JOURNAL OF SCIENCE FICTION
Volume 5, Issue 2, May 2022
ISSN 2472-0837

Coming of Age in Indigenous Science Fiction: Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and D'Arcy McNickle's *Runner in the Sun*

Gwen Rose University of Saskatchewan, Canada

Abstract: This paper analyzes the Bildungsroman narratives of two Indigenous works of young adult speculative fiction, D'Arcy McKnickle's *Runner in the Sun* and Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, incorporating Indigenous theorist Glen Sean Coulthard's "grounded normativity". Grounded normativity stresses a connection to land and community and the two teenage protagonists in the novels cannot complete their coming of age from impetuous and headstrong youths into leaders and men until they develop this traditional connection. The novels do more than just chronicle journeys to manhood, but, in speculative settings, highlight that perhaps a uniquely Indigenous form of the Bildungsroman might exist. The teachings of elders, an appreciation for the land, and the importance of tradition are all vital to the health of Salt and French's communities, and they cannot come of age within this framework until they develop knowledge of, and respect for, these traditions, which collectively make up Coulthard's grounded normativity. Whereas the traditional Bildungsroman journey stresses the individualistic nature of coming of age, McNickle and Dimaline's novels suggest a different path to adulthood: the protagonists must adopt grounded normativity and connect to their community to complete their distinctly Indigenous Bildungsroman narratives.

Keywords*: Indigenous literature, Speculative Fiction, Young Adult Fiction, Bildungsroman*

In Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* and D'Arcy McNickle's *Runner in the Sun*, young protagonists French and Salt attempt to find their way through changing worlds and come into their own. I posit that these texts, both Indigenous works of speculative fiction and centered on the journeys to adulthood of young protagonists, could be described as Bildungsroman narratives, but it will first be necessary to explore definitions of this term, as well as additional qualifications for what I describe as a distinctly Indigenous Bildungsroman form. A Bildungsroman is, most simply put, "a novel about a young person facing the challenges of growing up" (Graham, 2019, p. 1): Bildungsroman narratives typically explore a protagonist's "relationship between self and society" (Graham, 2019, p. 1). Yet this is an overly reductive definition that fails to consider the term's cultural and historical origins in eighteenth and nineteenth century Germany. Todd Kontje (2019) highlights how the specifically German Bildungsroman, largely created during a time when the centuries-old Holy Roman Empire was fracturing, was originally "the genre that explore[d] individual development and national identity in a politically fragmented state" (p. 18). Citing Johannn Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795), Friedrich von Hardenberg's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1800), Jean Paul's *Titan* (1800-3), and more, Kontje argues that authors of early German Bildungsromane, "seek to come to terms in their works with the emergence of modern individualism in a political context that had more in common with the hierarchical heterogeneity of the Holy Roman Empire than the Egalitarian homogeneity of the centralized nation state" (2019, p. 18-24). German Bildungsromane, then, engaged both with the distinctly European notion of individualism alongside political issues unique to the German states of that time. Kontje also highlights that the term "Bildungsroman" remains contentious in its contemporary applications, with a divide between those who would utilize the term solely in regards to "German novels that depict a young protagonist's development towards personal maturity and social integration," (2019, p. 10) and "others who extend the term to different national literatures" (2019, p. 10).

It is in this latter camp that my own formulation of a distinctly Indigenous Bildungsroman necessarily falls, but as Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most famous—and least rigid—proponents of the term argues, the Bildungsroman is in no way necessarily linked to one

Coming of Age, continued

cultural moment in time or a single national identity. Rather, in a Bildungsroman, "man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence" (2002, p 23). The elements of the German Bildungsroman that Kontje describes are extrapolated from the setting of German states during the decline of the Holy Roman Empire—and explored instead by protagonists of other nations, from other cultures, as they navigate the unique challenges of their own societies over the course of a protagonist's journey to adulthood.

The Indigenous Bildungsroman I formulate contains uniquely Indigenous philosophies: and while an incredible diversity of individual nations and cultures exist on Turtle Island (North America) alone, some Indigenous scholars theorize certain elements that do define Indigenous worldviews. I argue that Indigenous Bildungsromane integrate a specifically Indigenous theory of ethics through which cultural values which stress the development of the collective, as opposed to the European emphasis on the individual, are integral to the journeys to adulthood that otherwise qualify certain narratives as Bildungsroman. In *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves*, the two Indigenous protagonists come to manhood only when they gain a greater understanding of Indigenous ways of knowing: the land-based practices, knowledges, and traditions of their individual nations, collectively defined as integral to Indigenous cultures across Turtle Island by way of Glen Sean Coulthard's term "grounded normativity".

