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Storied Geographies: Settler Extractivism and Sites of Indigenous Resurgence in Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild*

Julia Siepak
Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu
julia.siepak@doktorant.umk.pl

This article offers a reading of Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild* (2019) that focuses on the novel's poetics of space, which contests settler colonial extractive geographies. Adopting a strong Métis- and women's perspective, Dimaline's narrative explores the contemporary Métis condition, which is marked by dispossession and displacement under settler colonialism, and the precarity connected with rampant resource extraction in Canada. In order to tackle the tensions between settler- and Indigenous conceptualizations of space, I provide a brief overview of settler Canadian land politics, and describe the nation's reliance on fossil fuels applying the concepts of petrostate and petroculture. By incorporating a Rogarou figure, a lupine monster in Métis stories, Dimaline embeds her novel within the traditional stories of her people, demonstrating their potential to critique and contest settler colonial geographies marked by extraction. The analysis approaches Indigenous storytelling as a strategy that resists dispossession and tackles the representation of Métis bodies as sites of resurgence.

Keywords: Indigenous literature; Métis literature; petroculture; settler colonialism; poetics of space; Indigenous storytelling

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Geografías historiadas: Asentamientos de naturaleza extractiva y lugares de resurgimiento indígena en *Empire of Wild*, de Cherie Dimaline

Este artículo presenta una lectura de la novela *Empire of Wild* (2019), de Cherie Dimaline, desde la perspectiva de la poética del espacio, la cual cuestiona las geografías coloniales de

asentamiento de naturaleza extractiva. Mediante la adopción de una narrativa de decidida postura favorable a los pueblos métis y a la mujer, Dimaline explora la situación actual de los métis, caracterizada por el despojo y el desplazamiento forzado bajo el dominio del colonialismo de asentamiento y la precariedad inherente a la potente extracción de recursos de Canadá. Con el fin de gestionar las tensiones existentes entre las concepciones del espacio de los colonos y de los indígenas, este artículo no solo proporciona una breve visión panorámica de las políticas coloniales de la tierra, sino que también describe la dependencia del país de las fuentes de energía fósiles mediante la aplicación de los conceptos de petroestado y petrocultura. Mediante la incorporación de la figura del rogarou, un monstruo licántropo propio de las historias de los pueblos métis, Dimaline inserta su novela dentro de la tradición narrativa de su cultura, demostrando así su potencial para la crítica y el cuestionamiento de las geografías coloniales de asentamiento caracterizadas por la extracción. Tal análisis se aproxima a la narración de historias indígenas como estrategia que se enfrenta al desposeimiento y aborda la representación de los pobladores métis como sujetos de resurgimiento.

Palabras clave: literatura indígena; literatura de los pueblos métis; petrocultura; colonialismo de asentamiento; poética del espacio; narración de historias de los indígenas

1. Introduction

Settler colonialism relies on the colonizer's geographical domination of Indigenous territories. The mapping of conquered land is one of the ways in which the colonizers exercise their control over these territories. Indigenous writers question colonial geographies, imagining in their works alternative spatial configurations that contest settler spaces and foreground Indigenous relationships with land. This article aims to explore the imaginative geographies emerging from Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild* (2019) and address the tensions between resource-intensive settler geographies and Métis vernacular mappings. In her novel, Dimaline establishes an alternative approach to space that is immersed in traditional storytelling that manifests the potential to resist settler normative mappings and the neocolonial exploitation of land by the resources industry. Written in opposition to the rampant resource extraction occurring in Canada, *Empire of Wild* is driven by an activist impulse that stresses the potential for the reclamation of Indigenous stewardship over the land which is endorsed by traditional Métis storytelling. The analysis of the novel attempts to reflect on the poetics of space present in Dimaline's work and the resurgent potentialities it conveys.

Cherie Dimaline is a writer and a member of the Georgian Bay Métis Community in Ontario, Canada. She has authored five books. Her young adult novel *The Marrow Thieves*, published in 2017, was her breakthrough work, winning the Governor General's literary award in the category of young adult fiction. Her recent novel *Empire of Wild*, published in 2019, became a bestseller in Canada and was recognized by the influential Canadian bookstore chain Indigo as the Best Book of 2019. The novel tells the story of a Métis protagonist, Joan Beausoliel, whose husband, Victor, goes missing after the couple argue over the sale of a plot of land that she inherits from her father. While Victor endorses the idea of selling the land to the resource development corporation, Joan opposes her husband's idea, concluding that "it is *ours* to enjoy, to build on. It's not *yours* to sell" (Dimaline 2019, 73; italics in the original). Joan keeps searching for Victor long after his unexpected disappearance and her investigation leads her to a religious group entangled in a resource development project. The story unravels into an epic pursuit to liberate Victor from the influence of the Christian sect that has made him a minister. The religious leader of the congregation, Mr. Heiser, turns out to be a Wolfsegner, namely one that controls wolves—a figure borrowed from German legends (277-278). Joan's husband, in turn, emerges as a Rogarou—a lupine shape-shifting creature characteristic of Métis storytelling. The man is symbolically confined to the body of a wolf, his human self trapped in the woods without a way to escape. With the help of traditional Métis medicine and stories, the protagonist attempts to liberate her husband from Heiser's control and his beastly Rogarou double.

