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Speculative reworkings of the good life at the end times: Care, resilience, and relational futures in Cherie Dimaline and Rebecca Campbell

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ABSTRACT

Taking as a starting point the idea that literature can function as an epistemological medium in its capacity as a testing ground where experiments in the good life can be imagined, aesthetically realized, and critically interrogated, this article turns to speculative fiction as a genre suitable for the exploration of cognitive frameworks that may lead to hopeful futurities amidst the ground-shifting transformations of the Anthropocene, supporting not only the continuity of life, but also the good life. It examines the representation of the ethics of care at the Anthropocene's tipping point in recent speculative fiction from Turtle Island/Canada, namely, Métis Cherie Dimaline's young adult novel *The marrow thieves* (2017) and its sequel, *Hunting by stars* (2021), and settler Canadian Rebecca Campbell's short story cycle, *Arboreality* (2022). It argues that they critique the modernist nature/culture divide underpinning the disasters of the Anthropocene while reworking the notion of the good life from alternative Indigenous and new materialist relational approaches.

KEYWORDS: The good life, ethics of care, relationality, Indigenous cosmologies, New Materialism, Cherie Dimaline, *The marrow thieves, Hunting by stars*, Rebecca Campbell, *Arboreality*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The search for the good life has long been a central concern of philosophy, ethics, and politics, yet its meaning becomes increasingly compromised in the context of the Anthropocene –a time when human activity has destabilized planetary systems and endangered the very conditions of life. This article begins from the premise that literature functions as an epistemological medium: a testing ground where experiments in the good life can be imagined, aesthetically realized, and critically interrogated. Among literary genres, speculative fiction is particularly well suited to this task, as it opens space for exploring alternative cognitive frameworks and cultural perspectives that imagine more just and sustainable ways of living.

This article examines how such possibilities emerge in two recent works from Turtle Island/Canada that envision new pathways toward the good life amid near-future scenarios of environmental and social collapse: Métis author Cherie Dimaline's young adult novels, *The marrow thieves* (2017) and its sequel, *Hunting by stars* (2021), and settler Canadian Rebecca Campbell's short story cycle, *Arboreality* (2022). This article's analysis proceeds in two parts. The first outlines a theoretical framework at the interface of ethics of care thinking, new materialist scholarship, and Indigenous epistemologies. The second part applies this framework to a close reading of the selected texts, highlighting how they reimagine the ethics of care as a means of fostering resilience and envisioning the good life in the Anthropocene.

2. CARE ETHICS, NEW MATERIALISM, AND INDIGENOUS COSMOLOGIES

Anthropologist Margaret Mead is often credited with saying that the earliest sign of civilization is a healed broken femur[i]. In the natural world, a broken leg often leads to death, a confirmation of the evolutionary law of the survival of the fittest. In contrast, a healed broken femur indicates that people took care of one another over time, which is the essence of civilization. This practice aligns with Joan Tronto's broad definition of the ethics of care, which she describes as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (1993, p. 103). The idea of living in the world "as well as possible" (Tronto, 1993, p. 103) underpins the aspiration for the good life, which may vary across cultural and social contexts. Generally, it centers on human flourishing and wellbeing, relying on both material conditions –such as income, health, and security– and non-material aspects reminiscent of the Aristotelian concept of *eudaimonia*: happiness derived from "aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness, and commitments to larger purposes" (Fischer, 2014, p. 2). Along similar lines, Sara Ahmed observes that "for a life to count as a good life, it must take on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course" (2010, p. 71).

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Within the Western modernist paradigm, the good life is frequently associated with progress and development, grounded in a belief in human exceptionalism. This worldview constructs a sharp division between nature and culture: nature is reduced to an inert reservoir of resources for human use, while agency is attributed solely to humans. Such a separation has been a key driver of the breakdown of life-sustaining connections, contributing to the environmental, demographic, economic, and political crises of the Anthropocene –the current epoch in which human activity has become a geological force, profoundly altering and destabilizing Earth's ecology on a planetary scale (Crutzen & Stoermer, 2000). These cascading crises jeopardize the very possibility of the good life.

As the Anthropocene highlights the entanglement of human and nonhuman worlds, continued affective attachment to the modernist myth of a human/nature divide exposes the good life as a fragile fantasy, often producing what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism" (2011) –the paradox of affective attachments to a desired object or ideal that sustains hope while simultaneously obstructing the very flourishing it promises. This condition manifests itself, for example, by believing in the promise of endless economic growth, which simultaneously contributes to environmental collapse; or pursuing the promise of security and fulfillment underlying the "good life" through consumerism, which often leads to precarity, debt, or burnout (Berlant, 2011)[ii]. A pressing question then emerges: how might we articulate an ethics and politics of care capable of bridging this divide and envisioning new pathways toward the good life?

