

RISK, MORTALITY, AND MEMORY: THE GLOBAL  
IMAGINARIES OF CHERIE DIMALINE'S *THE MARROW  
THIEVES*, M.G. VASSANJI'S *NOSTALGIA*, AND  
ANDRÉ ALEXIS'S *FIFTEEN DOGS*\*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines three contemporary Canadian novels that depict global risk society through a speculative fictional form that asks the question “What if?” Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) and M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* (2016) imagine dystopian worlds ravaged by climate change to critique humanist ideals of Progress. André Alexis’s *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) uses the animal fable to address what it means to be a mortal animal. Each asks what an awareness of risk means for agency and ethics: for Indigenous people in *The Marrow Thieves*; for Torontonians in the context of a heightened global apartheid in *Nostalgia*; and for dogs wrestling with a god-granted human intelligence in the contemporary Toronto of *Fifteen Dogs*. In negotiating risk, each fiction turns to the roles of memory, creativity, and alternative forms of subjectivity and community in ensuring survival. Each novel finds fragile yet necessary steps toward alternative futures in the ability to imagine otherwise.

KEYWORDS: global Imaginaries, risk society, mortality, memory, community, art, Canadian speculative fiction.

RIESGO, MORTALIDAD Y MEMORIA: LOS IMAGINARIOS GLOBALES  
DE CHERIE DIMALINE EN *THE MARROW THIEVES*, M.G. VASSANJI  
EN *NOSTALGIA* Y ANDRÉ ALEXIS EN *FIFTEEN DOGS*

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina tres novelas canadienses contemporáneas basadas en la sociedad del riesgo global usando un modo ficticio especulativo que inquiere: «¿Qué pasaría si?» *The Marrow Thieves* (2017), de Cherie Dimaline, y *Nostalgia* (2016), de M.G. Vassanji, imaginan sociedades distópicas devastadas por el cambio climático para analizar los ideales humanistas del Progreso. *Fifteen Dogs* (2015), de André Alexis, usa la fábula animal para abordar qué significa ser un animal mortal. Cada una profundiza en las implicaciones de una conciencia de riesgo para la agentividad y la ética: para los pueblos indígenas en *The Marrow Thieves*; para los habitantes de Toronto en el contexto de un apartheid global intensificado en *Nostalgia*; y para los perros que luchan con una inteligencia humana otorgada por Dios en el Toronto contemporáneo de *Fifteen Dogs*. Al negociar el riesgo, cada ficción recurre al papel de la memoria, la creatividad y las formas alternativas de subjetividad y comunidad para garantizar la supervivencia. Las tres narrativas dan pasos sutiles, aunque necesarios, hacia futuros alternativos con la habilidad de imaginar de una forma distinta.

PALABRAS CLAVE: imaginarios globales, sociedad del riesgo, mortalidad, memoria, comunidad, arte, ficción especulativa canadiense.



## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines three contemporary Canadian novels to consider the ways they depict global risk society (as theorized by Ulrich Beck) in relation to key issues of enduring concern for Canadian society that are taking new forms as a result of changing world dynamics. Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* (2017) is a post-Truth and Reconciliation dystopia that addresses the continuing heritage of settler colonialism and its residential school system to locate survival for Indigenous communities in a restoration of community and language through a renewed relation to the land. M.G. Vassanji's *Nostalgia* (2016), also a dystopia, addresses the post-9/11 security state in the context of shifting border imaginaries, intensified internet surveillance, and multicultural religious engagements with human mortality, reincarnation, and promises of immortality both religious and technological. André Alexis subtitled *Fifteen Dogs* (2015) "an apologue", locating its story within the Greco-Roman tradition of the moral, animal fable to address universal questions about the meaning of life, art, nature and nurture. Each asks what an awareness of risk means for agency and ethics: for Indigenous people fleeing urban areas for the Canadian north in the dystopian future of *The Marrow Thieves*; for inhabitants of Toronto in the context of a heightened global apartheid in *Nostalgia*; and for dogs wrestling with the burdens and pleasures of a god-granted human self-consciousness in the contemporary Toronto of *Fifteen Dogs*. Each asks about the meaning of life in the awareness of imminent death and what survives the individual.

