Dreaming as Pharmakon in Larissa Lai's "Salt Fish Girl" and Cherie Dimaline's "The Marrow Thieves"

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> Stories are wondrous things. And they are dangerous […] Want a different ethic? Tell a different story.
>
> – Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories* (11, 124)

Larissa Lai and Cherie Dimaline, Canadian authors of Chinese and Métis descent, respectively, interweave in their writing different epistemologies that inform their complex cultural heritage—understood as rational, Western, and scientific on the one hand, and embodied, Indigenous and/or mythological, on the other. While dismantling the hierarchical dichotomies of the Western cultural tradition, they also avoid ethnocentric or nationalist essentialism that would generate new forms of exclusion. Rather, both authors' critical engagements with colonial history signal what indigenous feminist critic Zoe Todd calls "a reciprocity of thinking" that requires us to pay attention to who else is "speaking alongside us" (19). By employing native myths and storytelling traditions, Lai and Dimaline show how the historical memories saved in myths and stories, as well as the processes of their transmission through oral and graphic modes of communication, can open vistas beyond dominant white anthropo- and andro-centric paradigms. While we have adopted a central metaphor from one of the seminal texts of the Western philosophical canon, Plato's Phaedrus, as revisited by Jacques Derrida in "Plato's Pharmacy"— namely, the figure of the pharmakon as simultaneously poison and remedy—for our discussion of dreams in Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) and Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieve*s (2017), our intention is not to impose a Western philosophical framework on the novels' presentation of myths, stories, and dreams, but instead to show what new perspectives they can bring to the dominant frameworks that have marginalized them.

Derrida's unconventional reading of the *Phaedrus* is centered around the irony that Socrates, as representative of the Western logocentric tradition, rejects the value of writing by resorting to myth which he had also dismissed in the name of truth and (self-) knowledge. The "kinship of writing and myth" (Derrida 75) thus established gains new perspectives in the novels of Lai and Dimaline, who weave elements from oral cultures into their textual web in ways that traverse the boundaries of dream and reality, past and present, and body and story. Both of these novels feature the conceptual framework of dreaming as pharmakon, understood as both disease and cure. In each case, the "illness" stems from an exploitation of human and (hybrid) non-human bodies within capitalist systems of resource extraction that brings society to the brink of collapse.

Throughout Derrida's essay, the recurrence of metaphors such as "texture," "textile," "loom," and "web" entwine text with body and matter, neither being reducible to the other, which shift

the focus from the subject of the *cogito* to the body caught in a process of re-inscription. The text emerges as an organism, "indefinitely regenerating its own tissue behind the cutting trace," since "[t]here is always a surprise in store for the anatomy or physiology of any criticism that might think it has mastered the game, surveyed all the threads at once" (63). This idea of text as an inexhaustible resource that can never be fully consumed is reflected in Lai and Dimaline's open-ended novels that, as in Alison Ravenscroft's description of Indigenous textualities, make "cuts" in language that unsettle the Western sovereign subject and call for a move from the lexicon of 'hold' and 'grasp' and 'apprehend' toward something more liminal, provisional, tentative, experimental" (358). These novels not only resist monological readings, but they also signal boundless possibilities for bodies and minds to escape from oppression and reconfigure ways to survive and thrive.[1]

As Patrisia Gonzales writes, "For many Indigenous cultures, dreams are both the site of knowledge and a way of knowing, as well as a method for organizing experience, interpreting data, and diagnosing illness and imbalance" (171). Dreaming, as both remembrance of a mythical past and (re)imagination of the future, emerges in both novels as *pharmakon* for capitalist systems of resource extraction. It compels one to "stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws" (Derrida 70) so as to challenge the *status quo* which, in both novels, is maintained through the exploitation of human or (hybrid) non-human bodies. The novels, which end with escape, rebellion, and/or revolt, feature the body as the locus of the (hi)story of the past, and of visions or stories about the future, both of which are associated with dreaming.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, a dreaming epidemic leaks the past into the present, evoking vivid "memories" and driving sufferers to commit suicide by drowning; in *The Marrow Thieves*, the non-Indigenous population has lost the ability to dream, driving them to harvest the dreams from the bone marrow of a people for whom dreams have a spiritual and cultural significance. Evoking Derrida's textual webs, dreams are understood as a story that is materially written upon (or coded within) the body. As Migwaans states in *The Marrow Thieves*, "Dreams get caught in the webs woven in your bones. That's where they live, in that marrow there" (Dimaline 19), while in *Salt Fish Girl*, the body is understood as a "language," as evidenced in Dr. Flowers' "dissections on TV" where he "rearranges the organs of the afflicted" (Lai 76). Heather Latimer suggests that Lai's novel connects "the creation of new bodies" via new reproductive technologies to the "creation of new texts" and to "new myths and stories of origin" (125). The kind of "experimentation" that is linked with the scientific methods in the novels—for example, the "Department of Oneirology" (Dimaline 4) in *The Marrow Thieves*, or Rudy Flowers' laboratory in *Salt Fish Girl*—proves insufficient for grasping or apprehending the dreaming sickness.