Martha Nussbaum develops a framework for thinking about the good life around ten "central human capabilities" (2000, 2011). Her approach for living a dignified, flourishing life emphasizes planetary and social justice through holistic relationality, highlighting not only social interaction –capability # 7, "Affiliation" (2011, p. 34)– but also the capacity "to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature" –capability # 8, "Other Species" (2011, p. 34). Along similar lines, American ecophilosopher David Abram develops the idea of the "more-than-human world" (1996) as a way of resisting the modernist anthropocentric framing and challenging the assumption that human welfare can be pursued independently of the wider community of life. Redefining nature not as a backdrop or resource but as a dynamic field of relations in which humans are entangled, Abram invites to cultivate a more ethical and sustainable relationship with the Earth by reawakening our sensory attunement to the agency, vitality, and communicative capacity of nonhuman beings and recovering our reciprocity of perception with the animate Earth. He argues that perception is "an ongoing dialogue between our animal body and the fluid, breathing landscape" (1996, p. 52), such that human consciousness is co-shaped by the animate presence of plants, animals, and places, which address us even as we perceive them (1996, p. 65). Acknowledging the distributed agency of the more-than-human and recognizing our radical interdependence with the lively material world informs Tronto's ethics of care, which tests traditional political

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thought by highlighting the interconnectedness of humans with the planet and each other, understanding "our bodies, our selves, and our environment . . . in a complex, life-sustaining web" (1993, p. 103). Similarly, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa argues that reckoning with such relationality often involves "affective, ethical, and hands-on agencies of the political significance of care and practical and material consequence" (2017, p. 4).

These phenomenological perspectives closely align with Indigenous modes of experiential cognition that predate and challenge the anthropocentric epistemologies of modernism, anticipating the critiques posed by new materialism and posthumanism. While Indigenous cosmologies highlight an ongoing process of co-creation (Wilson, 2008), rooted in a performative ethics of reciprocal exchange between human and more-than-human agents, new materialist and posthumanist frameworks envision worldhood as a co-constituted assemblage. In these views, the human is but one node within a complex network of vital agencies (Abram, 1996, p. 130; Barad, 2007, p. 178; Bennett, 2010, p. 108). Accordingly, anti-colonial scholars argue that Western new materialist and posthumanist paradigms should engage more deeply with Indigenous philosophy, moving away from their claim to be "new" (Magnat, 2022; Ravenscroft, 2018; Rosiek et al., 2020), while eschewing past practices of appropriation and assimilation of Indigenous ways of knowing into dominant Western knowledge systems. As scientific inquiry has evolved into a broader process of interaction, one that integrates personal, qualitative relationships with nature to generate knowledge, "Western science", argues Oglala Lakota scholar Vine Deloria Jr., "has thus arrived at precisely the starting point of non-Western peoples in apprehending more than physical and mechanical activities in nature" (1979, p. 36). However, the "*spiritual* dimension" inherent in Indigenous conceptions of agency remains conspicuously overlooked in post-structuralist approaches, as Virginie Magnat perceptively notes (2022, p. 31–32). The consideration of spirituality is absent, for example, from the influential quantum-based theory of agential realism advocated by Karen Barad (2007), and from Jane Bennett's idea that "the vitality of matter" (2010, p. vii) and its "thing-power" (p. 20) shape events alongside and often beyond human intentionality. In contrast, "the art of living the good life" (Simpson, 2011, p. 26 n9) emerges from Indigenous contexts as a holistic practice of world-building based on the (re)cognition of dynamic interdependence of body, mind, and spirit of all beings. Articulating the sacred nature of relationships and the ethics of relational accountability embedded in Indigenous spirituality is the Indigenous notion of ceremony (Wilson, 2008, p. 89), which mobilizes stories, dance, dreams, and songs as "co-creative processes lying beyond human desire for narration and entertainment" (Magnat, 2022, p. 30). These traditional cultural forms not only transmit and generate knowledge but also foster affective connections among people and with the natural environment, serving as crucial agents in maintaining the ecological balance that underpins human health and wellbeing (Kenny, 2006, p. 161, p. 173).

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By attending to diverse imaginaries of what the good life entails, Dimaline's and Campbell's speculative fiction not only illuminates the limits of dominant narratives of modern progress –which frequently undermine the flourishing of both human and nonhuman beings and the ecologies they depend on– but also gestures toward forms of care and critical resilience emerging at the interface of Indigenous and new materialist thinking.

