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Precarity and the stories we tell: Post-truth discourse and Indigenous epistemologies in Thomas King's *The Back of the Turtle*

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ABSTRACT

This article stems from the assumption that the stories emerging from distinct cultural traditions constitute discrete epistemologies that determine how human individuals and societies face ontological vulnerability and precariousness. Focusing on Thomas King's novel *The Back of the Turtle* (2014), it examines the differential agency of two interlocking sets of stories and their respective epistemological systems. Consequently, the article is divided in two main parts. The first examines the novel's rendering of the tensions between the Enlightenment's investment in the search for empirical truth, and its current alignment with unfettered neo-liberal capitalism and post-truth discourse. The second part reads the novel's use of ancestral Indigenous stories as a counterpoint to the stories of modern progress underlying western epistemologies. The emerging question is whether Indigenous ways of knowing embedded in ancestral stories may potentially show the way towards an "ecology of knowledges" that lessens precarity and works towards ecological sustainability.

KEYWORDS

Storytelling; neo-liberalism; anthropocentrism; ecocentrism; (post-)truth; Indigenous epistemologies

In his collection of CBC Massey lectures *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative*, Cherokee author Thomas King¹ (2003) provocatively argues that "[t]he truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2), thereby aligning storytelling with ontology. Situating his celebrated novel *The Back of the Turtle* (King 2014)² in the current context of global precarity, King emphasizes his belief in the agency of stories in world-making and their central role in our understanding of existence. "Stories", he says, "are wondrous things", but then adds the caveat "[a]nd they are dangerous" (King 2003, 9), for "once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world" (10). Along the same lines, Cherokee scholar Daniel Heath Justice (2018) reminds us that stories are "med-sins" (medicines); that is, "agents of both harm and healing" (4).

This article proposes a reading of *The Back of the Turtle* that underlines the centrality of story-making in the creation of precarity. It suggests that King's novel presents two sets of narratives. On the one hand, it connects the stories that uphold neo-liberal capitalism with the construction of precarity – understanding this notion in Judith Butler's (2009) terms as "differential precariousness, i.e., a condition of vulnerability that is *politically* induced against certain populations" (25).³ Most notable among these

stories are the myths of modern progress and the supremacy of human reason, which, as I aim to show in this article, are simultaneously reinforced and undermined by the post-truth discourse strategies currently sustaining the conditions of social, economic, and environmental precarity. On the other hand, the novel is deeply invested in the alternative stories emerging from Indigenous cultures and the ontological positions they elicit. I suggest that the novel's interweaving of stories underpinning western and Indigenous epistemologies questions the notion of modern progress traditionally sustained by the "monoculture of [western] scientific knowledge" (de Sousa Santos, Nunes, and Meneses 2007, xx). As a result, it opens up a space to imagine an "ecology of knowledges" (xx) that, setting Indigenous and western epistemologies in dialogic interaction, may help counter precarity and facilitate the "reinvention of social emancipation" (xx).⁴ Following Boaventura de Sousa Santos, Joao Arriscado Nunes, and Maria Paula Meneses, I take the term "ecology of knowledges" to metaphorically allude to "the interactions within a system of distinct and diverse epistemologies" (Coleman 2012, 7). As resilience thinking proves, the more diverse a system is, the better equipped it proves to withstand shocks, crises, or turbulences that may threaten its very existence. Therefore, an ecology of knowledges gained from distinct cultural traditions set in relational and adaptive interaction with one another may yield hopeful results for the reversal of the precarity processes triggered by the current hegemonic narrative of neo-liberal capitalism.

Mirroring Thomas King's fictional representation of the stories undergirding modern knowledge on the one hand, and Indigenous epistemologies on the other, this article is structured in two sections. The first part unveils the corporate instrumentalization of western modern knowledge through the use of post-truth discourse. The second section focuses on the alternative epistemologies embedded in the Haudenosaunee creation story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky", which runs as a leitmotif through the novel, and underlines the centrality in certain Indigenous cultures of kinship relationships between humans and the non-human world. The conclusion will consider whether the representation of these two distinct narrative traditions calls for a new story based on an ethics of interrelational care that may inspire a new ecology of knowledges to address precarity.