Looking back on history, contemporary scholars are now emphasizing what postcolonial scholarship always knew. In a 2018 article, "Postcolonial Theories as Global Critical Theories" Ina Kerner usefully outlines the methodological approach I take here. In her view, postcolonial theories bring four important features to global critique: "the transcendence of methodological nationalism and Eurocentrism, self-reflexivity, transdisciplinarity, and an emancipatory, transformative agenda" (1). She outlines a program that integrates the attention paid in postcolonial studies to colonial history, global entanglements, and global power relations (4). To this, I would add only the reminder that such features characterize much fiction as well as theory deriving from colonial relations such as current struggles within Canada to acknowledge and decolonize its settler colonial legacies and renew its democracy. Kerner further points out that the kinds of postcolonial theorizing endorsed in her article "draw on Western as well as non-Western thought in order to address problems of our postcolonial present, and to shed light on the discursive and institutional formations that brought them into being and that enable them to live on" (4). Each of the texts chosen for analysis here demonstrates the ways in

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which certain elements of such critique function in fictional form. If there are any answers to be found in these texts, they are not to be found in politics or economics. They reside in the human needs for creativity, art, and connection. Nation-states are depicted as no longer meeting such needs, yet there is little beyond small scale regroupings to supply them.

Each fiction begins with a speculative inquiry based on asking the question: “What if?” But unlike much speculative fiction, they do not ask “what if the world were different?” Instead, they ask how a shift in the current order might enable a deeper insight into the way things are, heightening and intensifying understanding of what already is, and leaving the future open for readers to negotiate. Cherie Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* and M.G. Vassanji’s *Nostalgia* depict imagined near futures continuous with colonial and capitalist exploitations of the past, where the ravages of climate change are inequitably distributed among the poor and the racialized. André Alexis’s *Fifteen Dogs* raises questions about identity, ownership, and belonging that are taking on new resonance in the context of contemporary posthumanism and animal studies. Each in its own way questions humanist exclusions of racialized or animalized others, while leaving other categories of marginalization, such as constructions of women, intact. *The Marrow Thieves* and *Nostalgia* are told in the first person; *Fifteen Dogs* by an omniscient narrator who has access to the actions and inner thoughts of gods, dogs, and humans. In form and the reading experiences they offer, their dissimilarities are striking. Yet each provides insight into some of the diversity of Canadian global imaginaries in the present.

As noted by Walter D. Mignolo, referencing Edouard Glissant, “the imaginary is all the ways a culture has of perceiving and conceiving of the world” (Mignolo 23). The globality of *The Marrow Thieves* may be understood through Mignolo’s understanding of the “modern/colonial world system” in terms of “internal and external borders rather than centers, semiperipheries, and peripheries,” Mignolo explains that these “are not discrete entities but rather moments of a continuum in colonial expansion and in changes of national imperial hegemonies” (33). The globality of *Nostalgia* engages in a similar attention to shifting internal and external borders, mediating between colonialisms old and new, encompassing transnational migration, and ongoing friction between Eurocentric America and its others. *Fifteen Dogs* explores the borders between species as it oscillates between the planetary perspectives of the Greco-Roman universe and the small-scale relations between humans and dogs in contemporary Toronto. Three globalization theorists in particular provide me with insight into these texts. In a series of books, *Risk Society* (1992), *World Risk Society* (1999) and *World at Risk* (2009), Beck provides insights into how perceptions of risk have evolved in response to globalizing processes. In addressing how each of these novels postulates risk, I am further influenced by Arjun Appadurai’s belief that globalization is providing the world with “a new role for the imagination in social life” (4). Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s validation of the productivity of friction and her attentiveness to the centrality of scale in understanding global connections also underlies the analysis that follows.



## 2. DIMALINE'S *THE MARROW THIEVES*: AN INDIGENOUS DYSTOPIA

Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves* is a Métis-authored dystopia that is addressed to young adults but rewarding for all readers. A young boy tells about his participation in the flight of Indigenous peoples from settled areas to find hoped-for survival in Canada's North. Along with *Nostalgia* and *Fifteen Dogs*, it employs a version of what Darko Suvin identifies as a "novum," an innovation "validated by cognitive logic" (63), which in his view is a distinguishing feature of science fiction, a genre that includes the kind of dystopian and speculative fictions embraced by Dimaline, Vassanji, and even Alexis because each is "interpretable only within the scientific or cognitive horizon" (67). For Suvin, it is the novum that is the determining feature. If "the novum, is hegemonic, that is, so central and significant that it determines the whole narrative logic" (70), then the alternate reality created meets his terms for the genre. In *The Marrow Thieves* and *Nostalgia*, the novum is a scientific invention designed to prolong certain human lives at the expense of others in a fundamentally unequal society. In *Fifteen Dogs*, the triggering intervention is presumed to be divine rather than scientific in origin but it too serves to alter presumed natural functions, in this case mingling canine memory with human intelligence in the minds of the dogs. In each case, cognitive estrangement is created, casting mortality and immortality, local and global, in a new light.

The novum upon which the dystopic vision of *The Marrow Thieves* is premised is the invention of a device that kills indigenous people to steal their dreams in order to heal members of the dominant Canadian society who have lost the ability to dream. The plot describes a future of continued colonial oppression in which Canadian government Recruiters incarcerate Indigenous people for processing in a system "based on the old residential school system" (5). Older Métis forced to flee refer to the pressure as a "New Road Allowance" (6). Families and individual refugees flee north, where they hope they will "find home" (6).

