The Wolf in the Woods: Ontological Concerns in *Empire of Wild*

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Abstract

A close reading of the cause and treatment of lycanthropy in Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild* is used to discuss differences between Indigenous and Western views on justice, community, monstrosity, and human nature. Utilizing Rupert Ross's *Returning to the Teaching: Exploring Aboriginal Justice* to provide first-hand understanding of Indigenous justice concepts, *Empire of Wild* uses myth to provide a moral impetus for community-driven justice models. This paper looks at how myth is integrated into the story, how it differs from other lycanthrope myths, and what the ramifications of that difference means for both the plot and message of *Empire of Wild*.

The exploration of monstrosity in Cherie Dimaline's *Empire of Wild* delves deeply into Indigenous worldviews, providing readers a rich expression of these ideologies without requiring extensive prior experience. The story follows Joan, a Métis woman of Arcand, Ontario on Georgian Bay, whose husband, Victor, disappears following a fight. Wandering into a revivalist tent shortly afterwards, Joan finds Victor preaching from the pulpit. Upon confronting him, she discovers he has no idea who she is. Joan's grandmother Ajean warns her that Victor may have become a rogaru, a Métis lycanthrope, or werewolf. Joan sets out with her nephew, Zeus, to pursue the revivalists, uncovering a conspiracy to purchase land from Indigenous communities for oil drilling. Recalling the rampant economic and religious colonialization of Canadian history, *Empire of Wild* is a compelling modernization of the Métis rogaru myth whose core tenet remains relevant today: in the face of ever-advancing colonialism, anyone pulled from community is a victim, not a traitor.

Any tale dealing with the mythical must work within that myth's conventions. The rogaru of *Empire of Wild*—a half-human, half-wolf creature—adheres closely to the original myth. In the prologue, Dimaline establishes a laundry list of social taboos which lead to the appearance of a rogaru:

> Broke Lent? *The rogaru will come for you*.
> Slept with a married woman? *The rogaru will come for you*.
> Talked back to your mom in the heat of the moment? *Don't walk home. The rogaru will come for you.*
> Hit a woman under any circumstance? *Rogaru will call you family, soon…*
> (Dimaline 3)

The last warning reveals the crux of the myth: a person estranged from humanity becomes simultaneously adopted by monstrosity. Being called family by the rogaru implies an inherent link between humankind and monstrosity. *Empire of Wild*'s many 'Victor in the Woods' chapters explore this duality through an unfolding drama of domination and submission acted out between human and monster in the pocket universe of Victor's mind. In contrast, the antecedent '*loup garou'* myth from France operates on a premise of straightforward viral transmission. A helpless victim is attacked and subsequently succumbs to a monstrosity that has been transferred onto them. While *Empire of Wild*'s rogaru does repeatedly chase and attack Victor, this is not the cause

of his transformation. Rather, transformation is the consequence of his struggle with an inherent monstrous nature. He doesn't encounter the rogaru; he manifests it from within. Dimaline retains the original framework of the rogaru myth: monstrosity is a failing of humankind to consider how our actions will affect others.

Empire of Wild's rogaru is an individual estranged from community. This monster reflects Rupert Ross's summation of Indigenous ontologies as being "about how things work together in systems" (64). Monstrosity is one outcome of being unable to operate harmoniously within these systems. Breaking community taboos is a common theme amongst Indigenous monster myths, seen in the Algonquin *wendigo*, Athabaskan *wechuge*, the Mi'kmaq *jenu*, or the Shoshone *nimerigar*. Ajean's reminder that Victor "didn't grow up in community," foreshadows his transformation (Dimaline 84). She reminds Joan that Victor is "not bad, just not right" (85). Whereas European lycanthropy myths center on punishing (killing) the monster, Dimaline faithfully frames hers through the Métis lens of saving a victim. To cure Victor of his monstrosity, Ajean tells Joan she must "go get her man from that wolf" (70). In place of Western retribution, Dimaline relies on Indigenous concepts of redemption as an answer to wrongdoing.

By internalizing monstrosity, *Empire of Wild*'s plot is less invested in archetypal antagonist/protagonist roles than it is in exploring consequences arising from disparate personal ambitions. At the heart of *Empire of Wild*, Victor must choose to continue to support his community by tending to his land or harm his community by selling it to colonial interests. Joan and Heiser's dichotomy represents Victor's internal dilemma. Rather than framing Heiser and Joan in opposition to each other, however, Dimaline sets both up as protagonists working towards winning Victor. Heiser as the European, moneyed, manipulative Christian comfortably wears a metaphor of the colonialist pressures Indigenous cultures have continually faced throughout Canada's history. Joan, on the other hand, represents the need for a continuation of traditional culture and a place of acceptance for Victor through his life. Both are a form of freedom for Victor. The rogaru haunts *Empire of Wild*'s pages because of the struggle he faces in choosing between them. The novel's larger plot, however, results from more than just Victor's dilemma. Without Heiser's assistant Cecile's driving need for acceptance, the final confrontation with Heiser wouldn't be possible. Without Robe, the original rogaru Heiser brings to Arcand, needing to flee from a traumatic past, the rogaru wouldn't exist in the first place. Without Jimmy's inability to connect with his wife and son, Zeus wouldn't succumb to the cycle of monstrosity at the close of the novel. The characters of *Empire of Wild* are not wholly monstrous, but their focus on self-interest perpetuates monsters. Their motivations create a plot of interdependent consequences, echoing Ross's words that "every action [in indigenous worldviews] is seen as flowing out of a large and powerful web of events" (220). There is no one person more important to save from their darker side than any other, Dimaline's plot posits.

Empire of Wild's most poignant insight into Indigenous worldviews is its exploration of fallibility. Ross writes that Indigenous ontologies "emphasize energies, forces, and patterns" (125). The web-like interconnectedness of its plot makes *Empire of Wild* an excellent example of these patterns. *Fate* doesn't adequately explain consequences in this framework. *Result* is more fitting. For example, Joan saves Victor from Heiser, but the result is that she leaves Zeus vulnerable to Robe. The novel ends with the rogaru still haunting Arcand even though Victor is saved because

both the internal and external forces acting against Métis communities are ongoing. The inherent fallibility of humanity creates and perpetuates the rogaru: Joan must choose between Victor and Zeus, Victor must choose between profit and community, and Cecile must choose between power and connection.

Dimaline's story underscores how human actions ripple with consequences no one individual intends. *Empire of Wild* reinforces Ross' claim that "great numbers of people are pulled into the pain" of trauma (*Returning to the Teachings,* p. 180). It insists that maintenance of a community's health must hold priority over personal desires to mitigate this pain.

Inter-generational trauma, an insistence in Western culture on individual healing, and a justice system that marginalizes already-marginalized groups are all everyday realities for many Indigenous people, but *Empire of Wild* provides a strong reminder that "wrongdoing is a misbehaviour which requires teaching or an illness which requires healing" (Dimaline 132). There is more to think about than just ourselves. Hinting at the wisdom of Indigenous perspectives, the argument is surprisingly modern, aligning with emerging attitudes towards community's role in mental health, addiction, and trauma-informed justice. Cherie Dimaline's treatment of the rogaru myth elegantly highlights the monster inside each of us and how being severed from community is the surest way to cause that monster to rise to the surface.

Works Cited

Dimaline, Cherie. *Empire of Wild*. Vintage Canada, 2019.

Ross, Rupert. *Returning to the Teachings: Exploring Aboriginal Justice.* Penguin, 2006.