

“Who’s going to look after the river?”

Water and the Ethics of Care in Thomas King’s *The Back of the Turtle*

[W]ater teaches us about an ethics of care and response.
—Cecilia Chen, Janine MacLeod, and Astrida Neimanis,
Thinking with Water

Water, a symbol of life in many contexts and cultures, is a recurring theme in Thomas King’s writing.¹ Among his most prominent musings on how humans currently relate to water are his novels *Green Grass*, *Running Water* (1993), nominated for a Governor General’s Award, and *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), which won the Governor General’s Award for English-language fiction in 2014. The latter provides an opportunity to reflect on today’s environmental destruction caused by human beings, and the various discourses supporting or countering it. Although there has as yet been little scholarly response to *The Back of the Turtle*, the first reviews and articles readily identify the novel as a cautionary environmental tale. Shoshannah Ganz, for instance, reads the novel for the toxic discourse/narratives embedded in it (5). In a forthcoming essay, Susie O’Brien focuses on the function of storytelling in King’s novel to map two contending versions of resilience that emerge from current responses to devastation, namely, a dominant version based on “devotion to self-preservation with conviction in the inevitability of capitalist resource exploitation” (n.p.), and an alternative model rooted in Indigenous cultures supporting the notion that human beings’ adaptive capacity depends on the health of the land. These examples point to the differential effects of contrasting anthropocentric and ecocentric worldviews on natural and social ecologies in King’s fiction.

This article aims to engage in and extend these conversations by focusing on water, a central trope in *The Back of the Turtle* affecting the social,

economic, and natural ecosystems portrayed in the novel. I contend that this approach provides an opportunity for placing Indigenous and Western epistemologies into a fruitful dialogue that contests the hegemonic ideology of modern progress at the core of neo-liberal global capitalism and its extractive techniques. In particular, I am interested in aligning a feminist ethics of care with Indigenous relational thinking to highlight the latter's relevance for the exploration of alternative ways of being and doing in the world that respect, nurture, and foster social and natural ecological balance.

I find inspiration for such a reading of the novel in the combination of two key notions. On the one hand, I loosely borrow the metaphor of diffraction from the works of Donna Haraway and Karen Barad to signify "another kind of critical consciousness" that records "the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference" (Haraway, *Modest_Witness* 273). As Barad explains,

Diffraction, using quantum physics, is not just a matter of interference, but of entanglement, an ethico-onto-epistemological matter. This difference is very important. It underlines the fact that knowing is a direct material engagement, a cutting together-apart, where cuts do violence but also open up and rework the agential conditions of possibility ("Matter Feels" 5).

Further, diffraction consists of "the spreading of waves around obstacles. . . . The phenomenon is the result of interference (i.e., when waves are superimposed, they may reinforce or cancel each other out)" ("Diffraction"). Interference, therefore, also becomes a central notion in my reading of King's novel. In particular, I draw on its meaning regarding reciprocal actions of overlapping waves that "augment, diminish, or otherwise affect one another" ("Interfere") to explore the possibility of aligning and allying various distinct epistemologies emerging from Indigenous cultures, Western feminisms, and environmental theories, thereby expanding their socio-political effect.

Concurrently, I draw on the notion of "Blue Ecology," an ecological philosophy propounded by Gitksan scholar Michael Blackstock, "interweaving First Nations and Western thought that acknowledges fresh and salt water's essential rhythmical life spirit and central functional role in generating, sustaining, receiving and ultimately unifying life on Earth Mother" (Blackstock 43).² Blackstock's theory, I would like to argue, is profoundly diffractive: by underlining the interference of Indigenous and Western knowledges, it highlights their mutual benefit. Thus, Blackstock claims that "Blue Ecology does not jettison the great work of modern ecology; however, it does reshape its foundation and opens up new paths of

inquiry. This new theory is meant to be a companion because it augments existing Western science hydrology rather than displacing this knowledge” (43). By applying to my reading of *The Back of the Turtle* the diffractive perspectives found in feminist new materialism and inherent to Blue Ecology, I aim to reveal the kinds of violence and possibilities entailed when the waves—metaphorically speaking—of the various systems of knowing interfere or overlap, sometimes cancelling one another out, sometimes magnifying each other.