Grounded normativity is a theory of distinctly Indigenous "decolonial thought and practice" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 13) established through and by connections to land. Coulthard (2014) argues that Indigenous relationships with land constitute the basis for other Indigenous ways of knowing. Traditional knowledges and practices, and ties of kinship and language are "deeply informed by what the land as a mode of reciprocal relationship ought to teach us about living our lives in relation to one another and our surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way" (p. 60). Coulthard stresses that land is the basis for the other practices that make up important facets of Indigenous life, including kinship and community. Following this, grounded normativity is a necessary component of the Indigenous Bildungsroman: it is what ties this version of the form to specifically Indigenous concerns, and what differentiates this form of the Bildungsroman from its traditional German, or even more broadly, European precedents. Just as the values that collectively make up grounded normativity set Indigenous societies distinctly apart from European society and values, as the protagonists of Indigenous Bildungsroman narratives grow into adulthood, the communal, land-based values that they must learn and come to exemplify as part of their journeys sets them, and their narratives, apart from the protagonists of other Bildungsromane.

My analysis of the coming-of-age stories of Salt and French focuses on the paths of these two young men towards attaining a respectful relationship with the people and natural world around them. This is where two very different novels about a pre-contact Pueblo boy and a Métis teenager in a futuristic dystopia converge. While *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves* deal with very different eras of history, both are speculative novels with teenage protagonists, intended for teenage readerships. Critically, the fact that both novels also both incorporate values in line with Coulthard's grounded normativity as necessary elements of Salt and French's maturity links them together as two examples of Indigenous Bildungsromane, despite their myriad other differences. As speculative works, they might also seem removed from the present-day setting of Coulthard's theory, or from the present-day concerns of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, but the opposite is true. If grounded normativity extends productively back into the speculative past of *Runner in the Sun* and equally productively into the speculative future of *The Marrow Thieves*, then these texts can serve as an authoritative baseline for the merit of the Indigenous Bildungsroman in any setting—speculative or otherwise. As the authors McNickle and Dimaline themselves navigate (or navigated, in the case of McNickle) the political realities of their own time, speculative fiction also provides a powerful tool through which to explore grounded normativity and the Indigenous Bildungsroman: as Daniel Heath Justice writes, "marginalized writers [can] challenge oppressive lived realities through the intentional employment of the fantastic to imagine otherwise" (2018, p. 143). Justice is describing the genre of Indigenous speculative fiction,

Coming of Age, continued

which both of these novels represent, but crucially, not every text in this genre is an Indigenous Bildungsroman.

I bring these two texts together to highlight the vitality and necessity of grounded normativity to novels with similar generic concerns—works of Indigenous speculative fiction for teenagers—but with very different temporal applications. Just as Kontje argues that the form of the Bildungsroman specific to German culture extended into the twentieth century (2019, p. 24-32), I argue that the Indigenous Bildungsroman transcends eras, including the distinct historical eras of McNickle and Dimaline, but also Indigenous speculative pasts and futures. This is demonstrated through Salt, and French, who share textual roles as protagonists of a Bildungsroman, but are also Indigenous youths who achieve their journeys to maturity by specifically by gaining an understanding of the importance of grounded normativity in their communities and cultures.

At the beginning of *Runner in the Sun*, Salt is a precocious youth who has only just been initiated as a man into the Turquoise clan of his village; his Bildungsroman has just begun. He is described as capable and intelligent, but he possesses little in the way of wisdom or patience. Instead, his status as a man is presented as still being very close to childhood. He feels that "a boy of sixteen already knew many things" (McNickle, 1994, p. 5). He overhears a conversation in the midst of his village, and although the details of it are unclear to him, when the men realize they are being eavesdropped upon, Salt realizes that, "he [is] not playing a boy's game[, and] he [grows] afraid" (McNickle, 1994, p. 5). He does not yet have the cultural knowledge to discern why it is that what he has heard is dangerous (nor is it revealed in detail to the readers, but remains a mystery at this time). The men of the Turquoise people are then summoned to kiva, a private gathering laden with ceremony and rules, but when he relays this to a group of teenage girls shepherding small children who block his path, the girls, his age-peers, laugh and mock: "'See… he is a man.' then her eyes flashed mischief: 'It is hard to tell nowadays who are our elders'" (McNickle, 1994, p. 8). Though he has formally been endowed with the symbol of manhood--"white shells strung on a buckskin thong with a central ornament of turquoise inlaid in bone" (McNickle, 1994, p. 6), a "turquoise badge"--it is telling that he is still referred to by the elders of his community as "boy" (McNickle, 1994, p. 16, 28, 32). Salt is a man in name only, not yet possessed of the maturity or knowledge to be seen or treated as one.

Salt's immaturity at this stage has further consequences. Despite realizing that he himself will be at the center of a developing conflict due to the conversation he overheard, Salt does not always pay careful attention to the proceedings around him or hold his tongue as he knows he should. At kiva, Salt is accused of a crime against his people by Flute Man, planting crops in the valley, which is forbidden. If he were paying attention, he would perhaps have realized that Flute Man was the man he overheard, who is now framing him. Salt, however, is not even listening: "To such an extent had Salt's thoughts strayed that he did not hear at once the words directed at him" (McNickle, 1994, p. 16). His friend urges him not to speak out in response: "Better not speak! Flute Man is watching you" (McNickle, 1994, p. 19), but the "cautioning words" (McNickle, 1994, p. 19) sting Salt's pride, and he responds.