Whereas earlier colonial dispossession took the land and children's bodies to "kill the Indian in the child" (Young), this new colonial system literally crushes people to death, distilling their bone marrow to steal their ability to dream. What enables such violence is the continuing belief that "they don't think of us [Indigenous people] as human, just commodities" (203). In other words, there is a global context of intensified exploitation and misery built upon taking colonial modernity and its capitalist system of structured inequalities to its logical conclusion. Perhaps this is why the only allies to the Indigenous struggle are the two black nurses who help the Indigenous leader Isaac, whom his husband Miigwaan has thought dead, to escape the government facilities. The young narrator, French, recognizes these nurses as Guyanese by their speech, recalling that "After the weather got violent and the islands were battered, the West Indian population here had swollen" (223).<sup>1</sup> Even

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<sup>1</sup> Guyana is not an island but it is a mainland territory usually grouped with the British West Indies. This error may remind us that French's education has been cut short by the attacks



within the challenges wrought by climate change, the dominant struggle is between imperialist/capitalist/white hegemony and the resurgent colonized of the world.

I see *The Marrow Thieves* as participating in contemporary global discussions about the future that the dominant global system of dispossession, dehumanization, and climate change denial is preparing for everyone, if on a highly inequitable and differential basis. Yet despite the traumatic stories of each of the people who come together in their desperate flight north, the book provides hope through the communal bonds they forge and through their rediscovery of the ancestral wisdom built into their ancient Cree language, its songs, and the alternative understandings it encodes. The elder who embodies their hope is a fluent speaker, and that gives her enormous power of resistance. Her dying word to them is “Kiiwen... go home” (211) yet her own name is Minerva, after the Roman goddess of wisdom. Is there hope here for some pre-Christian global restructuring on an alternative basis, returning people wherever they are to ways of reciprocal respect and dwelling with the land? *The Marrow Thieves* is about the quest for home and for family, and it finds the key to that search in the wisdom of the elders and the indigenous language through which it is expressed. But it is not a backward-looking search. The characters make family within and beyond traditional notions of filiation and compulsory heterosexuality. In this sense, they “make kin” along lines advocated by Donna Haraway, when she argues: “My purpose is to make ‘kin’ mean something other/more than entities tied by ancestry or genealogy” (“Anthropocene” 161). Survival for Dimoline’s characters comes through a remade community, renewing traditional bonds and forging new ones.

### 3. VASSANJI’S NOSTALGIA: A SYMPTOM OF OUR TIMES?

In its focus on embodiment, spirituality, wonder, and power within a dystopian near future, *The Marrow Thieves* is part of a current global trend, in which the “necropower” (Mbembe) of state and global forces is both experienced and resisted through the body. Mbembe concludes his influential essay by discussing the creation of “*death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead” (40 italics in original). This describes the status of Indigenous peoples fighting for survival in *The Marrow Thieves* and that of the inhabitants of the fictional Maskinia beyond “the Long Border” in *Nostalgia* (12), but it also haunts those in the First World who have undergone a process termed “rejuvenation”. The novum here is the medical innovation that enables prolonged, almost endless life through the eradication of old memories and the installation of new ones in new bodies. In many ways, as the two central characters of Frank Sina and Presley Smith experience

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but also, perhaps, that Canadians remain somewhat insular, with little knowledge of the rest of the world.



it, life after such a process is another kind of “death world”. The process is expensive, and thus only available to those who can afford it, or as readers learn later, to those the state wishes to neutralize, such as Sina and Smith. The title of the novel refers to a glitch in this new system in which old memories leak out to compromise the implanted identities. In this way, *Nostalgia* locates necropolitical state power in the body, not just through its ability to rewrite the identities of those it deems threats, but also through the novel’s presentation of nostalgia. Here, nostalgia is not presented as a characteristic of particular individuals but rather as “a cultural practice, not a given content ... [which] depends on where the speaker stands in the landscape of the present” (Stewart 253). Nostalgia takes various forms in the text but it is always a relation of power. Designed to mitigate risk from a state perspective, it also creates new threats.