My discussion of King’s novel is divided into two sections. The first section provides a critique of an approach to water derived from the discourse on modern “progress,” as pervasive in the current logic of global neo-liberal capitalism. The second section attempts a *diffractive* reading that disturbs the epistemological and ethical binaries characteristic of modern humanist tradition by underlining the intersections, interferences, and entanglements between Indigenous epistemologies and the ethics of (feminist) care.

I. “Modern Water” and Western Epistemology

The advent of the Western quest for progress based on the exaltation of reason and science has brought about a shift from respect and reverence for water as a life-giving force (Blackstock 44) to its consideration as an inanimate fluid to be disposed of as needed. Thus, understanding water in scientific terms as an “abstract, isomorphic, measurable quantity” reducible to the formula H_2O (14), the anthropocentric Western imaginary deterritorializes water. As a result, water is rendered “placeless” (18), and detached from its dependent ecosystems. The geographer Jamie Linton uses the terms “modern water” and “global water” to describe this “dominant, or natural, way of knowing or relating to water, originating in Western Europe and North America, and operating on a global scale by the later part of the twentieth century” (qtd. in Neimanis 18). The feminist scholar Astrida Neimanis also draws attention to this epistemological turn by referring to “Anthropocene water” (Neimanis 4).

Unsurprisingly, the abstraction, deterritorialization, and management of water under the paradigm of modernity is intrinsically linked to the history of Western colonization and the oppression of Indigenous peoples that went hand-in-hand with the creation of new nation-states and the legislation legitimizing them. In the case of Canada, the on-going centrality of the control of water underpinning the country’s development and sovereignty continues to have an impact upon Indigenous lives through laws such as

the Indian Act, the Navigation Protection Act (former Navigable Waters Protection Act), and the Environmental Assessment Act. Accordingly, water lies at the core of Indigenous land claims and activism.³

In King's novel, the allusion to a Hamm's Beer commercial (*Turtle* 197) illustrates the popular commodification of both water and Indigenous culture. The advertisement draws on Charles Wakefield Cadman's well-known 1909 song "From the Land of the Sky-Blue Water," whose lyrics (by Nelle Richmond Eberhart) are a translation and commodification of an Omaha love song. Following this tradition, the modern paradigm that places the irresponsible exploitation of natural resources at the centre of progress is best illustrated in King's novel by the transnational agribusiness conglomerate called Domidion and its successful CEO, Dorian Asher. Domidion's commodification of water is evident upon entering the business of bottled water (441). However, the dire consequences of the modern abstraction of water are most noticeable when a tailings pond at Domidion's oilsands facility in Alberta gives way, dumping thousands of gallons of toxic sludge into the Athabasca River (275). Rejecting Domidion's responsibility and accountability, Dorian cynically explains that "[t]he modern world runs on energy" (425), that "the occasional spill is the price we pay for cheap energy" (305), and that causing natural disasters is simply the bill to be paid for guaranteeing "the security of the nation and the protection of our children's future" (425). The fallacy of the discourse on fossil fuels as the only source of energy guaranteeing progress dovetails that of water's infinite capacity to renew itself:

Nothing to be done about the spills. Shit happens. It would happen again. The Athabasca would shove the toxins into the Mackenzie, and the Mackenzie would dump everything into the Arctic. . . . The river would eventually clean itself. That's what rivers did. (303)

This view on water is at odds with Barad's notion of "response-ability," that is, the understanding that agency is "about the possibilities of mutual response . . . about possibilities for worldly re-configurings" ("Matter feels" 8). Shunning the response-ability characteristic of such ethics of care, Dorian represents the moral blindness and indifference that come with having no attachment to place and prompt the destruction of the kinships that sustain the balance of natural and human ecosystems necessary for the well-being and survival of all.