In both novels, dreaming is associated with disease. At the same time, however, in each case dreaming also provides an impetus for resistance against exploitation and for new and affirmative re-conceptualizations of life and social existence. The dreaming disease cannot be prevented by rational medical methods, but necessitate a re-appraisal of conceptions of health and healing. The novels feature dreaming as *pharmakon*, namely, as a means to recuperate difficult or painful

memories and histories, and as a source of inspiration to imagine alternative ways of engaging with the world and others. Like the difficult yet necessary migrations that each of the characters undergoes, dreaming removes one from the safety of one's habitual context; yet, despite the discomfort that such dreaming provokes, it nevertheless appears as a force for configuring less violent futures.[2]

Lai and Dimaline suggest possibilities for decolonizing imaginaries by revisiting the significance of dreams and stories and linking them to speculative postcapitalist and dystopian contexts. Both novels imagine possibilities offered by non-dominant cultures' conceptions of dreaming and being that cut across bodies and stories, underscoring the transformative potential of oral, written, and graphic "texts." Native myths and stories, as well as dreams, are embedded in the embodied lives of the characters and constitute the very forces that compel them to cross zones and transgress boundaries as they attempt to escape from the sickness of post-capitalist dystopias, in order to forge new and inclusive communal bonds. However, far from making a call to revert back to some kind of pure (Chinese or Indigenous) origin, or presenting a universal idea of hybridity as the defining feature of diasporic or colonial experience, the novels contest ethnocentric, nationalist, and universalist claims of identity, by foregrounding the singularity of each diasporic experience as an antidote to toxic monocultures.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, the stories of the three incarnations of Nu Wa reflect the fraught history of colonial and diasporic experience in three different contexts. In the futuristic Ontario landscape of *The Marrow Thieves*, after the "world's edges had been clipped by the rising waters, tectonic shifts, and constant rains," the non-Indigenous population of North America have "stopped reproducing without the doctors, and worst of all, they stopped dreaming. Families, loved ones, were torn apart in this new world" (28). The loss of the ability to dream—understood as a "plague of madness" (53)—is intricately linked to the breakdown in relationships to kin, to community, and to land. This relationality has been lost in a society that has cultivated an extractivist relationship to the earth that sustains its very being. This is the same suicidal culture that now wants to retrieve the ability to dream by sending "Recruiters" to capture fleeing Indigenous populations and extract the dreaming from the marrow of their bones.

In both novels, the dreaming sickness is connected to dystopian visions of dominant society, whose survival is deemed impossible without relying on capitalist systems that feed off the bodies of "peoples of the so-called Third World, aboriginal peoples, and people in danger of extinction" (Lai 160). The corporate compounds in *Salt Fish Girl* depend on the labour of factory workers with brown eyes and black hair, just as the dominant Canadian population in Dimaline's novel depends on the harvesting of bone marrow from Indigenous peoples. In both cases, as a direct result of the dominant society's alienated and destructive relationship to the earth, survival is impossible without the bodily exploitation of Indigenous and/or cloned populations.