Dimaline incorporates the Rogarou story within a contemporary setting. Merging the actual with the mythical, *Empire of Wild* interweaves the contemporary Indigenous

condition with the realm of their traditional stories. This representation complicates both spatial and temporal configurations, contesting the linear chronology and normative geographies of settlers. The traditional story enacted in the contemporary setting bridges the gap between a mythical time and the present, grounding the novel within the ethics encapsulated in the Rogarou stories. At the same time, the return of the mythological creature is intricately connected to spatial constructions: "the stories of the rogarou kept the community in its circle, behind the line. When the people forgot what they had asked for in the beginning—a place to live, and for the community to live in a good way—he remembered, and he returned on padded feet, light as stardust on the newly paved road" (4). The Rogarou haunts and hunts on the territory because of the community's departure from their traditional relationship with the land.

Moreover, by invoking lupine figures, Dimaline inscribes her narrative within the tradition of speculative fiction. The characters of werewolves present in different incarnations in various mythologies became a gothic trope that continues to be recycled in contemporary popular narratives. Lycanthropy involves liminality and transgression as werewolf characters are always in-between, human and non-human at the same time. The novel applies and subverts conventions characteristic of contemporary werewolf narratives in order to critique the neocolonial mechanisms of settler colonialism in Canada. *Empire of Wild* deploys the popular genre of fiction in order to engage in the conversation regarding Indigenous land rights.

The novel's syncretism, including traditional stories from diverse cultural contexts and figures borrowed from them, as well as legal and cultural discourses, depicts the complex entanglements of various conceptualizations of space that function in contemporary Canada. This complication of spatial constructions rejects the authority of settler colonial geographies, making space for an alternative approach to territory. In *Empire of Wild*, real and mythical spaces coincide to establish a genealogy of Métis geographies that, despite dispossession and displacement, continue to exist alongside settler normative mappings. Mishuana Goeman, in her *Mark My Words: Native Women Mapping Our Nations*, argues that Indigenous women writers' literary maps are not

> apart from the dominant constructions of space and time, but instead they are explorations of geographies that sit alongside them and engage with them at every scale. Even though these geographies may be marginalized, dismissed, concealed, or erased, they still constitute a part of [their] daily lives. These women's imaginative geographies are the stories that construct, contest, and compose a mapping of the Americas. (2013, 15)

I approach Dimaline's novel as an imaginative geography that not only contests settler colonial mappings of Indigenous lands and bodies, but also as one that constitutes a site of Indigenous resurgence.

2. Space and Extraction in Settler Colonial Canada

To legitimize the existence of the settler nation-state, Canada needed to standardize and unify territories as well as the discourses relating to them. The geographical appropriation of land in the Americas by European colonizers was ideologically authorized by means of a set of concepts and precepts, such as *terra nullius*[1] and the Doctrine of Discovery. The latter granted European settlers property rights for the appropriated Native land and its people based on religious, anthropocentric and supremacist premises (Miller 2010, 2). Furthermore, the permanency of settler presence on Indigenous lands necessitated the reproduction of familiar structures descending from the Old World in the new environments. Kyle Powys Whyte approaches these mechanisms as being processes of inscription, explaining that

> [a] territory will only emerge as a settler homeland if the origin, religious and cultural narratives, social ways of life, and political and economic systems (e.g., property) are physically incised and engraved into the waters, soils, air, and other environmental dimensions of the landscape. Settler ecologies are inscribed so that settlers can activate their own cultural, economic, and political aspirations and collective capacities. In this sense, waves of settlement seek to embed ecologies required for their own collective capacities to flourish in the landscapes they seek to occupy permanently. (Whyte 2017, 360)

At the same time, Whyte points out that settler inscriptions ignore and threaten Indigenous people's livelihoods. Settler land politics based on industrialization, urbanization, commodification of agriculture and rampant resource extraction are inextricably connected to the emergence of the settler narratives of homeland (2017, 360) that virtually erase Indigenous peoples and their title to ancestral territories, and target land practices that could in any way undermine them.

The extraction of fossil fuels, as well as the concomitant infrastructure development, is an example of settler inscription imposed on Indigenous land and people. Resource development is deeply ingrained in the tissue of settler colonial Canada and inevitably involved in its land politics. Canada is one of the potentates in the energy industry sector. The recent extraction of tar sand oil in the province of Alberta has further secured the position of Canada as an influential petrostate, namely "a polity that is subordinated and restructured according to the needs of either the Big Oil multinationals or the global political economy of oil or both" (Mookerjea 2017, 331). In "Who We Are and What

[1] Literally, vacant land. John Miller (2010) explains that "lands that were not possessed or occupied by any person or nation, or were occupied by non-Europeans but not being used in a fashion that European legal systems understood and/or approved of, were considered to be empty and waste and available to be claimed. Europeans were very liberal in applying this definition to the lands of Indigenous peoples. Europeans often considered lands that were actually owned, occupied, and being actively utilized by Indigenous peoples to be vacant and available for Discovery claims if they were not being properly used according to European laws and cultures" (8). Hence, considering areas of land as *terra nullius* did not actually mean that they were unpopulated, but rather that they were inhabited by peoples that were not making "proper" use of their territories from the Western point of view.