Significantly, this attitude towards water parallels the corporation's commodification of history and its callous insensitivity towards the dire

consequences of colonization for Indigenous peoples. Thus, Domidion pays lip service to First Nations by setting its world headquarters at Tecumseh Plaza in Toronto. The Plaza's name memorializes the Shawnee warrior who organized an Indian confederation to oppose Euro-American expansion and was killed in the War of 1812 after the British betrayed him (16). However, Domidion's abstraction of water and disregard for the land involve also the disregard for and abuse of Indigenous peoples. Hence, when Domidion's spillages begin to make Indigenous people sick, Dorian cunningly plays on the legacy of settler prejudice against First Nations people and the general public's apathy regarding environmental issues: "Cancel a favourite television show. Slap another tax on cigarettes. Stop serving beer at baseball and hockey games. That was serious. Spoil a river somewhere in Humdrum, Alberta? Good luck getting Norm off the sofa" (422). When it becomes apparent that most of the people dying in the area affected by Domidion's spillage belong to Indigenous communities, Dorian carries his cynicism to the extreme of blaming Indigenous peoples for their dreadful situation, suggesting that it is "difficult to determine whether the additional deaths are the result of the spill or lifestyle" (437) given their "alcoholism, drug use, and irresponsible behaviour" (438). This illustration of "ecological imperialism" (Huggan and Tiffin 4) and environmental racism underlines King's pervasive representation of a connection between the careless exploitation of nature and the oppression of Indigenous people (Curtin 145).

Whereas Dorian stands for a vision of modern progress dominated by the callous anthropocentrism of current global neo-liberal capitalism, Gabriel Quinn, a young Indigenous scientist from Lethbridge, Alberta, working in Toronto as Domidion's Head of Biological Oversight, embodies the conflicting tensions between Western and Indigenous ethical epistemologies. At the beginning of the novel, Gabriel has come to recognize his arrogance and his error in unquestionably believing in the ethics and value of scientific knowledge. His scientific hubris makes him complicit with Domidion's irresponsible behaviour and unethical response to the many environmental crises the company has triggered over the years. In particular, Gabriel feels responsible for the destruction brought about by a powerful defoliant product known as GreenSweep, which he helped to develop for Domidion. Used to clear the land in order to lay an oil pipeline, the condensed herbicide reached the Kali Creek watershed, and the poison spread quickly all over the Samaritan Bay area. As a result, it caused a massive environmental crisis and an unprecedented human tragedy. The Smoke River reserve was particularly

affected, becoming a ghost town after most of its residents died—including Gabriel's own mother, sister, and nephew—and after the survivors were forcibly evacuated to distant towns. The intrinsic interconnections between the land, water, and all living beings become evident, at the same time as the author highlights the disconnection of global economics and Western knowledge from any sense of responsibility, or even a connection to place. Distraught by the belated realization that his research has been abused by global corporations such as Domidion, whose priority is to achieve power no matter what, Gabriel wonders, "How had he come to such a fantasy, that there was a benign purity in scientific inquiry?" (446). His guilt leads him to quit his job without notice and to attempt to commit suicide in the polluted waters of Samaritan Bay. However, he understands over the course of the novel that helping to rebuild the connections that may restore the socio-environmental ecosystem is a better way of taking responsibility for his actions than seeking atonement through self-destruction.

As the examples of Gabriel and Dorian indicate, the adoption of a Western knowledge paradigm that abstracts water from its place-based relations destroys the fabric of life. In terms of the watery metaphor of diffraction, it looks as if the interference between the waves of modern Western knowledge and Indigenous epistemologies cancel out the latter, exerting both material and epistemic violence on Indigenous peoples. However, approaching King's novel through a feminist ethics of care might help us reconsider ecological relations at the heart of some Indigenous modes of thinking.

II. Reading Indigenous and Western Epistemologies Diffractively

In contrast to the approach characteristic of hegemonic modern epistemology, Indigenous thinking from Turtle Island—otherwise known as North America—often emphasizes the intrinsic connectivity and interdependency between human beings and Earth. Paradigmatic of this relational ontology is the Haudenosaunee creation story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky," which runs as a leitmotif throughout *The Back of the Turtle*.⁴ In King's version of the story, a pregnant woman falls from the sky "through time and space" (King, *Turtle* 224) onto a small blue dot of water that happened to be the Earth. She is rescued by the birds and aquatic creatures inhabiting it, and placed on the back of a turtle for lack of any other available dry land. The animals dive to the bottom until one of them manages to gather some soil in which to plant the seeds the woman had brought with her in her fall, thus guaranteeing her survival and that of the