These threats take two forms. On the one hand, from the state perspective, difference and dissent are by definition threats to state security, which it seeks to neutralize. This is a view of nostalgia as a form of double loyalty associated with immigrants that the novel critiques. At the same time, Vassanji shows the ways in which the mechanisms of the security state, particularly its use of artificial intelligence, threatens not only individual lives but also their genuine forms of community-making that embrace diversity over conformity. Vassanji has expressed his impatience with “academics who work with formulas”, adding that “[i]n Canada the formulaic and simple-minded terms (in relation to writers or writing) ‘immigrant,’ ‘multicultural,’ ‘nostalgic’ are often used and are quite infuriating” (Desai 197). I see *Nostalgia* challenging such stereotypical views of immigrants as always nostalgic for a lost homeland, while also confirming Svetlana Boym’s insight (as summarized by Timothy Bewes), that nostalgia is “not an individual sickness but ‘a historical emotion,’ a symptom of our age; a yearning for a different time as much as a faraway place” (Bewes 167). In this sense, nostalgia functions as a global imaginary in this text. Later in the paper, I will analyze how the dog, Atticus, expresses such a yearning for a lost idealized world in response to a complex present of dramatic change in *Fifteen Dogs*.

*Nostalgia*’s first-person narrator, Dr. Frank Sina, first takes a medicalized and individualist view of nostalgia as a sickness that science has not yet learned to eradicate completely. He defines it as a bodily ailment in which submerged memories resurface to cause severe mental distress. Along with the other doctors and expert technicians of his future time, he calls it “Leaked memory syndrome,” and defines it as “a malady of the human condition in its present historic phase”, explaining that “Reminders of our discarded lives can not [sic] yet be completely blocked [...]” (5). Yet as his story unfolds, the novel reveals that what the state sees as an inability to adapt on the part of some of its citizens in fact affords a clearer analysis of the injustices that prevail.

If designated disposable bodies are crushed for their essence to revive the privileged and enable their sleep in *The Marrow Thieves*, then in *Nostalgia*, it seems at first that the patterns are reversed. In this future society, the rich in the First World, beyond the “Long Border” (12) that separates them from a devastated Mas-kinia, can pay to discard their old lives, renovating their bodies and their minds into



new, more pleasing forms for longer term survival, while the poor and the young are doomed to live and die a single life. These local inequities are troubling enough in their many implications for thinking about human identity and social justice. However, a more sinister story is gradually revealed, as both Sina and his patient, Smith, learn that they too, as previous inhabitants of the colony, Maskinia, have been involuntarily transformed through this process, treated as disposable lives and deprived of their previous identities in pre-emptive strikes to ensure the supposed security of the colonial state. Years earlier, when Amirul, described as “The Warrior” in Sina’s journal (written secretly after he learns the truth) had arrived on a secret mission from Maskinia, he was captured and disappeared, to emerge years later as the fictional creation (named Presley Smith) of the sinister Dr. Arthur Axe. Sina too has a manufactured past and a new, prolonged life courtesy of Dr. Axe. Only later does Sina learn that he is (or was originally) Amirul’s cousin, Elim, an idealistic doctor and teacher who was also made to disappear when he travelled to the West to negotiate Amirul’s release in a prisoner exchange many years ago (222).

In other words, the new technology enabling the erasure of earlier identities in the service of prolonging life also works as a military device for making pre-emptive strikes against anything imagined to be a threat to the current order. The Orwellian echoes of *1984*, possibly signaled by the new last name, “Smith,” assigned to Amirul, seem very clear. This is a society that employs a form of doublespeak in casting the total obliteration of memory as a blessing rather than a curse. Its employment of tactics for destroying memory and use of computer screens to monitor thinking are more advanced, but work on the same principles as the systems employed in *1984*. Ironically, Sina feels nostalgia for the false memories implanted by Dr. Axe (55). What he feels for Maskinia is more complex and changes during the course of his discoveries. In contrast to his own mercenary relationship with Joanie, he imagines Maskinia as a place of warm communal attachments and shared purpose, if not without its own gender-based violence, food insecurities, hazardous waste (courtesy of a defective nuclear reactor made in Canada), and fears of imminent attack.

Sina (Elim in an earlier life) is both a version of Dr. Frankenstein, in the work he currently performs, which links him to Arthur Axe, and also, like Smith, a version of Shelley’s Creature, himself the creation of Axe (whom he calls “the mysterious Author X” [182]) before he learns his actual name). Of X’s creations he writes “there is one signature this author leaves, where he deliberately, a conceited god, gives himself away—the sophisticated, cunning allusions that don’t sound quite right (51). They can be found in both Smith’s and Sina’s profiles, emphasizing their patchworked composition.<sup>2</sup> Both Dimaline and Vassanji express a deep suspicion of where humanity’s technological inventiveness is taking the human race and the earth on which we depend for our lives. In *Nostalgia*, just as the old individual self

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<sup>2</sup> Of Smith, Sina writes: “It looked as though more than one résumé or personality had been scrambled together” (26). There is a mistake in Sina’s biography, listing him as born in Yellowknife, Yukon, but Yellowknife is not in Yukon (28).