We Do: Canada as a Pipeline Nation," Darin Barney argues that oil is at the heart of Canadian national identity (2017, 78). Since resource extraction and the infrastructure allowing its storage and transportation have been greatly fetishized, Barney considers Canada as a nation "not so much imagined as fabricated,[2] produced materially by means of infrastructures onto which an imaginary nation was subsequently (and repeatedly) projected" (2017, 79). Barney's assertion aligns with Whyte's reflection on the necessity of settler inscriptions, in this case infrastructure, to construct the narrative of settler homeland. Furthermore, Canadian national identity and culture is tightly bound to the corporate neocolonial power of the resource development sector. This implies that settler Canada can be described in terms of a petroculture, understood as "petro-driven realities" (Wilson et al. 2017, 13), where social, political, and cultural dynamics are framed by petrochemicals. Canadian lifestyles are, therefore, both directly and indirectly determined by fossil fuel extraction.

Globally, the excessive exploitation of fossil fuels has led to anthropogenic climate change and human intervention in the Earth's geology, a situation which has been described in terms of a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene. Wilson, Szeman and Carlson note that "[o]f course, this geological term redistributes responsibility for the negative impacts on our planetary ecosystem to all *humans*, when these outcomes have largely been caused by populations in the global West, and by those with the greatest access to *power*—fossil fuels and capital—within those zones" (2017, 12; italics in the original). As such, then, the Anthropocene as a term, which refers to the impact of all of humanity on the environment, conceals the fact that it is the wealthiest and the most privileged who are primarily responsible for environmental degradation and its scope.[3] Indigenous peoples in Canada, alongside other minorities, have not enjoyed the profits of fossil fuel extraction to the same degree as the settler mainstream. On the contrary, Indigenous rights, cultures and livelihoods are imperiled by resource development. In contrast to the settler relation to territories and environments based on financial profit, Aboriginal connection to land rests on the reciprocity of the human and the non-human (Shilling 2018, 12). Space emerges, therefore, as relational. People take responsibility not only for their own well-being, but also for that of the environments surrounding them. Therefore, Indigenous ethics based on an intimate and reciprocal relationship with land opposes the approach to territory that identifies it with resource and market value.

[2] Barney refers here to the influential concept of nations as imagined communities developed by Benedict Anderson. According to Anderson, nations are imagined since "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" ([1983] 2006, 6). Hence, from this perspective, nations are not inherent but emerge as social constructs.

[3] Tim Gore's report for Oxfam on carbon inequalities states that between 1990 and 2015 "the richest 10% of the world's population […] were responsible for 52% of the cumulative carbon emissions" (2020, 2).

3. Corporate Geographies of Exploitation in *Empire of Wild*

In Dimaline's *Empire of Wild*, the extractive industry poses a threat to the Métis community's stewardship over their territories. The energy corporation is closely tied to a religious sect, The Ministry of the New Redemption, since its leader, Mr. Heiser, also turns out to be the CEO of Resource Development Specialists. The itinerant Christian congregation visits Indigenous communities, offering religious services in a huge circus tent. Joan encounters it for the first time when it is erected in a Walmart parking lot (2019, 25), which symbolically signals the consumerist and corporate ties of the group. The mission tent does not resemble a place of worship; instead, it appears to be the home of a carnivalesque spectacle: a child screams "Mom, look, a circus!" (2019, 25). Yet inside "[t]here were a lot of people, and none of them were carnival-boisterous. […] No smell of popcorn or cotton candy or animal shit" (2019, 26). The circus tent, utilized as a place of prayer and religious ritual, provokes a sense of incongruity between the locus and its purpose. Boundaries between the sacred and the profane are transgressed in that the revered ceremonies take place in a location conventionally related to vernacular spectacle. The irreverent and corrupt is masked as sacred and reputable. At the same time, the values represented by the members of the sect infringe not only Christian morality but also Métis worldviews that are intricately involved with place. Space, then, frames the blasphemous and corrupted nature of the Christian mission, disclosing its real character: "this *was* a carnival, a fun house, everything ugly and exaggerated" (2019, 31, italics in the original).

Mr. Heiser and his followers are vicious, promiscuous and vain. While the man builds a traveling Christian mission aimed at deceiving Aboriginal communities, he himself does not represent any of the Christian values. Mr. Heiser emerges as a villain—a selfish sexual predator, concentrated on financial profit:

> He never could have imagined having this life when he was a young man. An immigrant, an atheist, the son of a janitor—now here he was, fucking whomever he wanted, running a Christian ministry and raking in the big dollars from industry and government alike. The Reverend had brought in the masses, making the work of coming in behind to get project approvals so much easier. People loved seeing a reflection of themselves in the pulpit. Wolff was gold and Heiser would not lose him. (Dimaline 2019, 176)

Heiser is represented as the leader of the pack (2019, 48), or alpha male. His animalistic drives are stressed. Heiser's corruption is tightly linked to corporate power and money, as well as toxic masculinity. The Christian mission functions only as a cover activity to convince Indigenous communities to accept the development project planned by Heiser's corporation. Mr. Heiser resembles a vicious shapeshifter figure intent on removing any obstacle on the path of the resource development plans to be carried out.

Joan's husband, Victor, plays an important role in the manipulatory practices of the sect. He is apparently brainwashed, mysteriously controlled by Mr. Heiser, and chosen to act as an influential minister. His Aboriginal background helps the mission to gain

the trust of Indigenous people. During the religious service, Reverend Wolff, as Victor is called by the congregation, instills in his disciples the idea of progress parallel to its colonial reiteration. The fragments from the Bible excerpted by the priest in his sermons refer to the ideas of imperial expansion: "I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call the nation that you do not know, and a nation that did not know shall run to you, because of the Lord your God" (Dimaline 2019, 124). Reverend Wolff propagates the idea of development as God's plan, which recalls the foundation of colonial ideology in manifest destiny. The mission proposes a model of land management and reconciliation based on values which are foreign to Métis worldviews: "This entire empire of wild is ours in order that we may rejoice in His name [...]. We must build churches, new homes, better schools, thriving businesses—all in His name. This is how we move forward. This is how we heal" (2019, 122). This fragment of Reverend Wolff's sermon brings the promise of improving infrastructure and, associated with it, the well-being of the Métis community. Hence, the church's teaching reiterates the persuasive strategies of the energy industry, which in its negotiations with communities stresses its commitment to introducing the progress identified with modern infrastructure and technology.