left- and right-handed twins she gives birth to, who represent the balance between order and chaos, creation and destruction. The Nishnaabeg writer and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explains that the collaborative ethics involved in this story demand that all accept “the responsibility to get off the log and dive down no matter how hard it is and search around for that dirt” (Klein 9). This, to her, is “profound and transformative” (9), as it is in stark contrast to the individualism that characterizes the liberal and Christian paradigms. Comparing the Sky Woman story with the Biblical creation story in *The Truth About Stories*, King explains that “the elements in Genesis create a particular universe governed by a series of hierarchies—God, man, animals, plants—that celebrate law, order, and good government, while in our Native story, the universe is governed by a series of co-operations—Charm, the Twins, animals, humans—that celebrate equality and balance” (23-24). Whereas creation is “a solitary, individual act” in the Bible, in the Haudenosaunee story “creation is a shared activity” (24); while the world begins in harmony and slides toward chaos in the Bible, in the Indigenous story it is the other way around. The former describes a “world marked by competition” and the latter, “a world determined by cooperation” (25). King ends up wondering whether a different world might have been created out of the Indigenous story that was marginalized by hegemonic Western culture.

Generally, Western knowledge tends to marginalize Indigenous epistemologies that foreground relationality. However, setting feminist care ethics that contest Western thinking paradigms side by side with Indigenous thinking not only underlines their common focus on the relationality and entanglement between humans and non-humans, but may help Western readers to engage and understand the value of Indigenous stories and ways of knowing. Reading these distinct epistemological traditions diffractively “through one another” (Barad, *Meeting* 30) highlights, for instance, the fact that Barad’s notion of “agential realism” interferes with traditional Indigenous notions about the agency of water and the land, augmenting the reader’s awareness of it. While for Barad “agential realism” is based on the mutuality of “response-ability,” and the understanding that “[i]t is an enactment. And it enlists, if you will, ‘non-humans’ as well as ‘humans’” (“Matter feels” 8), for Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), “The earth is not a stupid insensitive lump floating numbly throughout space to be conquered, pillaged, and plundered at will, but rather an intelligent being with its own journey, its own way of resolving illness within itself” (*Memory* 146).

Anishinaabe scholar and activist Deborah McGregor reiterates the idea that from an Indigenous perspective water is “a relation,” “a living spiritual being with its own responsibilities to fulfil,” and so we “do not have the right to interfere with water’s duties to the rest of Creation” (37-38). Maracle similarly emphasizes water’s agency and its “duty by all the living beings” (“Water” 34) when she argues,

We do not own the water, the water owns itself. We are responsible for ensuring that we do not damage the water. We do not have an absolute right to use and abuse the water; we must take care of the water and ensure that we have a good relationship with it. This relationship is based on mutual respect. (37, emphasis original).

For Maracle, water lies at the heart of her cosmogony, as it certainly does in King’s broad literary corpus.

Moreover, the interference between Indigenous and Western feminist ethics of care enhances women’s agency as caretakers of the environment, inasmuch as women, and more specifically the mother figure, stand up for the planet and the healthy relationships that sustain it. In Indigenous contexts, the Earth is often seen “as a woman” (Maracle, *Memory* 146), and women acquire certain responsibilities related to the preservation of the environment. The Nishnaabe, for example, consider women “The Keepers of the Water” or “The Carriers of the Water”⁵ due to their ability to bring forth life. Nishnaabe-kwewag Elder Shirley Williams explains,

Woman is given the responsibility of looking after the water because it is the Mother Earth, it is the woman. The woman is the Mother Earth and through the Mother Earth she has the rivers and the lakes, that’s her bloodline. We in turn because we are women we are given that responsibility to help her, to clean her by praying and singing and to help her to clean herself. (qtd. in Bédard 97)

Williams’ words reinforce the fictional Dorian’s belief in water’s power to clean itself in King’s novel. However, contrary to Dorian and the profit-oriented epistemology he represents, Williams does not justify human disregard for nature on the premise of nature’s resilience and capacity for renewal, but highlights human responsibility and cooperation in the process of regeneration. More specifically, Williams underlines women’s responsibility for nature.