3. SPECULATIVE REIMAGININGS OF THE ETHICS OF CARE: TOWARD THE GOOD LIFE AT THE ANTHROPOCENE'S TURNING POINT

3.1. Cherie Dimaline's *The marrow thieves* and *Hunting by stars*

Cherie Dimaline's celebrated young adult novel *The marrow thieves* (2017) and its sequel *Hunting by stars* (2021) represent a strand of Indigenous Futurism that places anthropogenic climate change at the center of a dystopian future. In these narratives, climate breakdown causes the destruction of essential infrastructures and social collapse. In Canada, the government's reconstruction plan exemplifies Berlant's notion of cruel optimism: in its rush to restore the collapsed infrastructures, the state reestablishes the very anthropocentric practices that caused the environmental disaster, thereby triggering new health and environmental crises. Thus, when the imposition of long labor hours drives people to exhaustion, a catastrophic pandemic of dreamlessness spreads, affecting only the settler population of North America. Deprived of their capacity to sleep, people also begin to lose the capacity to reproduce and to dream, and thus the ability to envision and create a future for themselves. When, amid the "sleep-apocalypse" (De Cristofaro, 2023, p. 11), the Canadian Government discovers that Indigenous people are immune to the plague, rumors spread that their dreams live in their bone marrow (Dimaline, 2017, p. 20). In response, a special police corps known as the Recruiters is tasked with capturing Indigenous people and transporting them to reactivated Residential Schools, where their marrow is forcibly extracted –hence the earlier novel's title– in an attempt to find a cure for the settler population. The harvesting of Indigenous marrow emphasizes the persistence of a capitalist extractivist logic that, as settler Canadian journalist, writer, and activist Naomi Klein notes, "is based on the premise that life can be drained indefinitely . . . turning living systems into garbage" (2014, p. 442)[iii]. Accordingly, Dimaline's fictions shows that pursuing the good life through the unfettered technological exploitation of natural resources –including human labor and bodies– only perpetuates "a long, ongoing history of colonial resource appropriations, ecological loss, and violent suppression of Indigenous bodies and cultures in Canada" (Kerber & Lousley, 2022, p. 269).

Although in both novels the main focal perspective is that of Métis teenager Francis, a.k.a. Frenchie or French, a plurality of perspectives emerges, in the form of dialogue among different characters, heterodiegetic narration, free indirect speech, and first-person accounts.

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The marrow thieves begins with French's adoption by a multi-tribal, intergenerational group of Indigenous fugitives, after losing his parents and becoming separated from his elder brother Mitch while they are hiding from the Recruiters. Together, they travel north toward James Bay in the hopes of joining the Indigenous communities that are regrouping out of the government's reach. Amid all the destruction and persecution, their journey turns into an epistemological and spiritual quest for the good life as *mino-bimaadiziwin*. This Anishinaabeg term denotes "continuous rebirth" (LaDuke, 1994, p. 4, p. 132) or, in Potawatomi scholar Kyle Powys Whyte's words, "collective continuance" (2018, p. 126), emphasizing communal rather than individualistic wellbeing. In the novels, this understanding emerges from the teachings of the group's leader, Miigwan, and elder, Minerva, and it has the impact of transforming the heterogenous Indigenous group into a *chosen family*, whose members provide care for one another based on personal bonds rather than genetics. *Mino-bimaadiziwin* involves "the balanced relationship between one's personal well-being (i.e., physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual), and their relationship to their family and wider community, including the natural and spirit world" (Big-Canoe & Richmond, 2014, p. 128). At the end of the series, the title of chapter 40 –"Begin again: French and his family" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 398)– underlines both the creative resilience forces of renewal and the collective aspects of *mino-bimaadiziwin*. Moreover, in stark contrast with the anthropocentric ideal of progress based on capitalist extractivism, *mino-bimaadiziwin* appears as "a way of living designed to generate life, not just human life but the life of all living things" (Simpson, 2011, as cited in Klein, 2014, p. 443), extending care beyond the closest circle to the other-than-human world.

The Indigenous view of the good life as a relationship of interaction and mutual dependence between human, nonhuman, and other-than-human entities also redefines the notion of resilience. Grounded in "a complex ecology encompassing community, spirituality, and land" (2024, p. 196), as Susie O'Brien observes, Indigenous resilience emerges as "survival *in relation* —to an environment, to other beings and forces" (2024, p. 5). Just as spirituality mediates between inner and outer realities, Indigenous resilience operates at the interface of the personal, the communal, the more-than-human world, and the spiritual realms of both ancestors and yet-unborn descendants. As Dimaline's protagonists struggle to build resilience in an extremely hostile society, it is this understanding of the good life as a *performative ethics of reciprocity* with human and non-human agents (Rosiek et al., 2020, p. 337) that the texts emphasize. Consequently, the novels unfold around three intertwined principles underpinning *mino-bimaadiziwin*: *biskaabiiyang,* Indigenous *radical resurgence*, and *grounded normativity.*

The Anishinaabemowin term *biskaabiiyang* connotes, in the words of Anishinaabe academic and author Grace L. Dillon*, "*the process of 'returning to ourselves,' which involves discovering how personally one is affected by colonization, discarding the emotional and psychological baggage carried from its impact, and recovering ancestral traditions in order to adapt in our post-Native Apocalypse world" (2012, p. 10). In *The marrow thieves* and *Hunting*