is cut off from access to the new, until those constructed borders are breached by a mysterious phrase, “It’s midnight, the lion is out” (1), so the world of a future Toronto, in which the action takes place, is separated from the devastated third world colony of Maskinia by a rigidly policed border. Sina writes: “That war-torn country lies safely away from us behind the Long Border, and yet it never ceases to preoccupy us” (12). He continues: “It’s our Other, our Id [...] our constant dark companion on the bright path of our progress” (12). Nuclear devastation, hunger, extreme poverty, all appear to be confined behind that Border, which is policed not just by the military and its surveillance systems but also by a media that maintains its racist justifications and encourages public complacency in the West. Civilized and savage construct one another; indeed, the obnoxious television host calls Maskinia, Barberia (recalling Canada’s previous government’s invocation of “barbaric customs”). The colonial relation of “intimate enemy” identified by Ashis Nandy, morphs with technological interventions into ever more sophisticated forms, as Sina initially internalizes and expresses the implanted racisms and beliefs that characterize his Toronto world, until his leaking memory gives him access to fragments of his lost self. Through the stories of Sina, Smith, and the journalist, Holly Chu, the novel shows how, “under conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred” (Mbembe 40).

Their stories complicate binaries of Us and Them in troubling ways. Sina learns he was wrong in assuming that “Progress proceeds one way –forward” (123). In an effort to evade the ever-present surveillance and preserve a record of his story, he reverts to handwriting, turning to the old ways as do the central characters in *The Marrow Thieves*. Just as *The Marrow Thieves* is ultimately concerned with the entangled health of the soul of a people and the individual persons who comprise it, so *Nostalgia* asks, through Sina: “Can the soul (or the heart) be transmitted across generations?” (85). By the end of his story, and through its continuities with that of the journalist Holly Chu, it seems possibly so. The book’s epigraph from the *Aeneid* first poses this question through its depiction of “spirits destined to live a second life/in the body.” Different theories of reincarnation, derived from Hinduism and Buddhism, motivate other characters in the text (94), further complicating Sina’s secular story and its investigations of how past traumas and ideals may survive into the present.

In *Nostalgia*, as in *The Marrow Thieves*, the technologies of the future reproduce (and possibly represent) the colonial strategies of control, taken to a higher level. Just as the Residential and colonial schools took children from families at an early age, cut them off from language and tradition, and instilled new understandings of their identity, as lesser others, so Elim and Amirul’s consciences were voided so that they could become colonialism’s “mimic men”: the ideal immigrants who express and share colonialism’s willful amnesia about the violence of colonization in return for a small part of its privilege. Yet that amnesia is leaky and memories return to challenge the view of Canada as a multicultural utopia. Those memories are not, however, a nostalgic return to an idealized past but only fragments resonant with loss. In the end, both Sina and Smith choose death over rejuvenation into new false identities. Two other characters choose suicide in search of a better life, one





through the new technology, the other through a spiritual belief in reincarnation. Sina keeps asking himself why, when he has everything a person could need, he is not happy. Radha, the one character in *Nostalgia* who generates happiness (204) believes “all life is connected” (210) and shows Sina “alternative ways of perceiving the world” (211) beyond his own “materialist faith” (211). He can acknowledge her views but “cannot quite understand them (211). What he learns is what Dionne Brand’s poet-speaker claims in her long poem *Inventory*: “happiness is not the point really it’s a marvel, / an accusation in our time [...]” (100). Although Brand’s poem celebrates the “marvel” when it unexpectedly appears, within the global contexts of destruction invoked by her poem, even happiness functions more powerfully as an “accusation”.

#### 4. ANDRÉ ALEXIS’S *FIFTEEN DOGS*: IMAGINING BEYOND MASTERY

If Indigenous people and Maskinians are denied full humanity according to Eurocentric standards, and treated as disposable people in these texts, then dogs fulfill this function in *Fifteen Dogs*. To turn from Sina’s dystopian Toronto to Alexis’s apologue, *Fifteen Dogs*, is to turn to a different way of engaging similar questions about the meaning of life, the nature and value of happiness, and especially the nature of human consciousness. As the novel’s epigraph from Pablo Neruda’s “Ode to a Dog” suggests, the central question in this novel is “why?” – “why is there day, why must night come [...]”. To pose this question, *Fifteen Dogs* first asks: what if? What if dogs were granted the human consciousness necessary to ask Neruda’s question? What light might such an intervention throw on the conventionally understood borders separating the divine, the human, and the canine? This novel’s *novum* involves a wager between Apollo and Hermes made in a contemporary Toronto tavern. Arguing in “ancient Greek,” they speculate about “the nature of humans” (13). Wondering “what it would be like if animals had human intelligence” (14), and arguing whether such an attribute would be a “difficult gift” (Hermes) or “an occasionally useful plague” (Apollo), they grant “human intelligence” (15) to the fifteen random dogs they find in a clinic nearby. Their test for winning the wager is whether or not any one of the dogs granted such a gift will die happy.