In *The Back of the Turtle*, Mara Reid embodies the dovetailing of these discursive traditions, as she faces the challenges to fulfill her foremothers’ cultural mandate to be a caregiver while seeking her own personal realization as a female Indigenous individual living in a society dominated

by Western ideologies and values. From an early age, Mara has struggled with the consequences of colonization and the acculturation of her people in Samaritan Bay. In a passage that features Mara in her last year of high school, she pays her respects to the river, an old ritual her mother and grandmother had passed on to her. Like them, she begins each day “standing on the bank, touching the water, sprinkling tobacco on the current. It was a reminder of the relationship that human beings had with the world” (45). Even if Mara does not articulate the purpose of this ritual act, the narrative voice explains it in a way that is reminiscent of María Puig de la Bellacasa’s take on feminist materialism through the notions of *caring thinking* and *knowing as touch*. Thus, this episode brings up a neglected sensorial, haptic way of knowledge that takes into account the ambivalences resulting from “an intensification of involvement and proximity” (19). Mara had described this ceremony in an English class essay about her family, receiving an A. However, her teacher’s question at the bottom of the last page, “Is this the way Indian people send prayers to their water god?” (45), puzzles her. Mara’s mother and grandmother are also perplexed by the teacher’s question—“Didn’t know we had a water god” (45). Rather than a god, for Mara and her family, the river is treated as a relation, an element to respect and care for as an interdependent equal. Mara’s explanation to her teacher that “the women in her family had always gone to the river at dawn to lay tobacco on the water. It wasn’t a ritual or a ceremony, so much as it was a long-standing custom, a way of welcoming the day” (46), eschews exoticization and challenges her teacher’s expectations. As a result, Mara’s marks for the rest of the year do not rise above B-pluses.

Besides signalling the ongoing processes of Eurocentric colonialism, this episode suggests a situated knowledge based on material-embodied relationality expressed through touch. Touching the water becomes a sensorial metaphor for the connection between humans and other-than-human entities that eschews the abstractions of dominant epistemologies embedded in the visions of progress represented by either Gabriel and his faith in science or Dorian and his embracing of neo-liberal capitalism. Touch in the novel can be seen in terms of what Puig de la Bellacasa calls a “metaphor of transformative knowledge” (20), a kind of caring thinking that underlines human ethical obligations to water and the environment. Touch also poses the question of reciprocity in the context of thinking in terms of care, as touch has the quality of reversibility, or, as Puig de la Bellacasa puts it, “of being touched by what we touch” (20). The risk involved in touching

toxic water and being affected in turn by its poison is an instance of this haptic interaction. Fortunately for Mara, “the Smoke was running clean again, and you could reach into the water and draw your hand back without incident” (King, *Turtle* 47).

As a female character, Mara represents fertility and the potential to give birth to future generations, ensuring the survival and continuity of her community and the ecosystem it cares for. However, after rejecting her mother’s and grandmother’s suggestions to get married or become a nurse—both roles associated with female caregivers—Mara leaves the reserve to pursue her dream of becoming an artist in Toronto. In addition to her rebellion against family demands, she is constrained by the structures of settler colonialism that force Indigenous people to leave their communities to pursue an education, and she relinquishes her duty to nature and the community at the Smoke River reserve. Nevertheless, far from embracing Western individualism, Mara intends to resume her ancestral role as keeper of the water once she returns to Smoke River. Thus, when her mother complains, “Who’s going to look after the river?” Mara’s reply is “I’ll come back” (153).

Unfortunately, when Mara manages to return to Samaritan Bay, the lethal environmental disaster has claimed the lives of her loved ones. This is the moment when she discovers that her art may help fulfill the role she had unwillingly relinquished as keeper of the water, and help to re-establish some sort of ecological balance. Mara thinks that “art [like the river] was fluid and continuously full of potential” (189). This idea is similarly shared in Cathy Stubington’s claim that “Life is Water, water is art, art is life is water” (178). Mara’s project to paint the portraits of each one of the community’s absent members of the Smoke River reserve and hang them on the fronts of their houses symbolically restores historically located people to their ecological system and community. It thereby stresses the impossibility of separating ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed, and constitutes what Donna Haraway calls “naturecultures” (*Companion*). Through her memorializing act, Mara not only learns how to mourn her loved ones, thus starting her personal healing, but metaphorically brings the dead to life. Such a nature culture act has the potential to produce a radical reshaping of social environmental responsibility, fostering a relational or ecological approach to systemic change. Mara’s move back to her grandmother’s house further reclaims the legitimate existence of the survivors of the Smoke River reserve. She is now convinced that “they would

