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# Survival, Identity, and Power Dynamics: A Comparative Analysis of *The Marrow Thieves* and *Babel*

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how *Babel* by R.F. Kuang and *The Marrow Thieves* by Métis author Cherie Dimaline explore the intertwined themes of identity, survival, and power, arguing that both novels use speculative fiction to critique colonial systems that endanger cultural heritage and human dignity. I argue that these themes are central to the characters' individual experiences and serve as tools for broader social critique within the speculative frameworks of each narrative. *Babel* critiques how institutional power can elevate and erase marginalised identities, using language as both a weapon and a site of resistance. In contrast, *The Marrow Thieves* centres identity in Indigenous traditions and ancestral memory, presenting survival as inherently tied to cultural preservation. While *Babel* situates power within scholarly and magical hierarchies, *The Marrow Thieves* frames it as a struggle for sovereignty and survival in the face of ongoing colonial violence. By comparing these narratives, this essay demonstrates how speculative fiction can illuminate the persistent effects of colonialism on identity formation and the fight for cultural survival.

**Keywords**: speculative fiction; colonialism; translation; dystopian; power; control; survival; oppression; babel; the marrow thieves

The young adult (YA) dystopian genre often explores themes that resonate deeply with real-world issues, making these narratives particularly powerful and relevant. Many YA dystopian stories draw inspiration from historical and societal events, reflecting concerns such as environmental degradation, systemic oppression, and cultural resilience. In the speculative fiction landscapes of Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and Rebecca Kuang's *Babel*, the themes of survival, identity, and power are intricately woven into the narratives, offering a profound understanding of the human condition and the resilience of the human spirit. Both novels present worlds where characters are forced to deal with oppressive systems and societal structures that seek to deprive them of their cultural heritage, identity, and humanity. Both *Babel* and *The Marrow Thieves* can be classified under the umbrella genre of speculative fiction, despite differences in narrative focus and thematic elements. *Babel* explores the colonial underpinnings of linguistic power in an alternate 19th-century Britain, where language becomes a tool for domination and rebellion.

Meanwhile, *The Marrow Thieves* envisions a dystopian future where Indigenous peoples' cultural knowledge and resilience are vital to resisting a system that seeks to harvest their dreams for survival. Indigenous futurism, also known as wonderworks, is a potent form of storytelling that directly engages with the historical and ongoing realities of Indigenous communities while imagining hopeful futures. Both novels examine how language, culture, and agency can serve as tools of oppression and resistance, compelling their characters to confront the fragility of identity in the face of systemic violence. They both present alternative worlds and futures that are distinct from yet connected to our own historical and contemporary reality, allowing readers to explore and interrogate societal, cultural, and political issues through the lens of the speculative imagination. Both *Babel* by Rebecca F. Kuang and *The Marrow Thieves* by Cherie Dimaline engage deeply with themes of power, identity, and survival, but through distinct narrative foundations. In *Babel*, power is examined within the isolated halls of a prestigious academic institution, where the pursuit of knowledge and mastery of magical abilities becomes entangled with questions of privilege, exploitation, and resistance. By contrast, *The Marrow Thieves* portrays power through the brutal lens of colonialism, exploring systemic oppression and the enduring strength of Indigenous resistance. While *Babel* critiques the machinery of empire and the commodification of language, *The Marrow Thieves* confront the genocidal practices of a dystopian world that parallels real historical injustices. Together, these novels interrogate how identity and survival are shaped by, often in defiance of, oppressive structures, offering a profound understanding of the human struggle for agency and belonging.

In this essay, I will examine the themes of identity, survival, and power in the two novels, highlighting how they are central to the characters' experiences and the narratives' broader social critiques. In *Babel*, identity is closely tied to academia, where characters like Robin Swift and his friends struggle between cultural assimilation and the preservation of their language. As members of the elite academic institution of Babel, they are simultaneously insiders and outsiders, bearing the weight of colonial power that privileges their intellect but exploits their heritage. The novel explores how identity is shaped by and resists structures of cultural erasure, as characters struggle to

reconcile their loyalties with the demands of an institution deeply entrenched in imperialism. By contrast, *The Marrow Thieves* situate identity within the context of Indigenous heritage and resilience. Here, identity is portrayed as a profound connection to ancestral knowledge, traditions, and the land, elements that are threatened by the violent forces of colonialism and cultural genocide. The characters' journeys emphasise the importance of community and storytelling in preserving identity against efforts to erase it. In *Babel*, survival assumes multiple dimensions, encompassing emotional resilience and the struggle for identity within an elite yet exploitative academic environment. The novel explores complex ethical questions, as the characters must decide whether to conform to a system built on exploitation or to resist it, knowing that doing so may come at a significant personal cost.