Modern knowledge and post-truth discourse

In 1637, René Descartes published his *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison, et chercher la vérité dans les sciences* (*Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting One's Reason and of Seeking Truth in the Sciences*). Besides being the source of the famous dictum "Je pense, donc je suis" (I think, therefore I am), this influential work in the history of modern philosophy became also important to the development of natural sciences. Descartes defended in this treatise that "[l]a science peut rendre l'homme *maître et possesseur de la nature*" ([https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Discours_de_la_m%C3%A9thode_\(%C3%A9d._Cousin\)/Sixième_partie](https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Discours_de_la_m%C3%A9thode_(%C3%A9d._Cousin)/Sixième_partie); emphasis added; science can make man master and owner of nature), thereby articulating the Enlightenment's anthropocentrism and the subservience of both science and nature to man's designs. Contemporary political, economic, social, and environmental crises that evidence the flaws of current Euro-western models of thought and praxis not only help reinforce the critique of the paradigm of western modernity and Cartesian thought, but result in what de

Sousa Santos, Nunez, and Menses identify as “[t]he loss of epistemological confidence that currently afflicts modern science” (2007, 92). De Sousa Santos (2002) explains that this crisis of confidence in modern science is due in part to the fact that the sciences “are forced to share the field of knowledge with rival knowledges [...] which are in turn capable of generating different kinds of power and resistance” (447). I would add that the discredit of knowledge and science amidst the populace is also connected to the proliferation of the so-called “pundits” in talk shows, people who talk authoritatively about any topic at hand, often mistaking unfounded opinion for checked facts, thus contributing to the blurring of the distinction between truth and lies characteristic of the contemporary post-truth condition.

The conundrum caused by the undermining of the myth of modern progress, based on the development of science and technology, is best represented in King’s novel by its protagonist, Gabriel Quinn, and his antagonist, Dorian Asher. Gabriel is a brilliant scientist of Indigenous descent who works as head of biological oversight at Domidion, a transnational agribusiness conglomerate based in Toronto and led by chief executive officer (CEO) Dorian Asher.⁵ A firm believer in science, Gabriel pursued a degree in chemistry at Stanford University and distanced himself from his family and their ancestral stories and cultural traditions:

If he believed in anything, he believed in the laws of chemistry and biology and physics. He could see these gods, negotiate with them, anticipate what they would do. He liked that kind of certainty. [...] An organized and regulated world. He had been happy in that universe. (King 2014, 139)

As the architect of progress, science had had for him an ethical quality: “Science was supposed to have been the answer. World hunger. Disease. Energy. Security. Commerce. Biology would save the world. Geology would fuel the future. Physics would make sense of the universe” (King 2014, 446). However, at the beginning of the novel, Gabriel has become disillusioned with what passes today as “the ethics of science” (166), which, from university teachings to corporate practice, has become subservient to capitalist economic profit. The infiltration into North American universities of the corporate “ethics” of profit, epitomized in Dorian’s dictum, “Everything we do, all of us, [...] is in pursuit of profit” (79), comes to the fore when the creation of the Domidion School of Business and Media Communications in a local university is publicized as a “major partnership with the Humanities”, even if the said partnership excludes the departments of philosophy, fine art and history (57). As Susie O’Brien (2020) rightly points out, “[t]his exclusion highlights the absence of ethics and aesthetics from the corporate model of storytelling, as well as its detachment from the material world” (47). Gabriel’s first lessons on the ethics of science at Stanford had provided additional proof of the penetration of the corporate ethos into the educational system, evident in his ethics professor’s approach to the Kathryn Kousoulas case: after discovering that a new effective drug to treat migraines caused brain tumours, Dr Kousoulas broke the non-disclosure clause she had signed with the pharmaceutical giant Bush International and informed her patients of the potential risk. When Gabriel defended her, saying that “it was the ethical decision” (King 2014, 171), Professor Harden corrected him by asking “[t]o whom?” (172). The implication of Harden’s question is that abiding by the contract Kousoulas had signed with the pharmaceutical company should have prevailed over the ethics that call for the protection of

human life, putting the corporation's interests first. Years later, Gabriel witnesses how Domidion strictly adheres to this "ethical" subservience to money. After becoming aware that GreenSweep, a powerful defoliant product that he created for Domidion by genetically modifying a bacterium, has accidentally caused the pollution of the Kali Creek watershed and the subsequent devastation of Samaritan Bay on the British Columbia coast, Gabriel's faith in science, or rather in those who instrumentalize knowledge for economic profit, falters. Now, Gabriel chastises himself:

How had he come to such a fantasy, that there was a benign purity in scientific inquiry? He had mistaken the enterprise completely, had seen only the questions and had ignored the obvious answers.

What was the proper goal of research?

Profit.

What was the proper use of knowledge?

Power.