find their way home. Mara was sure of this” (156-57). While stressing the regenerating power of both water and art, Mara’s rightful occupation of Indigenous space with her art and physical presence points to an Indigenous resurgence. Thus, when she starts working on a portrait featuring her deceased best friend, Lilly, and Lilly’s family, as a way of bringing them back to life, Mara also “realized that she might have found a purpose, something that would help her push past the numbing sorrow, something that would help her make the world whole again” (127).

The histrionic character Scott Nicholas Crisp also provides an example of the way different systems of knowing can be entangled, with water as the fluid element that gathers and collects. Crisp has survived the Kali Creek catastrophe and stayed in Samaritan Bay. His practice of an ethics of care includes keeping an eye on his orphaned nephew, Sonny, and looking after the personal possessions of those who left after the Kali Creek disaster, which he calls “The Ruin,” in the certainty that they will return some day. A lover of language, he revels in equal measure in the lushness of Biblical stories, Shakespearian drama, and Indigenous orature. Every year he commemorates the environmental catastrophe by retelling the Sky Woman story at the hot springs. By respectfully preserving the Indigenous creation story while repurposing it to evoke new beginnings in the post-apocalyptic context of Samaritan Bay, Crisp endorses a transcultural ethics of care. His assertion “it’s not my story to tell. I only do so when there’s not a proper human being [i.e., Indigenous person] in the assembly” (222) acknowledges the story’s legitimate tellers. Crisp’s claim that “It’s a story that comes with the land, and the two are forever wedded” (222) also highlights “natureculture” interdependency and the symbiosis between stories, place, and specific Indigenous epistemologies—even if the fact that King has transplanted this Haudenosaunee story to British Columbia problematizes this observation. Crisp’s place-based perspective leads him to respond to the environmental and social crisis by accepting responsibility as the guardian of his absent neighbours’ possessions and cultural traditions. The character holds a kind of faith in the cleansing power of water that stems from his rootedness in his specific place. He holds such faith as a precondition for the reconstruction of the human and other-than-human communities.

Sonny, Crisp’s nephew, is a character deeply enshrined in Christian precepts that he struggles to come to terms with following his pious father’s departure. He relies on a different, but no less significant, relationship to water than his uncle to create order in his life and in his tormented mind.

Thus, he tirelessly salvages materials from the sea, which he repurposes to build a lighthouse that may guide both the turtles and the people back to Samaritan Bay, thereby inciting the rebirth of both nature and the community itself. The return of the sea turtles points again to the Sky Woman story, which holds that a new world emerges from the back of the turtle. This narrative of regeneration is therefore signalled on multiple levels. With Sonny and his late father resonating, respectively, as the Christian figures of God the Father and God the Son, the novel contraposes and integrates a medley of stories from both Christian and Indigenous cultural traditions; stories that constitute distinctive ethical paradigms and ways of caring and knowing.

Soldier, the stray dog from King's *Truth and Bright Water* also appearing in this novel, shares the Bay's ecocentric caring ethics, accompanying Gabriel in his most troubled moods, saving Crisp from drowning, being always attentive to and provoking decisive action. He is a crucial example of kinship and collaboration between humans and non-humans. However, Gabriel is the character who best represents the entanglements of Western and Indigenous knowledge and ethics. Thus, undergirding Gabriel's actions is his unconditional acceptance of modern ways of knowing through science and technology, as well as his solipsistic individualism and a belief in punitive justice grounded in the Christian law of retaliation "an eye for an eye," which leads him to the idea of killing himself. However, his time in Samaritan Bay rekindles his childhood memories, which in turn uncover the alternative epistemological system represented by his family and his mother's stories, thereby revealing the possibility of moving from self-annihilation to rebirth.

