notion of unity, in other words, critiques utilitarianism by emphasizing the value of collective well-being that includes emotional, spiritual, and relational health, not just outcomes based on numbers or efficiency. Where utilitarianism often weighs actions by their ability to produce the "greatest good for the greatest number," usually in measurable, material terms, unity highlights the importance of relationships, reciprocity, and shared responsibility, which can't always be quantified.Utilitarianism can justify exploitative choices if they have immediate payoff. A unity-based approach prioritizes lasting relationships with land, people, and non-human life, resisting utilitarianism's extractive tendencies.

Interconnections are ingrained within the text, existing within and outside of people. For instance, to explain why they are hunted for their bone marrow, Miig explains to the children that "Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones" (Dimaline 18). The imagery of webs is used to connect characters with each other, but also with the land and its inhabitants. Frenchie imagines these as "spiderwebs,"

connecting himself to nature, and we observe Frenchie grasp how he fits into a web of reciprocal relationships. Scholar Christina Turner explains this deep inter-weaving and connection as Wahkohtowin, which is the Cree and Métis concept that a sense of kinship extends to the environment (99). In the concept of Wahkohtowin, kinship is reciprocal, meaning that if you take care of the land, in turn it will take care of you.

Where Wahkotowin caters to conservation, and preserving the health of the land, utilitarianism lends itself to exploitation. Dimaline uses water as a symbol of the unsustainability of the utilitarian lifestyle, as the health of society as a whole is mirrored by the health of the water. For instance, the water in the great lakes, having been disregarded and polluted for so long, had become toxic for people to drink. Thus, for much of the novel the only source of water we see is in the form of endless (toxic) rain, or tears from people. Eventually, Frenchie and Rose find clean, drinkable water. They didn't know it at the time, but this clean, drinkable water meant they were close to another group of Indigenous people, who treated the land as kin.

Wahkohtowin is a lesson to be learned, though, and in the following passage, while Frenchie is hunting, he imagines the benefit he would give his family if he were to shoot a moose he sees. He reflects to himself:

“This was food for a week. Hide and sinew to stitch together for tarps, blankets, poncho's. This was bone for pegs and chisels. This was me, the Conquering hero, marching into camp with more meat than all of us could carry, taking the others back to field dress this gift. This was Rose looking at me with those big eyes so dark they shone burgundy in the firelight. This was my chance.” (Dimaline 49)

But, where a utilitarian might only see the copious amount of food and tools the moose would provide, along with the pride French may feel, he questions his initial desire to kill it. Although he does not fully understand it, French begins to understand that taking down this moose would betray his obligations to the land. He knows that killing the moose would mean “[they would] be leaving half, at least half, behind to rot.” (Dimaline 49) and he decides that this wastefulness and disregard for the animals life cannot be justified, because he is beginning to feel a familial tie to the land itself. Frenchie, after lowering his rifle, thinks to himself “I couldn't let it come to this, not for him and not for me.” (Dimaline 50) This is an example of Wahkohtowin, Turner (110) quotes Zoe Todd, as “Wahkohtowin is not just about human relations. Rather, Wahkohtowin is a “broadly conceived sense of relatedness of all beings, human and non- human, living and dead, physical and spiritual” (Todd 2017, n.p.).” Therefore, we are able to see how

Frenchie's decision to spare the moose places him in a larger web of interconnections.

Further, Dimaline's use of language shows the kinship, or Wahkohtowin, she sees in nature. She writes that Frenchie, before he had decided against killing the moose, "exhaled, long and loud like the wind."(Dimaline 49) This goes beyond a personification of nature, though. Next, the moose is written as having a life equal to that of an elder. Just before this revelation, with an implied sense of pride, Frenchie recalls hunting advice from Miig, and thinks to himself that he will "listen to [his] Elders"(Dimaline 49). His understanding of elders quickly extends from only humans, as he goes on to describe the moose "It was like he was a hundred years old, like he had watched all of this happen. Imagine being here through it all- the wars, the sickness, the earthquakes, the schools- only to come to this?"(Dimaline 49) By equating the life of the moose to his elders, Frenchie is able to see the value in protecting him, and learn from the moose. Further than just noticing he was there, the moose is given a sense of knowing, and "watched all this play out on [Frenchie's] face" (Dimaline 49). Frenchie saw that he, and the moose, were one in the same. While looking into the moose's eye, Frenchie says "I was sure I could see myself in there" (Dimaline 49). In Dimaline's writing of the moose as a creature who should be respected, we, the reader, are able to

reflect on the state of this utilitarian world. What had *caused* the wars between people, the sickness of the land, and the forcing of indigenous peoples into schools? The unbalanced taking, and nonreciprocal relationships.