While the scientific methods of resource extraction have failed to ensure a sustainable existence in Dimaline's dystopia, Lai presents a similar image of landscapes in the process of

being destroyed: the dreaming sickness slowly reaches "the point of epidemic" (71) at first in the Unregulated Zone (85), but eventually even in the walled corporate compounds which, despite their relative affluence, cannot escape "danger of infiltration from the ground, the danger of attack from the land itself, fighting back" (244). This pandemic indicates an impasse in dominant technocratic culture as the logical end point to scientific rationalism. Yet the ideology and practices of the privileged few are self-defeating, given that continuing along the lines of the status quo will only bring inevitable self-destruction. Likewise, the extraction of Indigenous dreams in *The Marrow Thieves* is an unsustainable solution to the problems of the white population since they are, after all, destroying the very people whose dreams they need for their survival.

Sonia Villegas-Lopez notes the way Lai's novel engages with bodies that have been "besieged by the effects of globalization, capitalism, and scientific engineering," and with "the means devised by diseased, hybrid, and queer bodies to rebel against social, sexual, and ethnic homogenization" (27). Lai's character Miranda reworks her mother's song lyrics and her own artwork in order to produce a series of graphic designs and slogans to sell brand-name running shoes, at the same time collaborating with her girlfriend, Evie—one of the cloned factory workers known as "Sonias"—who is trying to subvert the same exploitative capitalist system that gradually reveals itself to be the real sickness in the novel. This is a disease that cannot be cured without attending to the dream-memories that are driving people to suicide. Understanding this suicidal drive in line with the toxic lack of dreaming in *The Marrow Thieves*, we might suggest that disease is linked to a blindness or refusal to confront difficult histories.[3] In this way, Miranda and the Sonias' willingness to "embrace the contagion" (189) represents a potential threat to the dominant corporate structure, specifically by recuperating alternative histories in order to imagine alternative futures, just as in *The Marrow Thieves*, where the colonial system is "torn down by the words of a dreaming old lady" who "called on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors" and "brought the whole thing down" (Dimaline 172, 173).

As *pharmakon*—which, like any technology, has both positive and negative potentials—the dreaming illnesses are ambivalent but hopeful conditions. Likewise, the act of writing itself is figured as a risk, albeit a potentially transformative one, in both novels. Each narrative draws attention to a complex dialogue between the oral and the written in the tension between "official" writing (contracts, books, legal documents) and more relational stories, songs, dreams, and graphic engravings, which are cast as potentially revolutionary. For example, the fact that Miranda is seduced into signing a legally binding contract commercializing her mother's songs (Lai 239) does not diminish the creative potential of her drawings and oral memory, which are at the same time rooted in the body (91). The revolutionary slogans inscribed by the Sonias on the soles of the "sabot" shoes they produce in sweatshops "left a textual imprint behind" (237) as a form of "economic sabotage" (246). Given that some of the imprints "told the stories of individual Sonias' lives, some were inscribed with factory workers' poems, some with polemics, some with drawings" (248), this act of sabotage is simultaneously an act of communal storytelling.[4]

Also like the Sonias and their sabot/age shoes, the revolutionaries in *The Marrow Thieves* understand the paradoxically limiting and liberating role of writing, supplementing their traditional oral storytelling with the use of graphic signs, in the form of engravings on trees and the "syllabics" of written language (155) in order to communicate with one other and organize the resistance. At the same time, they are well aware of writing as dangerous techné, as in the genocidal residential schools based on the "book that was like a vacuum, used to suck the language right out of your lungs" (107), not to mention that other book that regulates virtually every aspect of Indigenous life in Canada, the Indian Act.[5] "They turned to history to show them how to best keep us warehoused, how to best position the culling," says Migwaans, and the new schools were set up when "they had found a way to siphon the dreams right out of our bones" (89). This dystopic dream culling is just a (less metaphorical) version of the cannibalistic tactics of ongoing colonization.