The process of retrieving his Indigenous ethos is triggered when, in the opening pages of the novel, Gabriel, who has walked into the ocean resolved to kill himself, is compelled to put off his suicidal intentions due to the emergence amidst the crashing waves of a drowning girl struggling to keep afloat. Once he manages to place her safely on the rocks known as The Apostles, he finds that "suddenly the sea was alive with people" (9) he must rescue. It is later disclosed that they are the Taiwanese crew of *The Anguis*, Domidion's stranded barge loaded with—Alas!—GreenSweep toxic drums (441), which has run aground near Samaritan Bay. In the exhaustion and exhilaration that follow the rescue, Gabriel thinks of the survivors as "the sea people. The ones who had come to the ocean when the world was new. The long black hair. The fierce eyes" (9). As he is reminded of the collaborative ethos inherent to the ancestral cosmogony stories that

his mother used to tell him and his sister Lilly when they were kids (4), he abandons his empirical thinking and envisions the possibility that this event may signal “a new beginning.” Alluding to the Sky Woman creation story, he muses, “Perhaps it was time for the twins to walk the earth again and restore the balance that had been lost” (9). The bond of kinship that he creates with these strangers is transformative. Changing the memorial song that he had chosen to sing before committing suicide for “A fierce song. A song for warriors” (9), the Taiwanese people gradually join him in his singing, and Gabriel swaps the will to die for the will to struggle and live on. Although he played a key role in the destruction of Samaritan Bay, his compassion and care for the people in need foreshadow the possibility of new beginnings for those he rescues, for the environment, and for himself.

King also writes with the character of Mara playing a key role in the process of building solid social structures of survival based on kinship and collaboration. Her reflection on the liquidity of art leads her to consider that Gabriel’s troubles may lie in his alienation from the community, the severing of his human and ecological connections: “Maybe that was Gabriel’s problem. Maybe he didn’t have a community, didn’t have anyone to anchor him to life. People weren’t single, autonomous entities. They were part of a larger organism” (189). As a consequence of this revelation, Mara contributes to the emergence of a new web of relations that may sustain a renewed all-inclusive community to which Gabriel can reconnect and may even play a caring role. In tune with this self-ascribed role, Mara adopts an Indigenous ethics of hospitality and care that emphasizes “the importance of specific relationships involving reciprocal, though not necessarily equal, responsibilities among participants who understand one another as relatives” (Whyte and Cuomo 240), even when they are not blood-related. Accordingly, Mara invites the Taiwanese refugees to her grandmother’s house in the Smoke River reserve, where they share food and their stories “as if they were family” (433). While the Taiwanese refugees are saved by Gabriel, fed by Crisp, and sheltered in Mara’s family house, they now reciprocate by sharing their own cuisine and the story of their trials and tribulations. Their presence in Samaritan Bay has the potential to help restore the area’s economy and reconstitute the community, as they agree to settle down in the Bay, live with Sonny in his rundown hotel, and refurbish the place while cooking for prospective tourists. In short, their settlement offers the possibility of social and ecological regeneration. Water appears again at this juncture as a symbol of cleansing and rebirth when Crisp invites

them to the hot springs, “where ye can throw off the trials of your old life and warm yourselves in the new” (436).

The collective responsibility for one another epitomized by the Sky Woman story is further emphasized at the end of the novel, when Mara follows Gabriel into the sea as he attempts to commit suicide once again. She is willing to risk her own life to have him tell his story—“The one you don’t want to tell” (502). As a result, Gabriel’s suicidal plans are aborted another time (475). Finally, the collaborative ethics adopted by the Samaritan Bay characters is highlighted at the end when they come together to push *The Anguis* off the beach, where it had stuck, thus preventing its toxic cargo from spilling onto the shore, triggering a new environmental catastrophe. Responding to Gabriel’s scepticism about being able to move the ship, Mara tells him, “It’s not about moving . . . It’s about community” (498). Hence, Gabriel is invited to “sing that song”—the warrior song he sang at the beginning after rescuing the Taiwanese crew—and all the characters in the novel join him as they push the ship into the sea, with the help of the rising tide.