He could see the errors now, could see all his illusions in stark relief. Too late, of course. Very much too late. (446–447)

Gabriel's guilt is further explained when we learn that his own estranged mother, sister, and baby nephew had moved to the Smoke River reserve in Samaritan Bay and were among the casualties of this environmental disaster. The novel opens after the catastrophe has hit the area. A guilt-ridden Gabriel has quit his job at Domidion without notice and is now in Samaritan Bay, resolved to commit suicide by drowning in the polluted ocean. His inner turmoil is represented at the beginning of the novel by the disarray of his thoughts, which shift from his meditation on the deceptiveness of rationality to his resurfacing memories of the Haudenosaunee creation story "The Woman Who Fell from the Sky". Set in contrast with the Latin maxim 'Post hoc ergo propter hoc' (4), denoting the error of mistaking correlation for causality, this Indigenous story stands for an ontological and epistemological alternative to the logical fallacies of (corporate) Euro-western thinking. Gabriel's turn to Indigenous paradigms is further underlined in the novel's opening by the fact that, when faced with the transcendental moment of his own death, he chooses to take with him his father's "Crow Fair" leather jacket and a ceremonial drum.

While Gabriel is devastated by the revelation of the effects of putting science to the service of money-making, Dorian Asher revels in the post-truth politics – also called post-factual politics (Schwartz 2016) and post-reality politics (Holmes 2016) – that take advantage of what he terms "the fatal flaw of democracy", namely, that it "offers its enemies the means by which to destroy it" (King 2014, 307). As a representative of corporate power, his actions fully situate the novel in the context of the regimes of post-truth that, as Jayson Harsin (2015) argues, "emerge out of postpolitical/postdemocratic strategies common to control societies where especially resource-rich political actors attempt to use data-analytic knowledge to manage the field of appearance and participation, via attention and affect" (327).⁶ In what follows I examine Dorian's managing of the various crises that he must confront to keep Domidion's rule as "one of the largest and

most powerful corporations in the world” (424). Drawing on post-truth theory, I analyse his adoption of strategies that are directed to mangle the truth, corrupt knowledge, twist ethics, and control the public opinion. His undeniable success results in his corporation’s profit, as well as the increased precarity of particular sectors of the population and the environment.

Although there is nothing new in the control of knowledge and people through lying, what has become a characteristic of our times is the idea that truth no longer matters, for “objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>). If the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution displaced the primacy of myths with hard facts, post-truth signals something that is both “post” and a return; that is, “a re-legitimation of arguments based on their emotional appeal and symbolic value and subjective rather than impersonal truth” (Kalpokas 2019, 2). The “decline in deference to experts, rising scorn for the political establishment, the tendency of social media to lock us in our echo chambers where our ill-founded opinions are confirmed rather than challenged, [and] the blurring of fact and fiction online” (Jeffries 2017) are coalescing/converging developments confirming that we live in a “post-truth” era.

In *The Back of the Turtle*, post-truth discourse is usually activated in connection to man-made environmental damage, as exemplified by the three major environmental crises in which Domidion is involved, namely, the Kali Creek poisoning that caused “The Ruin” of Samaritan Bay; the disappearance of *The Anguis*, an old barge loaded with the GreenSweep barrels that Domidion had to remove from the market after the Kali Creek disaster; and the leaking of toxic residues into the aquifers of Domidion’s oil sands tailings ponds in Alberta. If a precondition for post-truth politics is a conscious detachment from the reality upon which the post-truth discourse is applied, Domidion strategically detaches itself from the dire consequences of the multiple disasters the corporation creates as a result of its biased embrace of the neo-liberal narrative of modern progress. A clear example of this detachment can be observed in Dorian’s routine daily briefing by his assistant Winter Lee on the various crises they face “as though she were reading items on a grocery list” (King 2014, 289). Dorian’s response is equally detached. For instance, when Winter informs him that some anthrax, botulism, and flu cultures that Domidion has sold internationally are now a global hazard, Dorian immediately rejects any responsibility in this global trade: “Not the corporation’s fault that product occasionally fell into the hands of madmen” (18). The same happens when he learns that *The Anguis* has vanished off the coast of Brazil with its toxic cargo, becoming in the eyes of the critical media “a symbol of what was wrong with North American culture” (19). Thinking exclusively in economic terms, Dorian’s corporate “ethics” leads him to reason that since the barge was insured, announcing a compensation package for the disappearance of the Taiwanese crew will satisfactorily solve the problem without taxing the corporation. Furthermore, he believes that an accidental sinking as far away from Canada and the US as possible was the best outcome (20). Dorian’s attitude represents the “ethics of science” that Gabriel was taught at Stanford, as the loss of human lives and the deathly threat to the environment are of secondary importance to the corporation’s loss of credibility and money.