The powerful legacy of song in *Salt Fish Girl* can be compared to the "key" of the old language, as linked to Minerva's and others' dreaming, in T*he Marrow Thieves*. Central to the narrative is the articulation of individual memory through the telling of the "coming-to" stories of the protagonists: Migwaans remarks, "Everyone's creation story is their own" (79). Yet, at the same time, these stories together constitute "Story" in a collective sense. The fugitives share memories, dreams, and visions, and the individual and communal stories of those who are lost along the way are preserved in the texture and textile of Story, as it is reshaped by each new addition to the community. The Canadian government's techno-extractivist approach to Oneirology is set against Indigenous dream narratives and the sharing and interpretation of stories. Frenchie feels "sorry for a minute for the others, the dreamless ones" (19) who are disconnected from collective memory. In a sense, the most dangerous illness comes from living a hyper-individualized existence, instead of forming an integral part of "metaphors and stories wrapped in stories" (20) of communal history. Woven into the diasporic memories of individuals from various nations and backgrounds, "Story" emerges as a store of memories of individual and communal history, in a dynamic co-creative process that envisions time as a continuum in a constant re-inscription of the past.

In both novels, dreams are carved within memory and passed on through stories, songs and poetry, and as such constitute a source to healing through emerging forms of kinship and community that cut across boundaries of various kinds. Importantly, both novels foreground the idea of communal futurity in hybrid and non-heteronormative terms. At the end of *The Marrow Thieves*, Frenchie chooses to leave his biological father behind in order to make a home for himself with his chosen family; even though this decision in large part depends on his feelings for Rose, the narrative (narrowly) avoids following a heteronormative model by conclusing with a powerful vision of same-sex love. As Indigenous scholar Kim TallBear suggests, colonial nation-building projects continue to impose a (heteronormative and monogamous) nuclear family model upon the vibrant webs of family relations in Indigenous communities. In this respect, (open-) endings that prominently feature reconfigured kinship networks present an important challenge to the shaping of population in a colonial mold by the settler state.

As Villegas-Lopez argues, in *Salt Fish Girl* Lai proposes "a new ontology of the body that fosters productive and enriching readings of interbreeding, same sex relationships, and cyborg politics" that suggest ways to "imagine worlds in which body technologies have made it possible to think differently about sexual relations and to go beyond heteronormativity" (28). The Sonias are able to "seize reproductive power and change their abject origins, creating a redemptive space and a female community" (Latimer 131). By implanting human genes into the fruit of the durian tree the Sonias are able to take control of their own futures:

> We are the new children of the earth, of the earth's revenge. Once we stepped out of mud, now we step out of moist earth, out of DNA both new and old, an imprint of what has gone before, but also a variation. By our difference we mark how ancient the alphabet of our bodies. By our strangeness we write our bodies into the future. (Lai 259)

Even though the Sonias and their babies are destroyed, the novel ends with the birth of Miranda and Evie's baby girl in the hot springs of the Rocky Mountains. Latimer suggests that "although it involves a womb birth," this "reproduction is both human and technological without being paternal" (132). Not unlike "the seeds of the durian tree" which are "not quite organic, not quite technological," this "is a birth that acknowledges how the creation of new cyborg bodies through innovative reproductive technologies might lead to the creation of new myths and new ways of imagining and representing the world" (132). The setting is also important: the birth occurs close to the Burgess Shale (Lai 160), where some of our oldest non-human, ocean-dwelling ancestors are quite literally written on the earth: "the ancient imprint of their bodies to sleep beneath ice and snow, smelling faintly of salt. Here they lay on this dry, cold ocean, dead or dreaming, I couldn't quite tell" (268). This nod to the fossil record at the very end of the novel resonates with the idea of "making kin" in Haraway's sense, as a "flourishing for rich multispecies assemblages that include people" (160), and thus not only decenters the heterosexual family as the norm, but opens the notion of kinship to include non-human others.

As a "key" (Dimaline 227) to accessing the future through a re-inscription of the past, dreams signal the recuperation of individual and communal history, while at the same time refusing to idealize any kind of essentialist or "pure" origin. In his reading of the *Salt Fish Girl*, Nicolas Birns aptly remarks that Lai not only offers no return to prelapsarian purity, but also stresses that "hybridities can be radically different from each other" (163). Similarly, Sabine Sharp makes use of Lily Cho's notion of "diasporic solidarity" to identify in *Salt Fish Girl* an "affirmative politics wherein a monstrous collective of marginalized voices attends to the entangled histories of racialized and gendered oppression" (226). In both novels, there is a certain skepticism toward "purity" in a biological as well as a cultural sense: Evie tells Miranda, "I'm not human…. I am a new life form" (Lai 258); Frenchie carries the complex mixed history of Métis ancestry; Rose's father is black; the Guyanese nurses are important allies; and one of the most important "keys" to resistance and survival is Isaac, who is part European but nonetheless dreams in Cree.

