



# “Maybe The End Is Just A Dream”: Indigenous Post-Apocalyptic Fiction and Reading Residential School Literatures

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# Land Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples, many of whom continue to live and work here today. This territory is covered by the Upper Canada Treaties and is within the land protected by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Agreement. Today this gathering place is home to many First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and acknowledging reminds us that our great standard of living is directly related to the resources and friendship of Indigenous Peoples. To find out more about the territories, treaties, and lands on which you live, visit [Native Land.ca](https://www.native-land.ca)

## Content Warning:

Please note that this presentation will discuss the physical, mental, and spiritual trauma associated with residential schools. Resources can be found on the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation's [Health Supports for Survivors](https://www.nctr.ca/Health-Supports-for-Survivors) page.

# Dr. Aubrey Jean Hanson and Reading Indigenous Literatures



Map of La Tuque Residential School,  
Quebec

- ▶ Dr. Aubrey Jean Hanson is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta, and currently teaches at the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary.
- ▶ In her article, “Reading for Reconciliation? Indigenous Literatures in a Post-TRC Canada,” Hanson comments on the suggestions made by Carolyn Bennett to create a Canada-wide book club dedicated to Indigenous Literatures, by stating: “it is important to point to the community-oriented concerns at play in the creation, sharing, and celebration of Indigenous literatures” (71).
- ▶ Hanson stresses the need for reading to be a community-based practice, in order to engage with traditional Indigenous pedagogy and foster reconciliation.

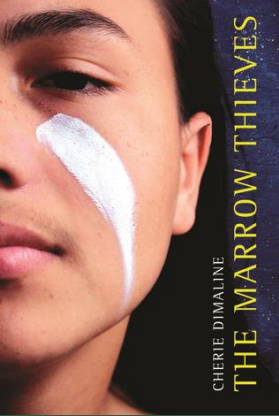




Kuper Island Indian Residential School, 1941

# What is Residential School Literature?

- ▶ Residential schools operated in Canada from the 19th-20th century, as Indigenous children were taken from their homes and families and forced into government-funded schools that had “explicit objectives” (Hanson 1) in assimilating the children into Euro-Canadian and Christian culture.
- ▶ While residential school literature is a relatively new term in Indigenous studies, it has been used as the basis for case studies in which both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students are invited to read residential school literatures and talk about how to implement decolonial teaching within the classroom (Wiltse 18).
- ▶ Anah-Jayne Markland explains how close-reading books that depict the experiences of residential school victims within North America “unsettle young readers empathetically as part of restorying settler myths about residential schools and implicating young readers in the work of reconciliation” (132).



(Cormorant Books)

# Sharing Residential School Literatures

## *The Marrow Thieves*

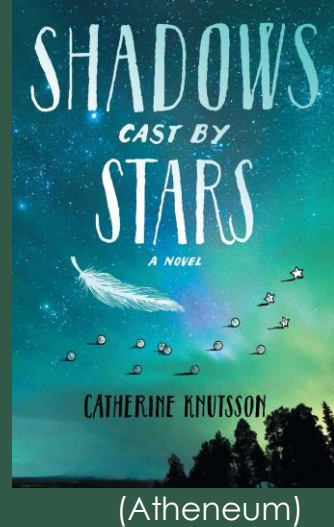
By: Cherie Dimaline

- Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* references the residential school system through the point of view of Frenchie, a Métis teen who allies with a group of other Indigenous teens and adults. Frenchie explains that white officers known as "recruiters" (Dimaline 2) search for Indigenous teens and capture them to go to schools at which their bone marrow is extracted.