At the same time as Dorian hears of *The Anguis's* disappearance, he also learns that Gabriel is missing too. His vanishing is all the more disturbing given Gabriel's expertise in the development of bacterial and viral strains that can be used in warfare (King 2014, 20–22). While Dorian manages both crises, a new emergency arises when one of Domidion's tailing ponds in Alberta tar sands starts seeping its toxic contents into the aquifers, killing hundreds of fish in the Athabasca River and north of Fort McMurray. When a second dam collapses spilling "about 240 million gallons of toxic waste into the river system" (289), polluting Lake Athabasca in less than a week, and reaching the Beaufort Sea in the Arctic Ocean, Domidion finally becomes subject to the scrutiny of the media and public opinion.

It is at this point that the novel draws attention to the tensions between post-truth strategies and the media. While Dorian attempts to hide the source, magnitude, and consequences of the environmental disasters systematically caused by Domidion during the last few years in order to protect the corporation's interests, the media unveil the truth. Against a background of environmental activism and street protests, Manisha Khan, the incisive anchor of the prestigious CBC TV show *En Garde*, interviews Warren Thicke, a senior scientist at Domidion. During the interview, Thicke unwittingly reveals that Gabriel, Domidion's top scientist, is missing (King 2014, 132–133). This disclosure coincides with the Athabasca crisis, and Domidion activates all the mechanisms of post-truth so as to turn this drawback to their advantage.

The French thinker Sylvain Timsit (2002) summarized some of the most salient post-truth strategies in his decalogue – often erroneously attributed to Noam Chomsky. In the following analysis I am going to look at Domidion's strategies in the light of Timsit's observations so as to assess the corporation's wholesale adoption of the post-truth discourse.

Following the expert advice of his public relations assistant, Victoria Lustig, Dorian's first decision is to divert the public's attention from the tailings ponds disaster: "So long as the press has a missing scientist to chase", Lustig explains, "we might be able to keep the Athabasca off the news" (King 2014, 135). To this end, Domidion produces a logical fallacy that renders Gabriel as a deranged scientist and holds him responsible for the Kali Creek environmental catastrophe. "Properly managed", Lustig suggests, this manoeuvre of distraction "could take the edge off the Athabasca" (438). Remarkably, distraction is the first mechanism for the manipulation of public opinion in Timsit's decalogue of post-truth strategies.

Moreover, in an exercise of corporate cynicism, Dorian plans to convey the idea that Domidion is deeply engaged with green practices. Thus, anticipating the public's demand to find a solution to the Athabasca basin pollution, Dorian plans to send cleaning teams and equipment over to the oil sands plant, and have these operations broadcast on TV, even though he knows that "the dioxins and the heavy metals were already on the bottom of the river, where neither the booms nor the vacuums could reach them. Still, it was a good show" (King 2014, 410). Then, aiming to use the media to mislead public opinion, Dorian demands to be interviewed live by the influential journalist Manisha Khan. As it happens, however, Khan has done her fact-checking and exposes his ruse – or bullshitting, in the parlance of Evan Davis (2017), Mathew D'Ancona (2017), and James Ball (2017). "We've talked to experts in the field who say that the damage is already done, that the cleanup is simply for show" (King 2014, 424), Khan says. Caught up in this embarrassing situation, Dorian displays during the interview a whole array of post-truth strategies, from insinuating conspiracy theories to pretending a responsible concern for the nation's security.

For example, when confronted with the choice of either letting this incident appear as “[c]orporate malfeasance”, or claiming that it is all part of an “international conspiracy”, Dorian turns to conventional methods of disinformation and mass persuasion. “The trick”, he reasons, “was to control how the matter was read” (King 2014, 449). This self-consciousness about the power of narrative to shape the world is what the novel emphasizes by focusing on the distinct cosmologies emerging from the corporate discourse and Indigenous stories. In this instance, Dorian concocts a conspiracy theory that involves portraying as terrorists the environmental groups that pose a threat to the company’s lucrative plans for uncontrolled mineral extraction. Once Domidion gets the hoax across that environmental activists are targeting their facilities, provoking the fatal leakages to force the public opinion against the corporation, they do not need to offer any sound fact proving its truthfulness. Dorian foresees that “[t]he conspiracy theorists will run with it all on their own” (440), accusing the environmentalists of causing the catastrophes they allegedly struggle to prevent. The lie will then easily reverberate in talk shows organized by Domidion to enlighten the public about the rewards of energy extraction and the evils of domestic terrorism (440). Instead of being accurately perceived as “a callous corporation that valued expediency over morality, profits over ethics” (449), Domidion will be seen as a gentle social benefactor and the victim of fanatical terrorists. In the post-truth package that Dorian puts together, all the environmental disasters Domidion had been party to in the past “could be understood as a concerted assault by shadow extremists on one of the world’s most successful and innovative conglomerates (449). The success of this strategy lies in what the comedian Stephen Colbert has called “truthiness”; that is, the acceptance of a claim as true when it *feels* true, even though it may not be true. As Colbert put it in a 2006 interview, “[f]acts matter not at all. Perception is everything” (quoted in Heath 2014, 3). Khan, however, sees through Dorian’s ruse to make people believe that this is a sabotage and tells him that his explanation “[f]eels like a smokescreen” (King 2014, 425).