On the other hand, *The Marrow Thieves* portrays survival as an immediate struggle for life itself. Set in a dystopian future where Indigenous peoples are hunted for their marrow, the source of their ability to dream, survival becomes a form of resistance. The characters' fight for survival is deeply linked to preserving their cultural and spiritual identities, as the novel highlights the enduring violence of colonial systems. Lastly, the structures of power that operate in both novels reveal how oppressive systems seek to exploit and subjugate marginalised communities. In *Babel*, power manifests through the mechanisms of empire and linguistic control, where language serves as both a tool of colonial domination and a potential mechanism of resistance. Similarly, in *The Marrow Thieves*, power is embodied in a dystopian system that mirrors historical and ongoing colonial practices, where Indigenous bodies are commodified for their cultural and spiritual essence. Both novels critique the dehumanising effects of such systems, highlighting the resilience and agency of those who resist them. Both Indigenous and Asian communities have experienced diasporas, which have left profound and lasting impacts on their cultures, identities, and histories. Indigenous communities around the world have experienced forced displacement, colonisation, and cultural assimilation due to European settlement. The colonisation of Indigenous lands and the imposition of colonial laws and policies, such as the Indian Act in Canada, have resulted in the loss of traditions, cultures, and languages.

An example of this is the Canadian residential school system.[1]. These government-sponsored and church-run institutions were established to eradicate Indigenous cultures and languages and forcibly assimilate Indigenous youth into Euro-Canadian society. By exploring these central themes, I aim to demonstrate how *Babel* and *The Marrow Thieves* offer profound insights into the intersections of identity, survival, and power, illuminating the enduring impacts of colonialism and the human capacity for resistance.

*The Marrow Thieves* is set in a dystopian future where climate change and environmental collapse have devastated the Earth, leading to the widespread loss of humanity's ability to dream. In this world, Indigenous people are hunted for their bone

[1] Miller, J. R. "Residential Schools in Canada." *The Canadian Encyclopedia,* 11 Jan. 2024, https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools.

marrow, which is believed to be the key to restoring dreams in everyone else. It follows Francis, known as Frenchie, a Métis teenager who has been on the run since losing his family to the Recruiters, agents of the government who capture Indigenous people for their marrow. His brother is the last family member he loses before starting a lonely journey, hiding from danger. Eventually, he is found by a group of Indigenous survivors led by an older man named Miigwan (Miig). Miig and others like Minerva, Wab, Chi-Boy, Rose, and Riri become Frenchie's newfound family. Together, they move north, away from the government's reach, hoping to find safety. As the group travels, they rely on traditional survival skills, including hunting and foraging, as well as oral storytelling, to sustain their lives and preserve their cultural identity. The world-building and the treatment of Indigenous characters in Dimaline's novels mirror the colonial violence that Indigenous peoples suffered at the hands of the Canadian government. Indigenous people are forcibly taken to the schools where the extraction process, which often is fatal, takes place: ''the new schools are based on the old residential school system they used to try to break our people to begin with, way back'' (Dimaline 5).

In *Babel,* the academy is a dominant symbol of the mechanisms of colonialism. Oxford University's Babel Institute exemplifies how languages and knowledge production are central to colonial domination, serving as the epicentre of translation and linguistic study. Kuang illustrates how translation is not a neutral act, but one that is full of power. The translation process in Babel often involves extracting and recontextualising knowledge from colonised cultures, thereby stripping it of its original context and meaning. Kuang's narrative highlights how Western educational systems exploit the intellectual labour of marginalised people. Students and scholars from colonised regions are often recruited for their linguistic and cultural expertise, only to find their knowledge used to further imperial ambitions. The inclusion of students of colour, as well as women, serves a dual purpose in Kuang's narrative. On one hand, it challenges the historical exclusions of these groups from elite educational institutions, suggesting a more inclusive environment.