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by stars, biskaabiiyang is mobilized through the revalorization and recovery of native languages and ceremonial storytelling, dance, song, and dreams. These traditional epistemological practices serve as the basis of Indigenous *radical resurgence,* which Métis scholar and educator Aubrey Hanson defines as "the regrowth of Indigenous communities from strong roots toward strong futures, building upon tradition and heritage through processes of revitalization and reclamation in order to create healthy, vibrant, self-determining nations" (2019, p. 31). In Dimaline's novels, Indigenous radical resilience is not an insular project. While it is led by Indigenous characters and grounded in Indigenous epistemologies, non-Indigenous allies play a complex supporting role in enabling resurgence, offering material assistance or temporary protection. Dimaline suggests that meaningful allyship entails not appropriation or leadership, but the willingness to stand beside Indigenous struggles, accept limits, and support the sovereignty of Indigenous practices of care, storytelling, and dreaming. In this sense, allies can contribute to creating the conditions for Indigenous radical resilience, but they cannot substitute or direct it. In turn, radical resurgence is shaped by what Yellowknives Dene scholar Glen Coulthard calls *grounded normativity*: the "modalities of Indigenous land-connected practices and longstanding experiential knowledge that inform and structure our ethical engagements with the world and our relationships with human and nonhuman others over time" (2014, p. 13). The Indigenous communities that are regrouping up north and are the ultimate destination of French's family symbolize this land-based resurgence.

Dimaline's novels foreground sound –voice, language, song, storytelling, and dance– as central epistemological practices that resist colonial violence and highlight "the inseparability of matter, mind, and spirit" (Magnat, 2022, p. 32). These sonic elements are not inert signifiers but living forces that sustain community, memory, and futurity. Story –with a capital "S" to suggest the crucial and performative quality of ceremonial storytelling– emerges then as a crucial practice to envision the possibility of the good life as *mino-bimaadiziwin*. It is Miig's mission to lay the foundations for the children's resilience and wellbeing by reconnecting them with the land, their history, and themselves through Story. In their weekly ceremonial gatherings around the fire for Story, Miig mobilizes the cognitive and agentic functions of narrative: "every week we spoke, because it was imperative that we know. [Miig] said it was the only way to make the kinds of changes that were necessary to really survive" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 25). Stressing connectivity and relationality, Miig's narrative juggles the experience of Indigenous peoples from precolonial and colonial times, present-day ecocide, and the renewed genocide of Indigenous people by the Canadian settler state. As a result, the necropolitics of the diegetic present are exposed as a continuation of the destructive thrust of settler colonialism and capitalist extractivism.

While reckoning with the traumatic consequences of settler colonialism for Indigenous people –"We almost lost our languages. Many lost their innocence, their laughter, their lives"

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(pp. 23–24)– Story also shows how the ancestors grappled with similar challenges and endured (p. 24). Miig's reconnection of past and present through Story offers a model for action towards healing and resurgence, illustrating Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice's claim that stories have not just been integral to the survival of Indigenous peoples in North America, but that they are also "good medicine. They remind us about who we are and where we're going, on our own and in relation to those with whom we share this world. They remind us about the relationships that *make a good life possible*. In short, they matter" (2018, p. 6; emphasis added). Miig's telling of Story –"the entire history of us and how we came to be here" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 245)– foregrounds this view, as it reminds the group of their direction in life, toward *mino-bimaadiziwin*: "*We are running toward community, toward safety, toward a future centered around what we know and understand to be the good life*" (p. 246; emphasis in the original). Story emerges, then, as the vehicle for the "*repatriation*" (Fraile-Marcos, 2020, p. 12) of Indigenous radical resilience derived from cognitive relationality and affective connection with one another and the land.

In much the same way as *mino-bimaadiziwin* is ethically oriented towards the future by focusing on continuing life through continuous rebirth, Story mobilizes the past and the present to act upon the future. This agentive aspect of Story aligns with Kyle Whyte's definition of the Anishinaabe idea of *spiraling time* as "the varied experiences of time that we have as participants within living narratives involving our ancestors and descendants" (2018, p. 229). In keeping with the Haudenosaunee Seven Generations Principle, which contemplates how to become good ancestors by considering the long-term consequences of our actions up to seven human generations into the future[iv], spiraling time brings together the experiences of becoming simultaneously ancestors and descendants (p. 228, p. 229), eliciting a "counterfactual dialogue" (p. 230) that allows to see the present as a dystopia (p. 227) from the perspective of ancestors, as well as to think of ways to be a good ancestor in the present for future generations (p. 229).

Alongside Miig's collective narrative of history, the group's affective cohesion is reinforced through the autobiographical accounts that each member is required to share. These stories function as acts of self-creation over which the teller retains full authority –as Miig insists, "everyone tells their own coming-to story. That's the rule" and "[e]veryone's creation story is their own" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 79). In doing so, the oral narratives situate individuals within a larger historical framework, explaining not only "how they became one with the group" but also how they became one "with the Story Miig tells of Indigenous history" (Ruthven, 2024, p. 488). Oral storytelling thus operates as "an important vehicle for the creation of free cognitive spaces" (Simpson, 2011, p. 34), while simultaneously forging affective bonds between tellers and listeners that enhance the collective's capacity for mutual care and solidarity.