Dorian’s tactic once Khan begins to question his statements is to abide by Joseph Goebbels’s dictum that “[i]f you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth” (King 2014, 306). Therefore, he starts with the mantra that “[t]he modern world runs on energy” (425), turning then to the fallacy that “North America needs oil. The price of freedom is energy” (307). His claim that “the occasional spill is the price we pay for cheap energy” (305), responds to Timsit’s strategy number four, “deferral”, consisting of convincing the public to accept an unpopular decision by presenting it as painful but necessary, and whose detrimental consequences will take place in an indefinite future, rather than the present. The case of the oil sands tailings ponds’ accident is just the result of the deferral implicit in the decision of exploiting the tar sands for cheap energy, despite the potential risks to the environment. The message Dorian puts across is that this is a risk worth running, not just to get cheap energy, but for the preservation of freedom. The public’s engagement with his message can be understood in terms of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls “cruel optimism”, or the attachment to unachievable fantasies that actually becomes an obstacle for meaningful change, reinforcing the status quo and reinstating the affective conditions of precarity.

Dorian also resorts to the “appeal to emotion” – Timsit’s sixth strategy – when, capitalizing on the fear that characterizes the terror biopolitics of the 9/11 aftermath, he affirms that causing natural disasters is just the toll for “the security of the nation and the protection of our children’s future” (King 2014, 425) – ironically, he has no children, and the reader may

wonder whether he really cares about the future or only about his own ego. Furthermore, Dorian capitalizes on consumerism's numbing effect on people, which diverts attention from the truly relevant social and planetary issues – Timsit's (2002) first strategy; keeps the public in ignorance and mediocrity – Timsit's seventh strategy; and allows his business to proceed as usual despite Domidion's 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). This ancient biopolitical strategy of authoritarian control, epitomized by the Latin dictum *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses), enjoys great success in the society of the spectacle, and even greater purchase in the age of electronic communication, where the flood of information and the speed of successive news reports prevent the public from focusing their attention for long on a given issue.

Aware that in this post-truth political environment fact-checking is futile – for, as Michael A. Peters (2017) explains, by the time facts are collected and arranged into a counterargument, "the media moment has passed, the headline has been grabbed, and the lie can be modified, apologised for or replaced by another" (565) – Dorian foresees that "[i]n a week, no more than two, the shock factor would wear off, the hysterics would run their course" (King 2014, 304), the market and the lawsuits would find their place, and the media would move to the next news. Sure enough, the tailings ponds scandal and the studies documenting the continuing damage to the Mackenzie and the Arctic are consigned to "the back pages of the 'Life and Arts' section" of newspapers when the Canadian prime minister is stabbed, making the front-page news. While Domidion's share prices recover, "[t]he networks ignored them altogether" (511).

Finally, the disregard for facts that defines post-truth politics in King's novel is attuned to Timsit's (2002) ninth post-truth strategy, which describes the neo-liberal rationale that makes individuals believe that they are the only ones responsible for their well-being or misfortunes. Thus, when Dorian learns that most of the people dying along the Athabasca River as a result of the spills' toxicity belong to the Indigenous communities, he decides to minimize Domidion's responsibility and accountability for the casualties, arguing that "the mortality rate [in these Indigenous communities] is already higher than the norm" (King 2014, 437) and that it is "difficult to determine whether the additional deaths are the result of the spill or lifestyle" (437). While eschewing objective facts related to the effects of the spills on the health of humans and non-humans, Domidion's narrative exploits empirical data to allude to the "alcoholism, drug use, and irresponsible behaviour" (438) of Indigenous people, thus appealing to racist emotions deeply embedded in the Canadian psyche. Tampering with the truth, Dorian and his team sidestep the effects of a history of settler abuse of Indigenous peoples. In a typical post-truth move, they equate belief, truth, and truth-telling, while they shift any accountability for Domidion's criminal negligence to the Indigenous peoples who are actually its victims.