## *Shadows Cast by Stars*

By: Catherine Knutsson

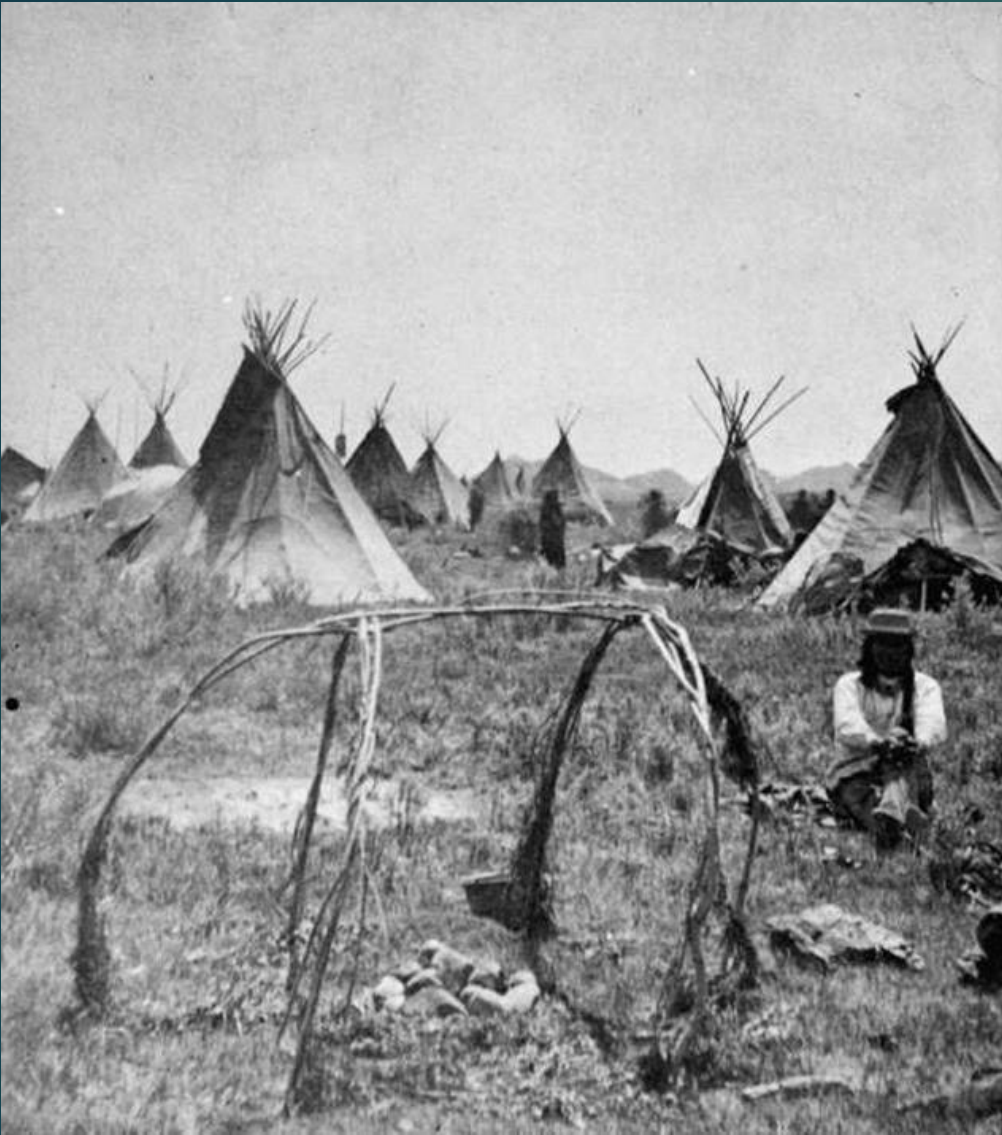
- Knutsson's *Shadows Cast by Stars* takes place 200 years in the future. The protagonist, a Métis teen named Cassandra, refers to the settlers that hunt down Indigenous Peoples as "searchers" (Knutsson 21). Cassandra's brother warns her of the dangers of the searchers, and the two teens along with their father seek solace on an island safe haven for Indigenous Peoples.



(Atheneum)

# Connecting the Texts

In my MRP, I link both *The Marrow Thieves* and *Shadows Cast by Stars* to the sub-genre of residential school literature, as both texts depict characters with a sustained interest in traditional Indigenous cultures.



A Sioux man in front of a sweat lodge, approx. 1896



# Research Questions and Arguments



Image of Catherine Knutsson  
(Simon and Schuster), Courtesy of  
the Author

I am intrigued by the question of why reading residential school literatures while using communal reading practices helps to develop ongoing reconciliation. More specifically, what happens when the literature being read takes place in a dystopic future, as opposed to the time period in which residential schools were operational?

Perhaps...

Indigenous YA apocalyptic texts differ from the dystopian genre because they do not posit a collapse in the future, but recognize an ongoing apocalypse for Indigenous Peoples that dates back to the onset of colonization. The young adult protagonists in these novels come to realize of this ongoing apocalypse through the communal modes of storytelling that their Elders share with them, especially with stories shared that are rooted in the history of residential schools. Dystopian Indigenous YA does not speculate on the future, but represents communal reading practices as a means of coming to terms with a traumatic past.

# Community-Based Storytelling in *The Marrow Thieves*



Sept-Îles Residential School, Québec, Canada

I am fascinated by the way Dimaline integrates the idea of traditional Indigenous storytelling practices within the text. She demonstrates that these practices survive out of necessity, as the futuristic setting includes the risk of Indigenous children forgetting about their ancestral histories. One of the adult characters, Miig, shares his Story as the sixteen-year-old protagonist Frenchie explains, “sometimes Story was focused on one area, like the first residential schools: where they were, what happened there, when they closed” (Dimaline 25).



# Community-Based Storytelling in *Shadows Cast by Stars*

I connect community-based storytelling in *Shadows Cast by Stars* to Cassandra's relationship with her father. Cassandra details how her father shares stories with her about "the Old Way" (Knutsson 5). Cassandra says that such way, according to her father, "keeps us connecting to the earth" (Knutsson 5). The young protagonist needs to rely on the older characters to keep her histories alive.