Similarly, song and dance operate as modes of embodied memory and resurgence. In *The marrow thieves*, when Minerva is captured by the Recruiters, she starts calling through

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language and song "on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 172). Her individual voice and "every dream Minerva had ever dreamed" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 172) embody those of the collective. When her "heartbreaking wail" changes "her heart beat to drum, morphing her singular voice to many, pulling every dream from her own marrow and into her song" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 172), the bones of the previous Residential School victims start rattling, literally, in the ground under the school where they lay buried, until the electronic system attached to her neurons fails and the school catches fire. The scene reveals the vitality and agency of language, Story, song, and dreams, while showing how "Indigenous peoples have storied [their] experience to empower the struggle of the present and to make the truth of struggle clear to future generations" (Justice, 2018, p. 118). Thus, the risks taken for the sake of collective survival by individuals such as Minerva and all those involved in the resistance to the government regime are part and parcel of "a life worth living, even if you're not the one that'll be alive to live it" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 152), as Chi-Boy puts it.

Yet, *Hunting by stars* complicates this hopeful emphasis by underscoring the vulnerability of sound and vocality when these are suppressed, stolen, distorted, or weaponized and used for control by colonial institutions. Placing French within the residential school system offers an interior perspective on the moral ambiguities of surviving within a system designed for his people's destruction and raises questions about complicity, betrayal, and the costs of endurance. Yet, Dimaline also shows that even when silence is violently enforced through the state's extractive apparatus, the School's Indigenous inmates find ways to resist and preserve their identity and their voices. Writing their stories on fragile napkins with soup, sauce, or even their own blood, they defy erasure through embodied acts of narration. By secretly entrusting these fragments to French, who commits them to memory, their messages appear as "prayers" that hold "the potential of us . . . the belief that we could exist, that we had before and would again" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 178). Thus, French realizes, the words enact "real resistance, small and impactful" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 178), creating "community even in the darkest of prisons" (p. 178). These "gifts" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 178) constitute *biskaabiiyang,* "[b]ecause in a way, they started delivering me back to myself" (p. 178), as French puts it, showing him the ethical path toward the good life.

Sound also appears as contested terrain when Indigenous forms of storytelling and ritual are appropriated and manipulated for exploitative ends by false prophets, such as "the Chief" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 152). Described as the leader of a "Vampire cult" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 286), he forcibly restrains Rose and her badly injured friend Derrick in order to extract and consume their blood, a grotesque alternative method to that of marrow harvesting for recovering the capacity to dream. Hiding his reproduction of the extractivist logics of the settler state under the guise of the ethics of care, he not only reproaches Rose for her ingratitude –"I have done nothing but provide a roof and care for your friend" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 169)– but also tells her that Indigenous people have "an obligation to help" (p. 169) the dreamless settler

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population. Rose, however, resists this lethal colonial design by displaying the logic of Indigenous grounded normativity and emphasizing the connection of Indigenous dreams to the land: "Where exactly do you think our dreams come from? My dreams are full of lakes and the small islands that skip across them like a heartbeat. They are all that I am. They are my land. . . Our lands are who we are. That's not something easily replaced" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 169). Hence, Rose reaffirms a conception of identity as resonating relationality, encompassing human and more-than-human interrelations.

The Indigenous materialism of grounded normativity is similarly underlined at the end of *The marrow thieves*, when Clarence voices how the aspiration to heal is concomitant with a return to care for the land (Dimaline, 2017, p. 193). When French wonders how that can happen if they have no home, Clarence clarifies, "I mean we can start healing the land. We have the knowledge . . . When we heal our land, we are healed also" (Dimaline, 2017, p. 193). Traveling north to the safety of James Bay and working on the recovery of their culture in connection with the land constitute the embodied practice of radical resurgence as grounded normativity, which is summed up with the Cree term "Kiiwen" –"You must always go home"– that Minerva whispers before being taken away. The rebirth implicit in the Anishinaabe idea of the good life is noted at the end of both novels: *The marrow thieves* closes with family reunions, the emergence of new couples –French and Rose, Wad and Chi-Boy– and, specifically, with Wad's pregnancy, whereas in *Hunting by stars* it is Wad and Chi-Boy's newborn girl, Ishkode, who embodies hope in resurgence. As Rose imagines her as a Jingle Dress dancer, Ishkode's freedom to be loud epitomizes the reconnection of community and the land through ceremony. Making "the noise that brought the healing" (Dimaline, 2022, p. 410), storytelling, song, dance, and dreaming emerge as not merely cultural survival but as material, relational, and future-oriented practices that affirm Indigenous sovereignty and enact grounded forms of ethical care.

3.2. Rebecca Campbell's *Arboreality*

In Rebecca Campbell's *Arboreality,* a speculative book comprised of six interconnected stories about adaptation in the midst of environmental and social collapse caused by anthropogenic climate change, modern notions of living well intersect with contending Indigenous perspectives on the good life as continuous rebirth and with new materialist notions of generative flourishing[v]. The stories follow the lives of trees and several generations of people who struggle to build resilience in a world in rapid and catastrophic transformation. The action takes place in the city of Vancouver and on Vancouver Island from the 2030s through 2100.