From an ethical point of view, Dorian's adherence to the neo-liberal version of the "ethics of science", and to post-truth techniques that confound the public opinion by leaking fake and misleading news, is deplorable. Yet he is utterly successful in his defence of the firm's interests. By the end of the novel, Domidion has recovered from its multiple crises, and stability is restored after the period of turbulence. Nonetheless, the corporation's resilience is regressively status quo, as it does not result in positive social transformation, but in buttressing the unequal balance of power under neo-liberal capitalism. Furthermore, it casts off human and non-human ecologies that are not resilient to the toxicity of their methods of natural resources exploitation.

Indigenous stories and ecocentric epistemologies

Despite the novel's emphasis on the post-truth discourse simultaneously undergirding and undermining the western system of knowledge, its very title – *The Back of the Turtle* – situates the narrative within the Indigenous cultural and epistemological context of Turtle Island – also known as North America – by making the Haudenosaunee creation story “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” the novel's leitmotif. In the story, a pregnant woman falls from the sky “through time and space” (King 2014, 224) onto a small blue dot made out of water that happens to be the Earth. She is rescued by the birds and water animals inhabiting the Earth, and placed on the back of a turtle for lack of any other available dry place. The animals dive to the bottom and one of them manages to bring up some dirt in which to plant the seeds that the woman brought with her in her fall. This joint effort guarantees her survival and that of the left- and right-handed twins she gives birth to, and who represent the competing forces of order and chaos, creation and destruction.

The Nishnaabeg writer and activist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson finds this story “profound and transformative” (Klein 2013, 9) as, in stark contrast to the individualistic western/Christian paradigm, the collaborative ethics it invokes demands 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” (9). The story, therefore, encapsulates an understanding of kinship that is central to various Indigenous cosmologies, as numerous Indigenous intellectuals have pointed out. Thomas King, for one, emphasizes the expansive understanding of interconnectivity in Indigenous thought in the introduction to his collection of contemporary Canadian Native fiction *All My Relations*, where he explains that the Indigenous phrase “all my relations” goes beyond the reference to family to encompass relationships “to all the animate and inanimate forms that can be seen or imagined” (King 1990, ix). Daniel Heath Justice insists on the relevance of *imagining* these interconnections, “for these acts of relationship”, he argues, “are at least as much exercises in imagination as they are in lived practice” (2018, 88). Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) Winona LaDuke (1999) similarly confirms, speaking of the ravages of corporations and US government activity on the reservations, that “Native American teachings describe the relations all around – animals, fish, trees, and rocks – as our brothers, sisters, uncles, and grandpas. Our relations to each other, our prayers whispered across generations to our relatives, are what bind our cultures together” (2). Expanding this notion even further, King explains: “More than that, ‘all my relations’ is an encouragement for us to accept the responsibilities we have within this universal family by living our lives in a harmonious manner” (1990, ix). These Indigenous understandings of kinship entail deep respect for relations, establishing “a roughly if not entirely horizontal model of relationship” that makes it impossible to accept the monolithic settler colonial vertical authority that justifies “the widespread exploitation of land, plants, and animals, as well as humans [...] because we recognize our implication in these relationships and their health” (Justice 2018, 90). The Anishinaabe journalist and author Tania Talaga (2018) similarly stresses the importance of caring for this interconnectivity by linking the loss of traditional languages and the disconnection from the land enforced by the colonization of Indigenous peoples to the current suicide crisis among Indigenous young people in Canada.⁷

Apart from the novel's title, the first reference to the Sky Woman story in *The Back of the Turtle* appears in the initial scene, when Gabriel kneels down on the beach before

walking into the ocean to kill himself. Touching the sand, he “tried to remember which of the diving animals had brought up the first lump of earth” (King 2014, 4). His memories of the cosmological story are paired not only with those of the fallacies of western rational thinking, mentioned above, but with allusions to biblical stories that lend themselves to an ambivalent typological reading of his current ordeal. For example, given that Gabriel is waiting for the low tide to walk to the rocks called The Apostles and let himself be engulfed by the ocean when the tide rises, does his reference to the Red Sea parting waters story (4) envision him as one of God’s Chosen People? Or does he rather see himself as one of the drowning Egyptians as he seeks to be punished for his unqualified trust in science? The intersection of stories relevantly draws attention to the two competing world views represented by the Indigenous creation stories, on the one hand, and the myth of modernity and the Judeo Christian stories that shape western thought and values, on the other. Comparing the Sky Woman story with the biblical creation story, King insists on the world-making capacity of stories and their differential effects on reality. In *The Truth about Stories* he 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. (2003, 23–24)

Whereas in the Bible creation is “a solitary, individual act”, in the Haudenosaunee story “creation is a shared activity” (24); and if in the Bible the world begins in harmony and slides towards chaos, 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). With its juggling of stories from Euro-western and Indigenous traditions, *The Back of the Turtle* ponders the question of whether a different world might have emerged had western culture taken on the Indigenous story rather than the biblical one. The novel’s initial scene prefigures the effect of adhering to the values of the Sky Woman story when the mysterious appearance of a group of drowning people looking like Indian ghosts out of the Haudenosaunee story (4) compels Gabriel to interrupt his own drowning plans to go to their rescue. This incident foreshadows the net of reciprocal relationships that is woven among the people in Samaritan Bay, constituting the foundation of their individual and collective resurgence.