The Ministry of the New Redemption's "statement of faith" further criticizes and devalues Indigenous spiritualities in the following claim: "We worship Jesus Christ, not other spirits, or totems, or animals. We do not condone any other form of spirituality or belief" (2019, 118). This depreciation of Indigenous religiosity, suggesting its inferiority, parallels the Christian Church's forced conversion of Indigenous peoples in the residential school era. The passage reflects Daniel Heath Justice's observation regarding the affinity of Christianity, conquest, and neoliberalism:

> In the Eurowest, the dominant stories of humanity are rooted in the Abrahamic traditions, notably those of the militant, hierarchical visions of Christianity that have justified centuries of expansion, invasion, expropriation, and exploitation; while there have always been other Christian traditions, these by and large have had a negligible impact on colonist policy and practice. In the dominant Abrahamic stories, there is a fiercely maintained boundary between human and nonhuman, and even in the former category, there is a clear hierarchy: men are more human than women, European colonizers are more human than Indigenous and other colonized people, the rich and titled are more human than the poor and the oppressed, Christian capitalists are more human than animist traditionalists, and so on. (2018, 40)

The "statement of faith" illustrates Christianity's continued complicity with the settler colonial project. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), an institutional body that investigated the historical and ongoing repercussions of the residential school system on Indigenous peoples in Canada, emphasizes in *Calls to Action* the church's role in the colonization and dispossession of Aboriginal communities. The Commission demands "denominations and faith groups who have not already done so to

repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous lands and peoples" (TRC 2015, 5). *Empire of Wild* shows, however, that these concepts are still promoted by certain religious groups in order to exploit Aboriginal peoples and their ancestral lands. This actively demonstrates that the settler Canada's neocolonial approach echoes that which is characteristic of colonial contact, despite superficial attempts at its repudiation.

Joan, acting on her desire to find and rescue her husband, at first does not comprehend the mechanisms of exploitation that the mission represents. One of the mine workers explains to her that the church is part of development projects, in this specific case a pipeline construction through Indigenous territories:

> there's always one of those mission tent things popping up on projects [...] for the local communities, Indians mostly, I guess. But it's also kinda for the workers. Makes our jobs easier. [...] We call them the clearing houses. [...] The only real threat to the projects—to our jobs—are the Indians. They're the ones with goddamn rights, I guess. Always protesting and hauling us into court. [...] But when the missions come through? [...] They're too busy praying to protest. The missions are good at changing the way people see shit. Course it helps if you can hook one or two of the powerful ones—chiefs and whatnot, especially the ones willing to take the company cheque and give speeches about moving on with things, doing things like actually working. [...] Mission tents are an important part of mining, of any project really—mining, forestry, pipelines. That's what's going in up here next, a pipeline conversion. Maybe that's why your guy is coming to this shithole. (Dimaline 2019, 220-221)

The religious sect functions therefore as an ideological catalyst for the project to be realized. The mission's itinerant character allows it to spatially exploit Indigenous communities. This particularly overt expression of the issue troubling Canadian First Nations and Métis communities[4] may seem to be highly didactic in character. Yet the conspicuous cases of exploitation by the extractive industry render this blunt representation of the religious group's manipulatory practices and involvement in resource development ever so urgent. By including the perspective of a white non-specialist resource development worker on a temporary contract, the novel shows the tensions between the Canadian mainstream and Indigenous peoples. The worker's prosperity is tied to resource development. Indigenous dissent concerning mining projects jeopardizes the very core of his Canadian identity. The anger permeating the man's account sheds light on the ubiquity of racism against Indigenous people in settler society where they are seen as hindering the road to prosperity and progress.

Even though the resource extraction industry contributes to the dispossession of the Métis, Joan's brothers consider taking jobs in the mines up North due to the difficult

[4] In the interview conducted by Shelagh Rogers for CBC's *The Next Chapter* (2019), the author acknowledges that an article in *The Walrus* entitled "Inside the Controversial US Evangelical Movement Targeting Indigenous People" (2017) inspired her to tackle the issue of religious groups and their complicity in Indigenous communities' vulnerability to resource development in Canada.

economic situation of the family. The salaries in the energy industry sector are high, particularly for non-specialized workers, and it is virtually the only well-paid work opportunity for the men.[5] This meets with severe criticism from their grandmother, Mere, one of the important community Elders:

> Mere dropped her spoon. It rattled against the bowl like a miniature alarm. "The mines? You gonna work for thieves? That's going from making things all day to taking things all day. […] You find something else, not the mines, that's what you do. You can't work in town? The Friendship Centre doesn't need anyone?"
> "The centre doesn't pay the way the mines do."
> "It also doesn't steal from us, ignore our rights and mess up the land. How bad do you need that pay?" (2019, 18)

This family argument stresses the tension between Métis communities and the resource development sector. In her dissent, Mere emphasizes the dispossession of Aboriginal people and the negative impact of the mines on the environment. The Elder's conceptualization of space differs significantly from that of the extractive sector, which stresses profit over social and environmental justice.