At a time when several African-descendent writers are choosing to locate African gods in North American settings, as Nalo Hopkinson does in *Brown Girl in the Ring* (1998), Alexis chooses ancient Greek gods for his intervention and the classical apologue for his literary form. Even more so than Vassanji, Alexis has always refused stereotyping as either an immigrant or a racialized writer. He claims this Greco-Roman heritage for himself and feels free to imagine present-day Toronto as the laboratory for their experiment. This novel is intensely local in that it takes place entirely in Toronto, for which local maps appear at the front of the text. Yet it is also global in that it imports Greek gods to influence a local story, incorporates their planetary perspectives, and asks questions about the meaning of life that are generally accepted as universal. Alexis suggests that any city is “a correlative of the minds that made it” (91). His fifteen dogs and the humans they encounter reveal



the imagination of the city as he conceives it, as experienced from a dog's eye view, in which smells take precedence over other modes of engagement.

Both the dogs' relations among themselves and their relations to humans are upset by the gods' experiment, but I would argue that even more than a new language and a new form of thinking, the deepest change for the dogs stems from the gods' careless decision to allow them to retain their memories. As in Dimaline's and Vassanji's texts, memory plays a dual role as both an enabling and an inhibiting resource, depending on how it is mobilized to deal with change. Previously established borders between canine and human become confused with the god's gift, and memory intensifies this confusion. The dogs remember, and then increasingly think they remember, what it feels like to be a dog without this new gift.

Certain dimensions of dog experience remain unchanged. Working through his unhappiness, Atticus realizes he still has key elements of the canine that make him a dog: he has his senses; his physical self is unchanged. Using his new human intelligence, he concludes that the canine in him was "being obscured by the new thinking, the new perspectives, the new words" (93). These new elements cloud his ability to access his old self, which he increasingly recalls with a crippling nostalgia. If language proves the key to home in Dimaline's and Vassanji's novels, then it is language that Atticus believes denies him the old ways of being.

The text may be read as inviting a collision between allegorical and posthumanist modes of reading. As in conventional apologues, the dogs function as analogues for human tendencies. But the text's insistence on the qualities of dogs that they still exhibit makes it difficult to see them as simply symbols for something else. Humans and dogs may both be animals but in this text, there is an insistence on dogs as their own kind of animal. There is so much of them that still belongs to the world of dogs, and distinguishes them from humans, that they are still dogs, even if they are dogs placed in a peculiarly difficult situation. In particular, while each has been a companion animal with a human "master" before the transformation, that role is not seen as defining in this text. Despite generations of domestication, these dogs do not on the whole see their relations with humans as either definitive or even primary, even though some of the intertexts their experiences suggest may privilege that relation.

Once granted human intelligence, the dogs may remind readers of Franz Kafka's Red Peter from the story, "A Report to an Academy", as discussed by J.M. Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals*. There is a similar insistence on the animality shared by animals and humans as well as a certain respect for their embodied difference. *Fifteen Dogs* might also be read as in part a response to the first question explored in Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (2003). Haraway asks: "1) how might an ethics and politics committed to the flourishing of significant otherness be learned from taking dog-human relationships seriously" (3). This question seems most relevant to the relationship between the human Nira and the dog Majnoun but otherwise does not seem to be centrally what *Fifteen Dogs* explores. Its central interest seems to lie in the reciprocal relations between mortality and creativity. Yet the question of embodied identity and what Haraway calls "naturecultures" (1, 3) certainly inflects this text's



attitudes to ethics, reciprocity, and art. If the story of Majnoun and Nira seems to suggest the ethics of what Haraway terms elsewhere “making kin,” then the story of the opportunistic dog Benjy shows its limits. Yet even here, Majnoun and Nira have a reciprocal relationship that is described as particular to these two individuals. It may carry potential for expansion into Haraway’s ethic but it is still far from her claim that “all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense, and it is past time to practice better care of kinds-as-assemblages (not species one at a time) [...]” (“Anthropocene” 162). Although we are told that belonging matters deeply to Prince, he copes best of all the dogs with his exile from the pack and with his new life as essentially a masterless dog. Prince seems to be the dog most comfortable in his dual identity as dog and poet, taking delight in all aspects of his world, his new language, and the opportunities it affords him for learning.