The collaborative spirit embedded in the Sky Woman story is also symbolized by its polyphonic retelling in the novel. Every year Nicholas Crisp, a red-bearded man of archaic expressions who revels in equal measure in the lushness of biblical stories, the English classics, and Indigenous orature, commemorates the environmental catastrophe he calls “The Ruin” with his recital of the Sky Woman story at the hot springs. Rather than delving into the tragedy, he repurposes the story to invoke new beginnings in the post-apocalyptic context of Samaritan Bay, reactivating the story’s function as “the spiritual scaffolding for navigating present struggles” (O’Brien 2020, 48). His claim that “[i]t’s a story that comes with the land, and the two are forever wedded” (King 2014, 222) highlights the symbiosis between stories, place, being, and knowing, and stands in stark contrast to Dorian’s solipsistic and detached-from-the-land story-making. Thus, the Indigenous Sky Woman story embodies what Vanessa Watts (2013) calls Place-Thought, founded in the recognition “that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of

these thoughts” (21). Following Watts, O’Brien observes that, contrary to the indissolubility of knowledge and ontology in Indigenous thought resulting from grounding meaning in the material world, western philosophy legitimizes “the abstraction of knowledge from materiality” (2020, 47) and, thereby, the separation between epistemology and ontology, leading to the damaging consequences that King explores in this novel.

Place-Thought and agency appear to be represented at the end of the novel in various scenes that convey the collective responsibility for one another epitomized by the Sky Woman story. First, Mara, an Indigenous artist who returns to her birthplace in the Smoke River reserve after her mother and grandmother die in the GreenSweep disaster, invites the Taiwanese refugees to her grandmother’s house, where they share food and stories “as if they were family” (King 2014, 433). This building of kinship bonds entails the possibility of social and ecological regeneration when the Taiwanese families plan to settle down in the area and contribute to the reconstruction of the economic and social fabric of Samaritan Bay. Another symbolic representation of the collaborative ethics embedded in “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” takes place when *The Anguis* appears foundered on the beach and all the characters join efforts to prevent a new environmental catastrophe. Responding to Gabriel’s scepticism about being able to move the ship and send it away into the ocean, Mara tells him that “[i]t’s not about moving. [...] It’s about community” (498). The scene ends with all of them joining Gabriel in singing the warrior song he sang at the beginning of the novel after the Taiwanese crew has been rescued, and *The Anguis* has sailed away on the rising tide. Moreover, for the first time in years, a turtle arrives to lay her eggs on the beach, thus announcing the restoration of the natural cycle of life. Rather than the second coming of Christ, it is “the second coming of the turtles” (104) that Sonny had foreseen, that marks nature’s rebirth, reinforcing the Sky Woman story’s ethos by showing that salvation lies in the recognition of human and non-human interdependence.

The interconnectivity resulting from a collaborative ethics fittingly materializes at the end when Mara follows Gabriel into the sea (King 2014, 475) and induces him to tell his story – “The one you don’t want to tell” (502). Thus, story-making and storytelling are further highlighted as crucial mechanisms undergirding the processes of meaning-making, world-shaping and life-saving. Mara’s insistence on hearing Gabriel’s story will help him reconnect with his family memories and meaningfully consider the intertwining of western and Indigenous ontological views. Perhaps, by voicing and sharing the story of his pain, Gabriel can be dissuaded from committing suicide and his spiritual healing process may begin.

Conclusion

With its focus on the distinct lineages of stories, *The Back of the Turtle* emphasizes the agency of narrative in world-making. I have argued that King’s novel proposes to open up western epistemologies to Indigenous forms of knowledge that involve the creation of kinship networks of collaboration so as to move beyond the destructive solipsism, Manichaeism, and individualism of hegemonic western thought. King’s use of the story “The Woman Who Fell from the Sky” to represent the rebirth of the Samaritan Bay community illustrates his conviction that “that there are other ways of imagining the world, ways that do not depend so much on oppositions as they do on co-operations” (King 2003, 110).