Grandmothers have traditionally been centers of Métis communities as they possess knowledge of medicine and traditional stories (Kermoal 2016, 122). Mere exercises her authority by threatening to cut her grandson's hair, an important cultural attribute of Indigenous men: "Me? I'm getting you ready for your new jobs at the mines […]. You need to fit in with all the others and none of them will wear their hair traditional" (Dimaline 2019, 19-20). Through this act of intimidation, she emphasizes that the extractive industry works against the traditional values of her people. Mere's statement represents the female authority that remains valid in Aboriginal communities despite the settler gendered politics that delegitimizes Indigenous women's knowledge.

Mere's concerns address the long-time exploitation of Indigenous territories by settler resource corporations, which can be approached in terms of the concept of *slow violence* proposed by Rob Nixon. He defines it as "the violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is not seen as violence at all […], a violence that is neither

[5] Unemployment rates are consistently higher among Indigenous peoples than among non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. When negotiating their projects with local communities, the energy development companies often promise new well-paid job opportunities. However, these are deceptive since the majority of the on-site employees are temporary transient workers from other parts of Canada. Due to agreements with Indigenous nations regarding development on traditional territories, the energy corporations dedicate a specific number of contracts to the Indigenous people. Yet Indigenous workers often struggle with discrimination in the workplace, their taxing jobs require long shifts far from their families, and the positions often turn out to be only temporary. At the same time, the development project jobs do not benefit Indigenous women to the same degree as men, widening the income gap. On the intersections between the energy industry sector and Indigenous peoples in Canada, see the report published by Amnesty International *Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Gender, Indigenous Rights, and Energy Development in Northeast British Columbia, Canada* (2016).

spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales" (2011, 2). Dimaline's novel attempts to represent what is denied representation, trying to disclose the mechanisms of slow violence connected to the neocolonial extraction in Canada. The delayed outcomes of the settler extractive industry affect Métis communities most immediately due to their poor socio-economic status. The effects of centuries of colonial slow violence are difficult to observe for the Canadian mainstream but are obvious and tangible for Mere since her perspective is informed by Métis stories and traditional environmental knowledge. The Elder prioritizes the traditional relationship between her people and the land, since "[t]he more [Métis] people stay off the land, the more vulnerable the land is" (Dimaline 2019, 22-23). As an embodied repository of Métis ecological knowledge, Mere understands the outcomes of resource extraction, which include not only land dispossession but also harm to plants and animals, as well as the Indigenous knowledge connected with them.

Kermoal argues that Métis "women's relationship to land is bound up with values that are integral to the well-being not only of their families and communities but also of the environment" (Kermoal 2016, 120). Joan's grandmother embodies these values. Mere attempts to organize a group of Elders in order to stand up against the resource development project: "We're not letting the community leaders sign no agreements with nobody" (Dimaline 2019, 22). Her activism manifests the ethics of care that underlies her relationship to land and dismantles the colonial gender bias that ignores Indigenous women and their knowledge in negotiations regarding land and resource management. In "Métis and Feminist," Emma LaRocque stresses the disregard for Indigenous women's perspectives in socio-economic settings:

> Our alienation from constitutional processes and from positions of leadership in white and Native male-dominated institutions are evidence of this [political oppression]. Aboriginal women have not enjoyed automatic inclusion or leadership roles in the public sphere of either Canadian society or in the upper echelons of national Aboriginal political organizations. Nor have they enjoyed equal treatment in Canadian legislation or in Aboriginal governance. They continue to face discrimination in a wide spectrum of social and economic settings. (2007, 54)

In the construction of Mere as a strong matriarchal character, the novel restores Indigenous women's authority and reestablishes their position in political activism and leadership, showing that their knowledge is indispensable to planning for better futures.

It comes as no surprise that Heiser aims to eliminate the Métis women Elders Mere and Ajean, as their knowledge and resistance have the power to disrupt the company's exploitation of land. Engaging in local politics and acting in defense of the Métis' interests (2019, 22), Indigenous women constitute a serious impediment. Heiser confesses to Joan that her grandmother died because of her activism against the pipeline project: "The old bird had been kicking up quite a commotion in the community about one of the projects I'm working on. So I just let nature take its course" (2019, 271). Both Mere and Ajean fall prey to abducted Indigenous men who are

mysteriously transformed into wolf-like monsters and controlled by Heiser Rogarous. The lupine male figures represented by Dimaline should be read within the context of petro-masculinity, which, as argued by Cara Daggett, highlights the link between the extraction of fossil fuels and settler heteropatriarchal gender norms (2018, 28). Daggett argues that petro-masculinity is "a reactionary stance" (2018, 36) to the imperiled fossil fuel economy conflated with the vulnerability of settler hypermasculinity that is dependent on the extractive industry (2018, 29). Consequently, she believes, petro-masculinity "aims to defend the endangered *status quo*, entrenching the petrocultures that have historically propped up Anglo-European fossil-burning men" (2018, 34). This often involves the use of violence as a method of asserting power and authority towards both the environment and women (2018, 39).