This leads him to an audience with Eldest Woman, one of his village's most respected leaders. Here, realizing at last the connection between Flute Man's voice and the voices he heard speaking, and recognizing the second speaker as well, Salt accuses Flute Man of conversing with "the one we call Dark Dealer" (McNickle, 1994, p. 33). Eldest Woman must rebuke Salt for this shortly after, not for what he has said but for when and in front of whom he has chosen to say it: "If Flute Man has been talking to Dark Dealer, it was wrong of you, child, to speak of it when Flute Man was here among us" (McNickle, 1994, p. 35). Eldest Woman's solution for the danger Salt is now in--danger of his own making, in speaking out so rashly--is one that sting's Salt's burgeoning pride still further. Eldest Woman elects to take Salt's "manhood badge away" (McNickle, 1994, p. 35) and return him to childhood in the eyes of his village. Salt's pride rears up, and he protests: "surely this cannot be. Let me remain a man, my Grandmother,

Coming of Age, continued

and I will show you how I can protect us all!" (McNickle, 1994, p. 36). He is sternly rebuked, and his rash words confirm Eldest Woman's opinion of his readiness for manhood: "Now you are showing us that you are indeed a child!" (McNickle, 1994, p. 36). Salt lets his pride choose his path for him, and not the traditions of his people, and in response he moves backwards, not forwards, on his journey to manhood.

In *The Marrow Thieves*, the young protagonist, French, begins as a pre-teen in the company and protection of various family members. At the opening of the novel, he is with his older brother Mitch, and their mom has "been gone a few months" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 1). Largely in the care of others, his own Bildungsroman narrative has barely begun. The brothers are on the run from the Recruiters--state officials who kidnap Indigenous peoples in the novel to take them to "Schools" where their bone marrow is drained, ostensibly for the dreams that are contained within--and when they are discovered, Mitch quickly pivots to protect his younger brother. He sends French out into the trees and sacrifices himself to the Recruiters to save French (Dimaline, 2017, p. 2-4). Flashback scenes then elucidate the manner in which French and Mitch lost their parents. First their dad, a leader in a Métis community the "old people" call "the New Road Allowance" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 6) attempts to convince the colonial government to stop hunting Indigenous peoples, but never returns (Dimaline, 2017, p. 4-6). Then their mother, who went to find supplies for the fleeing family, also fails to return to them (Dimaline, 2017, p. 4-5). French knows that "Mitch had sacrificed himself so I could live, so I had to live" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 7). French heads north, following the last advice of his father: "up north is where we'll find home" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 6). French doesn't yet understand the history of colonial oppression of Indigenous peoples, or the present situation for his family and the Indigenous people like them in the world of *The Marrow Thieves*. At this stage of his Bildungsroman, French is just a child, who though he lives in a vastly different world and society, like Salt, has much to learn.

After French is saved by and incorporated into Miigwans' group of Indigenous survivors, which they call a family, time flashes forward to his late teens. He is now approximately Salt's age, sixteen, and, like his peers in the family, pines for old ways: traditions, language, ceremonies, and storytelling. They try as best they can: "Us kids, we longed for the old-timey. We wore our hair in braids to show it. We made sweat lodges out of broken branches dug back into the earth, covered over with our shirts tied together" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 22). Yet French doesn't appreciate the subtleties of these traditions; he hasn't yet come to appreciate the element of grounded normativity that Coulthard (2014) describes as "our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (p. 13). The boys of the group, like French, "[puff] out their chests" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 23) when Miigwans describes Indigenous warriors and their prowess. French is obsessed with the manly preoccupations granted to group members, which distracts him from paying attention to the traditional knowledge, the grounded normativity, that the elders of his small group are trying to teach the youths in their charge, the next generation. "I feel bad for you guys" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 37), he tells Rose, because Rose and the others, termed "Homesteaders", "are stuck with that" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 38), using "that" to refer to Minerva, their group's oldest member. French disrespects Minerva and fails to establish an equitable relationship with him. Consequently, he fails to bond with Rose, his love interest, who more fully appreciates what Minerva has to offer. Minerva has taught the Homesteaders "a little of the language" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 38), in this case Anishinaabe, the Indigenous language of Minerva and Miigwans, the group's elders. French will remember what he's missed out on later and comes to reassess his opinion of Minerva.

For Salt, the transition to manhood through a connection to land is gradual but builds on a particular component of his village's life: corn. Corn is the lifeblood of the village, but Salt relates, first to the kiva and later to Eldest Woman, what they already know: "our corn grows badly" (McNickle, 1994, p. 19). When Salt is accused of laziness and dereliction by Flute Man in the kiva, he defends himself by revealing his secret growing project; one thing he does understand is the importance of corn to his community, and he is trying to help them by growing corn in a new, wetter location (McNickle, 1994, p. 19-20). Still, Eldest Woman does not offer a

Coming of Age, continued

judgment on what the village will do about their corn; this leaves Salt to turn to the other great leader of the village, The Holy One.