Gonzales suggests that "dreaming is a simultaneous co-creative process that involves the

bodyspiritland and life-moving powers in which there may or may not be borders between flesh, mind, spirit, cosmos, or place" (172). *The Marrow Thieves* concludes with its young protagonist finally understanding that "as that as long as there are dreamers left, there will never be want for a dream … I understood just what we would do for each other, just what we would do for the ebb and pull of the dream, the bigger dream that held us all. Anything. Everything" (231). Dreaming is the only way that broken relationships to land, as well as to human and non-human others, can begin to be repaired: Migwaans suggests that "when we heal our land, we are healed also…maybe not soon, but eventually" (193). Minerva's last words to Frenchie are "Kiwen," which means "you must always go home" (211). Apart from signaling the importance of connectedness to land (as well as land claims) for Indigenous communities in Canada, the narrative suggests a more general necessity of going home to a certain relationship to the earth itself, to the cycles of nature, to the land as our dwelling place.

Lai and Dimaline engage with the notion that storytelling and myth are both necessary and dangerous, painful, and liberatory. In contrast to diseased extractive ideologies, the novels showcase the creative, (re)generative, and renewing potential of stories oriented towards the future, without turning their backs on the baggage of the past as well as the present. As Christopher B. Teuton argues, stories "enable us to create our worlds" (xii), while at the same time they are "a source of reflection on the responsibilities of being" (xiii). The ability to dream is the ability to imagine the future in a speculative sense: the interwoven stories of the characters in these novels highlight the importance of telling different kinds of stories in order to imagine that healthier futures might still be possible.

Notes

1. In *Salt Fish Girl*, material/bodily traces are texts that invite further reading but will never be fully deciphered by existing paradigms. For example, the durian seed holds within it the secret code for life in the past- present-and-future of the novel: "a pearl in the mouth… something cool and precious to lay in the cavity from which speech comes. The dark and empty rooting place of language. A pearl, a seed, how little space it takes to record all that is essential to know about life" (Lai 206).
2. The significance of a change in setting —the characters' movements to and from the Unregulated Zone in *Salt Fish Girl*, and from the city to the forest in *The Marrow Thieves*— reflects Derrida's observations about the significance of the geographical space in which Socrates felt the need to refer to myths. The river outside of Athens where he and Phaedrus sit and converse is the same river where one the myth of Pharmacia had allegedly taken place. In *Salt Fish Girl*, for example, Miranda would not have met Evie if her family had not been exiled from Serendipity; at the same time, she would not have been born if her father had not secretly brought the durian from the Unregulated Zone.
3. Miranda herself does not register her affliction as negative: "I did not think of myself as a child

afflicted by history, unable to escape its delights or its torments" (70). In fact, despite her father's deep shame, she says, "I did not feel unwell" (167). On the contrary, she says, "my dreams comforted me. I dreamt often of the sea, but not of drowning" (168). For Miranda, the disease brings back ancient memories of humans' evolutionary history, and this lineage is heightened in the novel by the presence of the cloned Sonias who share their DNA with "freshwater carp" (158).

4. This act of sabotage is, in turn, re-absorbed within the capitalist system, when the "memory-proof soles" are advertised by Pallas as "protection from the dreaming disease" (Lai 244). *The Marrow Thieves* similarly problematizes the dangers of the cultural assimilation of that which is potentially transformative: "At first, people turned to Indigenous people the way the New Agers had, all reverence and curiosity, looking for ways we could help guide them," but quickly they looked "for ways they could take what we had and administer it themselves. How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? How could they make ceremony better, more efficient, more economical?" (Dimaline 88). The problematic appropriation of Indigenous knowledge is also reflected in Salt Fish Girl: the building in the mountains was designed by a "Native architect," "as though purchasing her labour would somehow connect their project to the land" (Lai 267).

5. The almost complete loss of language for Indigenous people in Canada echoes Nu Wa's experience on the Island of Mist and Forgetfulness, where she acquires the "gift of speech" "albeit at the expense of" her "native tongue" (132)—not to mention her kinship, culture, and community.

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