The opposition between Métis femininity and toxic petro-masculinities stresses the precarity of Indigenous women's condition and, therefore, symbolically connects them to the precarious position of the land and the environment. In an interview with Naomi Klein, Leanne Simpson stresses that the mechanisms of extraction are indispensable to the settler colonial project and are not limited solely to resource development:

> Extraction and assimilation go together. Colonialism and capitalism are based on extracting and assimilating. […] Extracting is taking. Actually, extracting is stealing—it is taking without consent, without thought, care or even knowledge of the impacts that extraction has on the other living things in that environment. That's always been a part of colonialism and conquest. Colonialism has always extracted the indigenous—extraction of indigenous knowledge, indigenous women, indigenous peoples. (Klein and Simpson 2013)

Like the environment, Indigenous women become sites of extraction under settler colonialism. Heiser's determination to dispose of Métis grandmothers illustrates the assumption of settler petroculture that economic growth requires "the eradication of certain bodies, in particular those of Indigenous women: the original owners of the oil- and resource-rich lands now occupied by settler Canada" (Wilson et al. 2017, 11). Mere's and Ajean's lives are, therefore, commodified and calculated as mattering less than fossil fuel—a resource identified with Canadian prosperity. Their deaths represent petro-misogynist violence enacted to secure the *status quo* in terms of political, economic, environmental and gender settler regimes.

4. Métis Dispossession and the Transformative Potential of Indigenous Stories in *Empire of Wild*

In *Empire of Wild* the potential of the extractive industry to dispossess the Métis community of their land is yet another element in their exodus story. Coming from Drummond Island, situated in contemporary Michigan, this highly diversified Métis community, their lifestyles having been shaped by years of interactions with the ecosystem they are part of, were uprooted to landscapes foreign to them:

> The people who lived in Arcand were brought from another place, moved off Drummond Island when it was handed over to the United States in 1828. They were halfbreeds, the children of French voyageurs and First Nations mothers, and Métis people who had journeyed from Manitoba. The new colonial authorities wanted the land but not the Indians, so the people were bundled onto ships with their second-hand fiddles and worn-soft boots. They landed on the rolling white sands of the Georgian Bay and set up their new homes across from the established town that wouldn't welcome them. (Dimaline 2019, 1-2)

Making new relationships with their non-human kin, land, and bodies of water, they started calling the Georgian Bay their home: they cultivated land, fished and developed small industries (2019, 2). However, due to the proximity of Toronto and the expansion of settlement in that metropolitan area, Indigenous people started being pushed offshore by the increasing white investment in tourism and leisure along the shoreline (2019, 2). The spatial context outlined in the prologue to the novel demonstrates the intricate connections between the Métis community and the territory they inhabit.

Since for a long time Métis peoples were not considered Aboriginal populations, their territories were not assured by legally binding treaties with settler Canada,[6] which resulted in their land insecurity. As a result, the feeling of uprootedness is prominent in the Métis condition under settler colonialism. Dimaline outlines the history of the relocation and dispossession of Métis communities by settler colonial Canada, implicating the (il)legal background of these practices in order to explore the complex entanglements between Indigeneity and location as experienced by the Métis, and emphasizing the troublesome experience of displacement. The notion of an ancestral territory is immensely complicated as each relocation creates new homelands and sets of relationships. This transient experience of physical territory generates for the Métis community a desire to mark their permanency on the land and to resist neocolonial land politics. This is foregrounded in the novel in the characters' aspiration to buy back the land they were dispossessed of: "[i]n any halfbreed home there were jars of coins and a wistful plan to buy back the land, one acre at a time if need be" (Dimaline 2019, 3). While the reacquisition of land by individual Métis is of rather symbolic significance, it is a clear manifestation of the collective desire for self-determination.

The land represented in the novel appears to be constantly shifting, which is confirmed by Dimaline herself in an interview with Rosanna Deerchild (2019). Dimaline emphasizes that land strongly informs Métis ways of life but, at the same time, is impermanent in their experience due to settler colonial land management. Consequently, the only permanent home that her community has is the one embedded in stories. Storytelling

[6] Treaties are agreements determining the principles of sharing territories by Aboriginal communities and settlers in Canada. They were signed between the Crown and Indigenous nations from the mid-seventeenth century till 1921. On the legal context of treaty signing in Canada, see Lindberg (2010). Métis communities, as peoples of mixed Indigenous and settler descent, would generally not be included in treaty signing, and their rights as Indigenous peoples were established relatively recently. On the legal status of Métis communities, see Peach (2013).

emerges for Métis communities as a particularly salient "way to carry home with [them]" (Deerchild and Dimaline 2019) and a practice that resists displacement.

Joan feels a strong inherent connection to land as "place reminded her who she was" (Dimaline 2019, 72), something that is reinforced by stories passed down to her by women Elders. She manifests the provenance of Métis identity as firmly embedded in territory and the traditional stories so deeply entrenched in it. Métis vernacular geographies, understood as networks of relations to place and landscape, are inscribed in their traditional stories. Thus, the practice of inserting home into stories proves to be a strategy to resist dispossession. While the settler normative geography maps the land in monetary terms, vernacular geographies story the land, outlining Métis presence on, and legitimate claim to, their ancestral territories. In her essay "Land as Pedagogy," Leanne Simpson delineates the affinity between land and Indigenous stories as she observes that both are crucial elements in Indigenous knowledge systems. She writes about a Nishnaabeg story of maple syrup production, an important point of reference for her community. Simpson insists that it should not be treated as belonging to the pre-colonial past but as happening in diverse manifestations all over Nishnaabeg territory at the same particular time of the year when her community engages in that traditional activity (2017, 152). The scholar further argues that this cyclical engagement with land and stories is