Salt's knowledge is verified in one way; The Holy One agrees that corn is paramount to the village's survival and what's more, The Holy One links corn explicitly to the land itself. Salt learns that the people of the Village of the White Rocks have not always lived in their mountainous cave dwellings. Before that, he tells Salt, "our people lived to the south and west of here" (McNickle, 1994, p. 55), in an era of apparent abundance until a natural disaster forced them to move. The Holy One, a respected elder and village chief, who holds knowledge for his village that is not widely known, here is elucidating grounded normativity, "land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 13). Just as Salt and his fellow villagers have learned traditions established through the generations including where and how to plant the corn, so has the knowledge of their place of origin been retained by their elders. Connected to this knowledge is the origin of their corn as well, but Salt is not yet ready to hear this. The Holy One is beginning to prepare Salt to succeed him (though Salt does not know this yet). When the boy admits at last, "I was a child, I see" (McNickle, 1994, p. 57), The Holy One is ready to impart some wisdom concerning the relationships between human beings that makes up part of grounded normativity: "I remind you to expect faults in others and to bend your words to travel around their faults" (McNickle, 1994, p. 57). Salt is left, as part of his growth, with a task, to find the Village of the White Rocks' "secret trail" (McNickle, 1994, p. 58); before he can journey to distant lands, he must first come to know, as the leaders of his village have passed on from one to another, the land where his people still live. Salt has just had his first glimpse at the grounded normativity that enables the respected elders of his village to not only lead, but lead well, and his Bildungsroman narrative will see him return to this theory.

French, too, matures slowly but surely through his journey. Like Salt, who must realize the importance of corn, tied to the land, before he can realize the importance of the human relationships in his community, French realizes on a hunting expedition the importance of a reciprocal relationship between humans and animals. They all hunt alone, so French is ensconced in a tree hollow. When he sees a moose, it is he alone who sees it. At first, French sees a vision of himself, "the conquering hero, marching into camp with more than all of us could carry" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 49). The nebulous concept of manhood dances before him as it did for Salt. Yet French has begun to understand "the position that land occupies as an ontological framework for understanding *relationships*" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 60). For French's family, always travelling, always on the move, hunting is a needed form of sustenance, but as they move through the land, their movement from location to location is a blessing to the returning animals: the group cannot stay in one area, where they would risk overhunting. Their constant movement through the land forces French to consider the full value of the moose in opposition to the reality of their circumstances: "we'd be leaving half, at least half, behind to rot" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 49). French considers the moose one last time and lowers his rifle: "I couldn't do it. I couldn't let it come to this, not for him and not for me" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 50).

The reciprocal relationships between human and non-human that stem, per Coulthard, from a genuine connectedness to land, are attaining importance for French, and dwarf even his visions of himself as a successful hunter, or conquering hero. French is beginning to mature, and it manifests in his coming-of-age narrative as grounded normativity, as a respect for the land around him and all the lives, human and non-human, that it contains.

After a struggle for power in the Village of the White Rocks, The Holy One formally tasks Salt with journeying south to the origin place, not of their people, but of their corn. The Holy One explicitly names Salt as "the one to save [his people]" (McNickle, 1994, p. 163), positioning the young man's coming of age in the narrative to a central place. To save his people, Salt must no longer be the impetuous youth that he once was. Something in him indicates to The Holy One that Salt has "the desire

Coming of Age, continued

to help our people" (McNickle, 1994, p. 164); Salt now understands the importance of human relations, but must journey to a new land, and retrace his ancestors' long-forgotten footsteps to accomplish this. He must journey to The Land of Fable, from where "our songs, our dances, and our Mother Corn came" (McNickle, 1994, p. 164). By explicitly linking this physical destination, this connection to the land that Salt must make, with the traditions, and importantly, the corn, of Salt's people, The Holy One is impressing upon Salt that grounded normativity, "land-connected practices" will be the key to his journey's success, and to Salt's manhood coming to fruition. These practices, the traditional wisdom of his people, are repeated to him before he departs: advice on how to navigate for a man who has never left his home community; how to safely cross rivers; and alongside this advice, how to treat the strangers he will meet with courtesy and respect (McNickle, 1994, p. 170-1). This time Salt listened attentively to his elder and follows his advice. He honors the wayside shrines he passes, placing rocks atop the piles, "as taught [to] him in childhood," and strangers who would otherwise have mistrusted him in their lands instead spare his life and leave him unmolested to go on his way (McNickle, 1994, p. 174-5). Salt is respectfully engaging with new people and new lands, as he was instructed, and forging reciprocal relationships with new lands and the people of new lands, in the spirit of grounded normativity.