Yet, despite the prospect of a hopeful future brought about by the success of their common endeavour and nature’s incipient rebirth, the threat of destruction never disappears, as the toxic barge is still afloat, and Dorian and his unscrupulous global economic ventures proceed as usual. Indeed, the success of the human and non-human collaboration at Samaritan Bay is paralleled by the triumph of Dorian’s individualistic Western ethos, epitomized at the end of the novel by his repetition of the last lines from William Ernest Henley’s poem “Invictus”: “I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul” (481, 484). King always reminds us of the sort of ecological balance represented by the left-handed and right-handed twins and the forces of creation and destruction they stand for.

The Back of the Turtle creates a dialectical space—or “cultural interface” (Christian and Wong, *Downstream* 4)—where Indigenous epistemologies and Euro-Western thinking interfere. Reading through the diffraction patterns around the centrality of water in the novel highlights the interference and entanglement of the stories the different characters tell and live by. They reveal that for the Samaritan Bay community, knowing is a “direct material engagement” (Barad, “Matter Feels” 5) with nature, with language, and with one another. In contrast, Dorian’s corporate mindset is unfettered from the materiality of the land. The interference of these stories increases our awareness of the various kinds of violence deriving from the hegemony of modern discourses on technology-based progress that situate

the human outside of nature, while reducing the natural environment to a passive object. A diffractive reading of the novel also shows that the unquestionable adoption of the modern metanarrative leads to epistemic violence against the place-based, relational knowledge of Indigenous peoples and nations, which has been stifled and suppressed through a history of settler-colonialism and current neo-liberal capitalism—remember the cultural uprooting of both Gabriel and Mara. This has led to the violence of appropriation of the land and its natural resources, seriously affecting the survival of Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) peoples and their cultures. Ultimately, the diffraction pattern emerging from the interference of stories reveals the catastrophic consequences of the material violence against all life derived from modern discourses on extractivism and exploitation.

Applying the notion of diffraction to my own critical methodology, I have aligned Indigenous relational thinking around water and women's role as keepers of the environment with the relational care ethics of feminist materialism. The interference of both ethical epistemes emphasizes the relevance of natureculture in the novel, and enhances the link between storytelling, knowledge systems, ideology, and agency, reaffirming Haraway's claim, in another context, that "it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with . . . it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories" ("Staying" 12). Just as the novel emerges as an important reminder of our ecocultural relations and decisively contributes to the hydrological shift in the Humanities, it also encourages us to embrace a renewed ethico-political practice of relational care that can pave the way towards sustainable futures.

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NOTES

- 1 Water is a recurring symbol in many of his titles, such as *Medicine River* (1989), *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), *Truth and Bright Water* (1999), *Dreadful Water Shows Up* (2002), and *The Red Power Murders: A Dreadful Water Mystery* (2006).
- 2 Chen, MacLeod, and Neimanis' collection *Thinking with Water* (2013), Christian and Wong's *Downstream: Reimagining Water* (2017), as well as Astrida Neimanis' *Bodies of Water* (2017), and Stacy Alaimo's *Exposed* (2016) equally attest to the current interest in water and the interdisciplinary shift in the Humanities.

- 3 For instance, the Indigenous grassroots movement Idle No More defends “Indigenous Ways of Knowing rooted in Indigenous Sovereignty to protect water, air, land and all creation for future generations” (“Idle”). First launched in December 2012, this movement has attracted wide support from non-Indigenous people whose environmental concerns coincide with those of Indigenous people. Together, they opposed Bill C-45, a legislative amendment introduced by Stephen Harper’s Conservative government for removing the obstacles to industrial development, thereby deregulating forests and waterways, many of which stand on traditional First Nations land.
- 4 The Haudenosaunee creation story also appears in King’s previous novel, *Green Grass, Running Water*, and in his Massey Lectures collected in *The Truth About Stories* (2003). The choral retelling of “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” in *The Back of the Turtle* is an example of King’s characteristic interfusional literary strategy that blends oral storytelling and print culture (Dvořák).
- 5 The term has been adopted by the Anishinaabe grassroots movement Keepers of the Water, launched in 2006 as a response by the Indigenous peoples of the Deh Cho (Mackenzie) river basin to the alarming pollution of the river and the depleting water resources in the watershed caused by the extraction of oil and natural gas, mining, intensive agribusiness, and the construction of transport infrastructures. Their annual water conferences are an example of transnational collaborative activism (see D’Souza 198).

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