> physically disrupting settler colonial commodification and ownership of the land through the implicit assumption that they are supposed to be there. Their existence as a hub of intelligent Nishnaabeg relationality may be threatened by land theft, environmental contamination, residential schools and state-run education, and colonial gender violence, but Binoojiinh[7] is there anyway, making maple sugar as they have always done, in a loving compassionate reality, propelling us to re-create the circumstances within which this story and Nishnaabewin[8] takes place. (2017, 152)

Similarly, in Dimaline's novel the storied realities of the depicted Métis community resist neocolonial exploitation. Even though the land constantly shifts, as the community is forced to abandon their old homeland and start living in a new one, the stories and their ethical message remain intact. Joan has intuitively internalized the teachings passed on from Elders when she was a child, even though her cultural knowledge is limited. However, the struggle with mythical monsters requires her to rely on the traditional teachings. Mere and Ajean's stories instruct her how to survive.

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[7] Leanne Simpson explains that "Binoojiinh means child. Previous versions of this story have the main character as a boy and a girl. This story is republished here with the main character a gender-nonconforming child choosing to use the pronouns *they* and *their*" (2017, 145).

[8] Nishnaabewin, or grounded normativity, is the concept pointing to the ethical and epistemological underpinnings of Indigenous land-based practices. For more information about the term and its connotations, see Simpson (2017).

The strategy of building the narrative arc around the mythical figure of Rogarou that embeds the novel within the realm of traditional Métis storytelling follows the sentiment of establishing home through storytelling. Fragments of traditional stories are scattered throughout the narrative, indicating their ever-present tangibility. In the Prologue, Dimaline introduces the figure of the Rogarou and his role:

> On these lands, in both the occupied places and those left to grow wild, alongside the community and the dwindling wildlife, there lived another creature. At night, he roamed the roads that connected Arcand to the larger town across the Bay where Native people were still unwelcome two centuries on. His name was spoken in the low tones saved for swear words and prayer. He was the threat from a hundred stories told by those old enough to remember the tales. (Dimaline 2019, 3)

The Rogarou's function in Métis stories is to deliver a warning. He admonishes men and boys not to transgress community values because such actions might transform them into a monster. On the other hand, Rogarou warns girls not to walk on their own at night so they are not attacked. Rogarou stories are, then, a source of ethics for the community.

In the novel, the mythical Métis creature marks the transgression of community values by contemporary Indigenous men. Victor becomes a Rogarou as a punishment for wanting to sell Joan's ancestral land, inherited after her father's death, to a development company (2019, 72-73). The man acts against the interests of the community, rejecting Métis reciprocal ethics and embracing instead the idea of profit linked to corporate power. Victor tries to persuade his wife to sell her plot of land, stressing its monetary value: "[l]ook, babe, let's just discuss it. This is a shit ton of money—life-changing money" (2019, 72). Approaching Joan's plot of land in terms of Western ownership, Victor expresses his entitlement: "It's not your dad's land anymore; it's yours. And I thought it's ours" (2019, 73). The male protagonist's assertion echoes "the persistence of the colonial portrayal of Aboriginal women as landless and consigned to domestic space" (Kermoal 2016, 113), manifesting colonial patriarchal hierarchies. His departure from Métis ethics is therefore behind his transformation into a Rogarou, trapped on a small, claustrophobic plot that he is not able to escape from.

Sections narrating Victor's experience of entrapment are spatially separate from the other chapters. They are short and unnumbered; their briefness creates the sense of constant hurry and containment of the Rogarou lurking in the darkness. Victor's prison cell is a twenty-six-acre plot of wild forest (2019, 42). Shrouded in darkness, the space of the man's imprisonment assumes a gothic character: "The darkness behind him was absolute, the same darkness he'd existed in for his indeterminate internment" (2019, 132). Spatial dynamics parallel Victor's inner confusion: "Victor felt as though he were being chased by his own shadow. It never got closer, never fell behind, and seemed to know his next move before he made it" (2019, 224). He acknowledges the liminal state of being hunted and trapped by a Rogarou when explaining to Joan the status of another Indigenous man that

turns into such a monster: "he's not human anymore […]. Human Robe got lost in his own woods and he's not making it out" (2019, 286). This passage suggests that the forest as a space of imprisonment is located within oneself. Symbolically, the process of being lost in the wilderness illustrates moral corruption, whereas Victor's eventual liberation from his forest cell with the help of Joan suggests the restoration of balance.

5. Salt Bones and Indigenous Bodies as Sites of Resurgence in *Empire of Wild*

The role of storytelling is further stressed in the stories about salt bones circulating in the community depicted by Dimaline. The supernatural quality of the community members to grow medicine in their bodies that protects them from mythical wolves is storied knowledge that manifests the Indigenous body's ability to contest settler geographies spatially. In the narrative, the medicine, called salt bones, builds up on the bones of the Métis in the form of osseous matter that, when extracted and ground, exhibits protective qualities, as explained by Ajean: "Someone figured out if you grind them up, they make salt. And you can protect yourself with it […]. How do you keep unwanted things from coming in your house? […] [W]ith this salt. You put salt around your house and no spirit, no rogarou, can come in" (Dimaline 2019, 145-46). Furthermore, the Elder and medicine woman teaches Joan that this medicine has been known and cultivated in their community for generations: "[p]eople from Red River, on your mere's side, have been growing salt bones for generations" (2019, 144). Salt bones establish close ties between the community and their primary homeland as the narrative recounts that salt bones and stories about them were "carried all the way from the Red River" (2019, 4). This suggests that Métis bodies are symbolically forever connected to their ancestral land. Ajean asserts the medicinal qualities of Indigenous bodies through the salt bones: "You think all we have around here is good men and handsome women like me? There's just as many bad. We gotta keep it in balance […]. Someone has to" (2019, 146). Métis osseous matter thus exhibits the potential to manipulate spatial configurations, protecting the communities from exploitation and dispossession. Hence, in *Empire of Wild*, Métis people, through their biological matter, emerge as geographies that transform the landscape, marking both Indigenous survival and resistance.