The opening story, "Special collections", marks a shift from the modern metaphysics of progress and development –grounded in the belief in absolute human control over nature– to a preoccupation with "disaster management" in the face of the environmental crises unfolding in the early twenty-first century (Campbell, 2022, p. 4). The focal perspective is Jude's, a

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Communications professor at the University of Victoria who specializes in eighteenth-century English literature. Jude experiences an ontological disconnect with his students, who view the lifestyles of earlier generations as evidence of reckless disregard for their descendants' wellbeing: "That earlier age was incredible to his students, even horrible: frivolity bought at a terrible cost" (Campbell, 2022, p. 4). For them, the modern promise of the good life has been replaced by the burden of adapting to the consequences of their predecessors' irresponsibility. This motif recurs throughout the short story cycle. Kit, born decades later, embodies both fascination and rage toward a past of abundance and carefree living he never knew. In "Scions and root stocks", he laments that "his only future was in undoing what had been done by generations who lived brief golden lives, sucking all the sweetness from the world before he was even born" (Campbell, 2022, p. 74). Similarly, in the concluding story, "The cathedral arboreal", Kit's inability to secure adequate healthcare for his asthmatic granddaughter, Meg, intensifies his resentment: "not for the first time a terrible rage rose in his throat at the billions of people who had lived strange, glorious lives spanning continents and planets, and abandoned him here with a little girl he couldn't help" (Campbell, 2022, p. 99).

Yet new forms of care also emerge in this time of crisis. Anticipating a future in which access to knowledge through digital resources will no longer be possible due to frequent power outages and failing electronic communications, Jude, together with Berenice and other colleagues and students, recognizes that printed books will be vital for the survival and wellbeing of future generations. As Berenice foresees, they are "going to need books again, for a while at least. Maybe forever" (Campbell, 2022, p. 6). This realization leads them to salvage as many volumes as possible from the flooded and collapsing McPherson Library at the University of Victoria, redistributing them to safe homes across Vancouver Island. Their unlawful dismantling of the library transforms them into a collective of conspirators (Campbell, 2022, p. 7) engaged in an ethico-political practice of care –an affective response to modern institutions and the diverse knowledge legacies accumulated under modernity. Among the books Jude rescues, one on "the history of the violin and principles of its construction" (Campbell, 2022, p. 10) and another on landscape architecture, "coppicing and inosculation" (Campbell, 2022, p. 10) recur as motifs throughout *Arboreality.* Echoing the future-oriented practices of care in Dimaline's novels, these salvaged texts embody an ethics of care directed toward the spiritual and material flourishing of future generations.

Another recurrent trope introduced in the opening story is the emergence of a new resilient species of tree that Jude names the *golden arbutus*, "A new tree for a new world" (Campbell, 2022, p. 15). The golden arbutus, or *aurum,* functions as a figure of interspecies care, stressing nature-culture entanglements that hold the promise of regeneration through collaboration (Campbell, 2023, p. 155). In "Special Collections" this entanglement is foreshadowed by the Indigenous myth recounting how the Saanich people were once saved by an arbutus tree during the "great flood" (Campbell, 2022, p. 13), situating the aurum within a

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longer history of reciprocal relations between humans and the more-than-human world. Across subsequent stories, successive generations of human characters contribute to the spread of the golden arbutus, while the tree in turn mitigates wildfires, regenerates depleted soil, and sequesters vast amounts of carbon, offering a speculative model of ecological repair. In this way, the aurum crystallizes the collection's vision of resilience as an intergenerational and interspecies project, dependent on mutual care and co-becoming.

At the center of *Arboreality,* "An important failure", the award-winning story that was the germ for the book, balances the nostalgic and melancholic investment in modernity with the emergence of relational practices that go beyond the futile attempt to bounce back to prolong modern ways of achieving the good life. The attachment to modern notions of the good life is embodied by the luthier apprentice Mason, who lives in the city of Vancouver. For him the end of the world is symbolized by the approaching expiration date of a particular historical violin, the *Plaisir*, which embodies a kind of hedonic happiness. Like the protagonists of "Special collections", Mason engages in salvaging the civilizational project of modernity, represented here by the ongoing construction of outstanding instruments for the performance of highbrow music and the production of exquisite sound. Like Jude, Mason finds a sense of purpose and individual wellbeing amid a crumbling world by putting his skills to the service of something that is larger than himself. However, his decades-long endeavor to build a new violin out of old-growth wood in the tradition of the prestigious seventeenth-century Cremona School of luthiers appears as a form of "cruel optimism" (Berlant, 2011), as his concern for the preservation of a refined violin-making culture proves detrimental to his own mental and physical health, when he is assailed by guilt and chronic pain after poaching the last surviving millenary Sitka tree and falling out of another tree while illegally pruning.