Salt grows into a man along this voyage, one who will return to lead his people, the arc of his Bildungsroman narrative complete and with greater knowledge of grounded normativity that will serve his people well. He comes to realize the value of communication along on his travels and stops to learn the language of another young man he befriends, named Ocelot. He observes the ways of Ocelot's family and can appreciate that they have different ways of doing things than his own village, without wanting to change the traditions of his people (McNickle, 1994, p. 188-9). He meets a slave girl named Quail in Culhuacan and befriends her despite her low status (McNickle, 1994, p. 195-6). Salt tells Quail of his search for "the Mother Corn from which [his people's corn] came" (McNickle, 1994, p. 198). Quail's people, like Salt's, grow corn, and she appreciates its value; she sings him a song about "Mother Corn" (McNickle, 1994, p. 198). Ultimately, Quail is to be sacrificed, ironically in honor of the new corn crop, in the tradition of the people of Culhuacan. Salt has not yet succeeded in locating the "Mother Corn" that will save his people but decides to save Quail's life even if it means leaving. Here, Salt foregrounds the relationships he has built, and like French, refuses to sacrifice a life in service of his quest. His loyalty and kindness are rewarded; Quail waits months to reveal that she, remembering their conversation, had stowed away the corn that Salt's village needed: "I gathered these few kernels from each of the strong corns that grow in the Valley of the Lakes" (McNickle, 1994, p. 225). Salt has learned to trust others, that he cannot do everything himself, and it pays dividends to him.

His journey to new lands will not have been in vain for his people; indeed, for bringing back new, strong corn, they learn to trust him in turn. Some years later Salt, who is then Village Chief, "made the decision which changed the lives of his people… they traveled southwards… into the valley of the big fields. Land was set aside for them by those who were there first, and the new corn, when planted and watered abundantly, produced such harvests as had never been known… There they lived in peace and supported one another" (McNickle, 1994, p. 233-4). It is Salt, in the course of his coming of age, who has attained the grounded normativity possessed by The Holy One that allows him to lead his people to grace and prosperity in their time of need. He has forged connections with new lands, and knows where to lead them; through Quail, he has helped to provide them with a new and robust strain of corn, through which they in turn are connected to the land. Salt has blossomed into manhood through grounded normativity, his new recognition of "the land as [a] system of reciprocal relations and obligations" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 13) which he passes on to his people. They incorporate new knowledge and their relationship with their new land and new corn into "a new ceremony, which they called Red Corn Dance" (McNickle, 1994, p. 234). Through Salt's leadership, they are said to attain peace and harmony and support one another.

Coming of Age, continued

French encounters more trials and tribulations than Salt; before he can fully understand grounded normativity and the importance of relationships between humans, two pivotal moments influence his development. Two Indigenous strangers, named Lincoln and Travis, invite the family to join them in their camp. The family has not been unaware of their presence on the trail, and the situation is highly suspicious, but they decide they cannot avoid encountering the strangers. Things do go awry; the family's youngest member, RiRi, is taken by Lincoln, who falls over a cliff with her, killing them both. In a moment of anger, French shoots Travis. He has taken a life. Afterwards, for French, "something had changed since I'd fired the gun, since I'd killed Travis. It was like a color had ceased to exist and now the world seemed dull" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 139). Minerva, who was closest to RiRi, is changed as well, becoming unresponsive and needing to be carried. French has learned that it is crucial that they take care of each and every member of their group. Minerva repays them; when they camp out in an abandoned barn one evening, Minerva perhaps senses what is to come. She insists on remaining below the loft where all the others sleep. The Recruiters arrive in the middle of the night—but take only Minerva with them. She has moved the ladder to protect the others, and as French makes eye contact with her from the loft as they take her, she "held her finger to her thin lips, just for a split second, before they curled back in a mischievous smile" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 150). Like Salt, French learns an important lesson from his elder, and it changes his attitude. Where he was numb before, he now makes a decision on behalf of his whole group for the first time. When Miigwans suggest the family again head north, French says only, "No", and then: "I'm going after Minerva" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 153). Their elder, her knowledge, her language, and her presence, is worth fighting for, and the dynamic of the family's struggles change. French has emphasized the importance of "reciprocal relations" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 13) and taken a strong step in moving not only past the horror of taking a life, but towards honoring Minerva's sacrifice by refusing to leave her behind.

French is learning, one event at a time, the practices of grounded normativity. He learns from Clarence, another elder they meet when they encounter a resistant community of Indigenous peoples outside the town of Espanola. Speaking about his own peoples' ruined homeland, Clarence stresses that one day, his nation can still return there: "we can start healing the land. We have the knowledge, kept through the first round of these blasted schools, from before that, when these visitors first made their way over here like angry children throwing tantrums. When we heal our land, we are healed also… we'll get there. Maybe not soon, but eventually" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 193). French also learns from his own father, with whom he is unexpectedly reunited in this community. After the attempt to rescue Minerva fails, Rose (with whom French has been developing a relationship) decides to leave. French's dad tells him a story about himself and French's mother; this story, too, is rooted in grounded normativity, as he relates that French's mom urged him to move "toward something" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 217); to value connections, and to see relationships with others as worthy, tangible goals in life. French ultimately decides that his relationship with Rose is the most important thing in his life; he, too, decides to leave, and his father understands (Dimaline, 2017, p. 217). French is able to learn from conversations with Clarence and with his father to understand the importance of patience, of land, and of relationships, just as he once came to understand with the moose.