Through dramatizing the dilemma of dogs endowed with a puzzling change in their consciousness and their circumstances, *Fifteen Dogs* reflects allegorically on the resistance to change that characterizes many reactions to globalization today. Because they still have their memories of how they experienced the world before the gods intervened, some of the dogs lament a loss of old ways and seek a return to a purer, simpler ideal of what it means to be a “real” dog, even if it requires “cleansing” (93) the pack of any dogs unable or unwilling to perform the pure canine anymore. Atticus, the pack leader, expresses these views most forcefully, concluding that the dogs must turn their backs on the gift and “learn to be dogs again” (32). Atticus has “a notion of what an ideal or pure dog might be: a creature without the flaws of thought. As time went on, he attributed to this pure being all the qualities he believed to be noble, sharp senses, absolute authority, unparalleled prowess at hunting, irresistible strength” (95-96). When he prays to the “Great Dog” (96) he believes must embody these qualities, Zeus eventually responds. The omniscient narrator explains: “the gods are compelled by rhythm –as is the universe, as are all the creatures in it” (96). In Atticus’s mind, purity of being and mastery are inextricably linked. Zeus appears to approve. When Atticus asks how he can be a better dog, Zeus explains that Atticus is no longer a dog, but adds: “You are mine and I pity your fate” (96). Despite the violence and suffering that Atticus’s obsession with what he has lost costs the other dogs and even himself, the narrative suggests that there is a certain nobility to his devotion to this lost cause and to what Alexis Shotwell, in another context, aptly terms “a purity politics of despair” (195).

In *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*, Shotwell suggests an ethos humans could use “to mark the beginning of the Anthropocene: roughly, the moment that humans worry that we have lost a natural state of purity or decide that purity is something we ought to pursue and defend” (3). Although she is addressing an environmental concern with a lost purity of the natural world, such an ethos of purity also seems appropriate to Atticus’s despair at his loss of an original canine purity, an understanding he is only able to conceive by virtue of his new human-derived self-consciousness. In other words, that purity is manufactured in retrospect, as a human desire for a lost innocent past. Throughout history, such obsessions with purity have functioned to validate various forms of group identity, usually taking recourse in nostalgia for a lost past or fall from grace. For Atticus, it



comes in the form of seeking to protect the purity of the dog, something he remembers (or thinks he does) yet feels he is losing as the new language takes hold. As Shotwell specifies, to be against purity, as she argues we should be, is “to be against the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled and homogenous” (15). To attempt to embrace purity instead of recognizing complexity and complicity is to misrecognize the way things are. One might argue, for example, that for centuries, the fates of dogs and humans have been entwined. *Fifteen Dogs* recognizes these entanglements and shows that to seek such purity is a self-defeating endeavor, yet there is also an elegiac tone to the novel as a whole, which seems to lament the lost purity of a physical way of being in the world uncontaminated by self-consciousness and the awareness of time passing.

This ambivalence about human intelligence is expressed by every dog in the text except for Prince, who is the only dog to successfully combine the best of canine and human ways of sensing and knowing the world. Significantly, he is also the only dog not obsessed with either purity or mastery. A mutt himself, he is the only dog not born in Toronto, depicted as already in exile from a prairie paradise and his first human master, Kim, before his second exile from the pack of transformed dogs. Unlike the other dogs, he moves from human to human, retaining his independence and taking equal pleasure from composing poetry in the new language and in the delights of his senses, until vindictive Apollo deprives him of these and he has only his thoughts and his poetry left. But that is enough for Prince. He is grateful that he was given the ability to create this beautiful language, privileged to glimpse its depths, and hopeful that “it was a gift that could not be destroyed” (168). Feeling pleased, Hermes grants Prince a final gift. Hearing the voice he loved, “Prince’s soul was filled with joy” (171). As he bounds toward Kim, the narrative concludes with the assurance that “In his final moment on earth, Prince loved and knew that he was loved in return” (171). The stories of Prince and Majnoun explore the nature of love, affirming that despite the pain it causes it is infinitely more precious than the power wielded by the gods. As the narrator puts it: “On the one hand, power; on the other, love” (170). Just as the gods’ power is linked to their immortality, so the animal (human and dog) feelings of love are deeply entangled with their mortality and the inevitability of death. Love for Majnoun and Prince is not only tied to a particular person, but also entangled with the joy they feel in learning to communicate across differences: Majnoun in an evolving, reciprocal relation with Nira, and Prince through composing his fifteen poems commemorating the names of each of the dogs who together received the gift of this language.