On the other hand, it exposes the precarious position of these individuals within the institution, which professes to value intelligence and hard work. However, in practice, access to opportunities and recognition is often influenced by factors such as gender, race, class, and conformity to rigid Western intellectual ideals. The characters' experiences in *Babel* expose the myth of meritocracy, showing how structural inequalities persist even in spaces that claim to reward excellence alone. This critique can be extended to the real-world academic context, and this narrative aims to question the fairness and inclusivity of contemporary educational systems.

Babel's magic consists of speculative technology, specifically silverworking. Silver captures and channels the subtle differences in meaning lost in translation. Kuang's portrayal of Babel's silver bars and their various uses provides a nuanced commentary on the nature of technological innovation and its impact on society, highlighting societal disparities. On the one hand, silver bars are used to improve existing processes and technologies, such as making ships faster or weapons more deadly. Simultaneously, the text also describes how silver bars are used for more frivolous and wasteful things, such

as embellishing the gardens of wealthy people, underscoring how only the privileged could access the silver. Instead of using the silver bars to reduce poverty or improve healthcare for those in need, capitalism encouraged materialism and excessive consumption on the part of the economically privileged. In addition, languages are a diminishing resource in the world of Babel; since they become increasingly similar through contact, Babel's scholars need to explore more distant ones to exploit additional resources and people. Professor Lovell travels the world searching for future Oxford students whose linguistic skills would guarantee Babel its global dominance. After his mother's death, he allows Robin to leave Canton and obtain an elite education in Britain. Non-white students like Robin are tolerated at the Institute of Translation but excluded from the other Oxford faculties. Language was the most potent tool for Oxford and the Empire, and once Romance languages became less strategic, they needed to find something else to exploit. Just as Indigenous people were hunted for their bone marrow, Robin and other students were hunted in a figurative sense because they had something valuable that the people in power needed.

Lovell states, ''but language…is not like a commercial good, like tea or silks, to be bought and paid for. Language is an infinite resource. Moreover, if we teach it, if we use it – whom are we stealing from?" (Kuang 117). For Lovell, languages are a commodity that can be exploited and controlled only because they are intangible; how is that exploitation? Lovell does not realise that students are the intermediary of this exploitation; shapeless languages do not suffer. Robin's experience at Oxford and his involvement with Babel and the Hermes Society compel him to confront the ethical dilemma and moral complexities of serving an empire built on exploitation and injustice. Robin struggles to reconcile his loyalty to Oxford with his love for his motherland as his awareness of the Empire's oppressive policies and exploitative actions intensifies. This serves as a powerful exploration of identity. When Lovell enters Robin's life unannounced, the child's mother has just died. Not only does he inform Robin that he must choose an English name, but he also tells him to forget Cantonese, as it is useless. Instead, Lovell believes it is futile for Babel, who perceives Mandarin as more advantageous to its institutional goals. The erasure of Robin's cultural identity is aggravated under the tutorship of Lovell, Robin's biological father, a fact the latter never acknowledges. The Empire's use of silverworking to manipulate and exploit language and culture is a metaphor for how languages can be exploited as a tool of power, control and oppression.

While *Babel* explores how diverse languages have been exploited as a tool of colonialism, *The Marrow Thieves* highlights how many Indigenous languages have been erased. Elders often possess the most profound knowledge of Indigenous languages and cultural traditions; without their presence, future generations may not be able to access their cultural heritage, as their traditions were primarily passed down orally. At the end of *The Marrow Thieves,* Minerva's murder intensifies the confusion and fear of losing those roots. Indigenous languages not only connect characters to their ancestral roots but also serve as a form of resistance against the forces that seek to erase their culture and eradicate them. Dimaline draws heavily on the history of residential schools in her novel. By highlighting the specific ways in which white Canadians have historically

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targeted Indigenous people, Dimaline forces readers to confront the unsettling realities of systemic racism, colonialism, and genocide that continue to impact Indigenous communities today. By referencing, in the novel, the historical roots of the residential school system, Dimaline highlights its deeply ingrained nature within the essence of Canadian colonialism: ''Miigwans says the Governors' Committee did not set up the schools brand new; he says they were based on the old residential school system they used to try to break our people to begin with, way back.'' (Dimaline 14). The portrayal of the supposed establishment of new schools as a continuation of the old residential school system serves as a terrifying reminder of how historical trauma, colonialism, and systemic racism continue to shape and influence the struggles of Indigenous communities.