The larger utilitarian society in *The Marrow Thieves* ignored the devastation on the environment that came from its relentless extracting practices. The natural world deteriorated as the society continued to consume the resources it needed to sustain itself. The harm that this denial could cause is depicted by the novel's account of the "Water Wars," in which the overexploitation and neglect of vital freshwater sources, (like the Great Lakes), turned them into toxic, undrinkable sludge– no longer able to support the lives of others. In other words, the inability to recognize the interconnectedness of human survival with the health of the land and ecosystems was a key flaw in the utilitarian model. Indigenous knowledge, like Wahkotowin, in contrast, teaches that humans must live in balance with nature, protecting and nurturing the environment in return for its sustenance. The novel critiques the utilitarian tendency to see nature as a collection of resources to be exploited, rather than as a partner in a reciprocal relationship that ensures survival for all.

Finally, I think the ultimate weakness of the utilitarian society in *The Marrow Thieves* was the failure of this worldview to ensure a sustainable future. Utilitarianism is focused on the

immediate benefit of the present society, and it fails to account for the long-term consequences of its actions. In the novel, this is shown through the erasure of Indigenous knowledge, and the depletion of resources. For example, the capture and presumed murder of Indigenous people to extract their marrow is irreversible, and permanently erases vital traditional knowledge that would allow for the long term existence of any life on earth. The destructive, exploitative tendencies of utilitarianism permanently sever connections from the past to the future.

In contrast, the Indigenous worldviews in the novel recognize that survival depends on maintaining these relationships over generations, ensuring that future generations inherit a world that is balanced, and able to sustain its inhabitants. Dimaline emphasizes the importance of how the connection to the past, through storytelling and teaching traditional knowledge and language ensures the longevity of future generations. Minerva, in particular, is central because of this. She had "the language," which is never explicitly named in the novel. However, the omission of the Indigenous language taught by Minerva ties back to Dimaline's support of a united society, as Turner (121) points out that "it is the language's ability to resonate across time and space, rather than its name, that lends Minerva the ability to destroy the residential schools." I read this as meaning: it is the act of revitalizing language and

culture that is powerful, and holds the ability to disrupt colonial systems, rather than the specific Indigenous languages themselves.

Through Minerva, we see a full, reciprocal cycle that is necessary for a society to prepare itself for the future, and continue on for generations. For example, in her elderly age Minerva had lost some of her physical ability and “like a child on their backs” (Dimaline 138) had to be carried by the group, and cared for like a small child. But they did this, despite sacrificing speed, because they understood her value in the larger picture. She could teach them knowledge that would ensure their success in the future. Turner explains that “an essential component of Wahkohtowin involves teaching future generations about duties and responsibilities” (105). In her language and stories, Minerva is able to teach traditions of reciprocity and balance, like Dimaline’s message that if you nurture the land, it will nurture you in return. The mentality of continued extraction and taking with nothing to give in return is what had created the dystopian, utilitarian society in the first place.

In conclusion, Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* highlights the flaws of a utilitarian society that prioritizes immediate survival at the expense of long-term sustainability, interconnectedness, and balance in nature. The larger society

depicted in the novel fails because it neglects the reciprocal relationships between humans, animals, and the land—relationships that are fundamental to the survival of communities over generations. By disregarding these ways of living, the utilitarian society destroys not only its environment, but also the cultural and spiritual knowledge and beliefs that would have ensured its future. To address these failures, I think we must begin by shifting our mindset away from exploitative models of growth and consumption, and instead embrace Indigenous worldviews that emphasize reciprocity, interconnectedness, and sustainability. By recognizing that the health of the land is tied to the well-being of all people, we can start to restore the balance that has been lost in many communities.

Another crucial step would be to rethink how we define value in society. Rather than focusing solely on short-term gains or profits, we must expand our understanding of worth to include contributions that sustain future generations. As an education student, this means that the Alberta TQS #5, "Applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Metis, and Inuit" must be taken very seriously, and implemented effectively, accurately and respectfully— meaning Indigenous peoples would be consulted and involved in the teaching of their cultural knowledge. Our educational system as a whole would have to

include the teachings of Indigenous histories, languages, and practices, from Indigenous perspectives, ensuring that future generations understand the importance of maintaining these interconnected relationships. Through storytelling, language revitalization, and the practice of reciprocity, we can foster a generation that understands the vital role of the environment and Indigenous cultural traditions in the survival of all peoples. By learning from the lessons of *The Marrow Thieves* and embracing a worldview rooted in balance and reciprocity, we can build a more sustainable and just society, one that values all lives, recognizes our dependence on the land, and ensures that future generations inherit a world that is whole and connected.

Works Cited

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