In contrast, his friends Sophie and Jake, who live in the remote Cowichan Valley/Kaatza[vi] on Vancouver Island, develop an alternative form of care that does not look for "a return to the world as it was but for a way to live meaningfully through what remains" (Doyle, 2021, p. 164). Their efforts exemplify what Patrick D. Murphy terms *culturopoeia* –"the imaginative and practical work of conceptualizing and implementing new cultures [that] could provide nascent structures, practices, behaviours, and attitudes upon which [the following generations] can build their own future with a more 'natured culture'" (1992, p. 314). This emerging culturopoeia is enacted through the collaborative practices of the multiethnic Kaatza community, foregrounding cultural creation as an ongoing, dialogic negotiation with both ecological systems and diverse epistemologies. Sophie epitomizes this dynamic through her syncretic practice, combining Western science –her training in horticulture and collaboration with the Forestry Lab at the University of Victoria, whose research in tree genetic modification is yielding "promising" results (Campbell, 2022, p. 58)– with the land-based cosmology of the Ts'uubaa-asatx Nation, which understands relationality as an "endless flow of complex interactions and exchanges" (Acosta, 2017, p. 2605) premised on reciprocity and solidarity.

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When the Kaatza community joins Indigenous Benno in razing the abandoned suburbs to return land to nature, they enact what Potawatomi plant ecologist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer describes as a "gift economy" (2013, p. 28), whose currency is reciprocity. Sophie articulates this gift ethics when she remarks to Mason, "We lost what, ninety percent of our population to the mainland? So why not give it all back [to nature]?" (Campbell, 2022, p. 60). The regreening of Kaatza thus emerges not only as ecological restoration but also as the cultivation of resilient interspecies and communal bonds, grounding the possibility of a shared good life in practices of reciprocity and care.

This future-oriented optimism is tempered by the text's insistence on what has been irretrievably lost. Although Kaatza has managed to survive the worst years of the "Dark Age" (Campbell, 2022, p. 87), those who experienced the pre-collapse era recall it with unrelenting nostalgia. Set against the backdrop of food, medicine, clothing, and fuel shortages in the diegetic present, the story "Pub food" is suffused with longing for the comforts of the past. Sophie, caring for the terminally ill Jake, prepares a birthday meal that recalls the dishes of their youth. Yet even as she indulges in these memories, she is overwhelmed by "a grinding, rageful resentment" (Campbell, 2022, p. 78), echoing Kit's and Jude's students' earlier anger at the irresponsibility of past generations whose excess precipitated collapse. The inability to access technologies that once sustained life –and could have prolonged Jake's– underscores how care in the present is shadowed by the losses of the past. Sophie's gesture, however, also exemplifies the persistence of embodied, affective forms of care that endure even when infrastructures falter.

This intimate act of care resonates with broader frameworks of relational ethics. As María Puig de la Bellacasa argues, "the reciprocity of care is rarely bilateral" but functions as "a collective disseminated force" within assemblages of human, nonhuman, and technological entities, sustaining worlds as "a thick mesh of relational obligation" (2017, p. 20). Likewise, Donna Haraway's notion of *response-ability* calls for ethical "becoming-with other companion species" (2016, pp. 12–13). Sophie's attempt to nourish Jake through food thus prefigures the wider communal and ecological forms of care that culminate in the cycle's final story.

In "The cathedral arboreal" these intimate practices scale up into collective, intergenerational, and interspecies commitments. The Kaatza community, having cultivated new relations of reciprocity with the land, now welcomes a violinist and fourteen young scientists from the mainland, who style themselves as the Corps but are referred to as the Canadians, a name that reflects the islanders' alienation from a state that once abandoned them. Their mission is to compile an oral history about what it was like to live on the island through the worst years of "the Dark Age" (Campbell, 2022, p. 87). As in Dimaline, storytelling emerges here as an important caring mechanism, providing the tellers with a sense of community and belonging. Recording interviews appears also as a form of care on the part of the Canadians, involving the preservation of the identities, subjectivities, testimonies, and lived

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experiences of the tellers. From the stories, care emerges as an ethic of reciprocal respect, distributed across human and nonhuman actors alike.

The symbiotic permaculture developed on Vancouver Island finds its most potent symbol in the cathedral arboreal that Kit is "growing" through the technique of tree inosculation. Permaculture –sustainable, self-sufficient agricultural ecosystems built in collaboration with rather than in opposition to nature– directly challenges the modernist assumption of an ontological divide between nature and culture. It aligns with Haraway's insistence that "nature and culture are [to be] reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation or incorporation by the other" (1991, p. 151). These everyday practices of permaculture enact what Puig de la Bellacasa calls an *alterbiopolitics*, "an ethics of collective empowerment that puts caring at the heart of the search of everyday struggles for hopeful flourishing of all beings, of bios understood as a more than human community" (2017, p. 22). The cathedral arboreal thus crystallizes an alternative paradigm of resilience –one that resists the Anthropocene's technocratic logics by foregrounding care, reciprocity, and interdependence.