Students were prohibited from speaking their language or practising their spiritual beliefs; as a result, the vast majority lost the ability to speak their native language or felt too intimidated or ashamed to do so. Despite the trauma and suffering inflicted upon them, the characters in the novel continue to hold onto their culture and ancestral knowledge, passing them on to future generations. Historically, many communities worldwide have lost their fluency in their ancestral languages due to colonisation, migration, and assimilation into the dominant culture. Elder Minerva's bequest for the youngest is to maintain the Cree language through her gift to them of Cree words. Her gesture is a powerful tool for connecting children to their ancestral roots. By singing traditional songs in Cree, Minerva manages to destroy the extraction machine used by the Recruiters to steal indigenous languages, memories, and dreams. These songs cause the machine to self-destruct by tapping into the power of Indigenous cultural practices and spiritual beliefs. Minerva's ability to destroy the extraction machine highlights the profound connection between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral knowledge systems. These songs carry linguistic meaning and spiritual significance, serving as conduits for cultural resilience against colonial oppression.

Frenchie's experience of learning the Anishinaabe word *nishina* and describing it as sitting "in my throat like a stone; a prayer" (Dimaline 51) illustrates how language carries profound emotional and spiritual significance, embedding cultural memory within the act of speaking. It shows that it is not simply sound, but a recollection of historical events for him. The word' being heavy, almost like a stone' could be interpreted as a complex reconnection with his roots, which have been disrupted by colonial violence. It can also be argued that the language is challenging not only because of the sound but also because of colonialism, which made it difficult for Indigenous peoples to retain their language and culture. The word *"nishin" is translated as "good" or "well," and its significance could extend beyond its literal* meaning. In the context of the novel, it is part of a larger process of language revitalisation and reclamation. For Frenchie, learning and speaking the language is an act of survivance. In this context, language serves as a means of re-establishing a connection to both the past and the future. Rather than being passive victims of a dystopian or post-apocalyptic world shaped by settler colonialism, the characters actively save themselves, their communities, and their culture:

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

Frenchie's hope to leave behind enough dreams for future generations signifies the importance of intergenerational knowledge and the responsibility of the current generation to safeguard their cultural legacy. As they navigate their precarious existence, they find strength in communal bonds and shared stories. Frenchie learns that the health of his people is wedded to the health of the environment: When we heal our land, we are healed also'' (203). In Dimaline's novels, the act of stealing marrow is not only a metaphor for the exploitation of the natural world, since it represents both the physical essence of life and the cultural and spiritual identity tied to the land, but also mirrors how animals are treated in factory farming; reduced to a mere resource to be exploited.

In *Babel,* language, specifically translation, is central to the text's progression. Kuang herself is a translator, and she is familiar with the *traduttore tradittore*, coined by Umberto Eco. It means *translator-traitor*, and Eco states that translation is not always the same, but almost. The word nearly is essential to highlight because a good translator knows how far a translation can go. It is not enough to see a language as a good translator. A perfect translation does not exist and never will, because languages, even the most similar ones, are grammatically and culturally distinct. To fully understand a language, it is essential to understand the culture in which it is spoken. Babel did not care about the culture; they needed native speakers to exploit their knowledge most efficiently and further colonise the people of those countries. Robin experiences an internal conflict between personal ambition, loyalty to his Chinese heritage, and the moral imperative to resist oppression. As he witnesses the injustices perpetrated by the Empire's imperialist ambitions, Robin is compelled to confront the ethical implications of his involvement in a regime that prioritises profit and power over morality. In an exchange with his friend, Ramy, Robin attempts to justify his ambivalence: ''I'm not a traitor,'' Robin pleaded. 'I'm just trying to survive. 'Survival's not that difficult, Birdie.' Ramy's eyes were tough. 'But you've got to maintain some dignity while you're at it' (Kuang 285). This exchange highlights the ethical dilemmas and moral complexities inherent in the circumstances in which Robin and the others found themselves. Central to this process is the difficulty of unstitching the web of lies in which they are enmeshed. It can be argued that until the novel's end, Robin fights to understand his identity and sense of belonging. On the other hand, Ramy was aware of his deepest commitments from the outset, including respecting his language, religious identity, and homeland. Ramy's conviction is in part because of his profound bonds with his family, a connection Robin himself lacks due to death and Lovell's indoctrination. By the end of the novel, after his trip to Canton, Robin has a better understanding of the contradictions in his status regarding Lovell, Babel, and Britain, including the need to choose his allegiance. Ramy's death, at the hands of Letty, made Robin realise the harsh reality of his status as an outsider in British society.