Lastly, French actualizes what he has learned, and, like Salt, again takes a leadership role. Through conducting himself in keeping with the practices of grounded normativity, he has earned the respect of those around him like Clarence. When French and Rose are on the verge of departing, they receive word of another unidentified group of strangers. They decide to join the "welcome party", who intend to surprise the strangers and assess their intentions (Dimaline, 2017, p. 219). When one of the newcomers speaks Cree, there is confusion as to whether or not the welcome party should follow their usual protocol. It is French who steps in, telling Clarence, "I need to ask him something. Then we'll know" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 227). Clarence nods, showing that he trusts French. When French has learned what he wants to learn—that the newcomer

Coming of Age, continued

"dreams in Cree" (228)—he nods and smiles back at Clarence. "Pack 'em up" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 228), Clarence rejoins; again, French's opinion is all he needs to know. French has learned to trust in others, to establish reciprocal relationships with those around him through grounded normativity, and in exchange, they do the same for him, even those he considers his elders, like Clarence, his father, or Miigwans.

Politically motivated authors like Dimaline, a Métis woman, or McNickle, Métis by birth but a registered member of the Flathead Indian Reservation, utilize grounded normativity in *The Marrow Thieves* and *Runner in the Sun* to highlight the continued relevance of Indigenous knowledges and practices in the times in which they were writing as well as for the protagonists coming of age in their respective novels. My analysis considers the Bildungsroman genre and grounded normativity to be two distinct forms that blend within these novels, and through a joint consideration of which a greater understanding of the novels can be gained. These works are not only political; they still adhere to a conventional form. The novels are still constructed as Bildungsromane, and the journeys of the protagonists to manhood are still the central concern of the plot. That French and Salt achieve this through learning and coming to appreciate Indigenous ways of knowing and living, that is, through grounded normativity, highlights the importance of these same practices for Dimaline and McNickle. Both authors consciously incorporate grounded normativity into their novels, going beyond what the conventional form of the Bildungsroman can achieve and Indigenizing the form by creating novels that highlight the value of the land and land-based practices both for their protagonists and their readers.

In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Caroline Levine describes a new type of formalism for literary analysis that seeks to encompass forms above and beyond, while alongside, the aesthetic forms with which formalism is traditionally concerned. Traditional formalism is "a way of understanding art or literature primarily through its techniques rather than as a mere vehicle for personal expression or for moral and political doctrines" ("formalism," 2009). In opposition to this, Levine (2015) describes forms as "[any] arrangement of elements--[any] ordering, patterning, or shaping" (p. 3). Levine (2015) highlights that among such elements often considered outside the bounds of formalism are "various political ordering principles" (p. 3) which she attributes to the domain of "literary and cultural studies" (2015, p. 3). The crux of Levine's argument, and the source of her concern, is the tendency of academic scholarship to treat "aesthetic and political arrangements as separate" (2015, p. 3). Instead, Levine (2015) asserts that classifying political, historical, and other contextual concerns that influence authors and their work as "forms" that can be considered alongside aesthetic factors will dissolve "the traditionally troubling gap between the form of the literary text and its content and context" (p. 3).

Levine's theory stresses that genres, or generic forms, are best analyzed in tandem with other forms influencing given literary works (2015, p. 3). For Indigenous Bildungsroman narratives such as *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves*, the other "form" in conversation with the generic forms of the works—the other tenets of what makes up a Bildungsroman, the novels' statuses as young adult fiction, or works of Indigenous speculative fiction, and so on—is Coulthard's grounded normativity. *The Marrow Thieves* and *Runner in the Sun* were written for teenage audiences (Purdy, 2016, p. 10), and Fiona McCulloch (2019) asserts that a Bildungsroman written for such an audience will inspire a similar trajectory in the targeted audience as in the protagonists: "as they come to understand themselves more thoroughly, so too do they more fully comprehend their relationship with the external world" (p. 174). Examining what she terms "Postcolonial Bildungsroman" narratives, Ericka Hoagland (2019) also stresses that when an author from an oppressed group writes such a narrative, a prominent aim is "the reclamation of indigenous culture and the assertion of a national identity"[1] (p. 219). As a whole, these definitions suit the journeys of Salt and French in *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves*. Their paths to self-discovery and maturity are directly related to their Indigenous identities and cultures, and yet were also

Coming of Age, continued

designed to inspire McNickle and Dimaline's readers to reconsider the lived reality of Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island at the time of these books' publishing.

Some existing criticism by Indigenous scholars does suggest that analyzing these Indigenous texts via the lens of a traditionally Western genre -- the Bildungsroman -- is not without its pitfalls. Laguna Pueblo author Leslie Silko (2017) suggests that for her people, there is "no distinction between types of story" (p. 239), no discernable genres of any kind. Chickasaw scholar Jodi Byrd (2014) likewise asserts that "genre… colonizes texts" (p. 345). Yet this concern is mitigated somewhat by what Hoagland (2019) describes as the "defining characteristic of the postcolonial Bildungsroman: the ongoing remediation of colonialism's traumatic legacy throughout the self-maturation process" (p. 219). In both *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves*, this legacy is addressed through the incorporation of grounded normativity and the development of this broader "postcolonial Bildungsroman" into an even more specifically Indigenous version of this form.