For Kit, the cathedral represents far more than his "vision of a human life that was part of all the teeming kingdoms below ground and in the sky above" (Campbell, 2022, p. 106). It embodies a redefinition of the good life as the cumulative outcome of entangled human and nonhuman agencies. The cathedral arboreal therefore signifies a cosmopolitical ethic that both resonates with Indigenous traditions of reciprocity and enacts new materialist commitments to nurturing more life through multispecies relationality.

By contrast, the Corps' emphasis on deploying advanced technologies to manage nature on a planetary scale perpetuates what critics identify as the resilience discourse of the Anthropocene: the conviction that "modernity's problems can be fixed with more modernity" (Machado de Oliveira, 2021, p. 24). Their algae-farming project in Lake Ontario –designed to mitigate global warming but causing the collapse of aquatic ecosystems– reveals resilience as a technocratic strategy of adaptation-through-damage, justified as "the cost of recovery" (Campbell, 2022, p. 94). While recognizing the validity of science and technology, this orientation functions to normalize crisis and endless adaptation to destructive systems, rather than systemic transformation. In stark contrast, the nature–culture syncretism cultivated in Kaatza reimagines resilience as a decolonial and ecological ethic of care, reciprocity, and collective renewal across human and more-than-human worlds.

4. CONCLUSION

Both Dimaline and Campbell critique unbridled extractive capitalism and turn instead to alternative visions of living well that have the potential to foster not just more life but all life at a time of profound ecological disruption. As *biskaabiiyang* narratives, *The marrow thieves*

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and *Hunting by stars* respond to a category of Indigenous futurism that mobilizes Indigenous ancestral values and cosmologies through an emphasis on language and story, song, dance, dreaming, and ceremony to support a view of the good life as continuous rebirth. Unraveling the protagonists' journey from Indigenous dispossession, exploitation, and annihilation to Indigenous resurgence, these novels envision the possibility of the good life in the ability to rebound as self-determined nations *outside* the structures of settler colonialism and in interconnection with the land.

In turn, the modernist master narrative of the good life based on human progress ideals that sever nature from culture is reworked in Campbell's *Arboreality* by weaving intersecting narratives that combine Indigenous and critical new materialist perspectives on care ethics and practices. In the process, *Arboreality* exposes the damage caused by extractivist capitalism and foregrounds the need to understand the relationality inherent in the reproduction of life and wellbeing. The book's Anthropocene stories work toward an ecology of knowledge that juggles modern knowledge, an awareness of ethical *response-ability*, and Indigenous cosmologies.

Neither Dimaline nor Campbell provide finished utopian imaginaries, but rather they speculate about how damaged worlds may struggle to regain some sort of balance and harmony. The good life as a permanent state of wellbeing continues to be an aspiration rather than a reality. Therefore, from their distinct cultural backgrounds, both authors move beyond critique to imagine hopeful reworkings of the notion of the good life as forms of regenerative care ethics and practice that allow for life renewal and healing, even while staying with the trouble –to tweak the title of Haraway's well-known book– of anthropogenic climate change and its embedded crises.

NOTES

[i] The attribution of this metaphor to Mead remains unverified and is best regarded as apocryphal, as reliable evidence that she actually said this is lacking. The first known reference in print appears in Philip Yancey and Paul Brand's book *Fearfully and wonderfully made* (1980, p. 82) recounting a lecture Mead allegedly gave. The story has since proliferated through secondary sources.

[ii] For a multi-perspectival analysis of affect in narrative de/constructions of the good life, see Llarena-Ascanio and Caporale, eds. (2023).

[iii] Understood as "violent logic of taking resources—without reciprocity, without stewardship" (Durante, Kröger, & LaFleur, 2021, p. 20) at a high rate and on a large scale, extractivism usually generates profit for distant capital and does irreparable damage to the land, waters, and forests vital to local communities, leading to increased poverty, social unrest, violence, and inequality. Thus, far from achieving the ideal of the good life for all, extractivism curtails its fulfillment for large portions of the population.

[iv] The Seven Generations Principle is articulated in the Great Law of the Haudenosaunee, the founding document of the Iroquois Confederacy, which declares, "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact [of our decisions] on the seven generations from now" (LaDuke, 1994, p. 198). See also Daniel Heath Justice (2018, pp. 113–156).

[v] For an analysis of *Arboreality*'s use of nonlinear narrative models as aligned to understandings of the Anthropocene as a mesh, see Fraile-Marcos (2025).

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[vi] *Cowichan* is the anglicized rendering of the Hul'q'umi'num' name Quw'utsun, which refers to the peoples living under Shquw'utsun (Mount Tzouhalem). Yet, in a characteristic colonial gesture of territorial appropriation, settlers have used the term since the 1800s to designate various geographic locations in what is now known as the Cowichan Valley –stripping it of its original referent. *Kaatza* is the Quw'utsun name for the Cowichan Lake, meaning simply "the lake".

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The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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