Salt bones in the novel echo the metaphors of blood memory and genetic memory[9] present in Indigenous discourses. Both terms imagine Indigenous cultural heritage and its persistence as located in biological matter, either blood or genes. Ziarkowska argues that "[b]lood memory, contained and activated in the blood, facilitates cultural

[9] It is vital to stress the controversial character of these concepts in that foregrounding biological matter might essentialize Indigenous identities, which is especially problematic when taking into consideration the settler imposition of blood quantum as defining Indigeneity. Yet the tropes of both blood and genetic memory are present in Indigenous literature and may exhibit resurgent potential. For a more detailed overview of the issue of blood and genetic memory, see Ziarkowska (2021).

continuity by creating a genealogy of stories which, through combined processes of remembering and imagination, are accessed by subsequent generations of Native Americans" (2021, 135). Hence the biological resurgent potential of Indigenous people is conceivable only through the practices of traditional storytelling. Salt bone stories passed on by Elders to the younger generations facilitate the medicinal use of biological matter. Without these stories, the continuation of knowledge regarding the usage of salt bones would be disrupted.

By embedding cultural potentialities in Métis bones, Dimaline reiterates the strategy used previously in *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), where, as argued by Moritz Ingwersen, "Indigenous bones are envisioned as reservoirs of a material-semiotic life-force or energy that, if properly channelled, can also be wielded as a decolonial weapon" (2020, 7). While in *The Marrow Thieves* the process of extraction from Indigenous bodies is controlled and exploited by a settler Canadian institution similar to that of residential schools (Dimaline 2017, 5), in *Empire of Wild* the Métis community retains absolute control over their biological material and its insurgent potential. Both novels apply the poetics of extraction to bridge the materiality of fossils with those of human bones. The affinity between bones and fossil is manifested in Joan's unearthing of her family's medicine:

> She dug. The ground was hard and she had to chip away at it, pulling small clumps out and stopping to examine every rock. […] She chopped through smaller tree roots, releasing a meaty scent that made her feel a bit murderous. Then, when the hole was about a foot deep, she hit something different. Carefully shovelling away a little more dirt, she spotted a piece of old cloth. […] Joan gently dug around the wadded fabric until she had enough room to pry up the whole bundle. It was crusted and stiff, almost fossilized in places from groundwater and pressure. (2019, 141)

The storage of salt bones in soil marks a special connection between the land and Indigenous bodies. Métis biological material intermingles with the organic matter that surrounds it. This queer encounter between human and non-human particles destabilizes the division between people and the environment. The body emerges as exhibiting environmental potential. Recognizing the bodily as environmental has the potential to restore Indigenous ecologies against settler extractive inscriptions. Physically "mining" the salt bones, Joan parallels the processes of extraction. Yet the ethics governing her actions separates the woman's unearthing of salt bones and settler fossil fuel development. While the former is provoked by the desire to save a loved one and protect family and community, the latter is an act of exploitation triggered by monetary gain.

Dimaline's *Empire of Wild* should be considered a literary attempt to contest Canadian petroculture. The constantly lurking precarity on the side of the extractive industry regarding land appropriation provokes a quasi-spectral sensation in the novel. While Joan succeeds in liberating Victor from the snare of the Rogarou, there are other monsters that

prevail and endanger her community and their land. The narrative stresses the urgency to return to traditional stories that, intertwined with the land, transmit Indigenous ethics that prioritize community and environmental well-being over financial profit and, thus, oppose the extractive sector's practices of slow violence. Stories allow Indigenous people to turn contemporary spaces of extraction into sites of resurgence. Their vernacular storied geographies resist the colonial and neocolonial exploitation of land. By centering women characters, Métis female Elders and the uncompromising protagonist, *Empire of Wild* is immersed in the Métis and female perspective and re-establishes the position of women in Indigenous politics and knowledge production, disturbed by colonial heteropatriarchal inscriptions. The representation of Métis bones as challenging the rampant fossil extraction in Canada positions Indigenous bodies as sites of resurgence. At a time when Indigenous communities continue to protest against fossil fuel extraction and infrastructure projects in Canada, Dimaline's work surfaces as particularly important. The anti-pipeline protests by Wet'suwet'en First Nation in British Columbia, followed by demonstrations and traffic and rail blockages across the country, including in Toronto and Ottawa, as well as the subsequent resumption of the project during the COVID-19 pandemic, constitute one of the most recent examples of the tension between the Canadian petrostate and Indigenous communities (Trumpener 2021). There is certainly a need for literature, and other cultural productions, to address these issues and present alternative spaces in order to globally tackle the environmental imprint of the extractive industry in Canada.[10]

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Julia Siepak is a PhD student in the field of literary studies at the Interdisciplinary Doctoral School Academia Copernicana, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. Her research pertains to the poetics of space emerging from the intersections of the feminine and the environmental in contemporary Indigenous North American fiction written in English.