So too does grounded normativity lay to rest the concerns of scholars regarding the analysis of Indigenous literatures using Western theories, such as Levine's theory of forms. Kimberly Blaeser (2016) describes the problem with Westernized literary theories as implying "that the worth of literature is essentially validated by its demonstrated adherence to a respected literary mode, dynamic, or style" (p. 233). Levine's theory of forms moves beyond a prescriptive notion of adherence to any one form, but instead seeks to incorporate social and political realities alongside textual analysis. As such, the novels of Dimaline and McNickle should only be read as Bildungsroman narratives if this reading does not begin and end with the German genre, but actively seeks to go past it. Blaeser's statement points towards such a reading as well. When she hypothesizes a new mode of criticism for Indigenous literatures, that "[exist] within and [arise] from the literature itself," (2016, p. 236) I argue that grounded normativity fills this space, at least within considerations of the Indigenous Bildungsroman. Grounded normativity is a political theory, not a literary form, but given the presence in *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves* of what would constitute grounded normativity in the real world, this theory then exists as a form within, and without, these novels: both central to the texts' literary forms of Indigenous Bildungsromane, and to their critical interpretation.

For the authors of *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves*, grounded normativity and its attendant practices are an active goal of their writing: the synthesis of forms that combine a Bildungsroman with Indigenous political frameworks are far from accidental. This political element in their writing is a representation of what Scott Richard Lyons (2000) terms "rhetorical sovereignty". Lyons defines rhetorical sovereignty as "the inherent right and ability of *peoples* to determine their own communicative needs and desires" (p. 449, emphasis in original). By "peoples" Lyons means that Indigenous nations, and those within them, assert the right to tell their own stories; that they assert sovereignty over not just their rights, but over the discourse that surrounds them. McNickle and Dimaline assert rhetorical sovereignty over the discourse surrounding Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island, past and present, by incorporating grounded normativity into their novels and making Indigenous knowledges, practices, languages, and traditions an inseparable part of their main plots, their protagonists' coming-of-age.

Cherie Dimaline speaks frankly in interviews about the "responsibility" she associates with being an Indigenous writer (The Globe and Mail, 2017), responsibilities which reflect rhetorical sovereignty through grounded normativity even if not named directly as such. *The Marrow Thieves* was directly intended to "explain the way we persist and thrive as Indigenous people, in spite of [colonial oppression]" (The Globe and Mail, 2017). Dimaline is speaking out against oppression, and telling an Indigenous story from an Indigenous perspective, first and foremost for Indigenous peoples themselves. She tells "a narrative that actually is reminiscent of my own understanding of being an Indigenous person: That no matter what happens, you always belong to our land, we're always going to belong to each other, and we'll seek each other out" (Henley, 2017). Here grounded normativity and rhetorical sovereignty are connected through and tied to the land. *The Marrow Thieves* then is a narrative that describes Dimaline's own Indigenous experience and the resistance of not just her characters,

Coming of Age, continued

but of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island since the arrival of Europeans. Dimaline, in the novel itself and her own discussions about its intent, asserts the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples and nations to tell their own stories, and to chart their own paths of resistance, while also stressing the restorative power of the land.

D'Arcy McNickle, writing *Runner in the Sun* in the 1950s, faced a political landscape of termination that settler scholar James H. Cox and Pueblo scholar Alfonso Ortiz argue influenced the composition of the novel and explain its undercurrent of rhetorical sovereignty. Cox (2012) asserts that 1954, the year of the novel's publication, marked the climax of termination proceedings across the United States, and that McNickle, "as a powerful member of the [National Congress of American Indians, (NCAI)] fought vigorously against the policy" (p. 153). At the same time, through the NCAI, McNickle was involved in projects seeking to reinvigorate various reservation communities (Cox, 2012, p. 160-1), much like Salt's community is reinvigorated through the introduction of a new strain of corn. Cox (2012) asserts that through *Runner in the Sun*, McNickle intended to "[urge] American Indians to recognize that solutions can come from within their communities, or, more specifically, from the deliberations of Native governing bodies" (p. 161). Alfonso Ortiz (1994), in his afterword to *Runner in the Sun*'s reissued edition, calls the novel "[McNickle]'s response to the tragic policy of termination" (p. 239) by way of "reaffirm[ing] the antiquity of the Indian people" (Ortiz, 1994, p. 238), their historical place in Turtle Island. Ortiz (1994) describes McNickle explicitly claiming rhetorical sovereignty for Indigenous peoples: "claiming for Indian people a reality apart from that granted to them by white people" (p. 239). At a time when Indigenous activism was only just beginning to take root across Turtle Island and facing extreme political hardships via the policy of termination, McNickle is asserting the value of rhetorical sovereignty through grounded normativity in *Runner in the Sun* to impress upon his Indigenous peers across the United States the need for a similarly revolutionary reimagining for their communities and an active resistance against termination.