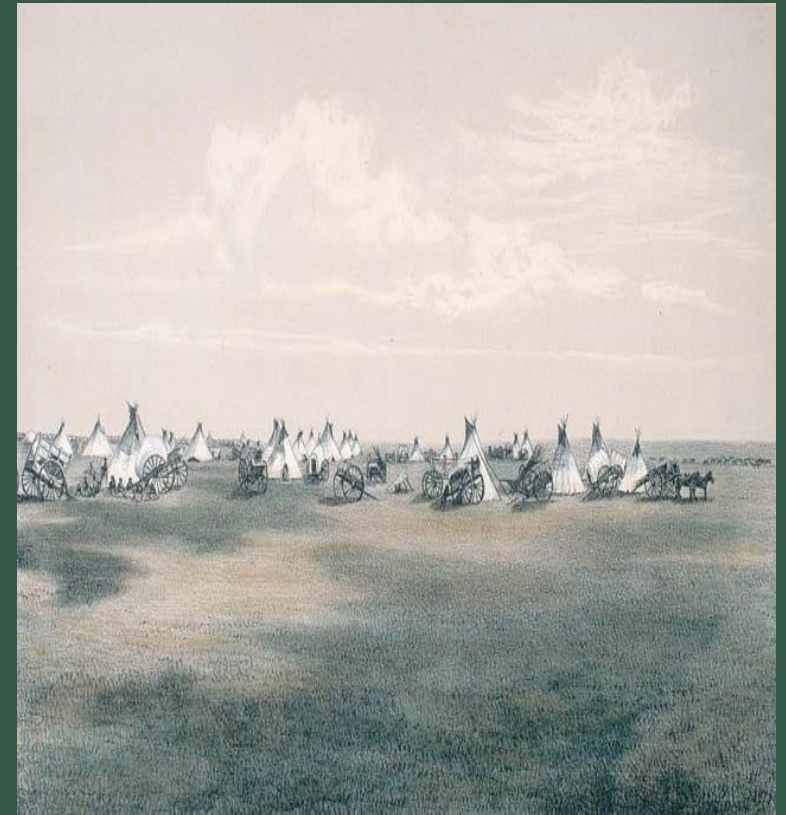
Métis camp on the prairie

# “The Old Timey”: Indigenous Teens and History

Frenchie in *The Marrow Thieves* describes the children’s fascination with “the old timey” (Dimaline 21), by wearing their hair in braids, and building sweat lodges. Frenchie’s interest in keeping his hair long is seen as important to him due to the sacred symbol of hair and how Indigenous children in residential schools often had their heads shaved (TRC 103).

Cassandra in *Shadows Cast by Stars* also calls to the past, by continuously referencing her father’s interest in her living “the Old Way” (Knutsson 5), however for Cassandra, she distrusts “the Old Way” due to her fascination with the future. While Frenchie longs for the past, Cassandra craves the future, but both feel connected to their histories through the element of communal storytelling.

Both of these texts perform the community-based pedagogical practice of reading that Hanson sees as important in igniting Indigenous histories in her article.



Métis Camp, 1873



# Literature Review

- ▶ Settler scholar Sophie McCall begins her paper: “Re-Framing, De-Framing and Shattering the Frames,” by quoting late Cree writer Gregory Younging, who argued in 2017 that Indigenous writers have begun to “reclaim” (1) their histories after they have been “extracted” (1) from them by settlers. Such extractions, as McCall explains through Younging, can be physical either through settlers invading on Indigenous territory for natural resources, or through settlers spinning what students get to hear about Indigenous histories through textbooks (1).
- ▶ In the essay collection *Sovereign Histories, Gathering Bones*, the editors of the collection note that Patrizia Zanella’s review of *The Marrow Thieves* reveals how the text “challenges Canada’s national discourse of reconciliation by putting residential schooling into the future as a way to comment on the colonial present in Canada” (Coupal et al.14). According to Zanella, the post-apocalyptic setting of *The Marrow Thieves* brings forth challenges in the text that reveal that for Indigenous Peoples, there is never really a “post” apocalypse, as the apocalypse continues to plague Indigenous Peoples through settler-inflicted trauma (183).



# Methodology



Cherie Dimaline at the Eden Mills Writers' Festival, 2016

- ▶ The research methodology that will be employed for my MRP will include not only a close reading of both central texts, but also an equal integration of the criticism that affects such texts, with a particular focus on the works of education scholar Dr. Aubrey Hanson. In equally weighting both the texts and the criticism, I will perform through my methodology a way of considering how Indigenous storytelling and criticism has long been a part of academic and creative discourse, but has not always been equally privileged.
- ▶ As such, I will privilege Indigenous scholars and writers to carve out a history of Indigenous scholarship that goes beyond what has been written about Indigenous Peoples by Western scholars in the past. I plan to consult Gregory Younging's book *Elements of Indigenous Style* (2018) throughout the writing process for information on respectful research etiquette. Like these two texts look towards a future for Indigenous teens, I will be looking towards the future of Indigenous scholarship.

# Conclusions



Sept-Îles Residential School dormitory,  
Québec, Canada

Overall, *The Marrow Thieves* and *Shadows Cast by Stars* look towards a future of Indigenous teens not only trying to physically survive, but also trying to spiritually survive by keeping their histories alive through storytelling. As Frenchie states:

“We go to the schools and they leach the dreams from where our ancestors hid them, in the honeycombs of slushy marrow buried in our bones. And us? Well, we join our ancestors, hoping we left enough dreams behind for the next generation to stumble across” (Dimaline 90).

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