In their early discussions, Apollo believes that “humans have no special merit, though they think themselves superior” (13). Hermes argues that “the human way of creating and using symbols is more interesting than, say, the complex dancing done by bees” (14). Although Apollo finds human language, when compared to that of the gods, to be “too vague” (14), Hermes counters that their communicational misunderstandings are at least “amusing” (14). The novel validates each of these contentions. The only human who seems at all admirable is also the only human who refuses to think herself superior to Majnoun. Readers have no access to the language of the gods. It appears to be too far beyond our limited capacities for understand-



ing. Prince's poetry is translated from the language of these dogs into English for the book's readers. For the other dogs, it shows that puns, linguistic play, and different levels of meaning may create both pleasure and annoyance according to the levels of receptivity in the listener. There is black humour and divine retribution in Benjy's hubris, which leads him to fatally misunderstand human behavior. His fate conforms to an idea of justice affirmed by Atticus and engineered by Zeus yet questioned by the agony of his death, manipulative and arrogant as he was. The unfairness of Majnoun's prolonged suffering further reinforces the arbitrariness of Fate as depicted in this text. Prince's god-inflected bodily suffering, and his endurance, recall the biblical story of Job. In recording fifteen deaths, each sad in its own way, the novel may be seen as an extended inquiry into the nature of mortality. From the beginning, Prince has reacted differently from the other dogs, feeling "as if he had discovered a new way of seeing, an angle that made all that he had known strange and wonderful" (27). His wonder sustains him through all his trials until Hermes rewards him in the end.

The novel asks to what extent the drive to purity is linked to the drive for mastery. The gods are obsessed with mastery. The price for losing the wager is to serve as slave to a master for a year. They struggle with the Fates over who has final mastery over the lives of mortals. Like the gods, the dogs are portrayed as dependent on hierarchy so that those who are dominant actually need those who are subordinate for the pack to function. When they purge themselves of the weakest members, the remaining dogs find their social cohesion weakened, because the powerful need the weak to maintain their kind of order. The text argues that the desire to dominate is ingrained: in Benjy, we are told it is "strong and instinctive and belonged to the unquellable depths of himself" (63-64). Even Majnoun assesses relations in this light. His most acrimonious disputes with Nira are about this matter. Where Alexis stands on this crucial question is unclear. His text wonders if something so deeply engrained in the human's animal nature, in that of dogs, and in that of the gods, can be loosened to develop the kind of transformative understandings of subjects and objects envisioned by Haraway. Such a question resonates even more deeply in the novel's linking of dominance to the males of both the human and dog species. The dogs assess the humans in terms of what they know about dogs. But whether Alexis endorses, critiques, or simply records these views is uncertain. Certainly gaps in inter-species and cross-species communication characterize much of this text. Yet each of the fictions analyzed in this article also finds hope in the transformative potential of the imagination even as they show how its power is feared by those who seek to exercise mastery.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In *Fifteen Dogs*, only the friendship and love that develop between Nira and Majnoun come close to answering what for Julietta Singh is the driving force of her 2018 book *Unthinking Mastery: Dehumanism and Decolonial Entanglement*: "What kind of subjects –and what kind of objects– can we be for ourselves and



for others if we loosen the hold of mastery?" (94). *Nostalgia* offers this as an open question, a challenge posed to Sina by Radha but never fully answered. *The Marrow Thieves* offers a solution through a return to North American indigenous languages and the alternative ontoepistemologies they enact. The central characters in *The Marrow Thieves* see first Miranda and then Isaac as holding the key to their survival—and their return to home—through their fluency in Cree. Although Isaac is not an Elder, Rose suggests: "The key doesn't have to be old, the language already is" (227). For Sina in *Nostalgia*, Smith's mysterious words that begin the novel, "IT'S MIDNIGHT, THE LION IS OUT" (1: capitalization in the original) provide the first clue, but it is not until Sina hears Smith speak a foreign language that he realizes this is "A language I felt instinctively I should remember and understand but didn't. The key was missing" (202). He finds the key through reading Amirul's diary. The search for the key to unlock the mystery and find a way home drives both these texts. For Rose and French, home will be made together in the unknown future. For Sina/Elim, it will come through regaining his memories, and handwriting his story to record them, before these memories kill him (252-254). *Nostalgia*, however, does not conclude with Sina's story but with Dr. Axe and his assistant, Tom, discussing Sina's decision to refuse the treatment that would have destroyed his memories but enabled him to survive. Axe asks what made Sina drop his successful career to "return home? What is home, after all?" (256). *Fifteen Dogs* does not use the language of the key nor does it seek answers in memory. But language, creativity, and the question of happiness are linked to questions of belonging as each dog wrestles with the change in destiny wrought by the caprice of the gods. I have argued that in negotiating risk, and considering the nature of mortality, each fiction turns to the roles of memory, creativity, and alternative forms of subjectivity and community in ensuring survival. The nation-state is both unable to contain global threats and is itself a danger in Dimaline's and Vassanji's texts, and irrelevant in Alexis's, yet the only alternatives they offer are retreats into small scale communities and art, retreats they posit as fragile yet necessary steps towards imagining alternative futures.

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