In *Runner in the Sun* and *The Marrow Thieves*, the protagonists Salt and French both come of age by incorporating grounded normativity into their worldview and thus actualize the Indigenous Bildungsroman through Coulthard's theory. They accumulate enough respect for the land around them that they learn in turn to live their "lives in relation to [other people] and [their] surroundings in a respectful, nondominating and nonexploitative way" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 60). Through this knowledge, they come maturely and genuinely into their manhood, and become leaders in their communities who build better, stronger, and more understanding relationships with those around them. The grounded normativity that McNickle and Dimaline use to make their young heroes' journey to adulthood possible reflects the political aims of their novels, i.e. the rhetorical sovereignty for Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island that their writing asserts in the real world. Cree/Métis scholar Emma Larocque (2016) cautions against over-emphasizing the political aspects of Indigenous literatures, stressing that scholars must attend "equally to its aesthetic value. Native Literature is as much about art and nuance as it is about colonial discourse" (p. 61). This is achieved through synthesis of the Bildungsroman genre with grounded normativity into the unique form of the Indigenous Bildungsroman. In this form, the considerations of genre in Dimaline and McNickle's writing is inseparable from the political ramifications of Coulthard and Lyons' theories. For Salt and French, as for McNickle and Dimaline, the coming-of-age narrative matters deeply, but so too is the manner in which they accomplish this growth: in these Indigenous Bildgunsromane, through grounded normativity, both the maturity of the protagonists and the political aims of the authors come to fruition.

Notes

[1] Hoagland here does not mean specifically "Indigenous Peoples" and hence does not capitalize the word, but refers to a given oppressed person's ancestral identity, which could mean indigenous to Turtle Island, as in the case of Dimaline or McNickle, or having an element of diaspora, as in some of the postcolonial authors that she considers in some parts of her essay.

Coming of Age, continued

References

Bakhtin, M. (2002). The Bildungsroman and its significance in the history of realism (toward a historical typology of the novel). In C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Eds), *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays: M. M. Bakhtin*, (V. W. McGee, Trans.), (pp. 10-59). University of Austin Press.

Blaeser, K. (2016). Native literature: Seeking a critical centre. In D. Reder & L. M. Morin (Eds), *Learn, teach, challenge: Approaching Indigenous literatures* (pp. 231-238). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Byrd, J. (2014). Red dead conventions: American Indian transgeneric fictions. In J. H. Cox & D. H. Justice (Eds), *The Oxford handbook of Indigenous American literatures* (pp. 344-358). Oxford University Press.

Coulthard, G.S. (2014). *Red skin, white masks: Rejecting the colonial politics of recognition*. University of Minnesota Press.

Cox, J. H. (2012). *The Red land to the south*. University of Minnesota Press.

Dimaline, Cherie (2017). *The Marrow Thieves*. Cormorant Books Inc.

Formalism as defined by Birch, D. (Ed.) *et al*. (2009), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford University Press.

Graham, Sarah (2019). "Introduction". In S. Graham (Ed), *A History of the Bildungsroman* (pp. 1-9). Cambridge University Press.

Henley, J. (2017, July 7). *The message YA novelist Cherie Dimaline has for young Indigenous readers*. CBC. https://www.cbc.ca/books/the-message-ya-novelist-cherie-dimaline-has-for-young-indigenous-readers-1.4195036

Hoagland, E. A. (2019). The Postcolonial Bildungsroman. In S. Graham (Ed), *A History of the Bildungsroman* (pp. 217-238). Cambridge University Press.

Justice, D. H. (2018). *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter*. Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Kontje, T. (2019). The German Tradition of the Bildungsroman. In S. Graham (Ed), *A History of the Bildungsroman* (pp. 10-32). Cambridge University Press.

LaRocque, E. (2016). Teaching Aboriginal literature: The Discourse of margins and mainstreams. In D. Reder & L. M. Morin (Eds), *Learn, teach, challenge: Approaching Indigenous literatures* (pp. 55-72). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Levine, C. (2015). *Forms: Whole, rhythm, hierarchy, network*. Princeton University Press.

Lyons, S. R. (2000). Rhetorical sovereignty: What do American Indians want from writing? *College Composition and Communication*, *51*(3), 447-468. https://doi.org/10.2307/358744

McCulloch, F. (2019). Bildungsromane for Children and Young Adults. In S. Graham (Ed), *A History of the Bildungsroman* (pp. 174-199). Cambridge University Press.

McNickle, D. (1994). *Runner in the Sun*. University of New Mexico Press.

Purdy, J. (2016). People, place and politics: D'Arcy McNickle's (re)valuing of Native American principles. *European Journal of American Studies, 11*(2), 1-14.

Ortiz, A. (1994). Afterword. In D. McNickle, *Runner in the Sun*, (pp. 235-249). University of New Mexico Press.

Silko, L. (2017). Language and literature from a Pueblo Indian Perspective. In S. McCall, D. Reder, D. Gaertner, & G. L. Hill. *Read, listen, tell: Indigenous stories from Turtle Island* (pp. 236-243). Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

The Globe and Mail (2017, June 30). *Cherie Dimaline: 'My community is where my stories come from and it's also where my responsibilities lie'*. https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/cherie-dimaline-my-community-is-where-my-stories-come-fromand-its-also-where-my-responsibilities-lie/article35509226/#:~:text=teams%20to%20answer.-,My%20community%20is%20where%20my%20stories%20come%20from%20and%20it's,But%20generally%20mediocrity%20scares%20me