Like the Haudenosaunee story, *The Back of the Turtle* starts with chaos and ends with a tentative restoration of balance. For Dorian and his corporation, the return to normality involves placing mendacity and sophistry at the centre of their efforts to survive as a dominant transnational business. By bringing to the limelight Domidion's corporate post-truth discourse, the novel stresses the interconnection between the ideology of global neo-liberal capitalism and the rise of social inequity, precarity, and man-made environmental disasters. It also shows the shortcomings of the hegemonic myth of modernity and its anthropocentric exaltation of reason as the basis for knowledge and progress. For the Samaritan Bay community, their renewal involves an ethics of care and relationality for which they find a template in the Sky Woman story. Even if both the myth of modern progress and the Haudenosaunee story aim at individual and social flourishing, the novel shows that the alignment of neo-liberal capitalism narratives with post-truth discourse creates more precarity for the vulnerable. In contrast, the epistemologies based on Indigenous notions of kinship bonds and reciprocal collaboration between humans and other-than-human beings create a more equitable and just world for all. King, therefore, underlines their significant differences in the understanding of what or who persists, and in what kind of world.

However, rather than reifying Indigenous epistemologies as an alternative to western thinking, King's novel emphasizes their grasp of the tensions and bonds between the creative and destructive forces that constitute existence. If in the Sky Woman story these interacting forces are represented by the figures of the right- and left-handed twins, who indistinctively stand for order and chaos, in King's novel Gabriel encompasses these antithetical tensions. As Mara reflects, "Gabriel had been the left-handed twin, the one who had brought chaos to the perfect world that his twin had created. So that there would be balance [...]. Or was Gabriel the right-handed twin?" (King 2014, 49). Thus, although Gabriel thinks of himself as "Death, the destroyer of worlds" (454), his partaking in both the western and Indigenous epistemological traditions turns him into a potential mediator between them, and a catalyst for the restoration of (provisional) order. It is his potential for integrating the positive elements of western and Indigenous knowledges that Mara underlines when she tells him at the end of the novel to take his feelings of guilt for the destruction he has caused and "do something about it" (501). The kind of agency that she reclaims does not derive from the sterile sense of justice that leads him to consider suicide as a sort of atonement, but from engaging in the construction of kinship relations between people and with the environment, as well as between knowledge systems. Therefore, Gabriel's position at the end of the novel can be read metonymically as a shift on a wider scale towards the recognition of Indigenous epistemologies and their role in the construction of a new ecology of knowledges that prompts an ethics of interrelational care to address vulnerability and precarity. Hence, King's novel is not only deeply invested in showing the agency of narrative in shaping our world views and actions, but with its emphasis on the kinship ontology embedded in Indigenous stories, the reader is led to consider the benefits of valuing and connecting distinct knowledge systems.

Notes

1. King, who was born in the US and moved to Canada in 1980, self-identifies as being of Cherokee, German, and Greek descent.
2. King's novel *The Back of the Turtle* won the prestigious Governor General's Award for English-language Fiction in 2014.
3. US journalist and activist Dorothy Day (1952) documented the word in her article "Poverty and Precarity", written for the Catholic Workers Movement, when she quoted an

anonymous Martinican priest discussing the condition of the poor. In 20th-century scholarship, the concept of precarity was understood as a feature of capitalist societies, referring to the unstable employment conditions of much of the world's population, especially in the global south. Then, the notion of precarity appeared in academic discourse after becoming a buzzword in political mobilizations, particularly following the 2007–08 financial crisis, the Occupy and anti-austerity uprisings that took place against unemployment and social exclusion, and the 2011 Arab Spring (Kasmir 2018).

4. For further reflection on developing an awareness of an ecology of knowledges specifically in dialogue between Indigenous and settler colonial epistemologies, see Coleman (2012, 2020).
5. The corporation's name, resembling the Latin term *dominium*, meaning "lordship, right of ownership", points to the hegemony of the corporate world in our current reality. This Latin word derives from *dominus* (lord or master) and *domus* (house). Likewise, the male French name of Greek origin Dion means "child of heaven and earth". As a metathesis, DOMI-DION signals the house of the child of heaven and earth. This is highly meaningful in the context of the novel and I wish to thank the anonymous JPW reviewer of this article for this insight.
6. This development marks the shift from the "regimes of truth", characteristic of disciplinary societies that relied on truth by means of a "tighter functioning between media/political/education apparatuses, scientific discourses, and dominant truth-arbiters", to "societies of control, where power exploits new 'freedoms' to participate/produce/express (as well as consume/diffuse/evaluate)" (Harsin 2015, 327).
7. On the novel's balancing of western and Indigenous approaches to kinship and the ethics of care through the trope of water, see Fraile-Marcos (2019).

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