The endings of both novels present readers with multiple deaths, as many characters sacrifice themselves to save others. Griffin sacrifices himself to save Robin and Victoire. Ramy dies because Letty kills him, and finally, Robin decides to sacrifice himself by blowing up Babel to destroy the silver power from the roots. In *The Marrow Thieves,* Minerva sacrifices herself multiple times until she is ultimately murdered. However, her last words are: ''Go home''(Dimaline 210). When he fails to save Riri, the youngest of them all, Frenchie shoots Travis in a moment of rage, thinking that the North will not accept him anymore because of these decisions. Unfortunately, as in real life, oppression and colonisation ensnare multiple victims.

When delving into these kinds of novels, it is sometimes unfeasible to expect a happy ending. Despite this, both books offer fragments of hope. Minerva's death creates a great sorrow within the community, but as a result, they find Isaac, whom everyone assumed had murdered and harvested for his bone marrow. Ironically, a 'man who dreamed in Cree' (Dimaline 231), Isaac's linguistic skills may reconnect the survivors to the land, language, and roots they thought were lost. Robin's sacrifice was his gesture to grant Victoire a possible future that would benefit his homeland. He might not have chosen a side until that moment because he felt torn between Britain and China. However, destroying Babel was his way of finally taking a stand and following his heart. Before dying, he saw his mother again and thought about all the beautiful moments spent at Oxford. The last words he remembered from Ramy were:

> ''It's like I've known you forever.''
>
> ''Me too,'' Ramy said.
>
> ''And that makes no sense,'' said Robin, drunk already, though there was no alcohol in the cordial.
>
> ''Because I've known you for less than a day, and yet...''
>
> ''I think,' said Ramy, 'it's because when I speak, you listen.''
>
> ''Because you're fascinating.''
>
> ''Because you're a good translator.'' Ramy leaned back on his elbows.
>
> ''That's just what translation is, I think. That's all speaking is. Listening to the other and trying to see past your own biases to glimpse what they're trying to say. Showing yourself to the world, and hoping someone else understands.'' (Kuang 535)

This passage encapsulates the essence of communication, understanding, and connection, which transform and transcend language barriers. It highlights the importance of active listening to the process of interpersonal experience and the development of empathy. Furthermore, Ramy's reflection on the nature of translation underscores the importance of emotional vulnerability in communication, highlighting the role of translators in breaking down cultural barriers. If circumstances had been different, Robin would have been an excellent translator and the best at his job at Babel.

Ironically, if there is something literature tries to help us with, it is to accentuate that, even in a fantasy world, utopia does not exist.

However, hope is somehow present in both novels despite the deaths and the endings. Robin sacrifices himself to destroy Babel's power from its roots and give Victoire perhaps another chance at life. While Kuang has never expressed plans for a sequel, Frenchie's story continues in *The Marrow Thieves* sequel, *Hunting by Stars*. In an interview with *We Need Diverse Books* (WNDB), Dimaline was asked, "What do you hope young readers take away from Frenchie's continued story?" (Diversebooks.org, 2021). Her response, "Just that... his story continues. Our story continues," speaks to the heart of Indigenous futurism, hope and continuity in the face of oppression. Unlike traditional dystopian narratives that often centre on despair, Indigenous wonderworks emphasise survival, adaptation, and the persistence of culture and community. Hope in *The Marrow Thieves* duology is found in relationships, storytelling, and the act of resistance. Frenchie and his found family sustain each other through stories, reaffirming their identity and history. This reflects Indigenous storytelling traditions, where oral histories serve as a means of cultural preservation and resistance. The continuation of these stories is an act of defiance against the forces seeking to erase Indigenous presence. Moreover, Indigenous wonderworks reject the trope of an inevitable dystopian downfall. Instead, they envision futures where Indigenous people persist, thrive, and reclaim their agency. This is a radical act of hope, asserting that Indigenous futures are possible and inevitable despite past and present traumas. Thus, while rooted in dystopian conventions, *The Marrow Thieve*s and *Babel* ultimately break away from nihilism, offering a vision of resistance and renewal instead.

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